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William T. Williams
by Mona Hadler



Photograph By Nodeth Vang. Courtesy of the artist.

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Ross. BOMB's Oral History Advisory Panel is Sanford Biggers, Thelma Golden, Kellie Jones, Mickalene Thomas, Carrie Mae Weems, Stanley Whitney, and Jack Whitten.

Mona Hadler

So, let's begin. Starting at the beginning with your roots in North Carolina, tell me about your mother, father, siblings, home, memories.

William T. Williams

I was born in Cross Creek, North Carolina. Cross Creek has been absorbed by Fayetteville. My father was William Thomas Williams. My mother was Hazel Davis Williams. My mother was from Love Grove, and my father was from Spring Lake. They were really just adjoining towns. My father came from a large family. They were thirteen in his family. My mother's was four girls. My mother's mother lived to ninety-eight. All of my mother's sisters except for one lived into their nineties.

MH

Wow, that's good genetics.

WTW

Good genetics on that side. My father's, most of them, again, except for one, lived until their eighties. I grew up in a rural community. The biggest employer in the area was either Fort Bragg, an army base, or in working farmland.

MH

And what did your dad do?

WTW

He worked for the US government in one form or another his whole career until he

retired. And when he retired he started working for the New York City juvenile courts.

MH

I noticed reading about the Smokehouse Associates murals in Harlem, in New York City, and your involvement in Studio Museum that you have a strong social conscience particularly involving youth. Do you think it comes from this part of your background?

WTW

I think so. My dad was a little league baseball manager and coach. He was always involved in the community and in trying to keep us on the straight and narrow path.

MH

And your situation must have been secure because your dad's government jobs and the GI Bill would have afforded you economic stability.

WTW

My dad had a strong work ethic. He was a strong believer in the notion of hard work.

I have a brother on my father's side, John Farmer. He was a career soldier and spent seventeen years in the military. He did two tours of duty in Vietnam. After his military service, he went to divinity school to become a minister.

MH

So he's your only sibling. Your parents must have really taken care of you as an only child, nurturing you.

WTW

My parents were very protective. A great deal of discipline. Education was a priority. They were good parents.

MH

Yes, they sound like it.

WTW

Very good parents. My mother and father were very supportive of anything I wanted to do. Here's an interesting story: when I first started arts school I came home. I was taking a painting class, and I said, "Dad, I need money to buy canvas."

And he said, "Oh, alright." So the next day, he brought home all these army tents that were made of canvas, these green army tents to paint on. (*laughter*)

MH

Did you use them?

WTW

Actually, the early Pratt paintings were on army tents. Stretched—

MH

Do you have them?

WTW

I do not have those.

WTW

When I told them I wanted to go to art school and I wanted to be an artist, they never once said, "How are you going to make a living?" They just said, "Go for it."

MH

When you were little, did they encourage your artistic talent?

WTW

They would buy materials. They realized that it was something that I wanted.

MH

And how early did you know that you wanted to make art?

WTW

I started art school when I was fourteen and didn't come out of art school until after I had completed my graduate degree at twenty-four.

MH

Describe your life in rural North Carolina.

WTW

The area I grew up in in North Carolina was called the Hill, primarily because there was a transition up a hill. At the top of the hill is pretty much where all my relatives lived. It's a really extended family. Maybe there are fifty acres in that area, and all the families are interrelated, or rather cousins, the children of brothers and sisters. But the top of this hill was a very insulated community. A dirt road got you up to the top of the Hill, and a very diverse range of people in terms of experiences lived there. It was an agricultural community; cotton and tobacco were the main crops.

On one side was a Rockefeller estate called Overhills, a riding estate, and they must have owned eighty or ninety thousand acres; on the other side was the army base at Fort Bragg—meaning you had to go through a very narrow channel to get up to where we were. So we were kind of insulated.

MH

But it's nice to be surrounded by family like that.

WTW

It was very nice for me because I could wander, and I would just wander to another relative's house. That's the way I grew up, in that kind of extended family.

MH

That's beautiful.

WTW

Yep.

MH

You talk about the importance of quilts from your childhood.

WTW

Mm-hmm.

MH

In New York, in the Adirondacks in the summer, I go to quilt shows because I'm interested in the women who make the quilts and in what they're doing, and I talk to them. What kind of quilts did your family make?

WTW

Patchwork quilts. Most of them were literally geometry. In most cases they were rectilinear shapes that were sewn together. They were made out of clothing that had been worn out or tossed. Rarely, if ever, can I remember their using store-bought material for making the quilts. They were utilitarian quilts.

MH

And did the women invent the pattern? Or did they use log cabin or traditional patterns?

WTW

It was more inventive. They were not making individual parts to assemble a whole. They were putting rectilinear shapes next to each other. The difference was the

shifting in the scale of the parts, but in terms of the traditional pattern, no it was much more like Gee's Bend.

MH

That's what I was going to ask you—if the quilts were primarily geometrical.

WTW

Yes, in terms of compositional movement and of their interest in pattern and color.

MH

And did they value the aesthetics of the quilts, or simply their functionality? Or did they not talk about aesthetics?

WTW

I really don't know. I mean, you could tell the difference between the quilts in terms of who made them, but I'm not sure they discussed the quilts' aesthetic value.

MH

When I asked the Raquette River quilters in the Adirondacks whether they prized the innovation of the design, they stressed the importance of the craft, of how the quilts were sewn.

WTW

Most of the quilts were very practical in terms of the sewing, so the utilitarian aspect was probably the first focus, and the aesthetics were likely to have been the second focus. There were no quilting bees as such or collaborative quilt-making. They were individual women. It was certainly their outlet in terms of the creative process. Just about every household had old sewing machines, the foot-driven kind.

MH

The quilts never sold? They were just for family use?

WTW

They were never sold.

MH

Were you sleeping in those quilts?

WTW

Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. I didn't really come to terms with the quilts as a kind of

visual expression until I was in my first or second year of art school at Pratt. Only then did the connection between the quilts and what I was doing begin to come together.

MH

It didn't seem to you then to be a feminine tradition distinct from a more masculine minimalist painting tradition? I am referring to current gender critiques of minimalism.

WTW

I wasn't thinking about them in terms of gender whatsoever. I was looking at them as objects, as an experience that I had as a child. And I was looking at the visual information they contained. The quilts were very much like the stained glass windows of a church. They were simple in terms of design; there were no depictions of angels or anything figurative. It was all geometry.

MH

What denomination?

WTW

AME, or African Methodist Episcopal.

MH

And there wasn't a prohibition against imagery?

WTW

They were just simple. I think they were probably the least expensive kind of window there was.

MH

When I was reading about your Smokehouse murals, I came across an interesting essay by Michel Oren. He writes that the imagery was designed to shift on the walls as you walk past them.

WTW

Mm-hmm.

MH

And that made me think of living with quilts or walking past stained-glass windows. The experience is phenomenological—about the moving and perceiving body. I also think of Sonia Delaunay wearing her dresses.

WTW

Yep, I loved her work. You know the quilts and stained glass windows were a kind of visual stimuli, much like caning. Caning, like reweaving chairs, was something that men did.

MH

Did you? Were you taught how to cane?

WTW

I was not. I left North Carolina when I was in kindergarten, and although I returned to North Carolina for first grade, thereafter I went to school in New York. But I went back to North Carolina every summer. You know, three days after school was over my parents put me on a bus.

MH

To your relatives.

WTW

They sent me back to North Carolina until September.

MH

It was typical for quilt-making to be done by women and caning by men because furniture repair can be seen as a masculine task and quilt-making was considered feminine. But in appreciating the quilts, you did not consider that you were appreciating women's work specifically?

WTW

I don't think I thought that way. You know, I thought of quilt-making as a heritable kind of thing.

MH

Well, what about in the '70s, with the women's movement and the pattern and decoration artists? Many feminists claimed crafts and quilts as their tradition.

WTW

You know, at the time my grandmother was still alive and making quilts. She was in New York by then. She was still making quilts in what I would call the traditional way, with clothing or something bought that was being transformed. Attaching gender to quilt-making is not something that I really thought about. The quilts were heritable phenomena, and that's how I thought about them.

MH

So, let's get you to New York, out to Far Rockaway, in Queens. Before you went to High School of Art and Design in your early years, did you have any experience with art or sense that you would become an artist?

WTW

I did. I went to Junior High School 198 in Queens in 1955. For where we lived, it was a new junior high school. It brought together four communities: Broad Channel, which was an Italian community; Wave Crest, a Jewish community; an Irish American community; and a black community. All of these communities were together in one giant high school. When I got there, there were twenty-one classes in the seventh grade: 7-1 to 7-21.

MH

(laughter)

WTW

So there were twenty-one classes.

MH

Wow.

WTW

It was a real change for me in terms of education, but to my luck there was a lady there named Mrs. Ross who taught art, and she began to mentor me. She saw that I was interested in art. She understood where I was coming from. My parents were living at the Redfern Houses, a public housing project, and Mrs. Ross began to provide not only instructions but also a kind of structure for me to begin to think about the arts. She was instrumental in getting me from Far Rockaway to High School of Art and Design, in Manhattan.

MH

Hmm. Did you ever speak to her again? Or make contact?

WTW

No. By the time I finished high school and went through art school and so on she had retired.

MH

It's funny, we educators can have these—*(laughter)*

WTW

That's right. A social worker named Tommy Hemans was also an instrumental influence. Tommy ran the housing project community center. He was a tall, African American man—must have been six-foot eight inches—who played basketball at Niagara University, near Buffalo, New York. He also had an interest in the arts, and he provided me with a little room in the community center that became my studio. He even provided me with materials. Later, he joined an organization called the AAA Courtsmen as a semiprofessional basketball player. He introduced me to the people that were in this club or fraternity or whatever you'd call it. Eventually they gave me a scholarship.

MH

I was going to ask you if you were athletic?

WTW

When I was younger I played basketball and ran track and was very involved in athletics. The ironic part is that the basketball coach at St. John's University, New York, Joe Lapchick, turned out to be the father of Barbara Lapcek, who would eventually become the director of Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.

MH

Ah! (*laughter*)

WTW

So this is how small and ironic it is. During a conversation with Barbara Lapcek, I mentioned the Courtsmen, and she said that her father was involved with it. I said, "Joe Lapchick!" And she said, "Yeah!" The Courtsmen gave me money that allowed me to go to school. Today Tommy runs the Public Schools Athletic League. You know, over the years a chain of people has helped focus me on art-making. Far Rockaway was a good place in terms of the schools. The public school I went to was good. The junior high school was excellent to mediocre depending on what class you were in, so my early education in the public school system was good.

MH

So let's get you to Pratt. In 1962 you enrolled in Pratt where you studied with Richard Lindner, Philip Pearlstein, and Alex Katz. Did you also know Philip's wife, Dorothy Cantor?

WTW

I knew Philip and Dorothy from Pratt. Dorothy taught a course with Gabe Laderman, a figurative painter. That's when I first came into contact with her. Alex was at Pratt also.



William T. Williams in his 654 Broadway Studio, Photograph by Irene Stern. Courtesy of the Artist.

MH

So Pratt was figurative land?

WTW

It was figurative land, and the savior was Ernie Briggs, Anne Arnold's husband, who was there teaching as one of the few abstract painters. He was the first abstract painter I came into contact with at Pratt. All the other teachers that I had prior to him were figurative. The person who was most influential in terms of early training was a man named Richard Bove. He took an interest in me and had me focus on artists whom he thought I should know about. The turning point in my education at Pratt was when Bove sent me up to the Kootz Gallery to see a Hans Hofmann show.

MH

Ah, yes.

WTW

You know, he just stopped me in the class and said, "I want you to go see this show." He gave me carfare. I went up to see it and the freedom of the paint, the exuberance, had me completely turned around. That was a turning point. Everything I had previously thought about painting changed. Lindner was also helpful in this respect. His class was called creative expression, or something like that, but the class took us to different locations.

MH

You were not painting abstractly at Pratt?

WTW

I wasn't painting abstractly.

MH

So what kind of images were you doing?

WTW

I was doing what I was asked to do in the classroom: painting still lifes and live models.

MH

Philip used to talk about how the content didn't matter, how it was all abstract. Even Lennart [Anderson] made a similar argument. These painters were obsessed with being figurative in the age of abstraction. *(laughter)*

WTW

(laughter) Right, it was about survival.

MH

But on the other hand, Philip was intent on having his paintings seen as abstract in many ways.

WTW

I think Philip taught a particular attitude toward composition and how it fits in the rectangle. There is a formalness behind that.

MH

Yes.

WTW

I also think his philosophy in terms of what art can be is pretty open. Alex, too, was kind of formalist.

MH

Yes.

WTW

He talked a lot about composing the color and shape of one's work. So both Philip and Alex offered entry points to abstraction for those interested. I also had Lennart Anderson as a teacher.

MH

You had Lennart as a teacher? Where? *(laughter)*

WTW

At Pratt.

MH

Well, he was also formalist, except he was obsessed with the light.

WTW

I had Lennart as a drawing teacher. I also had Richard Navin as a teacher.

MH

Oh my goodness!

WTW

I had Murray Israel as a teacher.

MH

For the reader, these are all colleagues of ours at Brooklyn College.

WTW

(laughter) I had every one of them as a teacher at Pratt, so when I came to Brooklyn to teach it was—

MH

—family.

WTW

Yes, pretty much.



William T. Williams and Mona Hadler with Colleagues at Brooklyn College, c. 1980, Courtesy of the Artist

MH

Yes, I can see that. I didn't know that, but you know your paintings do all have a kind of compositional resolve.

WTW

Yes.

MH

Which in minimalism is what you call "relational," versus "nonrelational," and your art has this too. There is a sense in which every one of your paintings resolves itself. In other words, they don't display one form after another; they're not examples of seriality or of minimalism. Rather they are about compositional resolve.

WTW

Very much so. Very much so.

MH

You know, as Lennart said, You move the lemon one half-inch and you have to make a whole other painting to resolve everything else. You have to start again. And Hofmann thought so too.

WTW

But that's why I connect with quilts because they are both about the relationship between parts and the whole. You know, rather than having a whole and then producing something inside of it, you're literally constructing something, moving from one little shape to another shape and another shape and another shape. All that relational stuff is what brings you to the whole. So the idea of working from the part to the whole, of relational composition, was something that seemed very natural to me.

MH

Well, it is very much in your art and in the work of Al Held. We'll get to this sense of an overall complexity of design that has been organized together. There is a structural organization that is very different from Donald Judd's multiple boxes in a row or even Agnes Martin's grids. This strikes me very much in looking at your art and in the history of the people whose work can be likened to yours.

WTW

Well, during my time with them as a student and throughout my career, each one of them gave me insight into what they were doing and insight into stuff that I could use in relation to what I wanted to do. I enjoyed working with all of them, and I probably learned the most during the time that I taught at Brooklyn College, from 1971–2008, by going through crits, being with students, listening to figurative painters talk about what they were doing, and really listening more than talking. It was helping me weed out what I was interested in and break from the preceding generation and the way they thought about what painting could be. I wasn't really interested in abstract expressionism, and I wasn't really interested in figuration. I was interested in where they started, but that's not quite what I wanted. I wanted to make something that resonated more with heritable information — "autobiographical information" might be a better way of saying it.

MH

Such as the quilts?

WTW

Such as the quilts. You know, I wanted to find something that had autobiographical associations, heritable associations. When I say "heritable," I mean literally that I'm inheriting something because I've experienced it.

MH

That's where terrific art comes from. If you're not invested personally, socially, how can you do it?

WTW

It makes it a little difficult. So during that period of going and listening to all those crits, I was trying to come to terms with my students' ideas about how to make this thing better. A lot of their criticism was tied into something that I wasn't invested in and this gave me an objective way of listening and looking. I found very often the students were invested in the work of their peers in terms of learning a skill but not emotionally invested. They were interested in becoming full artists or realized artists. I remember in one of the crits, at Brooklyn, someone said, "You're drinking wine out of someone else's glass." I took that to mean that the student was too invested and locked into a particular history rather than trying to find what was new. Most of the other professors were almost twice my age. The conversations that I had with painters, Harry Holtzman and Jimmy Ernst—because I was in the same office with them—and with Philip were invaluable. Over the

years, talking with them and listening to what they had to say was really helpful because I could see the generational differences. I could see it in the older faculty who were European. I could see the differences in their attitudes toward making art as compared to the American artists on faculty. To me, there were two traditions that were making art. They were all involved in this idea of modernism, but they were coming to it with different experiences. Like D'Arcangelo as opposed to—

MH

Ernst?

WTW

Ernst would be a good example of someone coming from a totally different position. A lot of that got sorted out for me when I was there.

MH

That's fascinating to me. Holtzman was an advocate for Mondrian.

WTW

Yes, he was.

MH

That was his life's work, as it was for Martin James. James and Holtzman worked together, and there is Mondrian and anti-Mondrian in your work. (*laughter*)

WTW

I like the neoplastic tradition in art. I like Mondrian. I like the Russian constructivists.

MH

El Lissitzky. They are gorgeous. I love them too. Well, I prefer to let our conversational threads take us to ideas rather proceeding chronologically. I'm looking at this work right here. What's the name of it?

WTW

This one is *Indian Summer* (1973).



Indian Summer, 1973, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 24 3/4 in.

MH

I see Mondrian, the diagonal to the edge—it balances the work. But in other ways, it's not like Mondrian. I noticed you don't paint around the edges.

WTW

I don't. If you paint around the edge it makes the painting an object.

MH

That's neoplasticism. Exactly. (*laughter*) That's Mondrian. That's where I'm going.

WTW

If you leave the paint on the inside, you're looking into something with volume. There is an idea of illusory space.

MH

Which is exactly what Mondrian doesn't do. He also doesn't do brushstrokes, which are visible in your paintings?

WTW

My interest in texture and mark making came out of the late '60s. For example, in this painting, it's called *1940* (1970).



1940, 1970, acrylic on canvas, 108 x 84 in.

MH

Beautiful. I love it.

WTW

More and more I wanted texture, a sense of mark or touch, the tactile, you know—the immediacy of a material. I wasn't getting that making flat surfaces with flat paint. And the desire to make it more physical, make it more sensuous, it just started seeping in. For me, visual experience comes through the tactile; the tactile is the first experience one has as a human being. The sense of touch precedes vision—certainly it precedes logical vision. I wanted to connect with the history of painting in terms of the history of touch. Which is not necessarily the history of the brush—because what I had been taught, what I was rejecting, was the history of the brush.

MH

So how do you distinguish between brush and touch?

WTW

The break for me is Mondrian. The removal of brush allowed for a different attitude toward abstraction and for a constructive engagement—not in terms of imagery but of what the paint does on its surface. So much of that has to do with how you drag the brush, how you pull it, how much pressure you put on it—there are all of these manipulations you can do with the brush. For me the history of painting had been the history of the brush up until a certain point. Then there was a break and it was as if the brush were another technology. The brush was used primarily as a tool to mechanically describe a volume. But for the Impressionists, the brush is a tool to mark a specific location. All of it has to do, again, with this artist standing in front with his tool, which just happens to be a brush. For me, there were real limitations to that at a certain point when I was making art. The shimmering paintings came from my desire to do two things: to make it impossible to locate where that surface was so that it's not like a piece of glass; to make a mark that was undeniably *my* mark. That there be no precedent for that mark was the driving force of my work from then on. I wanted to arrive at a mark-making system that evolved out of my painting instead of being tied to the history of the brush, to description. The mark making is not tied to a certain kind of action with the brush.

MH

Hmm...this is a tall order, taking on mark making and separating it from the

tradition of the brushstroke.

WTW

Well, that's been the underlying force in all of the works since 1969.

MH

But you do use brushes?

WTW

I do use brushes.

MH

I guess for someone like you, coming after the abstract expressionist movement, the whole idea of the brushstroke was so loaded. You were beginning in the late '60s and early '70s, when abstract expressionism was much cooler and more distanced. It seems to me you wanted to separate yourself from the angst and existentialism of the abstract expressionists but did not entirely engage in the distance of the minimalist artists. Am I correct?

WTW

You are correct. The progression of the minimalist idea was interesting in terms of reducing the work in a way that involved the, what I would call, "solid value" of all that stuff that abstract expressionists did.

MH

(laughter) What Harold Rosenberg called, "The arena."

WTW

"The arena." There was no psychic place for me in minimalism because it was an art historical idea. I saw it as based upon the idea of making art in relationship to something that preceded it. It was more an art historian's art than a painter's art.

MH

The minimalists were so involved in objects as sculpture, painting as sculpture. You don't do shaped canvases, for example.

WTW

I don't do that. When I was at Pratt I made some shaped things. I got away from that because I found myself too involved in carpentry, and because once I had decided on the shape and then made the shape, it was a forgone conclusion what the painting was going to be. I was merely making stuff. There was no emotion involved, and that bothered me.

MH

But also, for shaped canvases, the primary dialogue is between the edges and the interior, and that doesn't seem to be what interests you.

WTW

I would agree—that's not quite what I'm involved in. In all of these paintings, my interest in the edges was mostly about their shape, and how they form a diamond at the edge.

MH

But by not painting the corners, as you say, you bring us back to the surface.

WTW

Yes. During this period of the late '60s/early '70s, I made a conscious decision to complete the forms within the frame and have the work serve as a metaphor for containment. The works have a sense of restrictiveness or of repression, and this containment is underneath all those paintings of that period. It's a metaphor for what was going on around me. I didn't want to paint figuratively. I didn't want something that was overtly referencing the social issues around me, but I wanted to find a way to describe them. How do you internalize this? How do you make a form that forces a painting to be an experience that is not necessarily easy to see, handle, or look at? And multileveled or polyphonic complexity, something I was finding in music, is one way of going about this. Musicians were beginning to do this, and it seemed to me to open another kind of dialogue, a different way of seeing things.

MH

There are so many things I want to ask you, but let's go back to the idea of the turbulent '60s and your use of compression or restriction as a way to express your concerns. I've done a lot of work on abstraction in the postwar era, what it means, and what it doesn't mean, and I find what you're doing fascinating in relation to these questions. In London in the mid-'50s there was a competition called "The Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner" that Reg Butler won. He was for the most part a welding abstractionist when debates were raging about how one could deal with the Holocaust, with World War II, and whether abstraction had any role to play. Nathan Rapoport, the sculptor who did the Warsaw Ghetto monument asked, "How can I do all the sufferings of the Jews with a circle?" And then someone else said, "How can I do the people's sufferings with one figure?" Was

the debate about the appropriateness of abstraction versus realism taking place in the African American community too?

WTW

Yes, it was.

MH

Did you get any criticism from African American writers, artists, performers, for working with abstraction?

WTW

Absolutely. Not only for being abstract but for coming out of Yale's graduate school. That was a big hammer constantly swinging down at me.

MH

You were "elitist."

WTW

Exactly. But if you look at how many African Americans involved in the arts at that time came out of the Ivy League, you will find that it had a huge impact on literature and the visual arts. It had an impact on the visual arts because many African American painters who taught in historically black colleges had gone to Columbia University or Penn to take classes in the summer. The idea was to connect with other voices. Intellectual contact meant building something. If we look at the visual arts today, there is an undeniable connection with the Ivy League, and I don't mean Ivy League in an elitist way. I just mean it's a place, a point where there's dialogue going on. You are being exposed to lots and lots of ideas, and it's the exposure to those ideas that allows what we would call "the black art movement" to really thrive. It's not an isolated phenomenon, and sometimes it's written about as if it was immaculately conceived in Harlem, or in Detroit, but it's much more complex than that.

MH

The movement has fed on multiple ideas from different institutions.

WTW

Exactly.

MH

Even though, as you say, City University of New York (CUNY) can be a place just as rich for students to learn, but in your case it came from this background.

WTW

Yes, I also went through the CUNY system. I thought that abstraction could address the human spirit just as well as representation. I wasn't interested in making representational paintings, and for me art-making is about what interests me. I'm interested in painting, but I don't want to paint the figure because there is baggage attached to the figure that I can't get around. You know, the imagery maybe is an example—you can use the traditions of the Renaissance to paint a black figure.

MH

And people do. (*laughter*) And people do.

WTW

Am I looking at the black figure and bringing content to it? Or am I looking at the tradition itself? Sometimes a work's content exists in the tradition, the origin of the tradition, rather than in what is being depicted. If I'm trying to find a new aesthetic while also trying to express ideas that have to do specifically with black culture, what are the means that I have at my disposal? I think this is the underlying issue in the conversation around representation or abstraction and whether it's inherent in the form or the content or the depiction.

MH

Yes, the literature describes it as double marginalization. On the one hand, African American abstractionists from that era sought to be recognized by institutions that ignored them, such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York, which has collected your work. On the other hand, the same group of abstractionists was marginalized by leftist African American artists who eschewed abstraction. What's left is the choice between Scylla and Charybdis. [While sailing the Aegean Sea, the Greek hero Odysseus had to choose which of these mythical monsters he would face.]

WTW

Well, and that becomes a question of power. When you allow external forces to decide what you can and cannot do, you end up abdicating what I call the responsibility of the artist; and if you allow the mass consciousness to make that decision for you, you're doing the same thing.

MH

Well, you did your own work.

WTW

Yes, or you have to say that's one thing, but that's not what happens in the studio. That's not what happens in my mind. It may be, you know, I go out into the street and feel all these indignities and on. Unless I internalize this information and find a way of using it in my art, it's just another experience I've had.

MH

Let's go back to New York and to the Smokehouse murals, because what you all did with those was amazing. Frankly, it blows me away. (*laughter*) I also see Smokehouse in relationship, and I know you do too, to different mural movements — City Arts, City Walls in Chicago, the AfriCobra group, groups like that. How did it start? I know you were a major force in it.

WTW

When I got out of grad school at Yale, I got a studio on Broadway. My neighbor downstairs was Ken Noland. Joel Shapiro was on the floor above me. I began to wonder, Why does art have to be shown in galleries? Why do we need a special temple where we go see this stuff? Is that all art can do? What about art-making in a public space? And what responsibilities do artists have if they do something in public space? What's the function of the artist? What can I do in my studio that I can't do in a public space? I think you have to get rid of something before you can do it in a public space, so the idea of collaboration came up. There were four of us: Billy Rose, who was a young painter still at Pratt; Guy Ciarcia, who had been a classmate of mine at Pratt; Mel Edwards, the sculptor; and myself. Mel, a sculptor, had recently come to New York from the West Coast and was well versed in the Mexican muralists. And Guy Ciarcia was hugely interested in the Italian Renaissance, so we had these two polar—

MH

Mural thinkers. (*laughter*)



Smokehouse Associates founders Melvin Edwards (Left), Billy Rose, Guy Ciarcia, and William T. Williams, c.1968-70

WTW

Working together was truly a collaborative process because we were collectively painting a wall. We collectively prepared the design, and, as problems arose, we responded to them with changes on-site. It is not as if we were working with a prepared surface. We were working with brick paddings, walls that had been replastered or repaired at some point and that have all of these imperfections. We were painting over these imperfections and had to make decisions about how to deal with them. The greatest part for me was the idea of four people exchanging ideas about public art, and the responsibility we have as artists when we're putting something in the public domain. And this led each of us to examine our own studio practices. Are they private endeavors or public endeavors? What happens to a work of art once it leaves the studio? What's the artist's responsibility to the work?

Collaborating was difficult but also hashing out ideas and trying things out was exciting, too. If one thing didn't work out, we tried something else. Basically that

was the process—trial and error. But my sense of social responsibility toward the work once it leaves my studio came out of the same process. Once a work leaves the studio, it's a whole different dialogue, a whole different context, and the work takes on new associations.

MH

What does this mean for easel paintings?

WTW

As long as you are in the art world, as long as you are in a community of professionals who are involved in making art and in disseminating ideas that interpret or criticize art, you are addressing one audience using one language. When you begin to deal with people who are less familiar with the arts, and they're coming in and looking at an object, it's a whole different dialogue. That led me to think about the role and function of museums and of myself as an artist in relation to having an object in a museum. An object is far more influential when it's hanging on a museum wall than it is when it's hanging on a wall outside because it has all the stamps of approval, the stamps of authenticity. My Smokehouse collaborators, we recognized this, and it led us to discussions about how an object enters a museum. What's the function of a museum? What kind of objects enter the museum and why? How do you open up a bigger discourse in terms of what art can do. All of these questions spun out of that Smokehouse crew. We began by talking, and finally we got some money to do the first murals, and the idea was, all right, We're a collective, and no one will put his name out there. You go home, you do something, you come back, you propose. The rest of the crew looks at it, modifies it. We do all this. We get the community involved.

MH

How?

WTW

We did that in two ways. First, we had to get permission from whomever owned the buildings to paint on them. That was the first step. The second step was finding out who the community leaders were and having a conversation with them.

MH

And who would they have been?

WTW

Well, usually there's a councilman. Sometimes on a block there's a person who is most vocal about social responsibility, and we would just seek out that person out.

MH

This is in the age of Jane Jacobs. (*laughter*)

WTW

We would seek these people out and talk with them. We would never do what they wanted.

MH

Did they want social realism?

WTW

In most cases, they didn't know what they wanted. They were focused on the idea of someone coming in and trying make their lives better. We decided that the architecture, the 19th-century grid they were living in was part of the problem and that we would address it in terms of the architecture, and that's where we started. All of the projects had to do with this idea, OK, what do we do with the architecture surrounding us? How do we make something that relates to it? Brings attention to it? We wanted people to begin to think about the physical, architectonic thing that they live in as opposed to the larger social and political context. There was nothing I personally could do about the design of Washington DC, but I could make people very aware of their own block and the dilapidation of wherever they might be. We can bring heightened experience, and hopefully this will spur them onto development thinking and so on. We always hired someone from the community. We wanted at least one elderly person and also kids to be involved in the project. We were hoping, obviously, to get kids involved in the arts and to provide revenue to someone in the community who was elderly but still able-bodied.

MH

I understand that you raised money, and then you paid people with what you raised, which is great. So, what was the response? Do you feel that on some level it succeeded as a social experiment? Did it validate your ideas that art can be important to people?

WTW

I think it was. One of the first things that we tackled was Sylvan Place at 121st and Sylvan. It was a courthouse building that had been abandoned, and there was a little vest pocket park there. First, we got funding from the Department of Parks and Recreation through Doris Friedman so that we could come in and clean the place. After we worked on it, the parks department came in and fixed it up. They put new rails on the benches. That happened and people gradually started sitting in the park. That was fifty-two years ago. The mural that we painted has been painted over; it's long gone. But in terms of the social experiment, this thing is still alive. When we started there, it was littered with bottles and needles and everything else.

MH

I remember the era and its politics. I remember having to justify being an art historian.

WTW

Yep.

MH

Art history wasn't political enough. It was considered elitist. Instead I should be heading an abortion center or something like that. It was hard to justify aesthetics as meaningful in that political context.

WTW

Yes, well, the conditions of the society are often severe, but not everyone's cut out to do work that addresses them. There are other parts of society that have to go on also, simultaneously.

MH

Right. I mean, I'm sure you had to justify why, when there were so many problems in Harlem at that point, you were just beautifying a wall.

WTW

Well, the whole point was that we were not just beautifying a wall. We had Nina Simone as a voice. We had Mahalia Jackson as a voice. We had Dinah Washington as a voice. The diversity of these voices gave rise to change. There is no one singular way of doing something. If there is thought to be only one way of changing something, it is doomed to fail, especially in politics. It will fail. We need a diversity of opinions looking at a problem from different angles; some will be

sacrificial, and some will succeed. There are different ways of looking at how a society is organized, and how to effectively get change, and that's what we did. We took a proposal to Mayor John Lindsay at that point, so we could get money through the parks department. We had to learn the whole process of having a tax-deferment number and of finding a surrogate who could do that for us. All of that was a learning curve for me. Meanwhile, we were all still trying to work in our studios to keep a body of work going. We took this proposal to Washington, DC, to meet Pattie Harris, the head of HEW [Department of Health, Education, and Welfare], and pitched a role for ourselves in relation to public housing and improving their aesthetics. We argued that aesthetics don't have to evolve from the top down, that we are all entitled to those experiences, which I think is what a museum should be about. They came to realize what they *should* be about as opposed to what they had been about in the past.

MH

It's a fantastic idea, but did the community appreciate it, you think? Well, they appreciated the park; but what about your murals?

WTW

We never got any criticism about the style or approach of the murals from anyone in all of the years that we were doing them. The criticisms came later and had to do with what different groups thought was most important. It had to do with the press, and how they depict something that becomes an icon and the press message used to illustrate some idea, some place that becomes a benchmark of what this movement was about, and that's not really accurate.

MH

I actually didn't read any criticisms of the project. Everything I read seemed to be rather positive.

WTW

We never got criticism from any of the communities that we were involved with. We tried to be as unobtrusive as possible, and given the diverse backgrounds of the four people involved in Smokehouse, each of us faced a learning curve—not only about each other but also about our negotiating our ideas in relation to public art and about taking responsibility for what we did.



Completed Mural at East 123 Street, New York City, Art work created by Smokehouse Associates.

MH

It's a huge topic. Think of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*—the community response to where it was placed and then the debates around its removal. I wonder about the relationship between City Arts and City Walls. Did you talk to Allan D'Arcangelo at Brooklyn College? Wasn't he part of City Walls?

WTW

I did talk to Allan many times about public art. I got to know him because of City Walls and also because of Doris Friedman and the parks department. Doris was a catalyst for both groups. The difference was that one group was uptown and the other was downtown. The funding was different. City Walls was getting considerably more money than we were, and the scale of the projects they were doing was drastically different. There was the piece right down the street on Broadway by Forrest Meyers, right on East Houston and Broadway. It was called "The Wall" piece—a big, blue wall with Don Judd forms coming out of it. We knew of those groups because I was living here in SoHo and most of those guys were living here. We had conversations.

MH

But no one pushed for you to avoid being abstract in those murals?

WTW

No, no. There was no pushback from the parks department or anyone in the group when someone made nonrepresentational work.

MH

And the locals—did they want you to be representational?

WTW

Never.

MH

Because that's something I always thought that, rightly or wrongly, when it comes out of the community, it very often has to do with a sort of social activism versus when it comes out of the arts community where abstraction prevails.

WTW

That gets back to how much art experience they've had. How much they've seen. It becomes a really loaded issue as well.

MH

I was also interested in what you said about movement in relation to the quilts earlier—that there are visual changes with the movement of the body. This was an aspect of minimalism at that point also. Robert Morris and artists engaged with a more phenomenological attitude toward the moving body in space and shifting perceptions of the spectators. I'm sure this is throwing you back to debates in the '60s and early '70s.

WTW

Well, we started the earlier murals where we could find blank walls. We realized very quickly that we were running out of blank walls, so we started going between buildings and through alleyways. The last project we did was a pocket park formed by the back of some buildings, and that's probably where the most time was invested. There is all this space that exists but that you don't see because of that 19th-century grid; because of the backyards and the back alleyways. We started working through the alleyways. We had lots of ideas we wanted to try, but every time you try something you have to keep in mind it's someone's home, it's someone's community, and we may be invested in those ideas and interests, but

really you're impacting people's lives. And that's where the discussions among the four of us began to take hold.

MH

Can you elaborate? In what ways were you impacting their lives that you wanted to be aware of?

WTW

We didn't want the work to become a landmark, like some works of art that, no matter how good they are, you stop seeing them. After a while, you don't see the work. You just make arrangements, say, to go to the corner where "that thing" is. When that happens, it means that the object is not resonating with the community anymore. It could be a lamppost for all intents and purposes. There's no emotional involvement. So we wanted to think through questions around, If you put something in public space, when does it stop being a thing that you engage with?

MH

"You" as an artist? A viewer? The spectator?

WTW

The viewer, the community. The community stops having a relationship with it.

MH

How can you control that?

WTW

You can't. But it comes down to the idea of the responsibilities of the artist when you put something in public space. Ultimately, it is going to become a landmark unless it's of such enormous magnitude as a visual work of art that it holds that space for a long period of time. Most of the time it's not going to hold that space. So that's what I mean about responsibility.

MH

So is that why you stopped doing it? You felt it was just becoming a place marker and not having the same impact on community anymore?

WTW

It would only have an impact if we started with the architect. You flatten it. You start again. What is it? Brasília or something?

MH

Yes.

WTW

Then you can have that impact. But the idea of dropping something into an established context for me doesn't work. It has to have a relationship with the architecture around it. The dialogue is always between that work of art and the architecture, and the architecture and the people, and the traffic patterns through and around something. If it's not doing all that, then it's merely been a place marker. That's why we eventually stopped because we really wanted to work from a point of impact. The landscape architect Michael Paul Freiburg and I worked on a project—a little pocket park on the West Side at about Ninetieth Street. The same issue came up because he had a design and then wanted to put something in it, but it was an afterthought. I didn't want to work on an afterthought.

MH

Well, I can understand that, because your whole attitude toward art is so much about fundamentals and structure and the underlying meaning of the forms, the language of the paint. I understand that you would care about how the art would integrate into the architecture and that you wouldn't want to simply put it down like a poster.

WTW

Yep, I did not want to do that. I wanted it to be a little more organic, and those opportunities are very, very rare. A lot of the GSA [General Services Administration] projects are classic examples, the Beverly—God, what's her name? If you go straight down Broadway to the federal courthouse—

MH

Beverly Pepper?

WTW

Yes. The Beverly Pepper sculptures that went up changed everything around them. They erected fences around the piece. It's like a hodgepodge, and yet the objects themselves are quite extraordinary. Their relationship to the architecture and their relationship to all this new security stuff that was put around the sculptures; it's the hope that the content is about something else, and I think it was the same thing with the Richard Serra. When the sculpture was erected in Federal Plaza his intent in relation to space was one thing—

MH

But the community's response was totally different.

WTW

And that gets to the idea of the artist as the superego. What role are we playing when we put something in the public domain? I couldn't resolve it. We just stopped doing it.

MH

Right, but it must have been, in many ways, very satisfying because it was a huge effort. This was before one percent of the budget for any building had to be for art. The idea that somehow you could eventually try to make a change and impact the lives of the people. That must have been very satisfying. Or maybe, conversely, very disappointing.

WTW

(laughter) I was just a younger person trying out ideas to see what was possible.

MH

You know Smokehouse is something I didn't know about. I went to see the current show at the Studio Museum in Harlem. It's amazing on so many levels. Your experimentation with walls, for one. Or looking at the difference between Smokehouse and, say, AfriCOBRA or Chicago Walls. The viability of abstraction for working with the community is fascinating to me.

WTW

Well, so much of my background was about social work, and I was addressing what I did early on just to function.

MH

By social work background, do you mean your father?

WTW

My father was involved in community affairs. One of my earliest jobs was working as a counselor at a place out in Far Rockaway with kids who would be brought in for any number of reasons. Those kids and their disruptive families had a real impact on me. I worked in after-school programs when I was in Pratt. It was the job that allowed me to get through Pratt. I worked in after-school and evening programs at public schools from like six to nine.

MH

Plus the times were important. Rarely today does someone ask if it's elitist or not to be an art historian. But back then I felt that I should be doing something more

activist oriented. I struggled with it. You know, it was a very special moment, the late '60s and early '70s. And with all the Vietnam war controversy. Your brother—

WTW

My brother was in Vietnam.

MH

A lot of African Americans went out there, while white youths in university evaded the draft, going to their doctors or getting 4F s or getting conscientious objector status or going back to graduate school. On and on. It's a different relationship when your brother is there.

WTW

The late '60s/early '70s were a difficult time for art and for artists in general. The personal decisions that artists had to make to function were very different than the decisions they make now. When you put it in context, I was involved in the Studio Museum. Again, it has the same idea. The artist has a role to play in our communities, and it would be best were we to create a climate where artists are not all going to one place to live and function. If artists were to disperse among different communities and became invested in those communities, functioning as both purveyors of aesthetics and as role models, then there can be an alternative way of seeing the world , an alternative thing that art makes kids think about. It may open up a relationship between the visual arts and music, for example. My parents were far more obsessed with the idea of kids becoming musicians than they were visual artists because they could understand the economics of being a musician. They had no experience with fine art. Music, visual art, dance, for instance—they're all interrelated, and the more people are exposed to them, particularly young people, the better the understanding they will have. It gives them more insight into what it means to be human, and the ways we can express ideas about the commonality of people.

MH

That's so beautiful. Maybe we should end there for the time being.

[Following Williams graduation from Pratt in 1966, he enrolled in Yale's MFA program from which he earned his degree in 1968. In that same year Williams helped found the Studio Museum's Artist-in-Residence program, as well as the Smokehouse murals collective.]





J.D., 1968, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 24 3/4 in.

[After a two-week interlude, Bill and Mona reconvene in his SoHo studio to discuss his life and his recent group show *The Soul of a Nation* at the Tate Modern.]

MH

How was London?

WTW

London was terrific. I hadn't been there in forty-nine years.

MH

Wow. And it's changed?

WTW

It's changed drastically. Architecturally, it's changed. The feeling of the city has changed. It feels international. It's extraordinarily clean. Just amazing and polite—that's the other thing that struck me. The restaurants, the taxi drivers, and the people on the street were all incredibly polite. It's like you expect this bustling international city to take on some of the bad traits of big cities.

MH

And the art. I mean the art!

WTW

The art was incredible. I was struck by the number of galleries that have moved there. I was not prepared for that.

MH

So did you go around to galleries?

WTW

I did. We saw the new Marlborough and Gagosian galleries. They're very impressive.

MH

Yes, they're fantastic. And the show? Did you like the way your work was hung?

WTW

Given that there were sixty-four artists in the show, and that it tries to cover a lot of territory very quickly, they did one thing that I thought was very good. They isolated groups of artists and related thematic information together into single rooms, so when you went from one room to the next, the exhibition contextualized everything. One room displayed the abstractionists when we were younger, in 1969, and then a second room displayed our work from five years later, in 1974, showing how our work had developed. I thought that was very good.

MH

That is good. Which pieces of yours are in there?

WTW

They have a painting called *Trane* (1969) and another one called *Nu Nile* (1973). So that was good. They took paintings that got a lot of attention.



William T. Williams, *Nu Nile*, 1973.

MH

They should. (*laughter*)

WTW

They're all over the place in London and in the press. Just all over the place.

MH

That's wonderful. Let's see, *Trane* was from which period?

WTW

Trane was one of the first paintings I did when I got back to New York from Yale. They also have *Redfern* (1973–74) on the other side of here. *Redfern* really took everybody aback.



Redfern, 1973-74, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 60 in.

MH

They have *Redfern*, but it's that period?

WTW

It's that same period.

MH

It's a gorgeous period.

WTW

Monochromatic like that. It was hung in a room with a lot of painters who were interested in color field. They have a very large Sam Gilliam, which must be sixteen or seventeen feet long. And a Frank Bowling that was probably nine feet by eighteen. And a very large Jack Whitten.

MH

Did you know him?

WTW

I know Sam very well. Sam and I are very good friends. And I know Frank very well. In the '70s, when these paintings were being made, Frank's studio was two blocks down.

MH

Is it still two blocks away?

WTW

No.

MH

Because he showed with you in the exhibition *X to the Fourth Power*, and then again in the *5+1* show organized by Alloway out of Stony Brook. Am I right?

WTW

Sam was in *X to the Fourth Power* and Frank was in *5+1*. Frank's and Sam's contributions to the Tate show were very good. The West Coast painters were grouped together, highlighting their interest in assemblage. A lot of them were into that.

MH

Like Kienholz. His work had a sense of grittiness. Llyn Foulkes and Kienholz and people like that from the West Coast, definitely.

WTW

I associate Mel Edwards with New York City. But in the Tate show, you see him grouped with the West Coast artists first, and you see his work in the context of the West Coast. Then you see him among artists from New York City, in a different context, and you see how the work has developed.

MH

Is the Tate show coming to New York?

WTW

It is. It's coming to the Brooklyn Museum in 2019.

MH

Well, that's not too far away. I'm really excited to see it.

WTW

At some point, it's going to Crystal Bridges Museum, in Arkansas. That's the museum founded by the Waltons of the Walmart chain. It's supposedly a gorgeous space—large and airy. It will go there first and then to the Brooklyn Museum.

MH

So you are happy with the show?

WTW

I wouldn't quite go that far. I was happy to see the show's reception—people seemed to be looking at the work differently than they have in the past. I was happy that the show was at an international venue and that the idea of American art was being rethought.

MH

I know you also showed in an exhibition curated by Dore Ashton in the South of France. Who was in the show with you in? Did it have a sense of the international connection? Right now, art historians are interested in looking at art from an international perspective.

WTW

Yep, I was put in a room with Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, and Philip Guston.

The living artists who traveled to the show were Brice Marden, R. H. Quaytman, Frances Barth, and myself.

MH

Were you aware of the European reaction to it? Did you have a sense of how it was being received in France?

WTW

There was an emphasis on it being an American show. What I noticed was the difference in the body of work that was shown as opposed to what I was seeing in the museums.

MH

The museums or galleries?

WTW

Well, I didn't get to the galleries. The large show up in Paris at the time was a Matisse show from Russia. That was the blockbuster show. Seeing that show took a great deal of my time when I was in Paris. The Brancusi studio also struck me because seeing more of his process and of his working conditions gave me further insight into his body of work. I saw how many things he started and left unfinished, the thought process of reduction. That is what came through.

MH

Brancusi's work makes for an interesting comparison to yours. There is a similarity in your desire to produce something abstract that is filled with feeling and resonates in your own life. Brancusi's sculptures draw from his own past but are universal in their abstraction.

WTW

That's important. I think we both want to strip down the work but hold onto heart. That heart is what connects the work to a culture rather than to a movement or a moment in history. If the viewer can sense the reductive part in relation to art history and the relation to that kind of movement of modernism and also sense that there is something that turns on the imagination or turns on a sense of memory, then that is a common experience that everyone has had. A work of art that contains all of those components is a work that breathes. It lives outside of the artist. It lives outside.

MH

Universal but specific too—one wants both of those elements.

WTW

Well, music does that more easily than the visual arts; there is this instant connection to music that seems to be cross-cultural. I always have been interested in musicians even when they have different languages. Somehow they get together and play, and the language of expression is outside of words. The structure of music, or at least its commonality across cultures, is a kind of phenomenon in some way. It's interactive and playful.

MH

Your process is generally not collaborative. It is more about a direct confrontation with the canvas and the paint. I want to ask you about this in relation to your paintings from the '70s and '80s, and all the way up to the gorgeous blue ones that you did recently. But going back in time, there is a wonderful book by Caroline Jones called *Machine in the Studio*, where she contrasts the attitude of the abstract expressionists working as solitary artists in what she calls a "sacred studio" to that of Frank Stella. She's critical of Stella in certain ways, but what is important is how she depicts the abstract expressionist loner in the studio, engaged with the sublime expressivity of paint and brushstrokes, in contrast to Stella's more corporate attitude. The idea being, for Stella: I'm going to paint it, and I'm going to be done with it. And then I'm going to go home. (*laughter*)

WTW

Right.

MH

And the real revelation in her critique for me is when she compares one of Stella's shaped canvases to the Chase Manhattan logo, to which it actually looks all too similar. But you—you deal with the expressiveness of the brushstroke and of the paint and their deeper meanings, which links you to [Carl] Holty, Mondrian, and abstract expressionism, and then, on the other hand, you also say that you want to stay away from the history of the brush. So you're somewhere between two practices, and I wanted you to talk more about that.

WTW

What I like about Frank's work was that there was a decisiveness in terms of his studio action. He removed some of the tentativeness that I always disliked in abstract expressionists—what I call "sword fighting." You sword fight in the studio for five hours and hopefully something is going to come out of it. That always

seemed to me like extraneous emotion. I thought there was a cleaner way of putting it to resolution.

MH

Which is why you were so cutting edge as a painter at that time—and still are today.

WTW

What I see as a drastic difference between Frank's work and my own work is the intellectual mode. For him, he gets an idea, he executes the idea, and the idea is executed. It resonates in terms of art history. It doesn't necessarily resonate in terms of painting. It becomes an intellectual idea that has been carried through. A lot of his work early on was about taking a conceptual idea and executing it. The object was there, hence his phrase was "What you see is what you see."

MH

Right, it's done and you go home. You have dinner—like a workingman.

WTW

There was no psychic place for me there. In other words, art about art was not allowing me to work on the emotional or cultural level that I desired at that specific time. I always wanted something in a painting or in a body of work that seemed compositionally off-key or bothersome; something implicit in the way the work is constructed. I wanted a sense of tension or a sense of things being emotional and not addressed, and that became a way of functioning in the studio. A lot of those early paintings for me expressed art as an exception to that entire sort of writing and explanation. How do I do that without the drips of the paint and all those other kinds of signifiers?

MH

So you asked yourself, How do I keep the psychic intensity but not the uncertainty of what will happen? Is that it?

WTW

That's very much it. I was drawing on the canvas and then painting directly thereafter. But during the painting process, I was constantly changing whatever was there. I was making adjustments.

MH

But you didn't have preparatory drawings, did you?

WTW

I had small doodles, and the doodles were maybe eight-by-ten inches and sometimes as large as eighteen-by-twenty-four inches.

MH

So they were compositional studies?

WTW

I was figuring things out. Pretty much the diamond was always a given for me in the late '70s. It provided a compositional device. It provided a way of getting the eye to the perimeter, and this seemed to me very much a part of what painting is about.

MH

And that's what Mondrian was often doing, too.

WTW

How do you get the eye from the center out to the edges? And thus the diamond. The diamond also evolved out of a photograph of my parents that hung in my studio. Before that it had been in my home since I was a child. The photograph was taken at a nightclub, and the matte framing the image was shaped like a heart. I looked at that picture over and over again. That heart shape evolved into the diamond.



Hazel Davis and William Thomas Williams Sr., parents of William T. Williams

MH

Oh, how beautiful.

WTW

Yeah, over a period of years the heart shape evolved more and more into a diamond. What struck me was that it was a pictorial device that you use in portrait making in terms of where the eyes are in relation to the rectangle. How far up are the eyes in the rectangle? Where do you position them? Et cetera.

MH

We're looking at *Trane Meets Jug* (1970–71). And these are the ones that are the size of your body? Let's see, this one is 108 by 84 inches.

WTW

These are scaled up from that. The five-by-seven-foot ones—

MH

—are prevalent in your art.

WTW

Yep, the proportions came from how far I could reach to the side, and how far I could reach out in terms of one hand. It fell just about five-by-seven feet, so I accepted this proportion as a device because it gave me one scale. It gave me a fixed kind of method in the studio. I didn't have to think about it anymore. I knew I had a scale relationship that I could work with, and then it was scaled up from five-by-seven feet to seven-by-nine feet, so the proportions would be the same.

MH

But the work would change from the study that you drew on the canvas. I mean we know de Kooning did studies, too.

WTW

The studies never look like the paintings. The studies were a beginning but I would drive off from there. Very often I would stop to make a small color study and begin to decide which colors would be where. But the idea of making a sketch that I would then enlarged never occurred to me. That's just not the way I worked.



Trane Meets Jug, 197-71, acrylic on canvas, 108 x 84 in.

MH

So, again, I see you as pivoting between these different ways of thinking in the late '60s and '70s—between, on the one hand, the abstract expressionist model of discovering the final image through process and of being in touch with your psyche, and, on the other hand, the effect of coolness or distance through a use of geometry—but not the geometry of pop culture. I mean, you don't come out with the American flag like [Jasper] Johns did.

WTW

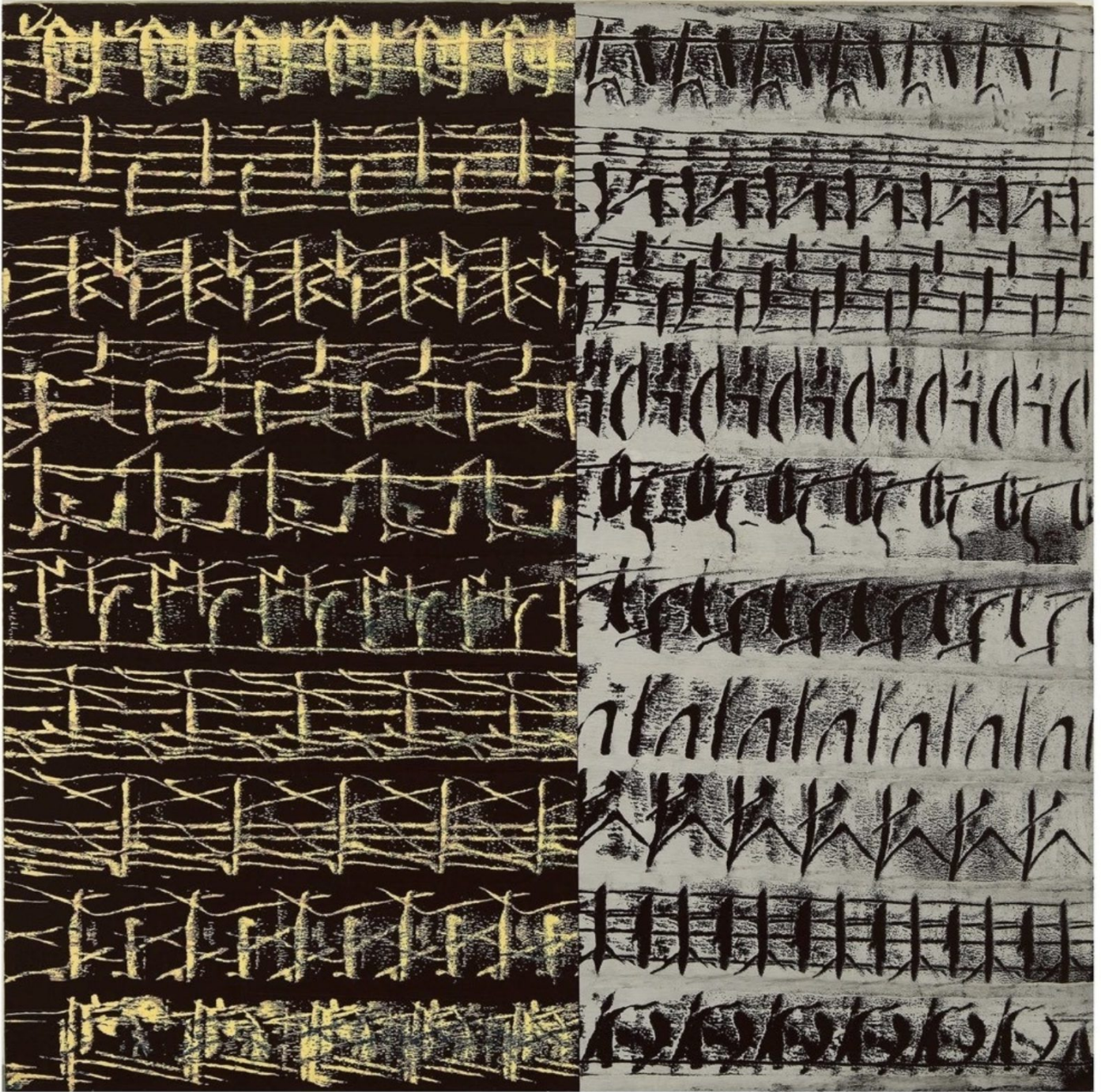
No. But what I liked about Johns was his idea of using parts in relation to a whole; of having a mark or matrix that can then be repeated.

MH

Yes, the way the encaustic is applied in early Johns is somewhere between cool and hot, between slow and fast. There's a wonderful essay by Fred Orton on Jasper Johns where he talks about Johns being something and not being something at the same time, a flag and not a flag, a painting and not a painting, etcetera.

WTW

I have found that sometimes the process of repeating a unit has allowed me to disregard the separation between the thing I'm making, or the object I'm painting, and the painting itself because the mechanics of a repetitive process can invoke a state of meditation. In the process of repetition I used to make works such as *Nu Nile* or *Indian Summer* (1973) exist in opposition to make paintings that preceded them, such as *Trane Meets Jug*, because in those paintings I was just putting the paint down flat. There was no time for lengthy contemplation. Whereas, when making the later paintings, I had a lot of time to meditate.



Tales for Shango, 1978, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 84 in.

MH

Meditate is a good word. The painting's repeated elements invite a meditative physical and mental engagement with it.

WTW

With the repetition, it's like there's a shape that has its own identity, and then within that shape there are subunits. In order for the repetition to work, the

subunits have to sustain a certain interval, a certain rhythm. Using the brush in this case, I was trying to get the same amount of space between each time I touched the canvas.

MH

But you still use the diamond, the off-center element that moves the eye toward the edges. In that sense, it is modernist. I like the play of differences in your work—they're meditative but also geometric; they contain the tactility of the paint stroke but also something of the spirit. There's also something about rhythm.

WTW

I would hope so. (*Points to a small section of the painting*) This shape would take the whole day to paint, and that's just one shape. If the rhythm or consistency of the mark broke, either because I did not apply the same pressure and/or did not mix the paint in the same way, I would basically stop, sand it off, and start all over again. In terms of this painting, there are many areas that sometimes have eight or ten layers of paint on them. It's very thin paint, but there's an insistence in these paintings that I really, really enjoy. They give me a way of holding onto the geometry. The only things that were dropped in those were the curves. The large curvier forms would drop.

MH

Well, there is a sense of joy in the earlier works—the diamond could be a kite, for example. There is a kind of playfulness. There is whimsy. The later works are more meditative and offer a different kind of viewing experience.

WTW

I was trying to push toward a series of painters from over many hundreds of years that I liked. At that point I was interested in painters who painted all-overness, giving every square inch of the painting the same degree of attention—painters for whom no hierarchy existed in terms of mark making.

MH

Yes, that was a trope for abstract expressionism, but that's not what you were doing.

WTW

No, that was just the beginning.

MH

So who else was an influence? [Ad] Reinhardt?

WTW

Reinhardt not so much. I was certainly thinking about Pollock since of all painters he was the one who was able to dismiss the brush; his imagery was not tied to a sense of touch in terms of the flex of the brush and what occurred thereafter. For me, it was total arriving at a place, which is not where I wanted to be. Seurat was another way of getting to that all-overness; however, I wasn't interested in the pictorial. Johns, again, in some of the things that began to be all over, but I wasn't interested in Pop or narrative because I was far more interested in geometry and abstraction. Geometry, in a sense, is absolute. Nothing equivocates. It's there, and you can take geometry and make it playful. You can make it strident. There are all these ways that geometry can be used, and all artists use geometry. I chose to put it front and center because it allowed me to make a nongender, nonracial, nonnational art. It got rid of all those kinds of things.

MH

And yet things like the diamond or the heart allowed you to pull in your feelings, or as you say, what is "heritable."

WTW

When you take what is sort of an international language, and you insert things back into it, what you insert becomes a cultural signifier. What struck me was when I backtracked by looking at an artist like Kazimir Malevich, for instance, I figured out where that came from. I mean that focal point gave me a clue in terms of this idea of evolving things. I arrived at a period after I stripped it down and used it over a long period of time. The thing always goes back to where you started from. It's been stripped down, internationalized. The content is what kept you going on rather than the image itself.

MH

Again, I see you as having one foot in one world and another elsewhere. Some of what you say is the best part of international modernism that abstraction speaks for so much. And that's not the language of minimalism. At Brooklyn College you talked to Carl Holty and Martin James who represent one side. And representing the other side were artists like Allan D'Arcangelo who came from a Pop and cool tradition.

WTW

The wonderful thing about the time I was teaching at Brooklyn College was that at twenty-four, coming straight out of graduate school, I had all of these ideas about

what art was. In talking with my colleagues, an older generation of artists who by that time had been painting for fifty years and sixty years—

MH

Carl Holty and Jimmy Ernst for example.

WTW

They had a whole history of international involvement, their own personal predilections in terms of what they did, and justifications for why they did things. I learned a lot from listening to and talking with them. So much generosity came from that group of artists. I saw the differences in our respective skill levels. What we wanted as content and why we were making art were drastically different from one another.

MH

Interesting. Can you unpack that a little more? When you say that “older generation,” are you thinking of Carl Holty, Jimmy Ernst, and Harry Holtzman?

WTW

Very much. You know, Jimmy Ernst and I were in the same office. We shared an office. Harry Holtzman was in that office. Philip Pearlstein was in that office. There was one more person who was with us there at the beginning. Allan D’Arcangelo came into that office as well. There were five or six of us that shared it.

MH

Lois [Dodd] and Lee [Bontecou] were not in that office?

WTW

Lois was not. She was actually in the office with Fred Badalamenti.

MH

And Lee? I doubt that she had an office. (*laughter*)

WTW

No, Lee did not have an office. That was a long conversation I had with Jimmy Ernst. Jimmy and I taught on the same day with Allan D’Arcangelo. From Jimmy I learned firsthand information about his dad [Max Ernst], about surrealism, about growing up in that world, and about the anguish he experienced as the son of a very famous artist. I also learned about and his own career and what he was interested in. We would be talking about a particular work, and the next week he would show up with it.

MH

Yes, I had the same experience with him.

WTW

That was really extraordinary—going from talking about this theoretical thing to holding it in my hand.

MH

I gave you an article that talks about him and jazz. He was completely passionate about jazz, and the surrealists weren't, and in many ways he broke from his father's generation through jazz. Did he talk to you about what he called *sifflage*? Well, his father used *frottage*, or rubbing. Soufflage was blowing. Jimmy would blow on the paint, and he said it was like the jazz musicians blowing the blues.

WTW

Oh yes. I know those pictures. (*laughter*)

MH

He liked Chicago jazz, and he was obsessed with music being architectural. Anyway, let's go on. So at Brooklyn College, there were these different generations of artists, and you had a firsthand link to the world of Mondrian and the surrealists. When I arrived, I organized a show on the history of the department. It actually started with the Bauhaus, but those people were gone by the time you got there. You and I were there pretty much around the same time, in the early '70s.

WTW

Yeah, I guess. Who was left? Papa?

MH

Stamo Papadaki. (*laughter*) He edited a book on Le Corbusier.

WTW

Papadaki was still there I think.

MH

But Robert J. Wolf had been the head of the department for a long time, and basic design originated as a Bauhaus course.

WTW

Yes, yes.

MH

And actually Brooklyn College was the first liberal arts school to welcome a Bauhaus education after World War II. I am interested in artists and pedagogy. And I think you're the most generous artist I've talked to about this, in that you found teaching students, talking to other colleagues, and being at crits meaningful. Artists very often don't want to talk about teaching, as they are less invested in it—except for educators like Hans Hofmann, for example—but for you Brooklyn College was a place of ideas.

WTW

You know, I tried to keep my ears open. Most of the time I didn't say anything. I was teaching the graduate seminar. Very often most of the ideas that came up had already gone a course in the crits. What I learned from that process was that the student body had very different ideas from the faculty; they were not trying to fit into the mode of what we were teaching. They were trying to find another voice. Once in a while an incredibly talented student or group of students would come through in two years were able to clarify their ideas and leave as whole artists. And what I mean by that is the work looked finished. I could tell by the way they talked about their work. I knew they could have a long career and sustain and develop their ideas, which is really remarkable given what Brooklyn College was. It wasn't a professional arts school. Still it turned out a number of students who were very good artists, and this had a lot to do with the school's teaching methods. The faculty nurtured the students as opposed to severely criticizing them and proselytizing to them. It was a different approach.

MH

A recent CAA panel led by artists critiqued the crits. They found the crit experience devastating and wanted a more positive model. I always remembered the telephone book assignment you gave to your undergraduate students. It was the funniest thing (*laughter*). But you got good work out of it.

WTW

I think because it was a non-art medium.

MH

Would you explain the assignment?

WTW

Well, the assignment was to take a complete New York telephone directory and make a work out of it. White pages, yellow pages, Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens—

it didn't matter. The objective was to give them material that they would not have had any experience using. Most of them were representational painters, and they were especially baffled by the prospect. But the assignment could lead to a conceptual work of art. It could lead to a sculptural object. It could lead to any number of things. They had the whole semester to do it. I gave it to them the first day of class, and they had fifteen weeks to develop this one project. The rest of the time they were working primarily on their other paintings.

MH

What we should add is that in those days the phone companies would drop off tons of phonebooks and nobody wanted them.

WTW

(laughter) That's right. They were widely available.

MH

They were vestigial, you know. There were stacks of them around in schools and in apartment buildings. In a way, the idea of using extant material rather than purchasing new supplies, or of using society's excess or garbage, is not unlike quilt-making.

WTW

There was one other requirement: the telephone book had to be transformed at least twice. They couldn't just cut it and set it down. They had to do something else to it. At least two levels of transformation had to occur. Some of the more inventive students would boil it and reduce it back to a pulp and then reconstruct it.

MH

Really? It was also an ode to the readymade. *(laughter)*

WTW

But it was fun. It was fun.

MH

I wanted to tell you that I have always thought of you as an incredibly ethical person— someone who was speaking for the students and for honesty and fairness.

WTW

Thank you, Mona.

MH

I did, and I still do. As a father, a husband, a colleague—in all these ways you have been an incredibly ethical person. Anyway, we'll move back to painting. Okay, so let's go back to your history again. You were a passionate teacher to others, but you also had some passionate teachers yourself. Let's start with Al Held at Yale's graduate school and proceed decade by decade through your work. Held was a wonderful painter, and he was also a maverick in some ways. He was doing complex, geometric hard-edged work, but he didn't want the work to relate to sci-fi or to the computer. He was passionate about the painting process. What would he say to you? How did the crits go? How did he inspire you?

WTW

Al relentlessly criticized me when I was in graduate school. He would show up and stay in my studio sometimes as long as two hours. Other students would be outside the door looking in and listening, and he would just pound me with questions about why I was doing what I was doing, how I was painting it, and how it could be made better. Always questions about the paint itself, the physicality of the paint. "What do you want?" And then he would pound me with questions about art history because he knew I was kind of anti-formalist. He would force me to read *Artforum* and other art magazines.

MH

Why do you call yourself "anti-formalist"?

WTW

This was 1967–68—to give it the right context. Specifically *Artforum* at that point featured writing about words but not about objects. The language was so thick that I couldn't penetrate it in relation to what I was doing. Consequently, I was beginning to turn away from Morris and Judd and a whole series of other painters who were very involved in that. And he would force me to read it. Week after week, he would arrive with either a reading list or a pile of books, and eventually I realized that he was trying to force me to make more and more decisions about what I was doing. He was pushing me because he was interested in the work.

MH

Clearly. What kind of books did he bring you? Do you remember any that were meaningful?

WTW

Most of the books that he gave me were works of art criticism. Very often, he

would bring me readings directly related to constructivism.

MH

Oh, yes, he was interested in constructivism and later in the Renaissance.

WTW

But really it was Al's relentlessness that was important to me. He wanted students to stand up to him and defend their work, and that was pretty much the way he taught. He would hammer, hammer, hammer, and force you to make decisions and clarify your ideas. He wanted the work to make an impact. He was also relentless about paint surface, the materials you were using, the way you were mixing paint, and so on.

MH

It often seems to me that the simpler a work is in a formal sense, the more complicated it becomes in an intellectual one. I feel that when I'm teaching. I'm often drawn to abstraction, even as it's not the main issue I write about, because when you hone in on the formal and conceptual basics, every decision has weight.

WTW

Al also forced me to work bigger. He wasn't my advisor until the second year, but in the first year he would still come to my studio and hammer me constantly.

MH

Did it upset you?

WTW

No, not really. Not really. Part of the strength of the program is the relentless criticism, being under the microscope, having to defend your work, having to clarify your ideas.

MH

That's a little of the way you described your father—as very nurturing and caring but also something of a disciplinarian.

WTW

That was very much my dad. (*laughter*) I can say that Al was extraordinarily helpful in many, many ways. He also introduced me to the person who is now my best friend, Mel Edwards, the sculptor. In my last year at Yale, Al said, I want to introduce you to someone in New York. Mel had recently come from California to work. Al said, "George Sugarman is having a party and I want you to go to New

York with me.” So I went to New York and to George’s party. George actually lived right around the corner on Bond Street from here, and he introduced me to Mel Edwards, and fifty-one years later—

MH

You’re still close?

WTW

We’re very close.

MH

That’s beautiful.

WTW

So, Al was good to me.

MH

I saw somewhere that you tried your hand at sculpture.

WTW

In 1970 I started cutting things out of these paintings, and I cut them out to decide whether the shapes were important. I used to have Xeroxes made, blow them up, and cut them up. That went on, and I would start cutting them out of aluminum foil. I guess they would hold their shape. I was at Lafayette College on a residency, and I was in the printmaking studio, making a silkscreen, and I happened to say to the other people there, “Gee, I wish I could cut this out of metal.” They said, “We can do it.” And they took me over to the engineering school, and at the engineering school, they said, “Oh, we can do that. It’s not a problem.” They programmed it on a computer, and then they said, “We have a graduate with a machine shop not far from here, and he specializes in laser cutting.” They took me over to this ten-thousand-square-foot facility, and there was this laser cutting apparatus. The bed was huge, over fifteen feet wide. There was a little compartment with a person running a laser, and the machine took the drawing. I sat there and watched them cut it.

MH

But then did you work on it afterward?

WTW

I did not. I did not at all. It’s actually in the back if you want to see it.

MH

(*laughter*) You mean you have it here?

WTW

Yes. I'll go get it. I will pull it out. Alright. (*Returns with sculpture.*)

MH

Oh that's gorgeous. It reminds me of the paintings that you're doing now.

WTW

Yep.

MH

Oh my goodness. And this was done in the '70s?

WTW

No, this was done about thirteen years ago.

MH

So while you were doing those wonderful blue paintings with the calligraphic forms in the middle?

WTW

Yep. This is aluminum, and I cut a section out of brass.

MH

Is it painted white?

WTW

No, that's the color of aluminum. It's just the light hitting it that makes it look white.

MH

Well, it's beautiful.

WTW

So it's almost identical and line for line in terms of the brushwork.

MH

So this is, judging from the shapes of later works, more like *Blue Obey* (2007). I like the way the light produces shadows. Did you ever show it?



Blue Obey, 2007, acrylic on Masonite, 21 3/4 x 18 1/8 in.

WTW

I did. It went down to the University of Maryland.

MH

I love it.

WTW

And then it was up in Massachusetts.

MH

Ok, let's proceed more chronologically. I will refer to the works in the recent survey at the Tate. *Harlem Angel '68* looks architectural—like a door. You painted it around the same time as the Smokehouse murals, and when I realized the connection, it made me feel good. (*laughter*) I want to go back to *Nu Nile*, with its repetitive and mesmerizing brushstrokes. I have a thought that I want your response to.

WTW

Tell me please.

MH

The paint has a pearlescent base, and it shimmers. And I was thinking in the language of the '70s about the essence of things; how a painting is either flat or color is color, or sculpture is sculpture, and then I thought about the relationship of painting to light. Realist painters like Lennart discuss capturing the illusion of light falling on a surface. But you are tackling actual light on the surface—at the moment when, say, Dan Flavin is exhibiting fluorescent light tubes. This is comparable to the issues of movement in sculpture. Historically, sculptors expressed the illusion of movement, and then their forms actually moved. Calder was involved with actual movement, and you have engaged the effect of actual light falling on the canvas. What do you think of that?

WTW

Well, these actually respond to the physical light that's in the environment; they respond to you as you move across them.

MH

I see. They shimmer!

WTW

They shimmer. They're kind of overlit at this point, but during the day, if the

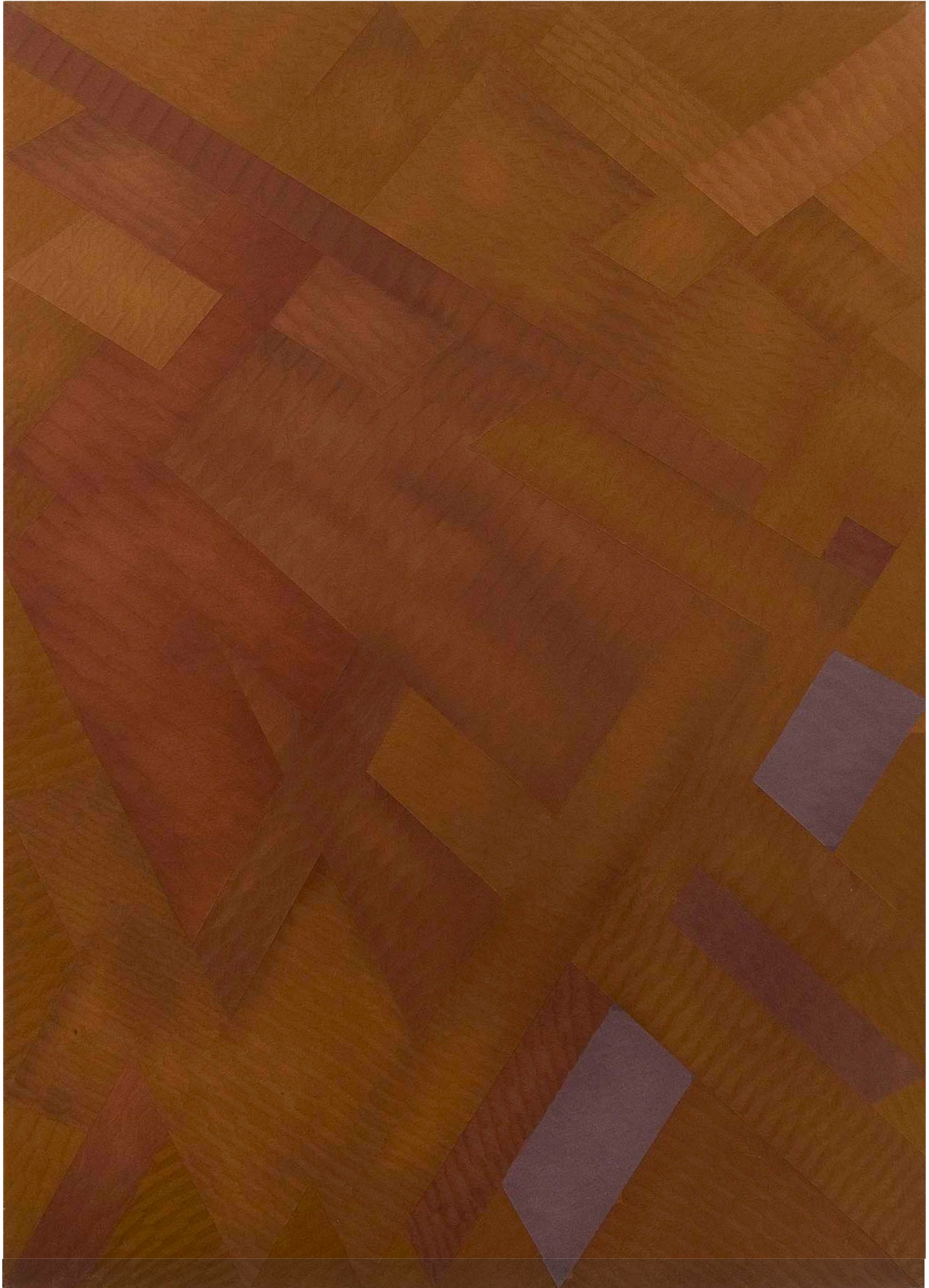
painting is in a room with any kind of natural light, the way the viewer experiences the surface literally changes as the day goes on.

MH

What is the name of this?

WTW

This one is *Indian Summer*.



Indian Summer, 1973, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 24 3/4 in.

MH

Look at the nuances in the color. It's just absolutely gorgeous. This kind of reddish brown.

WTW

That's a response again to some of the talk about tonal feeling. The idea of tonal painting was kind of restricted to representation along with the idea that "modern" painters don't have the ability to do that.

MH

Bill, it is so exciting to hear you say that because it is what I have been struggling to express. That you were finding in abstraction the element of light without painting as a landscape painter.

WTW

Yep, I think so.

MH

I think so too. (*laughter*)

WTW

The shimmering paintings brought together all the stuff I had been working on since I entered art school at fourteen. The activities became aerial also. I always experienced these paintings as aerial phenomena as opposed to being parallel to the wall.

MH

Aerial how?

WTW

You're looking at them from above.

MH

Really? But how does that accord with them being the width of your arm and the height?

WTW

It doesn't, and that's the key. When I'm painting these things, the shifts in the

direction of the brush become so hypnotic that the only way I can experience them is to think of being above water, or of a kind of rippling in water. The phenomenon occurs over and over again. There is a sense of continuum, a rhythmic thing that occurs across the shifts in rhythms, the shifts in these kinds of valences, and the brushstrokes begin to really excite me. The physical widening of the room, changing the painting, and the sense of body motion across all of those things began to really interest me because all of a sudden it was participatory. These are different from the minimalist paintings of that period; they were a total break from that.

MH

They are, but they are also in that middle place I've suggested you belong to, between abstract expressionist brushstrokes and the cool distance of something repetitive. You never had assistants, right?

WTW

I did have an assistant. I had a young man named Buist Hardison. He was a graduate of Fisk University. He was a graduate of Skowhegan. I met him in Skowhegan the summer I was teaching, and he worked for me. He was an expressionist to say the least. He was terrific in taping after he began to understand what I needed.

MH

But was he there when you painted? Or did he prepare things for you?

WTW

No, he never painted. Beauvais would be involved in taping shapes, stretching canvases, but never painting; there was never a point where he touched the canvas. I was just trying to cut down the labor. He came aboard when I was with Reese Palley Gallery. Reese was trying to maximize my time to do extra painting.

MH

But you slowed down. (*laughter*)

WTW

These paintings slowed me down considerably. One of these paintings probably... God, sometimes it would take six or seven months just to do one.

MH

You say that it now takes two years.

WTW

Yeah, the ones I am doing now, the blue line paintings—they take around two years.

MH

They are fabulous. We are going to talk about them.

WTW

These paintings made me decide whether it was the drawing I was interested in, the architectonic, or the mark, and that led to the next series of paintings, the roller paintings, where this mark is basically just isolated here.

MH

What is the name of this one?

WTW

This is *Batman* (1979).



Batman, 1979, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 60 in.

MH

The titles are so specific, but you say they're only humorous or anecdotal. This is the art historian in me. I mean, artists at times say the titles don't matter, and art historians say, Actually, they do. (*laughter*) Sorry, they do have associations for the viewer. I don't know what *Batman* means to you, but it is something because you could have called it *No. 1*.

WTW

The reference to Batman is twofold. During this period my daughter was in school, and I would stop working in the afternoon to pick her up. At this point she was probably in third or fourth grade. I would go up to Grace Church, pick her up, and come home. She would come in the studio and sit down and do her homework. After she did her homework, she would turn on the TV and there was *Batman*. (*Hums Batman theme.*) *Batman!* And that's how I arrived at the title of *Batman*.

MH

That's what it is. So the titles were funny? They're not really keyed into the content, although the title does make you think. Does the title relate to the painting in other ways?

WTW

Only in that the mark was very repetitive, much like the *Batman* song. But in terms of the character Batman or Bruce Wayne... I mean the character who goes out when the bat signal is over Gotham. That narrative is not part of the painting.

MH

So this is done when?

WTW

In 1979.

MH

So you're calling this a roller painting, What does that mean? You're not using a brush anymore?

WTW

I'm not using a brush. I discarded the brush. I wanted a surface that was absolutely

banal. Again, I'm trying to get away from the history of the brush, the history of what a surface should look like in painting. I wanted to accept the cracking and fissuring.

MH

Did you want the cracking?

WTW

Yes, I was very conscious of that. I wanted patterns that I couldn't control to exist in opposition to the ones that I could control, to create a duality. I was also interested in the fissuring you see in a Matisse or something like that, at a museum. The surfaces of the paintings are cracking, especially with Matisse's work. And I kind of like the idea that there is this imperfection, and the idea that beauty can come out of this kind of imperfection.

MH

Well, generally I would say artists don't like when the surface cracks. It signals to them that they weren't—

WTW

—good at their craft.

MH

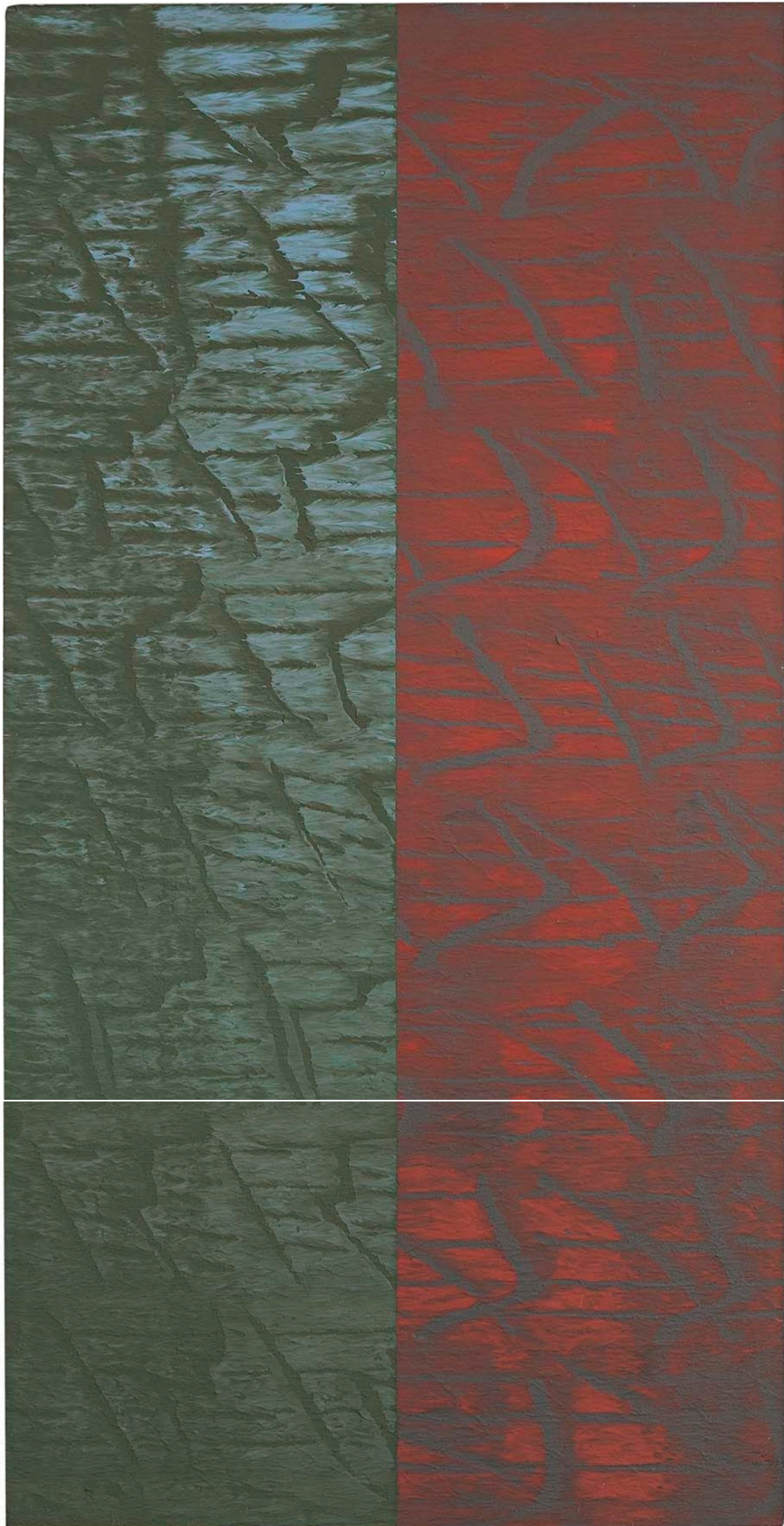
They messed up.

WTW

That's part of the tongue-and-cheek aspect of these paintings.

MH

Let's move on to the color range. We haven't talked very much about color, but the color here is gentle. It's lyrical—coral and lavender and yellow. It's very different from the earlier *Trane* ones and *Mercer's Stop* (1971), all of which have bright vivid colors, and it's just as different from the understated shimmering ones.



From the Du Drop Roller Series.



Mercer's Stop, 1971, acrylic on canvas, 108 x 84 in.

WTW

If you look at all the shimmer paintings, you can see that underneath the base is dioxide purple pushing and worn to a kind of red tone and then into a gray tone. I'm very conscious of deciding to take one color and exploit that color as much as possible, so if we put the eighteen and that series together, you would still see dioxide purple. It would almost be like a value chart from one to the other. One gets darker. The next one I paint has got to be darker.

MH

So you painted in series?

WTW

I painted the shimmering paintings in a series.

MH

And you thought about the various shifts and nuances of a color?

WTW

In this case, it was singular color, which was dioxide purple; it was a color that I rarely used, and it opened up all these possibilities when I started playing with it.

MH

It's certainly not natural—like the symbolists who used lavender because it's not a predominant landscape color. It fits the imaginings of the mauve decade.

WTW

It served me well.

MH

Let's talk more about color. Your roots are in the heady decades of the '60s and '70s, and Al Held helped introduce you to the theorizing of the day, certainly issues of color came to the fore along with surface, line, flatness, and so on. Debates around color ranged from Matisse's color, which is decorative and creates space, to Kandinsky's rumination on the spiritual to Benjamin Moore's color series to found color to color as readymade. Where do you fit on this continuum?

WTW

In graduate school, Benjamin Moore made sense because of the economics of it. A lot of the paintings that I did in graduate school intentionally used colors that came out of Benjamin Moore or Pittsburgh, deadpan flat colors devoid of any kind of artistic—

MH

Resonance? History? They were seen as found color also. The color chart and samples.

WTW

That kind of industrial thing was interesting to me at that point, and my work evolved out of that very slowly because of a profusion of paint from Lenny Bocour. Bocour became a patron. I had unlimited paint all of a sudden, so it allowed me to explore more color, more surfaces, in quantities that I had not been able to obtain prior to that.

MH

I often wonder how important practical considerations are. You have [Arshile] Gorky, for example, who was completely poor, yet stockpiled tons of colors that he wanted. What do you think?

WTW

You know, by that time in the '70s, I had a family, so all of the choices about baby milk or paint became a crucial part of decision making. Yeah, the color thing. I wanted to increase my range as a painter, as a colorist, and I knew if I kept doing these kinds of things that wouldn't occur.

MH

By "these kinds of things," you mean paintings like *Mercer's Stop*.

WTW

Mercer's Stop is a painting from the late '60s. By the late '60s, marks were starting to come to the surface in my work, suggesting that I was becoming less and less interested in flatness.

MH

So the brushstroke was coming in?

WTW

Yep, and the weave of the canvas was beginning to bother me. I just wanted more physicality.

MH

So having access to all of these colors was eye-opening for you or expanded the possibilities for your work?

WTW

It expanded my possibilities in terms of color. Having subtle shifts and paint was expanding it. For a long time, I had six colors that I would work with and that was it.

MH

Did you ever feel anything emotional about a color, as you did with purple? Or was it that you found you had more formal possibilities?

WTW

It was really just formal possibilities. I always say I'm more interested in social color than I am in structural color. To me, the Albers figures are about structural color; you know, he has a mechanical way of looking at color and of using it. I wanted something irrational; something the opposite of the idea of making art that entails putting a color next to another color. Matisse does this. I wanted to use color simply because I wanted it to be there and because the color feels right within the composition. It might make no sense having pink in a particular place, but it makes sense in terms of the painting being a work of art. It's a more intuitive way of responding to constructing a painting. Matisse I like a lot.

MH

Yes. I can see why.

WTW

If we can spin back to Brooklyn College—having conversations over the years with Jack Flam was extraordinarily important because he was interested in Matisse and in African art, which I was interested in as well. Listening to him over the years—to how he was perceiving the subject, perceiving Matisse, as opposed to how I was, was really helpful.

MH

Did he ever do a studio visit with you?

WTW

No, Jack never came to the studio. He retired from Brooklyn, but now he's the head of Dedalus Foundation and the Motherwell catalogue raisonné. I mean he didn't entirely retire. (*laughter*) That's even more—

MH

—work, yes. He was another colleague who was always ethical and caring.

WTW

Well, Brooklyn College was that. A lot of very good people worked there; a lot of very good artists.

MH

Lois Dodd is another one. I wrote a catalogue essay on her. Her show was in Montclair and next door was Mel Edwards's show. You were there for Mel's opening and I was there for Lois's.

WTW

That's right. I remember that.

MH

She is a wonderful artist. She had an extraordinarily formal eye. And she expressed openness toward toward other artistic practice s.

WTW

Lois and I got to know each other really well. I would pick her up in the morning and drive her to Brooklyn College. I would pick her up after she retired to bring her to the crits. And we spent time at Skowhegan together.

MH

That's right. She was a Skowhegan person.

WTW

And then I spent time with her at her house in Maine. She's a very good painter.

MH

I love her paintings. Many of the realist painters were formalists. For her, the rectangle of a door was equivalent to your diamond. But on the other hand, they weren't entirely abstracted because she was sitting out in nature painting those trees.

WTW

The kind of reductiveness she could do was extraordinary. I mean to look and see the subtle forms and then put it down. And her touch!

MH

The touch was gorgeous.

WTW

Jesus, it looked effortless.

MH

I want to talk about music, and I want you to think about what you want me to ask you.

WTW

I'm always interested most in contextualizing the paintings in terms of what's going on around me and in terms of what other painters, many of them better known, are doing.

MH

Has our discussion so far been helpful in that way?

WTW

Yes, it's useful to think about the fact that this shimmer painting was made in 1973, and to think about what was going on around me at the time. The art world looked really different. I think because these paintings were so different, it was hard for people to contextualize them and to see them as a variant on other work being made at the time.

MH

In 2007, there was *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967–1975*, the exhibition organized by Katy Siegel that chronicled painting practices in the late '60s and early '70s. I think you definitely should have been in it. Clearly painting never "ends," and there's a huge resurgence of it now. It is cyclical. One year the galleries show more video, the next year its digital photography, and the next year, sculpture. Of course, there is always a variety in what gets shown, but some mediums seem to take precedence. Something similar takes place in the Whitney Biennial. Painting is back right now, but painting whose figuration is elusive, I would say. You know like Dana Schutz's work, or comic abstraction, or strangeness, but painting. In the '70s and '80s, there was certainly painting; but there was also a lot of conceptual art, sculpture, installation, and performance. Painting received a lot of criticism too.

WTW

Mm-hmm. It was a "dead" medium. Painting got pushed to the side by curators who were young and more interested in new applications, video, and performance, for example.

MH

Right. Or conceptual art. And if you privilege the flat surface of a painting, you risk

having produced an object, so you might as well make an object, as the logic went. Today we better understand the complexity of painting as a medium in the '70s and how many painting languages were around at the time, from New Image painting to pattern and decoration painting, from photo realism to social realism, its artists from the '40s often still painting and exhibiting. Today, we rethink painting from that time partly because there are a lot of good painters now, like Thomas Noskowski, and I happen to like Dana Schutz in spite of that controversy. There was a good deal of painting at the biennial.

WTW

Didn't see it. Did not go to the Whitney. I was tucked away in Connecticut.

MH

Well, that tends to happen, but I do go partly because I teach it. I think that your art comes out of an intensely meaningful visual debate on what art is and what it can be, and specifically, on what abstraction in painting can be.

WTW

You have to have a platform in order to participate in these debates, and part of this frustration over this fifty year period that we're talking about is that in the art world, if there is such a monolithic thing, people were not as receptive to artists of color and to women artists. A lot of artists faced an aversion toward their work. I think of painters whom I started out with and the starts and stops in their careers. I'm thinking back over a forty-nine year period when there were a number of bodies of work that were of interest to me, and they were quality bodies of work. The problem is most of them never get shown.

MH

Of your art?

WTW

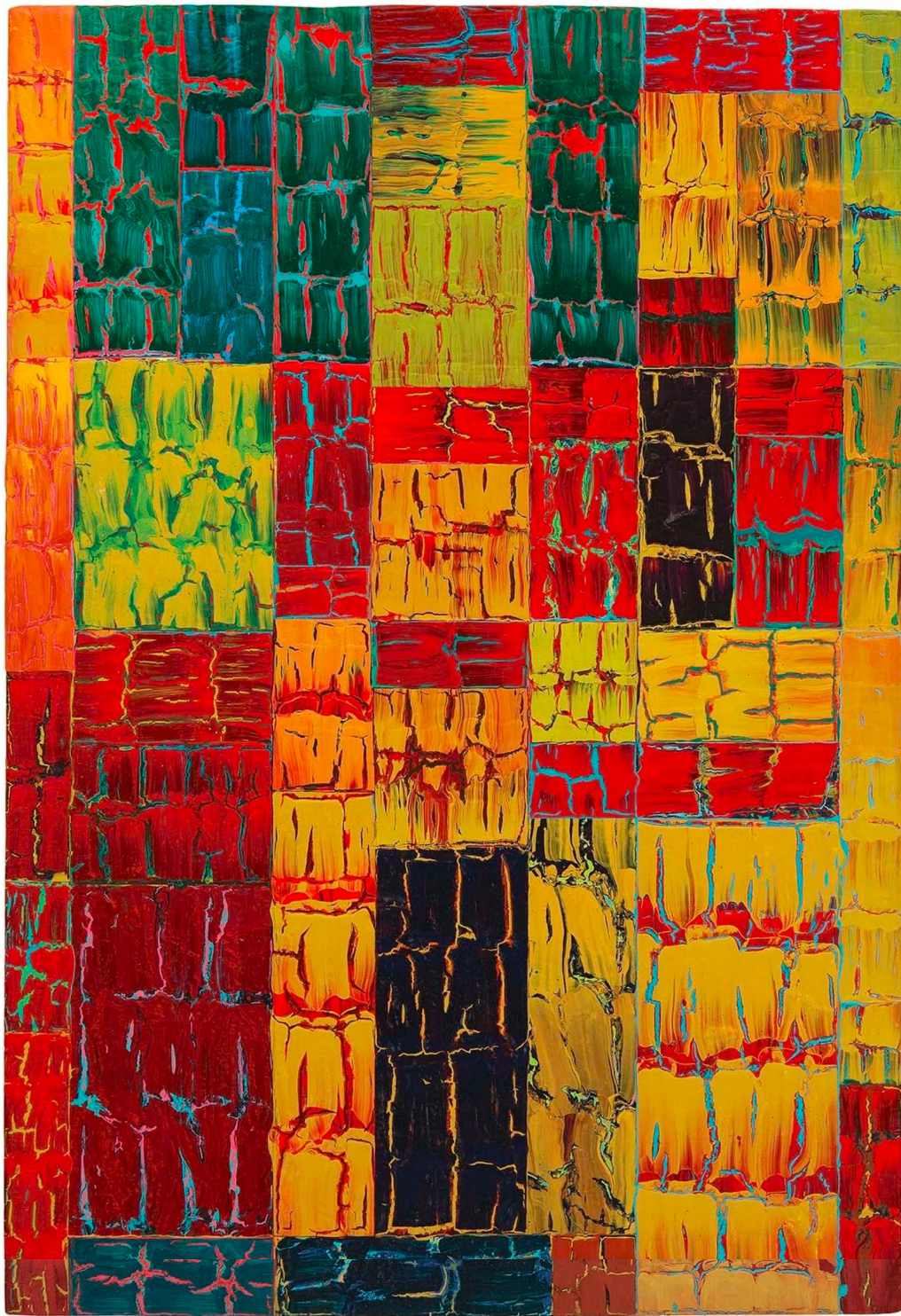
Yeah.

MH

But they will now, I think.

WTW

Well, possibly. You know, Michael Rosenfeld was trying to suggest that I have many bodies of work that have never been seen. Yet there's a continuum in the work; it doesn't jump all over the place. It's almost seamless when you see the work over a fifty-year period.



Blues Labyrinth, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 41 1/2 in.

MH

Like Mondrian. I've always said of artists that from their first work to their last, they're always painting the same painting, even if it looks completely different. Artists continually work on the same issues. I have found in my own work that when I write, I think I'm writing something new, and I'm actually expanding on some of my previous preoccupations.

But, to go back to our conversation: the discourses of race, gender, postcolonial studies—all of these have made it possible for people previously overlooked to be seen. Doing so does raise other problems that you were talking about earlier. There is a risk of ghettoization or of being seen through one lens that fails to bring into focus what your art is about. On the other hand, there's an intense awareness today of how the canon excluded marginalized people, and this revisionism has been important. I have learned a lot from the writings of Kobena Mercer, who has a series of four excellent books out. He is object-oriented, but makes meaningful cultural connections.

WTW

I'm always looking for writings about paintings that allow me to see something else within the painting that is not the consequence of seeing the painting in relationship to the painter. How does a painting enter into dialogue with other paintings in the history of the craft?

MH

That's what you want. These other issues are important for their contribution to institutional critique; for shedding light on power and the workings of the art world. And some artists, like David Hammons, have made this their subject with great wit and vision, but that's not been your project. Here, again, you fit between different ideologies.

WTW

My wife, Pat, keeps telling me, "You can get up every morning and go to your studio and paint. There is absolutely nothing keeping you from doing that." And I rejoice in that idea that for fifty-one years, I've gone into that studio just about

every day of my life, and that's what my life has been about. I have spent my time pursuing the idea that art has meaning, that there is a reason to do it, and that it can lead to a fulfilling life. I'm always trying to find more time in the studio. I'm always trying to get to the projects and ideas that I want to be working on. There is never enough time. At seventy-five, I figure I have maybe ten more years to paint.

MH

Fifteen.

WTW

It's what I think about every time I go into the studio: How do I spend the next eight hours as effectively as possible?

MH

Is that what you do? You paint about eight hours a day?

WTW

I paint about eight hours a day. Not every day anymore, because I can't physically do it. When I was painting at my peak in the '80s, I would probably paint eight or ten hours a day consistently. Except for the two days that I taught, I spent the rest of my time in the studio. I was in the studio in the morning before I got to Brooklyn College.

MH

And except when you picked your children up from school.

WTW

Except for that hour.

MH

I know you also went to all of your son Aaron's basketball games.

WTW

I went to all of his games, and to all of my son's? Daughter's? Nila's basketball games. That was important for developing the work, and it also helped me develop as a human being.

MH

Yes, and as a family.

WTW

I like painting.

MH

I know. I can tell. I used to interview an artist named Ethel Schwabacher. Did you know her?

WTW

Yes, I did know Ethel Schwabacher. I first met her sister when I was in graduate school at Yale. I got a job working at the Jewish community center in New Haven, and her sister was a patron. I met Ethel six months or so before I got out of Yale. I called her up and explained who I was and so forth. I showed up on Park Avenue and was just floored by the art. Ethel ultimately gave me a letter of introduction to Thomas Messer, the director of the Guggenheim at the time.

MH

She would sit up there with all of these works by [Arshile] Gorky all around her. She was his student and wrote the first monograph on him.

WTW

We had a long conversation about abstract expressionists and art.

MH

She was a wonderful artist and a serious intellectual. I was starting to tell you about her because as her physical condition began to worsen with age, she would find another way of making art. So when she couldn't paint with oil she used pastels. When arthritis made it impossible to do pastels, she wrote poetry. When she could no longer type, she dictated. Her creative involvement was endless because she substituted different techniques. You know, eventually she turned away from abstract expressionism, though never from Gorky. And she was very involved in civil rights.

WTW

Well, she invited me over. She had to have been. (*laughter*) This was 1968. She was a really nice lady. I had never been in an apartment like that. The idea of even going into a building like that was just more than I could ever conceive, but she was extraordinarily nice. Patient also. She'd had a lot of experiences. That's the other thing I try to tell young artists constantly. There are many, many people out there who are interested in the arts, in the creative spirit, and you never know who they are or where they are. You never know when your work of art is going to influence someone's life or to change it. It makes staying in the studio and making art all worth it. It is not—

MH

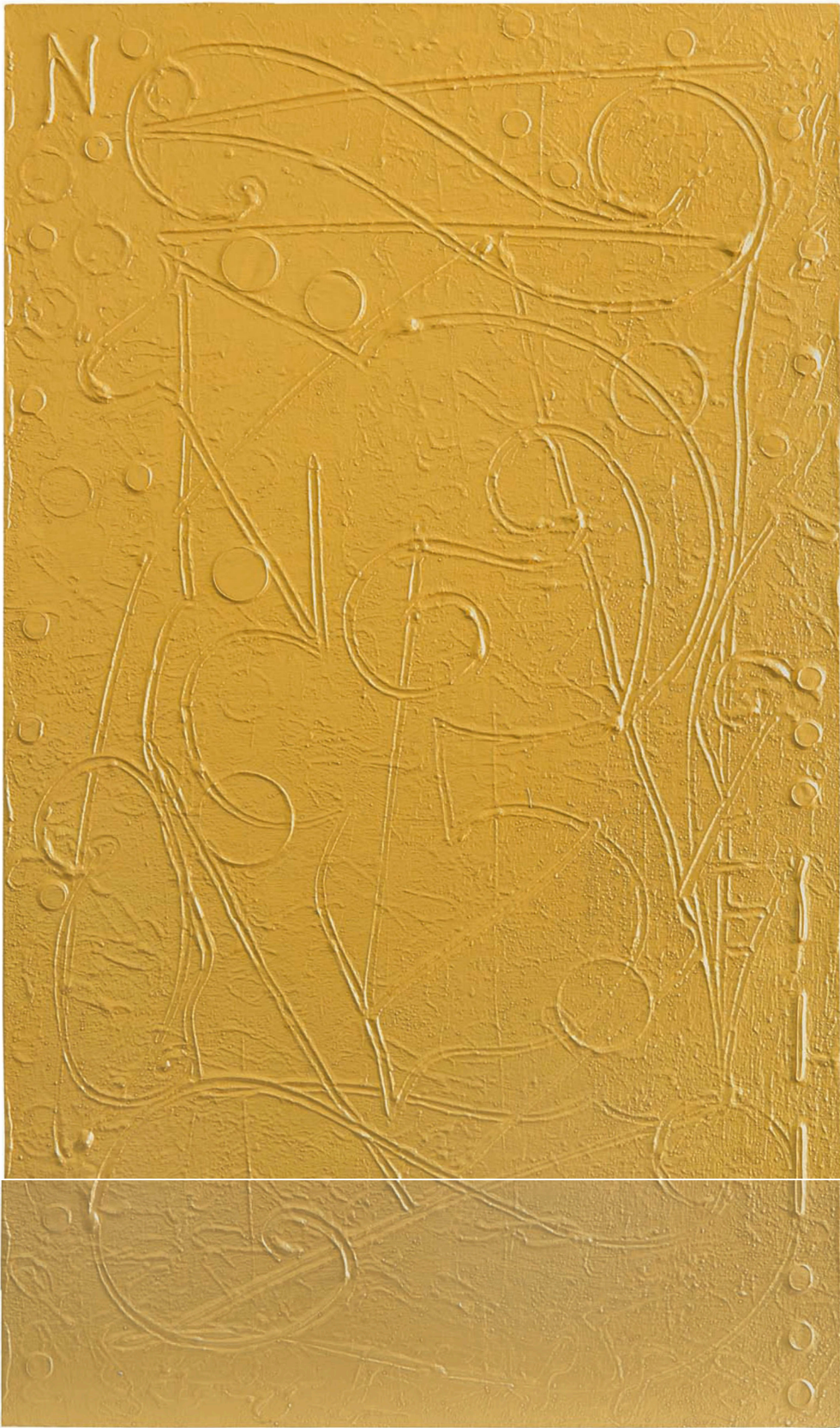
Well, it is a great privilege.

WTW

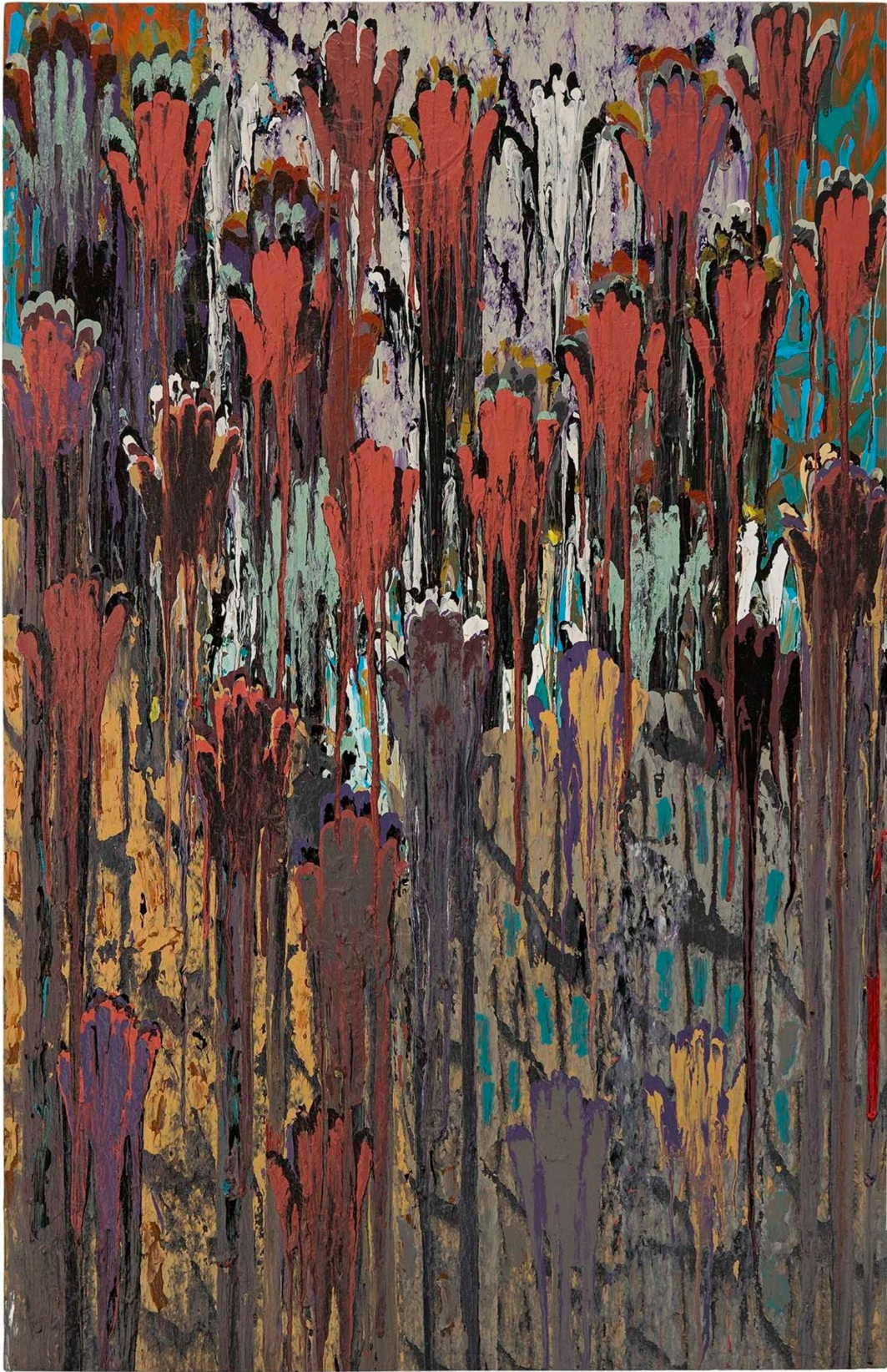
It is. It's been good.

MH

There seems to be a big shift in the early '80s in your paintings. They are much more painterly, if that's the right word. The brushstroke comes more to the fore in works like *A Note to Marcel Proust* (1984). You did a talk at the Rosenfeld Gallery about how the image of hands appeared in *Crossroads* (1984). You said it was your child's handprint. Was this a period of crisis or an attempt to shift your style radically?



Evidence, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 48 1/8 x 28 1/8 in.



A Note to Marcel Proust (Roller Series), 1984, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 54 1/4 in.

WTW

I wanted to put the paint on in a more direct manner, a manner that didn't have the brush as a basis or the roller, which had a kind of crackle. I applied a kind of impersonal method with none of the nuances of the shimmer paintings. I moved away from the nuances put in by the wrist and touch when it went to the roller. All of a sudden, that learned mechanism wasn't there because the roller is supposed to be an impersonal, continuous, and repeatable surface.

MH

Although, if I can interrupt—*Batman* doesn't have an impersonal look at all.

WTW

Well, it took a while to begin to use the roller; to find a way of making it more painterly and of creating transitions and nuance. I had to veer from the expected way of using the roller and modify it to suit my own needs. Ultimately what occurs is that underneath there is actually the beginning of the roller series. I began to work on top of that. One of my kids touched a painting in the series and all of sudden that form was there. I struggled; the handprint is a really recognizable form. Then I noticed there's an early Hofmann called *The Fifth Estate* where a hand appears. There were works by Miró, Jasper Johns—

MH

Pollock?

WTW

Pollock. There are any number of artists who used the handprint as a symbol or other device for pictorial information, so I decided I would work through it rather than avoid it by painting it out. I started layering the paint. It became thicker and thicker and acquired more physicality. The other thing that began to appear was this sense of gravity because the paint was becoming more physical.

MH

Was it dripping? It looks like it was.

WTW

It's actually pulling. The paint is so heavy that it's not dripping as it does in abstract expressionism; the paint is literally a physical object pulling down and then stopping in this kind of organic form. I then had to decide whether I could dissolve it enough to the point where I could handprint what I was perceiving as abstract. The symbolic nature of the hand, and specifically the symbolic nature of the hand in relation to some of my experiences. In particular, I grew up with the notion of "laying on the hands." This was specifically practiced by the elderly women in the church and occasionally by the men. As they walked by, they would touch the kids. They might touch a shoulder, for example. It's a ritual that allowed church members of different generations to come together. The people who were laying on the hands weren't necessarily from the same biological family—but they were from a larger, spiritual family. And as I was painting, the ritual kept coming into my mind. The hand began to emerge in relation to communication and to the ancestral or heritable idea.

MH

And the handprint on the painting belonged to your own child. I know you're thinking about the idea more broadly and culturally; still it was your own child touching your work and being part of it.

WTW

Very much so. Very much so.

MH

Which is beautiful because I know you're a very devoted father to these children.

WTW

In retrospect that gesture opened up a lot of things in the painting. It also stopped me from being precious in the painting. So many of the shimmer paintings and the paintings in the series that came after have a quality of pristineness because of the nature of the paint and the architectural construction that I was involved in. The hands released all of that. All of a sudden the physicality of the material was the main focus. The hand became the brush, in essence, and all of the possibilities were just impacts primarily. There is no feathering of the paint—none of that. I was just transferring the material there in this mechanical manner. And the enjoyment I found in the journey came out of trying to find answers to questions like: What do

you do with this? How do you use this gesture in an age set against representational art? How do you use the gesture in terms of the whole idea of the figure beginning to seep into the paintings? Because I never saw myself as an abstract artist—meaning someone who was adopting ideas from early abstract artists who were moving out of the figure. That was not what I connected with or wanted to connect with. I wanted to work with art that had a self-referential resonance to it.

MH

Well, I have several thoughts. One is that the thicker the paint becomes, the more the canvas resembles a wall. This idea connects to both graffiti art as well as to your experiences painting walls with the other Smokehouse artists. There were so many artists whose marks on the canvas referenced graffiti or were in fact a form of graffiti on a “canvas wall”—Dubuffet and others. And that changes the surface. It changes the dynamics. If it's hand-painted graffiti on a wall then it's different from the kind of space you were opening up earlier.

WTW

I think so. I began to reemphasize the flatness of the support. I found if I did that for long enough, painterly things began to happen and the canvas still became a window.

MH

Earlier we were talking about the importance of contextualization. We are now looking at your paintings from the '80s, and '80s painting culture was very different from that of the '70s. It was the time of neo-expressionism. There was a resurgence of painterly content and related critiques. I don't know how many of them you have read. I am thinking of Benjamin Buchloh's well-known critique of neo-expressionism, in which he favors more conceptual practices. Do you think that the resurgence of expressionist painting impacted your work? I think it's fair to say that your work is more expressionist at this moment. Do you think your painting practice changed in response to the times?

WTW

I'm not sure of that. I'm really not sure of that.

MH

I'm just throwing out possibilities. I'm not sure either.

WTW

At the time I was so involved with the physical material and with wanting this material to take on another life. I did not mean it to be a reference to my earlier paintings or to the paintings of others. The expression was coming out of different gels, different additives that I was beginning to put into the paint.

MH

You made these works at a moment when the artists were open to exploring alternate painting styles. The works seem to me to be consistent with what was transpiring in the '80s while also seeming today quite contemporary.

WTW

Well, you know, given the times in which they were made, they have to be contextualized as such—whether or not I was consciously or unconsciously responding to this context.

MH

Exactly. It's not as if you spent all of your time in the studio. You also had a life outside the studio. The '80s were also the moment of the AIDS epidemic and the culture wars. It was a very political decade in many ways. It was also the era of postmodernism, but that is not a language that appears to be relevant to your work. Your engagement with the paint is more direct; you are not self-consciously commenting upon it. Maybe you disagree?

WTW

No, I don't disagree. I'm trying to think about what I'm going through in the studio, and why I'm doing things, and why I backtrack. In my studio, often paintings from different periods are out and visible. Sometimes I end up laying the paintings on top of each other when moving them around and the juxtapositions create another window, another possibility. And a lot of my work has come about from one painting lying next to another, between a roller painting being next to this other kind of thing. But the encrustation begins with this series, and then it's a way of harnessing that encrustation.

MH

This is *Crossroads* (1984)?

WTW

Yep. Part of the notion of encrustation is this idea that there is a surface or an object underneath. The object becomes encrusted, and I played with that idea

more and more. Eventually I began to see the blistering or fissuring—I hate to use the word *crackle*—on the surface as visually interesting. Again, so much of the natural world has a sense for the lack of perfection. In contrast, with the shimmer paintings of the previous decade I was trying to find an absolutely perfect surface. So in the '80s I was really going against my own history.

MH

It's almost like—and please take this in a good spirit—you're playing with the aesthetics of the ugly.

WTW

That is a very good analogy, and I will accept it wholeheartedly. Part of the job as an artist is redefining what beauty can be or, in the case of painter, what painting can be. As long as you stay within the parameters of teachable phenomena you won't be able to open up the possibilities of all the sensibilities that an individual artist can have.

MH

What do you mean by teachable phenomena?

WTW

You go to a graduate program and—

MH

I see what you mean, "What you can teach and this is the other side of it, what you can't."

WTW

Yeah. We were talking about Dubuffet and others, and it seems to me that the notion of the ugly is very much a part of that kind of approach to making art. Or, as the Japanese would call it, *wabi sabi*—the idea that there is beauty in imperfection, beauty in the ordinary. And I am very much willing to bring that to painting. We talk about the wall. The wall is a given all over the place. Sometimes it's the way a light hits the wall. Sometimes it's the wall's texture. Sometimes it's an abandoned apartment. The building is being torn down, and I look out and I see all of this autobiographical stuff: I see the wallpaper, or the color of the rooms, or whatever may be there. I see its colors. I see the scale of it. I think, What else is there? What else lies within that context? I think this habit of mine comes out of painting walls; it comes out of my interest in the architectonics of the city and in the architectural changes that take place in it. When an older building is torn down and a new

building goes up, the interior of the older building gets hidden in the archeology of it.

MH

And like your paintings, they are very abstract, but loaded with human content.

WTW

They are—and I hope my paintings are loaded with human content too. (*laughter*)

MH

That seems to be one of the things I've gleaned from you in our conversations—your commitment to a feeling level that you are expressing.

WTW

They are hands on paintings. They are autobiographical. I keep pushing and pushing the paintings to the point where they have a physical presence, to where there's nothing else that I can put in the painting—either by making it more physical, or more painterly, or any of the other things I like paintings to be.

MH

So this was risky in some sense. It occurred because your child happened to touch the painting, but you allowed yourself to embrace the kind of language it introduced. The Michael Rosenfeld Gallery show this past spring (2017) provided an overview of your work, but I would hope at some point we see a full retrospective because it's sometimes periods like this that younger artists come to and get inspired by. These paintings, which feature the hands, flirt with the ugly but are not excessively so; not in the way that Kiefer and the neo-expressionists could be. I find your hand paintings very contemporary.

I wrote my dissertation on Baziotes, and at the time I loved his lyrical abstraction. But recently, when I returned to his work and looked again at his early paintings, including *Dwarf* (1947), which is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, it occurred to me that these lesser-known works of his seem more contemporary in today's context and should be revisited. Then I found that Carroll Dunham had written an essay admiring the power of the very same painting by Baziotes. It contains an expressive ugliness and a type of figuration that is different from his late style but that today seems important. Do you want to comment on that?

WTW

The handprints allowed me to think about painters who were painting really dark paintings. Not dark in terms of mood, but dark in terms of color or paint. I was

thinking about Monk and Ryder and a whole group of painters whom for years I didn't look at, even as my paintings got heavier and darker. My palette was changing drastically. The handprint paintings expanded the range of my palette; as a body of work, it was enormously helpful in that respect.

MH

Moving on then. What's this one on the right? (*Points to a painting hanging in the studio.*)

WTW

That would be *Cross Creek* (1984).

MH

Let's go over and talk in front of it. So these are from the late '80s?

WTW

Yes. With these I returned to using the roller, but they're far more painterly. I've brought the physicality of the roller into dialogue with the physicality of the paint.

MH

There is no brushstroke right here?

WTW

No, that's not brushed.

MH

It's all roller? Can you think of anyone that uses a roller in such a painterly way? I can't.

WTW

No.

MH

Is it all acrylic?

WTW

It's all acrylic paint.

MH

It's very thick. The surface is almost sculptural.

WTW

But I did not apply thick layers of paint. What you are seeing are many, many,

many thin layers of paint applied over a long period of time. It took me almost a year for each one of these paintings.

MH

The different strands of your art merge here. You returned to geometry and to a concern for balance, but there is energy and activity within the rectangles.

WTW

I was rethinking the paintings from the late '60s. That's what I was really thinking about.

MH

Oh, like *Mercer* and *Trane*?

WTW

Yep. The idea from my earlier paintings of isolated bands that are next to each other: How can they transition through the tactile? What if I had made the paintings from the late '60s in a much more physical way? That was what had probably begun to come through in the late '80s. What began to happen though is this kind of iconography, in a sense, a central form.

MH

Which in the late '80s is no longer a diamond, no longer a kite?

WTW

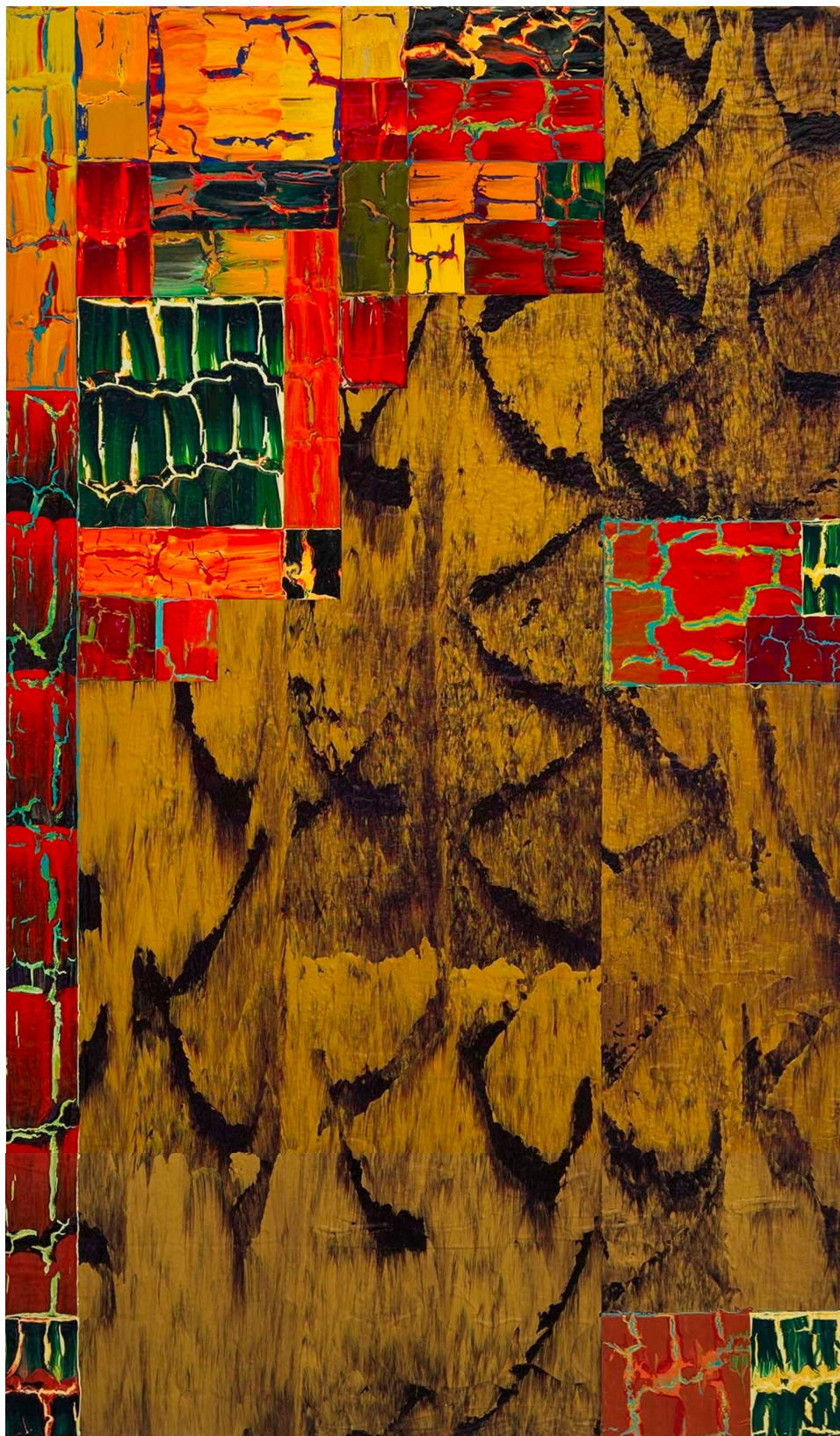
It is not. It's actually just a plane and then another plane in back of it. But when I was making the, this sense of the cross began to pop up. And then it was a matter for me in this particular painting. These two shapes became really essential in terms of breaking that sense of a cross and creating the illusion of a thick volume. So there is a play now in terms of thinking more about those early paintings overlapping, suggesting a space, and yet there is not enough information to complete it.

MH

And the name of this one?

WTW

This one is *Spring Lake* (1988–2003).



Spring Lake, 1988-2003, acrylic on canvas, 75 x 44 in.

MH

Spring Lake. So you go back into these it looks like?

WTW

I do. I go back and finish them. I finished this painting over a long period of time, and at some point this shape began to float into it.

MH

Oh, the heart.

WTW

This fish.

MH

A fish and a heart. A pineapple or something. (*laughter*) It's a heart.

WTW

(*laughter*) It's a repeat.

MH

Does the heart relate to that portrait of your parents you talked about earlier?

WTW

Well, on some level it does. It's a spade, a deck of cards, and it speaks to the painting being very much about the function of card games as a social activity in my family. It's autobiographical. Again, we were a very large family who migrated from the South. At one point we all lived in my aunt's apartment.

MH

One-Eleven and a Half?

WTW

(*laughter*) Yeah, One-Eleven and a Half. Once a month, we would gather back in that apartment. This extended family of brothers and sisters—we were all back together playing cards. Cards were a social activity, a social norm. As I began to think about these symbols, I began to want to use them. Again it was like defacing abstraction. That's what I saw in this.

MH

Do you want to explain how you would “deface abstraction”?

WTW

You know, this idea of abstraction being this pure thing. You put a sign or a symbol in it. It's not a fish. It's a shape. For me, it was just a shape, and yet we have so much pre-knowledge that we're going to see it as a fish. We are going to see this as a heart or a skin.

MH

But you left it in?

WTW

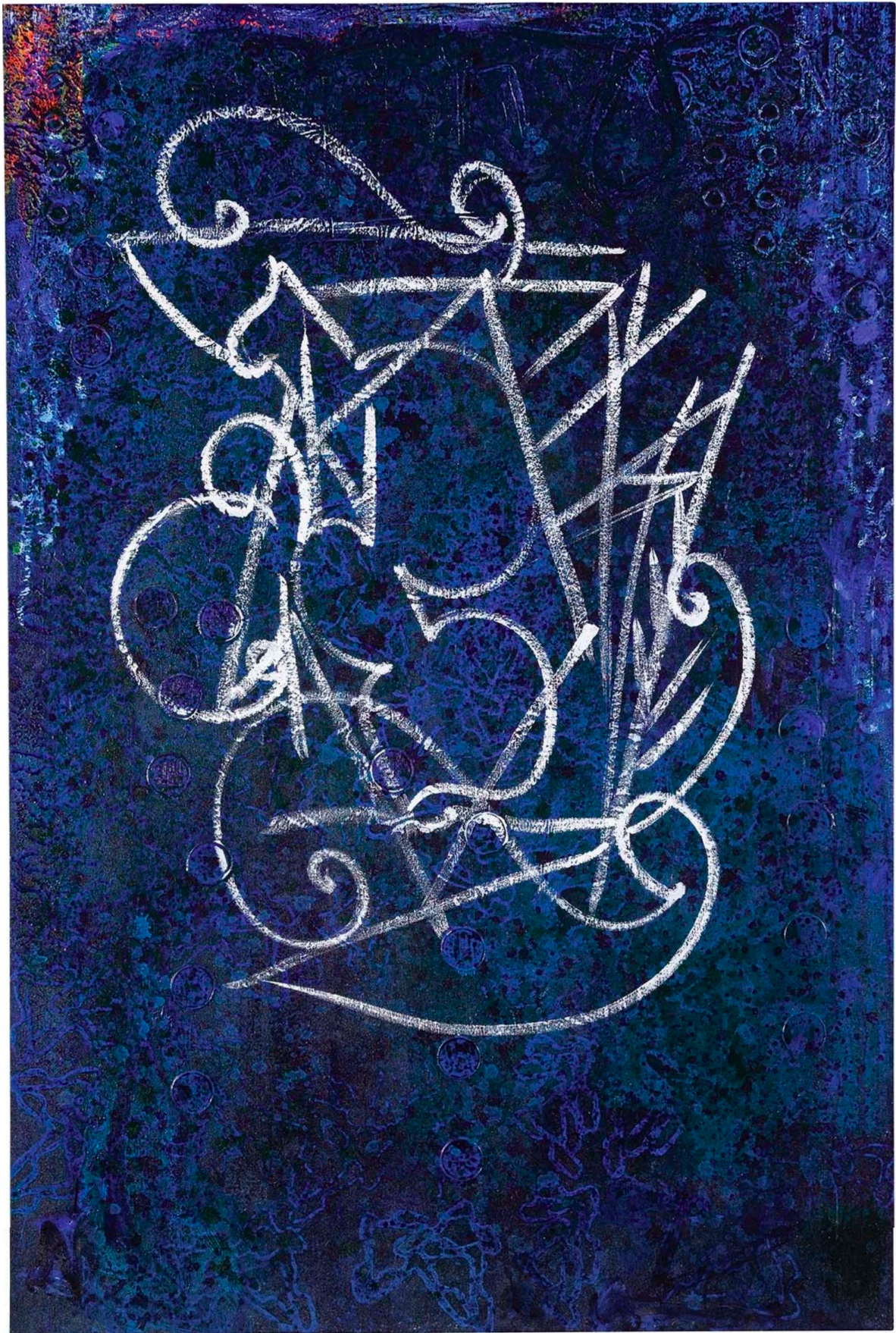
I left it in.

MH

Even if it could be read as a fish, you left it in because you could have painted it out if it got too recognizable as a fish.

WTW

That's right. And when I use the words *defacing abstraction* what I mean is that I'm attacking any confirmed idea about painting that I might have. I had to get rid of that idea. You know, I had to push that idea.



Let Me Know, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 60 1/4 x 40 1/8 in.

MH

Cards are also a prominent theme in art—cards and chess. The surrealists particularly favored chess. There is an underlying similarity in manipulating geometric shapes partly by plan and partly by chance. It is an analog to some things you're doing, no?

WTW

Well, I have to think about that one. I never thought of it that way.

MH

I throw it out to you as a possibility, just as I floated the idea that your paintings of the '80s share some commonalities with the expressionist paintings of that decade.

WTW

I would very much accept that.

MH

This isn't a metalanguage as in postmodernism. I don't find that in your work. But did you feel close to it?

WTW

I don't think I ever thought about it. At the time I made this painting I was kind of locked in the studio, just going through these things.

MH

You were in the world.

WTW

I was in the world. Yes, I was. I was trying to stay out of the world.

MH

At this point in the '80s, Rudy Giuliani is trying to shut down the Brooklyn Museum for the *Sensation* show. In the '80s there was more openness to different kinds of painting.

WTW

Well, here. These things kind of become striations. When it occurred, and it occurred in a few paintings, I was thinking very much the whole history of Chinese painting. There were lots of other kinds of painting that I began to look at. I was going to museums more and more during this time, walking through the Metropolitan. Just looking, looking, looking, and trying not to take the same route I always took when I got to the Met. I'd walk in, look at Cezanne, look at Monet and everyone else.

MH

You're getting away from canonical modernism, Bill! (*laughter*)

WTW

I am!

MH

Move to the other corners!

WTW

I began to look at more and more art. I also began to look at vase paintings because I had this idea of the repetition, of the same image being drawn over and over again.

MH

Which period? Greek? Roman?

WTW

Greek and Roman. There is such a rich collection there. I kept asking myself, Are these common objects? Are these everyday objects? Or are they elitist objects? And my conclusion was, Their manufacture was almost factory-like, and today I'm looking at these objects under conditions very different from those in which they were produced or used. I had to reassess those objects because they were distinctly different in their coloration and fragmentations. The way all of them had been glued back together interested me—their reassembly.

MH

Like your cracked surfaces.

WTW

Exactly. I began to see that more and more in museums. It was the idea of reassembling information.

MH

But how did this relate to your own practice? You were definitely producing paintings for museums at this point, not producing utilitarian objects. Or does it relate to your early experience painting walls.

WTW

In the studio, I'm not thinking about either one. I'm not thinking about the end product or where the work is going to go. I'm more involved in trying to get ideas out of my head and to put them in some tangible form that will lead me to the next creative idea. And the studio practice is more of a way of life than it is producing objects for sale. The object's sale is a byproduct of a whole practice. I can't think of ever going into a gallery or a museum and looking at a painting without coming away with something that's of interest to me no matter how horrible the painting is.

MH

It may be because it's horrible. (*laughter*)

WTW

Well, it very well may be. When I go to the museums I walk up close to the paintings. I'm really interested in what's on top, what's underneath, what's stumbled, and how it's painted. That's the way I go through a museum.

MH

Look at this painting of yours up close. It's just incredible. The lights obviously are fabulous. It's so rich in color. There's tension and change on the surface.

WTW

It's an imperfect world. What interested me was the color texture; the shifts that appeared as juxtapositions.

MH

These are really beautiful paintings. I wonder if you would have gotten to them without going through "the ugly period," which maybe freed you to do this.

WTW

I don't think I would've been able to. The paintings were essential in terms of opening up more and more because there was a removal of the tape. Removing the emphasis on drawing led me to the idea that I had to spread the paint around, and that process really opened everything up. It wasn't so contained. Once I got a handle on spreading the material, I reintroduced geometry, and that's when

these began to construct themselves again. I talk about quilts very often and the idea of parts to the whole. I have always constructed paintings from part to the whole. No part of a painting should be given any less attention to detail than another.

MH

But when you say “part to the whole,” you’re implying that you build the painting part by part, without any awareness of the whole?

WTW

I am very much implying that. That is very much the way I work—

MH

Because they all have such a sense of the whole at the end.

WTW

That’s through trial and error. That’s through moving forms around, forms being underneath. The forms move and move until they have, for me, a sense of existence, a sense of balance amid those other forms. The fun is in orchestrating the tactile, the geometry, the color. You have a lot of the things you’re orchestrating simultaneously, and that’s what I like a great deal. The more things I can orchestrate, the more adventure in the painting for me. It gets a little more difficult, and that’s what I like.

MH

It does look almost like tile work with these heavy, sun-glossed geometries. But these are not painted over, right?

WTW

No, that’s just a byproduct.

MH

Just a byproduct. And never framed?

WTW

There’s something about the black byproduct that I like. Very few of my paintings have been framed.



Union Jack, 1978, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 54 1/4 in.

MH

I think we should discuss music, jazz in particular, before we focus on your recent blue painting. You talk about orchestrating as if you are working with the sounds of different instruments.

WTW

I look at painting very much as a form of orchestration, and music plays various roles when I'm working. I play different artists for different reasons. When I get toward finishing a painting, there are certain musicians that I play. When I'm starting something new, I play a whole different group. When I get to the studio my morning starts with Coleman Hawkins because of the tones that come out of his saxophone. They get me moving. I listen to him literally every day first thing when I arrive in the studio.

Very often when I finish a painting I listen to Pablo Casals. In his music the nuances in the instant allow me to slow down and reflect upon the paintings. John Coltrane comes up often. I have named paintings for him or for tunes he popularized because there is such a rush of energy in his music, in this enormous kind of search within music itself. It allows me to think about humans being in this spiritual search as well as a plastic visual search, but the activity itself is one of endless searching and it's abstract.

MH

It's abstract, and it can be urban. I've written about it that way, too. You know, brassy sounds.

WTW

I grew up in a household where music was playing constantly. My parents were very interested in music. They went to clubs with anything from big bands to smaller quartets. Growing up music had different functions throughout the day. The music that my parents would play was always shifting.

MH

But you lived as jazz changed from dance music to very abstract and heady intellectual music.

WTW

I did. When I got out of graduate school and came back to New York I was lucky enough to move to SoHo. Around the corner was Sam River's Studio Rivbea. He had a studio right around the corner. Another jazz musician named Lloyd McNeil lives below me. And over the past forty-one years now, when Lloyd gets up in the morning he starts to practice. I'll stamp on the floor, and he'll play a little louder, and then we'll start our day.

MH

That's wonderful, so you're collaborating through the floor. (*laughter*)

WTW

It was a very long period of beginning to immerse myself in the music and with musicians. Some of my earliest supporters were musicians and people in the music industry.

MH

You had started to tell me earlier who supported you.

WTW

One of the surprises in my life was an interaction I had with George Wein. He bought a really essential painting called *Carolina Shout*. In terms of the *One and a Half* series that is probably one that reaches its full life in terms of where I want to get to. It helped that the title was *Carolina Shout*.

MH

Yes. (*laughter*)

WTW

You know, when I saw it in his home, I was taken aback by the painting. I was surprised that someone who had spent his whole life involved in music was buying my painting, appreciating it, and seeing the connection between the world of music and the world of visual arts, particularly in terms of my work.

MH

Well, one thing I've noticed in talking to you is that you want a loner practice in the studio twelve hours a day but you also admire more collaborative art forms, like

music. Of course, music is not always collaborative—musicians do practice alone. But they often perform together. You worked collaboratively with Smokehouse and with printmaking.

WTW

In both cases, those were collaborative processes.

MH

I wanted to ask you about Bob Blackburn, printmaking, and the collaboration involved in that.

WTW

Bob is a very interesting example. Bob started calling me in 1969. He'd say, "Bill, come over and make some prints." And I kept saying, "No. No. No." The reason I said, "No. No. No." was because as an undergraduate I found printmaking agonizing. And he said, "Come on over, Bill."

MH

Why was it agonizing?

WTW

The physical work and the prolonged process. You had to go through all of those steps. Well, he finally got me over there. He gave me a litho crayon and an etching plate, and he said, "Just draw on the plate." So I did, and then he popped it in the acid. Five minutes later, he pulled it out and had someone print it. The first two prints I made were called *Redfern I* and *Redfern II*. He brought me into printmaking in a different way other than what I had been taught in school. He said, "You can do anything you want on this plate, and we will get an image out of it. Then we will go from there."

MH

I bet Hayter did some of that.

WTW

So much of the printmaking I did with him was like that. He and I worked together after that for almost twenty years. I made something like sixteen or seventeen prints for Bob, and each time we made them he would show me something new. I would get frustrated, and he would say, "Let's try this." He made the process easier by minding the way I liked to work in the studio. There was a spontaneity that I was interested in, and he would always find a way to get me to what I wanted to do without all of the steps. It also helped that he had someone else

printing and pulling the proofs and doing all of that. I began to draw on proofs as they were being pulled off the press, and that led to whole editions that I would rework. There would be variations within the edition rather than all of the prints looking alike. They would be hand colored, and that really opened up a lot in the painting. The studio practice and the printmaking practice were close together.

MH

That's great. Bob printed for ULAE (United Limited Art Editions).

WTW

He did. He printed Jasper Johns and all those people.

MH

And Lee Bontecou printed there, too. She used to say she liked etching the most because she had the print and the plate. (*laughter*)

WTW

That's right. Yep.

MH

She also liked going into "the blacks," as she would say. This was a moment in the late '60s and '70s where people like Bob Blackburn and Tatyana Grosman brought printmaking back as a modernist endeavor.

WTW

I did a series of silk screens early on with Vera List. Again it was a situation where I was working with a shop and able to make the medium do what I wanted to. At that point the medium lent itself to the early geometric paintings. I really like the portfolio that came out of that.

MH

And one thinks of Andy Warhol. Actually, there's a great deal of variation in those silk screens, and he also maintained a dialectic between the handmade and the machine-made that on some level sounds like what was going on with Bob.

WTW

Bob liked to see artists work, but he also had people from different countries and people working in different modes. He liked to mix it up. He liked throwing you in there with all these other printmakers, wherever they were coming from, and to see what happens in the dialogue exchange. That was part of his mission as an advocate for printmaking. That was Bob.

MH

Yes, he had a mission: a collaborative and globally and racially inclusive endeavor.

WTW

Yes, he did. He helped me learn how to work with other people. For me, it was one of the first times where the art-making process involved other people; even finishing a print requires collaborating with the printer. And because I didn't know much about printmaking, there was a learning curve, and I found that exciting. Certainly tasks as simple as choosing the tone of the paper or choosing the texture of the paper, and then beginning to learn all of the tactile stuff, impacted the paintings as well. Again, someone was leading me through the process and trying to make it as close to painting as possible.

MH

What led you to working in the Studio Museum and to establish the residency for young artists?

WTW

When I was in art school I worked at a shelter for wayward kids. I was a counselor for kids who had been taken from their homes by the courts or had been deemed abused. I worked in a lot of after-school programs. The arts changed my life, and I thought that the arts could have a huge impact on everyone's life too. I championed programs that brought the kids to the museum early, or that brought them to concerts, and so on. That kind of experience is humanizing. Once kids are connected to the arts it's less likely they'll get into trouble because in becoming passionate about art and art making they pay less attention to all of the other stuff that's going on around them. For me, the number one thing the arts should be doing is bringing more and more young people into the museums, into concert halls, into plays. More important, art should be taken out of the museums and out of the concert halls and placed into public arenas to break down economic barriers. Who can afford twenty-six dollars to go into a museum? All of those are obstacles for people entering the arts as well as for the artists because you are cutting off the audience that the artists could exhibit to by having those kinds of high prices.

MH

Perhaps you are saying that once your art enters the museum it will reach people. Let me not put words in your mouth.

WTW

Well, when MoMA bought my painting *Elbert Jackson LAMF Part II* in 1969 my life changed drastically in terms of art making. One, having that particular painting acquired when I was really very young CHANGED HIS LIFE HOW?; and two, seeing the painting in the context of the museum collection changed what I was doing and how I perceived myself and my ambition. Keep in mind I had been going into MoMA since I was fourteen years old.

MH

Right, you went to the Industrial High School for the Arts in New York.

WTW

I went to high school on Fifty-First and Lexington, which is four or five blocks from the museum. The painting's acquisition affirmed my sense of possibility. But I quickly realized that the way I presented my painting was very different than the way it was being talked about and received.

MH

Can you explain that?

WTW

The painting is named after my grandfather, Elbert. And L.A.M.F. was a gang tag you saw very often on the subway and on the walls all over New York City.

MH

It was a graffiti tag?

WTW

It was a graffiti tag through the late '50s and '60s. L.A.M.F. It represented chaplains or whatever the neighborhood gang was. There were more gang tags than there were tags for individuals. The title was an evocation of... What is the painting where the swords are up like this? Is it Delacroix's *Oath of Allegiance*?

MH

No, it's David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1784).

WTW

The David painting. The idea of taking an oath to the academy. It was a tongue-and-cheek gesture about the painting itself because there are these forms that cross each other. It was also tongue and cheek because my allegiance was always to my family with the idea of keeping my feet on the ground. That was the intent of

the title and the intent of not getting so caught up in the fact that the painting was in MoMA. My journey as an artist had started long before, and recognizing the continuum is important. It's the studio practice that's more important because that's where you're connecting to the autobiographical material. That's where you're connecting to the experiences you've had.

MH

And how was it read?

WTW

It was read as a formalist painting in dialogue with prevailing ideas about form. But they missed the point: formalism only gets you so far because much of the painting had to do with dissidence. It had to do with any number of ideas that were drastically different from the prevailing ideas around formalism and specifically minimalism. The painting was meant to convey the opposite of all that, but this got lost in the museum context. There was a false assumption because museums tend to assert a linear idea of history.

MH

Yes, MoMA like Ad Reinhardt caricatured it. The canonical trajectory has Cezanne lead to Picasso and so forth, such that there's no place to deviate and Wilfredo Lam's *Jungle* (1943) lands in the stairwell.

WTW

There you go. We're not going to go there because that opens up all kinds of politics. (*laughter*)

MH

I know. I'm not pushing you.

WTW

I won't go there. I've lived through the art world's evolution from exclusion to inclusion or to participation, maybe that's a better word. Key for me is how many signs, symbols, or new ideas a body of work enters into the dialogue. Does a body of work provoke a shift in the dialogue around the medium?

MH

Can I back us up? I lost you a little bit. You were painting murals during the Smokehouse period. Then you felt that it was more important for art to be in the museum because of the broader audience it attracts and the affirmation it confers for the artist. You were starting to say it led you to a discourse on the museum.

WTW

It did.

MH

Maybe you can clarify what that was for you, because there are many forms of institutional critique, but I don't think that's what you mean here.

WTW

No, it's not. When you make a wall painting, it's in a specific place; it's on 121st Street and Sylvan place, say. It's locked there. That work of art is probably going to influence people within a ten-block radius. It doesn't become an artwork. It becomes a landmark.

MH

Yes, you said that earlier.

WTW

People walk by and know they are at 121st Street and Sylvan. To get people to see that it may be a work of art very often takes the museum wall. The museum gives the work authenticity, and then a person can really see it as an artwork.

MH

It gives you a broader audience, more people who can hear your voice and feel your message particularly if the fees are low and more people are encouraged to visit. Is this what you are saying?

WTW

Very much so. It's different if a work goes from being in a museum to being in public space rather than the other way around. It's like all the works that are in the subways. Some of them become landmarks. Some just disappear. You see a Henry Moore in front of a building.

MH

Plop art they call it. (*laughter*)

WTW

Plop art?

MH

Yes, as opposed to site-specific art. "Plop art" because it "plops" there.

WTW

Well, if you see a Henry Moore in front of a building, you are likely to consider it art because the work is coming from a museum to the outside.

MH

So let's turn now to those wonderful blue paintings that you have spent the last fifteen years doing—

WTW

For the last fifteen years I've been working on Blue Paintings. Here. Follow me. (*Escorts Mona to the back of the studio and unpacks painting.*)

MH

Beautiful. Ah, let's see the name of it.

WTW

Let's see, this one is called *Witch's Hammer*, 2007.

MH

Okay, let's bring it over to our table as it is not too large. It's calligraphic. It has the joy brought by the diamond in your early work, and includes the brush and the tradition of calligraphy.

WTW

The Blue Line Series returned me to drawing. As I was getting older my hands were getting stiff, and so I started drawing every morning. I realized that when I started off as an artist I drew all the time. I came to art through pencil drawings, linear descriptions. I started thinking about what kind of drawing I like to do. They are primarily linear drawings, playful. I like to move things around. I also like the idea of drawing the same image over and over again and the variations that happen when you draw the same thing from memory.

MH

They are very musical too.

WTW

That happens in drawing because it's spontaneous. It's direct. There is no shift in it, as when you go from drawing to paint. Anyway, when I was younger and drawing, I started wanting to use the brush. Now that I'm forty years down the road, I'm moving away from the brush; moving away from that whole history. And when I started rethinking the brush, it introduced a whole new series of studio problems:

What kind of brush? How big a brush? How thick a brush? What is the consistency of the paint? When I was working on paper a lot of these questions were resolved for me because I understood the consistency of paper. When I started working on canvas all of the things that I thought should happen with the weave of the canvas and the way the paint should sit on top were not happening. I began to work on the surfaces again and on the encrustation of those surfaces. I wanted to work over and through these surfaces. What occurred was a process of drawing, painting it out, drawing again, painting it out, such that there are very subtle hints of drawing underneath. There is a dialogue taking place between the painting underneath and the drawing on top. Relatively they are the same but there is a variation, a kind of ritual that comes through this idea of a surface that's being reused over and over again with a very similar kind of—

MH

And always blue and yellow?

WTW

Always blue and yellow or blue and white. I narrowed it down to those two colors.

MH

Do these paintings feel more joyful to you than some of your other work?

WTW

I think the latter ones are more playful. I chose the blue color because of the way the light came into the studio in the late afternoon. That alleyway gets very dark and the light that comes in becomes blue. It's a beautiful blue because of that particular light. And my love of Matisse, Matisse's use of blue also. So those two things converged in my mind. I literally saw the blue there and began to be interested in the luminosity. That blue seemed next to the other blues and the darks began to open up almost like a night sky and then there is the yellow on top of it.

MH

And the knee-jerk interpretation that these paintings represent the blues isn't part of your story here?

WTW

It is not part of the story. I chose the colors because I was trying to get the work to open up as a painting.

MH

Knowing you I would not have thought of the blues because that's too literal an interpretation. That's not what you are about.

WTW

No. It's literally the location of the blue that comes out of that window. I have worked in this studio for many years, and part of the reason that wall is there is because there is such a shift in the light back there.

MH

So, you made a lot of drawings and then the scale expanded. Were the works more satisfying as they got larger?

WTW

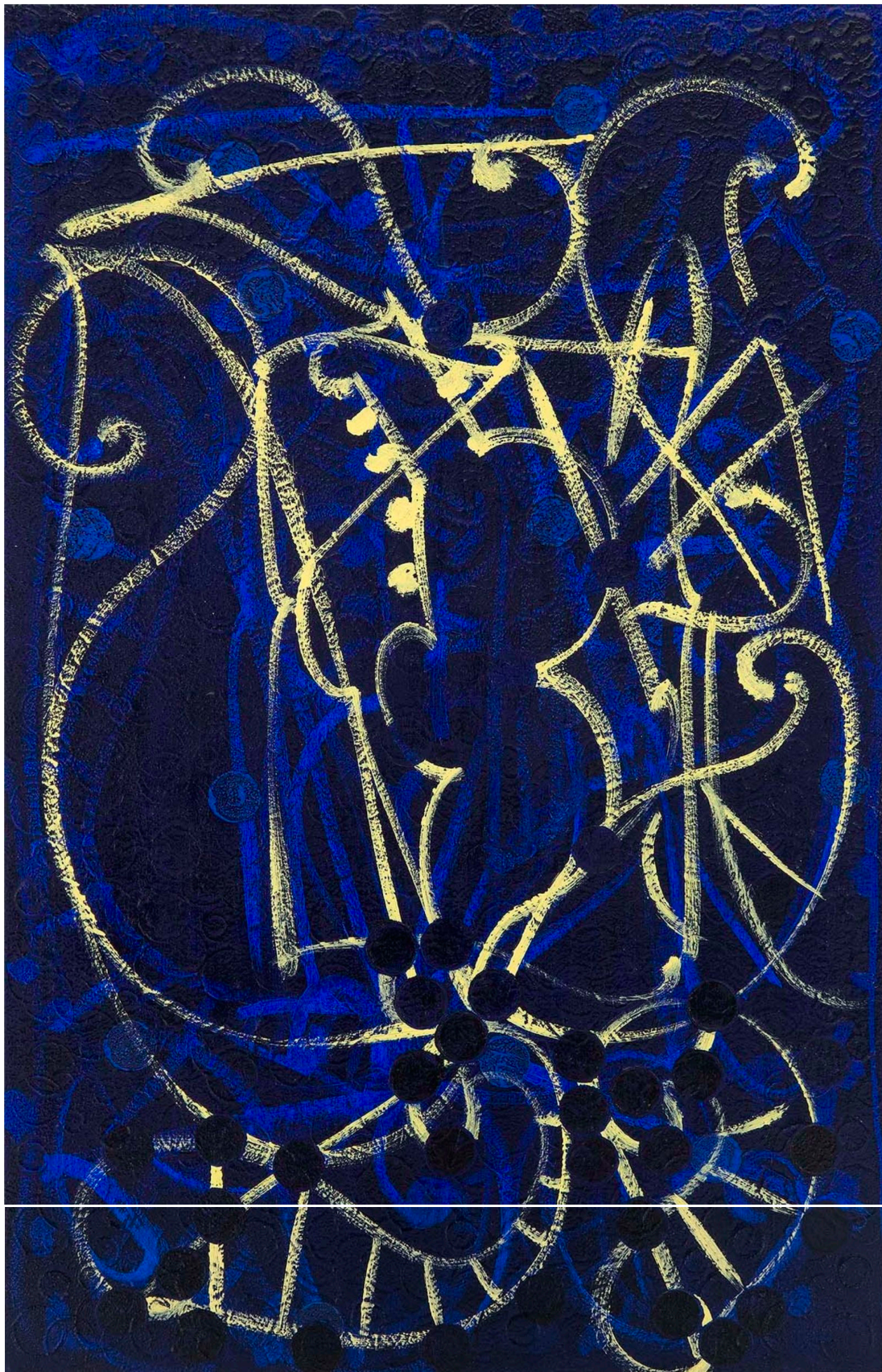
I like the large one as you come in the door of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery.

MH

Right, directly opposite the opening.

WTW

(*Gestures toward picture.*) It is this one, *Last Voice* (2007). What I like about this painting and others in the series is that the problem of the brush and the touch of the brush on the surface was resolved. There is a feathering and lacing that occurs as the brush is dragged across the surface in part because the surface is more encrusted. Sometimes the brush hit only the high points of the textured surface. The line becomes fragmented.



Last Voice, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 54 1/4 in.

WTW

It's the first set of works of yours that I've seen with a different relationship between figure and ground. The forms don't extend to the edge. You produce forms within a matrix and that's different.

WTW

That's the struggle with—

MH

That's why you cut it out.

WTW

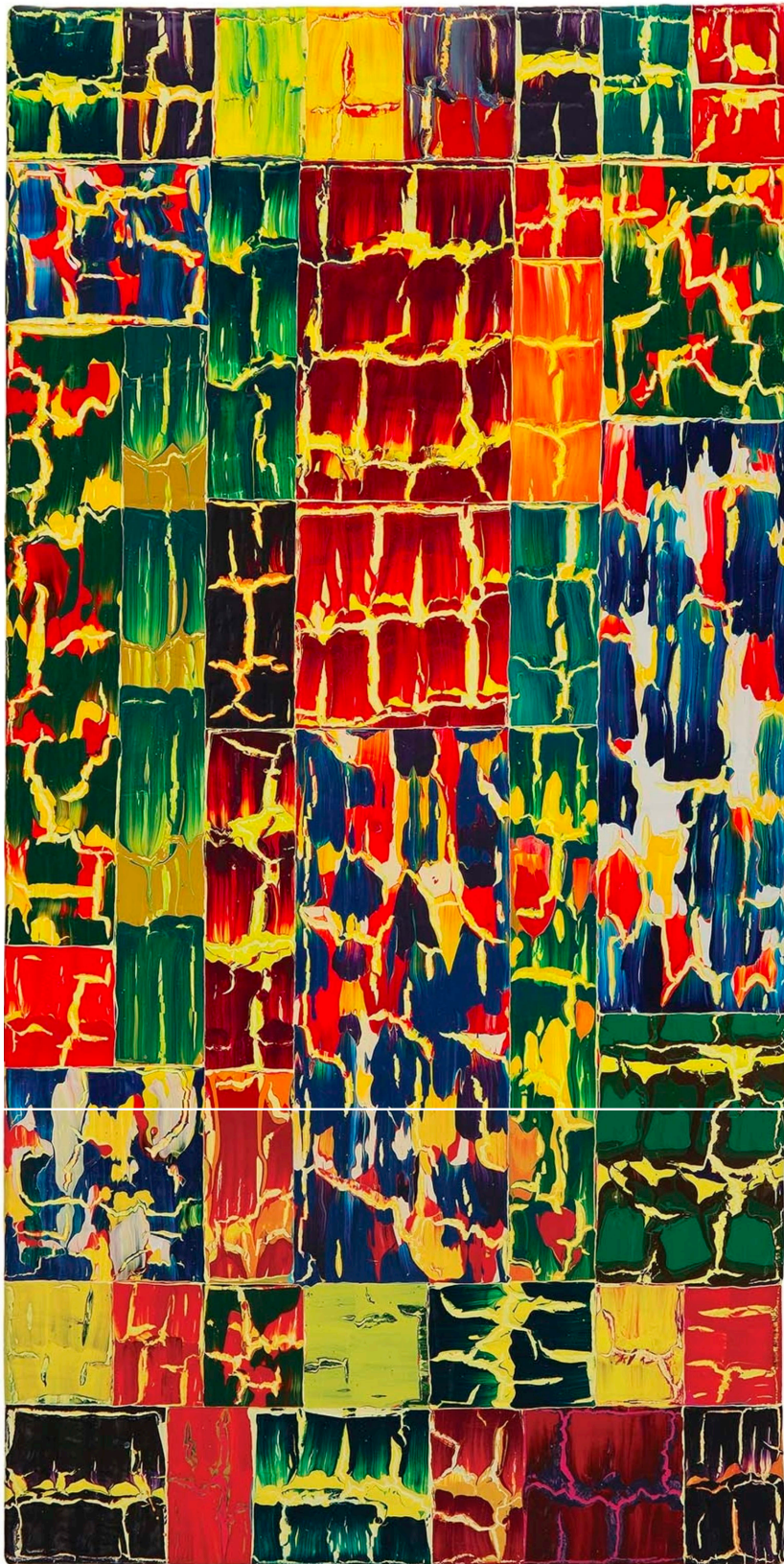
Exactly. I cut it out trying to decide if the depictions of sculpture or objects are sitting inside of that. There are a few of them where I try to resolve that by pushing them closer to the edge.

MH

The liveliness of the brushstroke and the yellow resolves it. I don't experience it as sitting in the middle of a landscape. I find it resolved in an overall way because of the energy and the color. But it's different from the language of your other work. It's as different as your paintings in the '80s were from their predecessors, but it's not about "the ugly."

WTW

I think if you were to see the body of work from the late '70s through now at full scale, the idea that the objects are relatively beautiful will come through. The show at Michael Rosenfeld displays only a sampling of what I did, and the title, *Things Unknown*, suggests that the huge body of work is only partly seen. Say in something like *Harlem Nights* (1999), it's important to realize there are a number of paintings within that One and Eleven and a Half series.



Harlem Nights, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 30 1/2 in.

MH

You're saying that a broader picture of all of your work would reveal more of a sense of continuity?

WTW

Absolutely.

MH

Across which concepts? Which elements?

WTW

The continuity of my thinking. The explorations move forward. A painting here or there might backtrack slightly, but otherwise I think you begin to see a sustained idea going from the shimmering paintings to the roller paintings. I would show you a painting called *Savannah* (1979), or one of the earlier ones like it, if I could find it. You would see the decision to go monochromatic and the decision to emphasize mark making. There are all kinds of decisions you make while painting, and the content of the paintings changes because of those decisions. Each decision adds another layer to the experience of the body of work. The bodies of work get richer from the late '60s on. My critique of that body of work has to do with the surface. Over time it has flattened out. It has lost its luminosity and sparkle. And all of this is the byproduct of my having put the paint on too thin.

MH

This is acrylic?

WTW

Everything is acrylic. As you work with acrylic for some length of time you begin to realize there are things you have to do to it to really make it hold up. My other critique of that period is that a stained painting is almost impossible to repair. You get a mark or something on it and you can't repair it because the work is about the weave of the canvas and the color being in that weave, and when you're in the midst of making paintings that way you don't think about fixing a future stain or mark. Forty or fifty years down the road, I'm looking at these early paintings, and I see I've made a journey in terms of the physicality of the paint. Luckily two paintings from the late '60s were cleaned for the Rosenfeld exhibition: *Harlem Angels* (1968) and one other. The cleaning brought back the painting's luminosity. The canvas had over the years developed a tanned quality. It had aged. The

cleaning brought back the contrast between colors. I guess what I'm trying to say is that my engagement with the material over forty or fifty years period has changed. Today I'm much more aware of making something that fifty years from now will retain its original surface and sense of color and excitement.

MH

So that's basically an advantage you'd have were you to live another fifty years.
(*laughter*)

WTW

I wish. I don't think I'm going to get there, but again, there has never been a comprehensive showing of all of my paintings, and I'd like to hold out long enough to see one.

MH

Well, there should be one. And after the shows at the Tate and Rosenfeld, who knows?

WTW

It might.

MH

It should happen.

WTW

It was very nice to see the paintings at the Tate. There are two there, one of the shimmering paintings and one from the late '60s. Nice seeing them in context.

MH

I have two questions to ask you in summation.

WTW

Mm-hmm.

MH

What is it you most want, and what is it you most *don't* want in your painting?

WTW

I don't want narrative in the painting—a story. That's the part that I probably don't want. What I do want are works of art that are confrontational, works that ask for a sense of experience in that you want to linger and look at them. I want the paintings to have a sense of life you can see in the actual object but that cannot be seen in a reproduction.





Harlem Angels, 1968, acrylic on canvas, 121 x 40 1/2 in.

MH

It's been a treat to do these sessions in the studio. I don't know how we could have had the same conversation looking at a few illustrations.

WTW

This gets back to what it means to work in the studio over a long period of time. If over some extended period of time you have been working on a lot of things—and I don't mean a lot of different kinds of styles; I mean a lot of things in terms of the practice of painting—eventually you begin to narrow down what it is that you are working on. An artist whose name I won't mention said something to me when I first came to New York, fresh out of graduate school. He said, "Painting is an old man's game." What I've come to understand this expression to mean is that it takes time to figure out what you are interested in, to develop the skill and the craft, and then to begin to use your skills to make a singular body of work. It just takes time. There are no shortcuts. That's my thought about it. The art world maybe functions differently, but it's all about the journey. That's the way I see it.

Mona Hadler is on the faculty at Brooklyn College. Her current book on postwar art and popular culture, Rites of Destruction: Ephemerality and Demolition in Postwar Visual Culture was published in 2017. She has written on the art of Lee Bontecou in many venues, including an essay for the traveling Bontecou retrospective shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2003. She has also published on New York art and visual culture of the fifties including essays on Abstract Expressionists William Baziotes and David Hare, and articles on the relation of jazz and the visual arts, the postwar artistic response to nuclear explosions, and most recently on the Pontiac hood ornaments and demolition derbies of that era.