

**DOUG OHLSON  
AT BENNINGTON**

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**DOUG OHLSON  
AT BENNINGTON**

**TWO DECADES  
1962-1982**

**May 9, 1982 - May 28, 1982  
Suzanne Lemberg Usdan Gallery  
Bennington College**

GEMINI, 1965, 44" x 96", acrylic on canvas (Cat. #7).

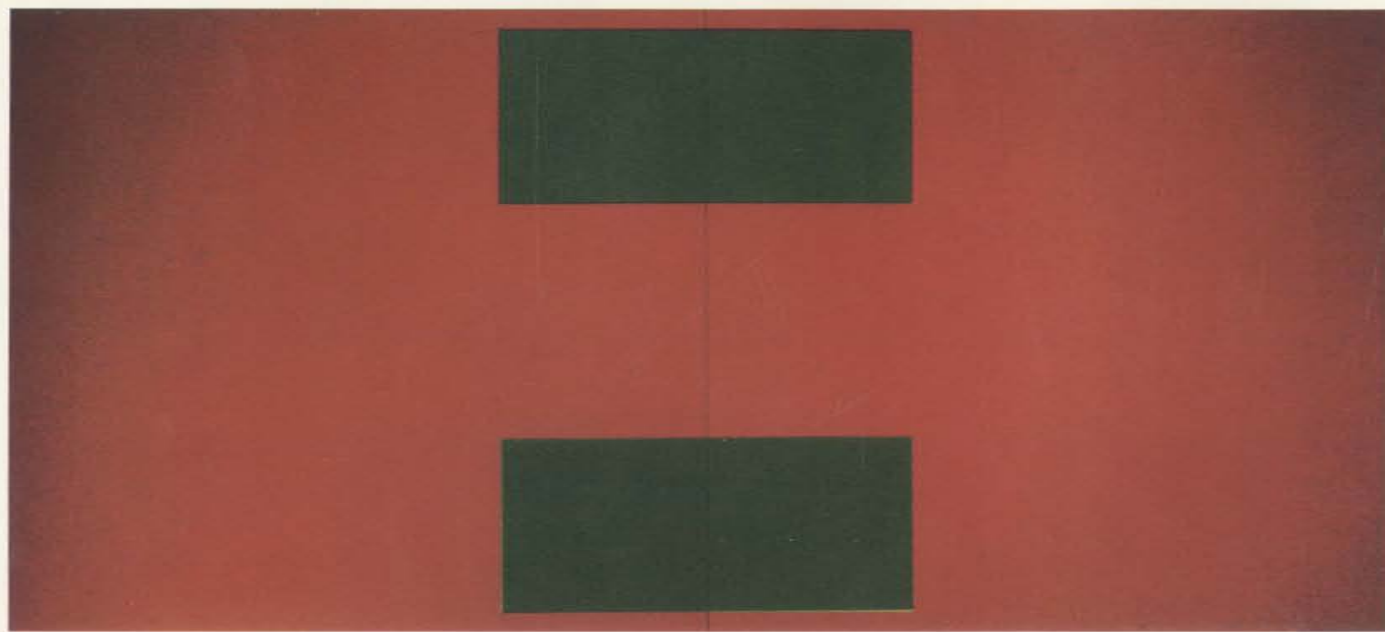






Photo of the artist by HANS NEMUTH

When Doug Ohlson was nearing the end of his years as an undergraduate art student at the University of Minnesota he took a trip to Chicago where he saw a painting by Clyfford Still. "Suddenly," he says, "I realized what modern art was about." Though he has never been that much interested in Still's particular kind of painting since, Ohlson's revelation establishes what George Kubler would call his "entry point" into the unfolding history of twentieth-century art. This was also a qualitative leap out of the provincialism then prevailing in the mid-west and into the difficult dialogue with art that had been begun just previously by the abstract expressionists. But perhaps the most telling thing about this incident is that the stimulus for what has now become a life's work came, not from class-room discussion or the pages of art magazines, but from a painting.

Obviously having a revelation and recovering its meaning in pragmatic terms are two different things. Old habits and the necessity of retracing at least some of the steps that one's models have ascended are the first barriers to the desired self-hood that every aspirant must face. Propelled to New York in 1961 because that was where one could see what the problems were and what some of the solutions might be, Ohlson became engaged in the difficult dialogue immediately. His first and erstwhile influence, probably due to the appeal of its gestural freedom, was the early black and white work of Franz Kline. Possibly without realizing it at the time he had to overcome the very problem that Kline's painting suggested but rarely solved, i.e. the neutralization of the figure/ground relationship, that automatic purveyor of literal, rather than ambiguous, space. The high passion of modernist painting has been to deny the object precedence over the space in which it seems to exist in order that the painting, not its subject matter, be the true vehicle of expression. Kline's method for keeping his blacks and white more or less in the same plane was to paint them obviously into one another. The result was a kind of pictorial biography of the struggle between black and white in which the physicality of the paint was relied upon to remind the viewer that this was indeed a painting, not an anecdote. Ohlson went this route for a short

while but soon abandoned Kline as a model because the similarities were too apparent and the mannerist approach too automatic.

In these *Idea* paintings (as he called them) of 1962 Ohlson had developed a blocky sort of form and a spatial division that was not Klinesque and it was these particularities he carried over into his decidedly hard-edged work of 1963. Here the purity of black and white was pursued without any hint of symbolism or gestural bravado. With such pictures as *Helen* (illus.) and *Offset* a solution for the figure/ground situation was arrived at; the design of the two areas locks them into each other in such a way that neither can be read as more figurative than the other, nor is either superimposed on the other in planar space. The tautness of the image is thus the equivalent of the surface upon which it is painted.

Thus, having learned how to make a twentieth-century painting, a task as hard for our times as the creation of perspectival space was for the Renaissance, Ohlson was now in a position to move into the second great venture of modernism, the control and exploitation of color. In order not to confuse the issue of figure/ground with the issues of color he opted for the method practiced by such painters as Noland in his *targets* and Feeley in his emblematic series . . . that is, the flotation of symmetrically placed shapes in an indeterminate space. Such an isolation of two or three colors in a simple structure forces the painter and the viewer to see color as the prime carrier of content. The straightforward resemblance of some of these pictures to those of Feeley does not disturb Ohlson since what he did with what he learned subsequently pays back the debt several fold.

From 1965 through 1969 Ohlson worked out of his reliance on the solutions of others. He did it mainly by discovering his own peculiar sense of color and ways of placing simple, non-obtrusive shapes, the square and the rectangle, within the rectangular field of the canvas. While these shapes echo the perimeter, the colors he chose, largely harmonic and close in value, also resound in unison with each other and throughout the ambivalent space in which they reside. A number of the



pictures of this period include the joining together of separate panels as if, by implication, the resonance occurs in real as well as pictorial space. His interest in the possibilities of rhythmical reverberations beyond the confines of a single canvas might be taken for granted since he shortly began to position his panels a few inches apart. This transition takes place between 1965 and 1967, from *Gemini* (illus.) to *Sterne*.

In *Sterne*, 1967, (illus.), the work of completing the painting is left partly to the viewer. The experience is comparable to a musical theme in which the individual tones cannot be collected in the mind until they are all heard in the memory. This association with musical duration is perhaps best illustrated by the way Ohlson showed a coordinated group of panel paintings at the Fischbach Gallery in 1969. To get them off the conventional wall, where people tend to read all canvases as configurations against a ground, he devised a pair of cubes joined at one corner and placed groups of panels on each of the eight surfaces. Each group was related to the others in an enlarged color spectrum. The cubed structure itself was painted Pompeian red to clearly mark its differentiation from the usual white gallery wall and the architecture of the room. As one proceeded around this structure the build-up in the visual memory was similar to the way a Bach fugue builds in the ear. Matisse, still perhaps the greatest master of color in this century, once wrote that if he jotted down "some sensations of blue, of green, of red — every new brush stroke diminishes the importance of the preceding ones . . . each of these several tones mutually weaken one another. It is necessary, therefore, that the various elements I use be so balanced that they do not destroy one another . . . when I have found the relationships of all the tones the result must be a living harmony of tones, a harmony not unlike that of a musical composition."

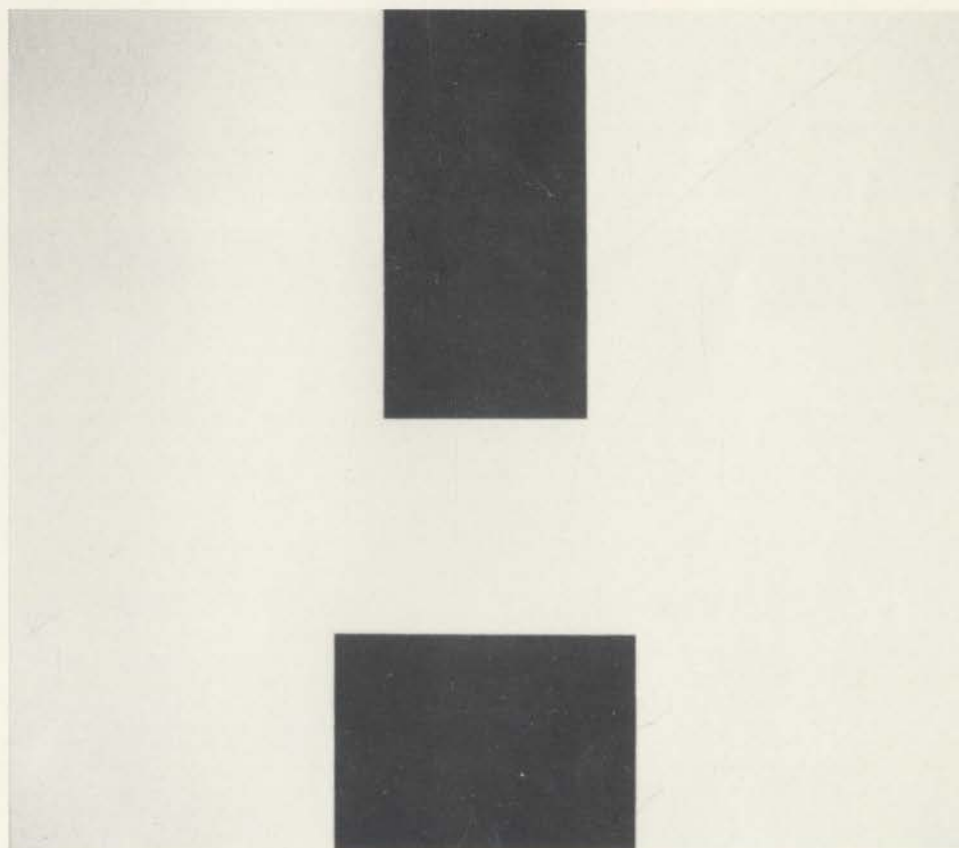
Ohlson's search for an equivalent to a kind of counterpoint in color, however, soon led him away from rectilinear organization and toward a freer form of notation. Color, after all, often comes to us like random sounds or bursts of light; the mind forms its own gestalts and often creates harmonies where on first appearance only discontinuity exists. Whereas Ohlson had

moved in his previous paintings from sharply delineated contrasting color to more harmonious interchanges through close values, in 1970 he began to use a circular sprayed spot on a pre-painted surface. One of the earliest of these, *Nodes*, 1970, (illus.), has a seemingly random look until, after a little time, a counterpointed unity is formed and the staccato bursts of hues resolve into an irreversible image. In the following year he dealt with bright primary colors on unprimed canvas, letting their coronas fuse with one another. In one such picture, *Basal*, 1971, red, yellow and blue are given the larger left section quite appropriately since the black on the white canvas in the right portion shows its power to take on all other colors and its desire to obliterate them.

Goethe wrote in his *Farbenlehre* that with yellow "the eye rejoices, the heart expands, the spirit is cheered, and we immediately feel warmed." Yet despite such romantic associations with the sun and light, yellow is very evanescent, very difficult to pin down in space and is as enigmatic and fickle as the sun itself. Ohlson's huge (90" x 258") *Yellow*, 1974, has, in some lighting, a cold tone, in other lighting, a warmer one. It is an extraordinarily ambitious work, meant perhaps to test himself against Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* and *Cathedral*. Since these Newman masterworks are about red and blue, in that order, Ohlson was left to tackle yellow. His strategy is somewhat similar to Newman's; the exact color is specified by what it is not. But unlike his forebear, Ohlson does not support his use of another, slightly different tone, with a clear-cut white, but depends upon the mere shifts of hue to do the work. There is a quivering in the field that points up, not the absoluteness of the color, but the evanescence of yellow mentioned above. Ohlson's *Yellow* could be hung quite gracefully in the same room with Newman's two majestic paintings.

In the late '70s Ohlson gradually developed a new kind of composition based on the introduction of articulated colors around a rectangle. The colors in the perimeter were often so reticent as to be almost invisible and only with close inspection were they distinguishable enough to be recognized as having a major role in defining the key and tone of the larger central area.

HELEN, 1963, 86" x 96", acrylic on canvas (Cat. #4).

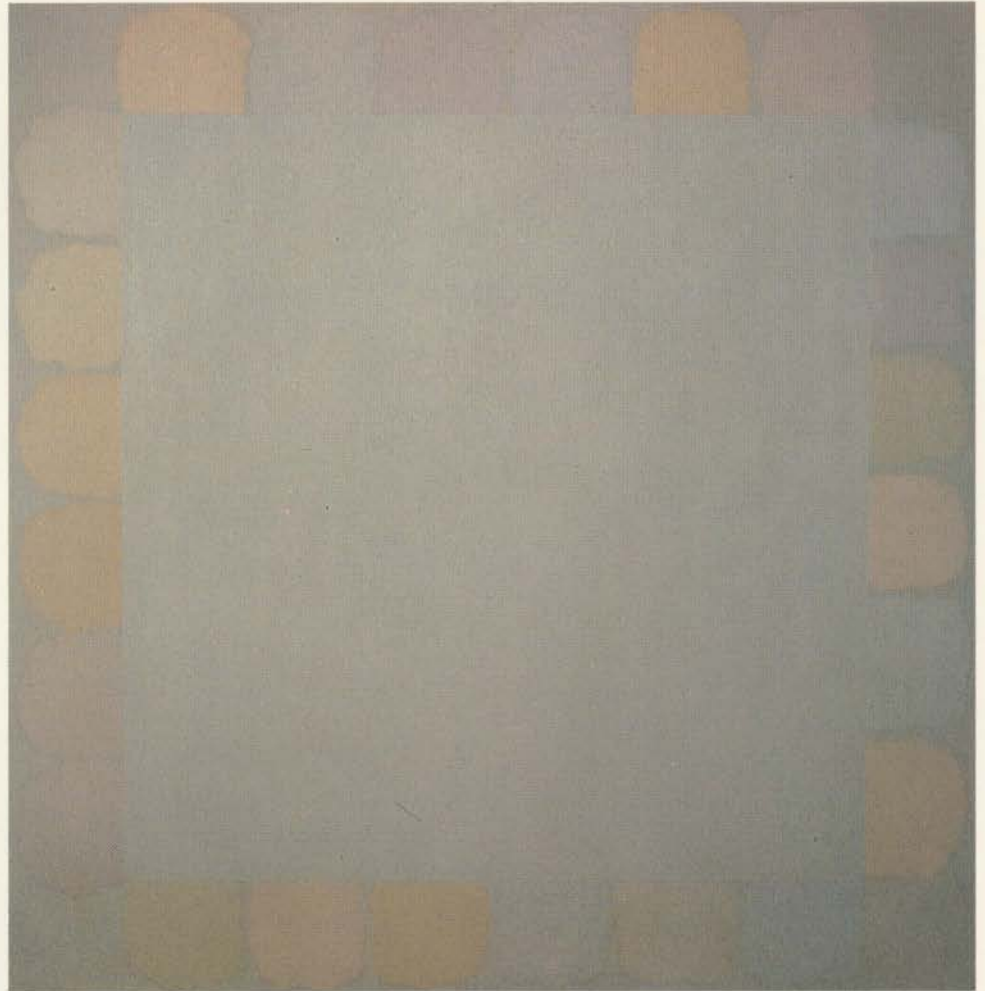




STERNE, 1967, 90" x 178", acrylic on canvas (Cat. #10).



REGION, 1977, 70" x 68", oil on canvas (Cat. #20).

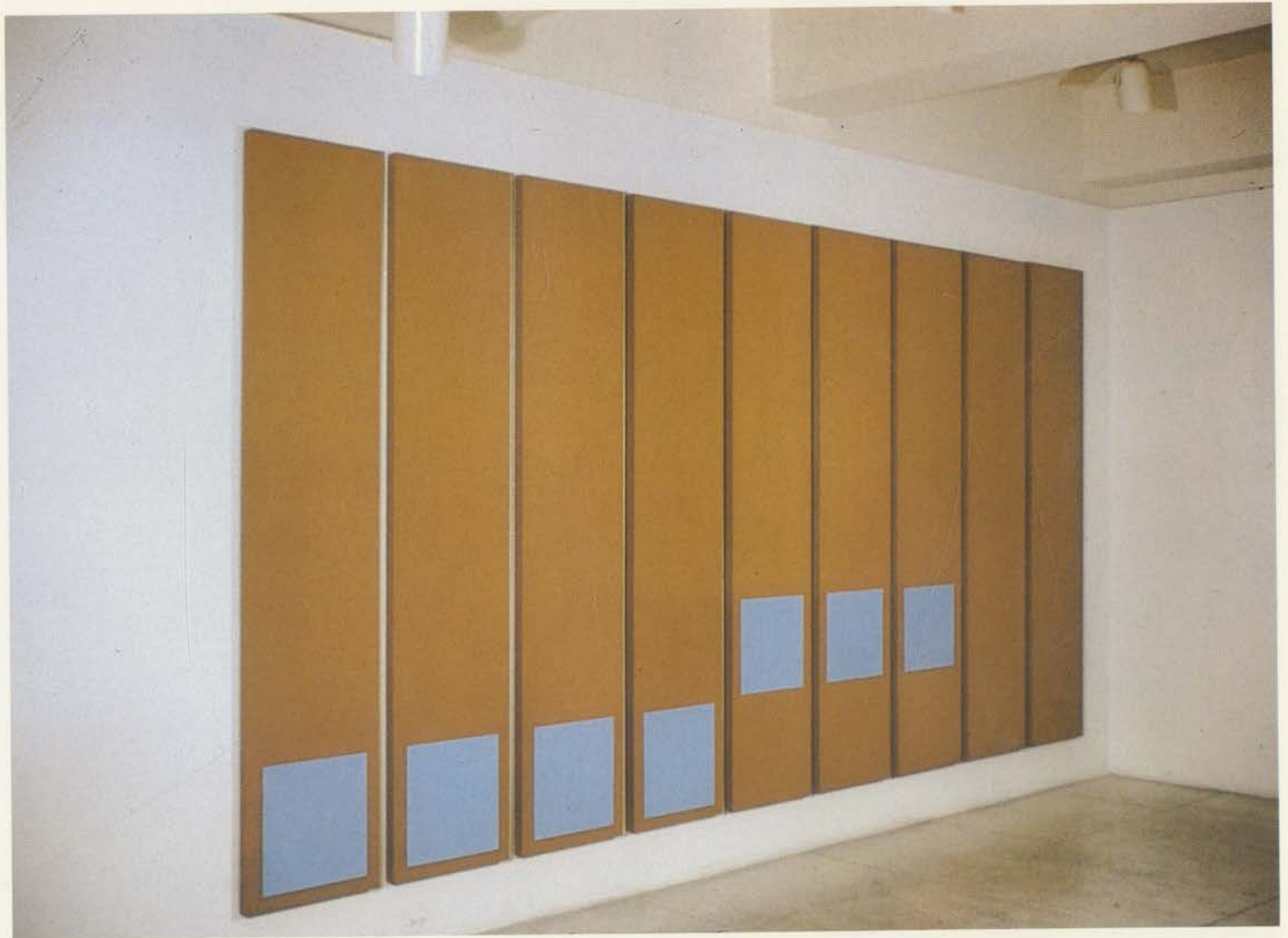


NODES, 1970, 76" x 110", enamel/acrylic on canvas (Cat. #13).

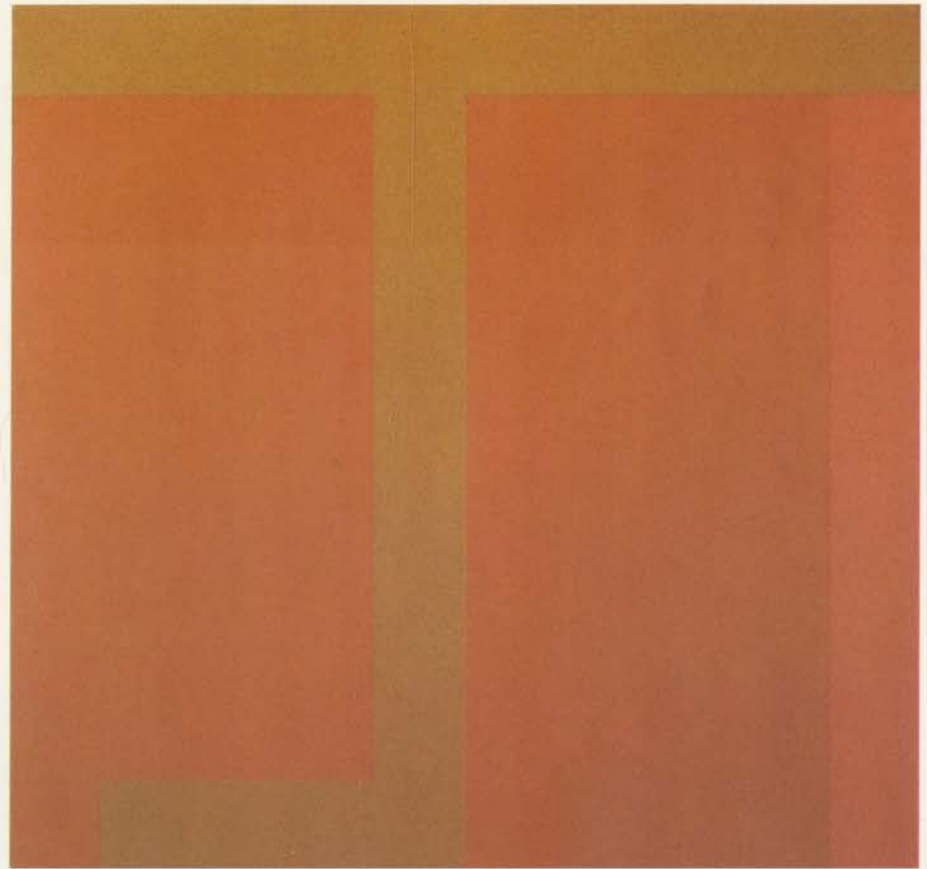




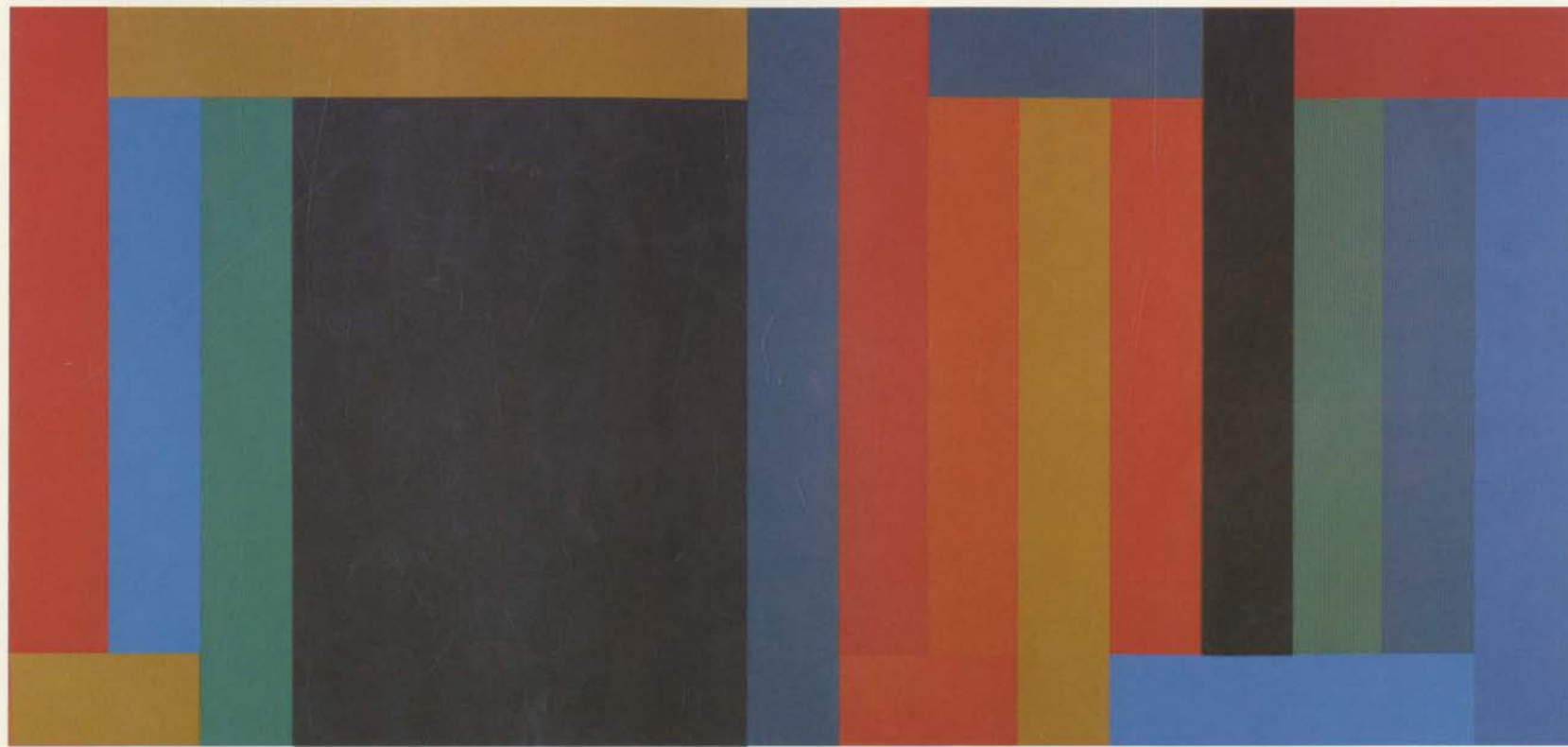
STERNE, 1967, 90" x 178", acrylic on canvas (Cat. #10).



PARTNERS, 1980, 66" x 69", oil on canvas (Cat. #25).



DEEP POCKET, 1981, 66" x 138", oil/acrylic on canvas (Cat. #27).





*Region*, 1977, (illus.), is an example of how several mutually interactive tones continuously redefine the center and each other; consequently the picture never lies flat on the mind as a terminated statement. The range of hues over this period is enormous, from pale warm and cool greys and their complements, through rich, moody reds to midnight blues and greens. Many of these pictures are too light-sensitive to be shown well in public spaces, like many of those by Reinhardt and Rothko. (One recalls the disaster of the Rothko exhibition in the American pavillion at the Biennale of 1958 where the Venetian light wiped out all but one or two of the paintings.) Nevertheless the effort to see such pictures is part of their aesthetic. They are tough pictures because they do not easily reveal their complexity or relieve the viewer of his responsibility to appreciate nuance.

In the same year as *Region*, Ohlson painted *Moravia*, a large horizontal, a diptych really, in which the units of color at the edge begin to merge into broad bands of hues that become potentially more competitive with the center. The balances are still delicate, but bolder in terms of contrast. The artist's problem, and his solution, has been to find a way of using the peripheral edge without *framing* the center; to keep it alive and breathing in concert with the expanse as a whole. Often the pictures from 1977 on have an "open" edge or corner to release the eye from the intense absorption of color that it experiences as it travels back and forth across the canvas. (The great mistake of Op art was that it exhausted the vision before the pleasure could begin.) Claudian landscapes were so constructed, and Matisse in his most brilliant pictures usually offers such an escape valve. Ohlson often does it by placing two colors of virtually the same value side by side at one edge so that they flow visually together, dispelling the abruptness that may occur at the other three sides or corners. Instead of unbalancing the picture, if it is done judiciously, this method can reaffirm the more rigorous aspects of the structure the way slant rhyme does in rhymed verse.

Ohlson's control of color, arrived at by intuition rather than scientific theory, is always part and parcel with the

compositional means he has selected at each stage of his evolution. These developments as outlined here may sound more methodical, more plotted than they actually have been. Neither he nor any other good artist educates himself to produce some final revelation of an earlier vision. Quite oppositely, at each stage the paintings have spoken for themselves on the premises which underlay their making at the time. Yet it is impossible in retrospect not to see that his preoccupations have contributed to an ongoing process and continuity.

From *Partners*, 1980, (illus.), to *Deep Pocket*, 1981, (illus.), there is both continuity and change — subtlety in terms of harmonically organized, close-valued color shifts toward hues with greater saturation and brilliance, and even, in more recent pictures, to the emergence of black as a *color*. And now the broader areas are often layed on in such a way as to let light through from behind. Thus some of the inner-outer pulse that he found in the sprayed pictures of the early '70s is recalled into action, but in a different context. This melding of the new with the old, this reaching back and forward at the same time indicates a desire for enrichment rather than replacement. One begins to realize that this work issues from an integrated view of art that allows for growth without revolution, a kind of non-violent metamorphosis.

In the latest paintings of 1982, *Cadman's Blue* and *Villa*, there is a new opening of the surface by an interruption that constitutes a species of inverse drawing. The raggedness of these breaks with the linear clarity of the divisions between most of the colors may be a quotation from Newman's *Stations of the Cross* where a ruled (taped) line is placed next to a smudged one. But Ohlson's use of the contrast seems to be less about dialectical relationships than it is a shift in the mood in which the density of darkness, à la Caravaggio (an Ohlson favorite), is proved and relieved by a stroke of light. What this tells us about where Ohlson is going is probably of less importance than that he goes to the masters for instruction rather than to the art scene.

E.C. Goossen



## DOUG OHLSON

1936 Born, Cherokee, Iowa  
 1961 University of Minnesota  
 Moved to New York  
 1968 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship  
 City University of New York Summer Research Grant  
 1974 Creative Artists Public Service Grant  
 1976 National Endowment for the Arts Grant

Represented by Susan Caldwell Gallery, New York

### ONE MAN EXHIBITIONS

1964, '66, '67, '68, '69, '70, '72 Fischbach Gallery, New York  
 1970 Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania  
 1974, '76, '77, '79, '81, '82 Susan Caldwell Gallery, New York  
 1977 Portland Center for the Visual Arts, Portland, Oregon

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1961 "Second Minnesota Biennial," Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, Minnesota  
 1964 "Eight Young Artists," organized by E.C. Goossen, Hudson River Museum, and Bennington College, Bennington, Vermont  
 1967 "Structural Art," A.F.A. Travelling Show, organized by Lucy Lippard  
 "Art Festival," Cologne, West Germany  
 "Color, Image, and Form," organized by Geno Baro, Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit, Michigan  
 1968-69 "The Art of the Real: 1948-1968," Museum of Modern Art, New York, July; Grand Palais, Paris; Kunsthaus, Zurich; Tate Gallery, London  
 "The Pure and the Clear/American Innovations," Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, November-January  
 1969 "Concept," Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, New York, April-June  
 "Prospect 69," Dusseldorf, West Germany  
 Annual, City Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri  
 1970 "Modular Painting," organized by Robert Murdock, Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York, April-May  
 "American Art Since 1960," organized by Sam Hunter, The Art Museum, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, May  
 1971 "Structure of Color," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York  
 "American Art Attack," Browersgracht 225, Amsterdam, Holland  
 1973 "The Way of Color," Thirty-third Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.  
 1975 "Fourteen Abstract Painters," Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery, Dickson Art Center, University of California, Los Angeles  
 1976 "Contemporary Paintings: A Review of the New York Gallery Season, 1974-75," Lowe Art Gallery, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York  
 "24 x 24," Sarah Lawrence College Gallery, Yonkers, New York  
 1977 "Alternatives," selected by Gene Baro, Susan Caldwell Gallery, New York  
 1979 "Abstraction in the 70's," Nielsen Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts  
 "Transitions I: Bordes, Gilbert-Rolfe, Mangold, Ohlson," Amelie A. Wallace Gallery, State University of New York at Old Westbury, Old Westbury, New York  
 Kristan Murchison Gallery, Dallas, Texas  
 1981 "Dark Thoughts: Black Paintings," Pratt Manhattan Center Gallery, Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York

#### PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

American Federation of Arts, Museum Purchase Fund  
 American Telephone and Telegraph  
 Beacon Collection, Boston, Massachusetts  
 Blue Cross, Blue Shield  
 Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York  
 Cadet Corps, New York Mission Society  
 Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.  
 Coudert Brothers, New York  
 Isham, Lincoln & Beale, Chicago, Illinois  
 Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, Minnesota  
 University of Iowa Museum of Art  
 Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Salt Lake City, Utah  
 Weatherspoon Gallery, Greensboro, North Carolina  
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 Smith Kline Corporation, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
 Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, Dallas, Texas  
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
 The Minnesota Mutual Life Insurance Company

#### SELECTED BOOKS, CATALOGUES AND ARTICLES

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| Alloway, Lawrence, and<br>Delahoyd, Mary | "Concept," Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, New York, 1969. (catalogue)  |
| Baro, Gene                               | "The Way of Color," Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1973. (catalogue)  |
| Battcock, Gregory, ed.                   | <i>Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology</i> . Dutton: New York, 1968. (Reproduction pp. 165, 438.)                               |
| _____                                    | <i>The New Art</i> . Revised edition, Dutton: New York, 1973.   |
| Burton, Scott                            | "A Different Stripe," <i>Art News</i> , February 1968, p. 55.   |
| _____                                    | "Doug Ohlson, in the Wind," <i>Art News</i> , May 1968, p. 38. (Reproduction pp. 38, 39.)                                     |
| Failing, Patricia                        | "Doug Ohlson: In Classic Abstract," <i>Sunday Oregonian</i> , Portland, Oregon, December 18, 1977.                            |
| Goossen, E.C.                            | "Eight Young Artists," Hudson River Museum and Bennington College, Bennington, Vermont, 1964. (catalogue)                     |
| Hess, Thomas B.                          | "Eclecticism at the Barricades," <i>New York Magazine</i> , August 4, 1975, p. 68.  |
| Kalterman, Udo                           | <i>The New Painting</i> . Praeger: New York, 1969.  |
| Lippard, Lucy                            | "The Ineluctable Modality of the Visible," <i>Art International</i> , Vol. XI, #6, Summer 1967, p. 24.                        |
| Littlefield, T.H.                        | "When Walls Matter," <i>Times-Union</i> , Albany, New York, September 8, 1968, Section F, pp. 1, 3. (Reproductions pp. 1, 3.) |
| Norland, Gerald                          | "Fourteen Abstract Painters," U.C.L.A., 1975. (catalogue)   |
| Pinto, Holly                             | <i>New York Magazine</i> , September 17, 1979, p. 49.   |
| Ratcliff, Carter                         | "Doug Ohlson's Color Condensations," <i>Art in America</i> , May/June 1978, p. 100. (Reproduction p. 101.)                    |
| _____                                    | <i>New York Magazine</i> , November 27, 1978, pp. 67, 69.   |
| Schjeldahl, Peter                        | "New Abstract Painting: A Variety of Feelings," <i>New York Times</i> , October 13, 1974, p. D 29.                            |



# CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION

1. IDEA, 1962  
35" x 40", oil on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
2. IDEA, 1962  
40" x 35", oil on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
3. OFFSET, 1963  
86" x 96", acrylic on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
- \* 4. HELEN, 1963  
86" x 96", acrylic on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
5. UNTITLED, 1964  
60" x 30", acrylic on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
6. MANA, 1964  
49" x 49", acrylic on canvas  
Private collection
- \* 7. GEMINI, 1965  
44" x 96", acrylic on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
8. CAPTAIN, 1966  
86" x 90", acrylic on canvas  
Private collection
9. HOWICK, 1967  
90" x 76", acrylic on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
- \* 10. STERNE, 1967  
90" x 178", acrylic on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
11. UNTITLED, 1969  
90" x 66", acrylic on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
12. COLOR STUDIES, 1969-71  
oil/acrylic on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
- \* 13. NODES, 1970  
76" x 110", enamel/acrylic on canvas  
Collection, Patricia Johanson
14. BASAL, 1971  
67" x 134", oil on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
15. CALLED WELL, 1973  
90" x 132", oil on canvas  
Collection, Susan Caldwell
16. YELLOW, 1974  
90" x 258", oil on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
17. GREYLOCK, 1975  
77½" x 90", oil on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
18. INTERIM, 1976  
67½" x 72", oil on canvas  
Private collection
19. VEN, 1977  
84" x 90", oil on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
- \* 20. REGION, 1977  
70" x 68", oil on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
21. MORAVIA, 1977  
78" x 168", oil on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
- \* 22. FOUR CORNERS, 1978  
68" x 118", oil on canvas  
Collection, Susan Caldwell
23. TWO BY TWO, 1979-80  
68" x 153", oil on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
24. COLOR STUDIES, 1980  
35" x 46", oil on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
- \* 25. PARTNERS, 1980  
66" x 69", oil on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
26. ICE BLUE, 1981  
68" x 84", oil/acrylic on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
- \* 27. DEEP POCKET, 1981  
66" x 138", oil/acrylic on canvas  
Collection, David and Sue Workman
28. SHIFT, 1981-82  
65" x 75", oil/acrylic on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
29. REACHING OVER, 1982  
64" x 65", acrylic on canvas  
Private collection
30. CADMAN'S BLUE, 1982  
84" x 176", oil/acrylic on canvas  
Collection, the Artist
31. VILLA, 1982  
68" x 104", oil/acrylic on canvas  
Collection, the Artist

(\* = illustrated)

Director of the exhibition, E.C. GOOSSEN

Assistants to the director:

David Beitzel, Jeffrey Curto, Richard  
Jordan, Anne Sofield, Darryl Zeltzer

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Jeffrey Curto with E.C.G.

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