

NEW OBSERVATIONS

Abstraction



ABSTRACTION
Edited by Linda Levit

NEW OBSERVATIONS 24

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WHY I LIKE ABSTRACT ART

In that terse way of his Nelson Rockefeller once told a TV reporter to whom he was showing his art holdings that he liked abstract art best because "You have to do the work."

I don't like to see it as work, because that implies that art is a problem to be solved. But I appreciate what Rockefeller meant: abstract art relies on *you*.

My favorite thing is reading novels, especially long and engrossing ones which demand that you live constantly with the characters. Day after day you must create them and dream up their world for them, and you go on doing this between readings when the book is closed. The best novels give you that space in which to do the creating.

So it is with abstract painting. The artist gives you the shapes, the lines, the colors and the indications of depth, but you do the painting—you distill its essence. One of Ad Reinhardt's famous cartoons features a business man ridiculing an abstract painting. Pointing at it he jeers, "What does this represent?" In the second panel, this painting (which has grown a finger) points at the man demanding, "What do you represent?"

At its best, abstract painting is a critique of the viewer, of his values, yes, but also of the elasticity of his mind. If you ask that a painting be told to you, well you simply aren't residing on the highest plateau of human evolution.

Abstract painting depends on the viewer's *imagination*, but it is fueled by the artist's *vision*. Vision is something more imponderable than imagination. It is something slowly, subtly but steadily realized. That's why when the painter is good, we can see scores of essentially the same painting and not be bored, but rather charged up.

Since the beginning of this century, art's destiny has been abstraction; other movements are like reassuring visits home. Abstract painting is both the course and the runner. It's a long-distance runner, its goal the daylight up above our heads.

© William Zimmer April 1984

CONTENT IN ABSTRACT PAINTING

Abstract painters are talking a lot these days about something like content in non-objective painting. Recently, for example, there was a panel discussion involving several of the painters included in this issue of *New Observations*—David Reed, Linda Levit, Kathy Muehlemann and Ron Janowich—where a general dissatisfaction with the lack of content in seventies abstract painting was expressed. The implication was that the painting of the eighties has more. They asserted that seventies painting emphasized formal elements at the expense of an expression of emotion. In the orientation towards the discovery of painting's non-mimetic elements in their most pure, non-referential aspects, the paintings were reductive to the point of being uninteresting. They became simply representations of an idea derived from an interpretation of Clement Greenberg's formalism. The paintings they are talking about are by the artists supported by Greenberg's theories such as Noland and Olitski, and by artists from the next generation such as Marcia Hafif and Doug Ohlson. Moreover, and more importantly, these artists are talking about their own paintings of the seventies. It cannot be denied that most of the abstract painters included here were influenced to some extent by this kind of reductionist thinking that they now find restrictive. These painters are questioning their own positions and assumptions with the intention of exploring all kinds of different and new possibilities within abstraction. It is an exciting time.

And, their paintings are changing. On a studio visit, one no longer sees essentially the same painting in a red, the blue, then yellow version. The paintings look different from each other to the point that sometimes two paintings done simultaneously hardly look like they are by the same artist. One finds oneself looking for similarities rather than subtle differences. There is much greater formal complexity; more color is used, spatial illusion is allowed, there is more brushstroke where there was none before and less where there was lots. Shaped canvases are being used as well as all sizes of rectangular ones. And, there is an interest in experimenting with new as well as the most traditional materials. Furthermore, a widespread, if somewhat eclectic fascination with older art is evident; inspiration is being derived from all kinds of art, from Primitive, Eastern and Near Eastern to every phase of Western art. But, how do we read these changes in terms of content?

The problem, at least in the discussion of content, is that as always meaning in painting remains indescribable. It's there or can be but it's hard to say what it is. These painters all seem to agree that the most significant and profound meaning for the present can and does exist in abstract painting. It can be seen in the paintings of Marden, Ryman, Pollock and Mondrian and it has to do with feeling. "Feeling," however, can be many things.

To get somewhat closer to describing the kind of feeling they want, words like "sacred" as opposed to "profane" and "spiritual" are used. The religious connotations of these words, however, are problematic. I don't think any of these artists want to suggest that they want to evoke a sense of God or any kind of "other." The paintings are very much about being man-made and present here and now.

To some extent the meaning has to do with change and the excitement of that. It can be felt as potential, optimism, hope and freedom. On the other hand, change alone will not sustain the paintings. A simple introduction of "expressionist" gestures can lead to mere pastiche which is as easy and boring in abstract painting as it can be in representational painting. Splattered red paint used to suggest violence or aggression, gestural brushstroke representing angst or a personal touch, ugly colors to suggest rawness are as banal as the use of geometry to present a "neutral" image. The content is not found in the form alone.

Mondrian said: "In art the search for a content which is collectively understandable is false; the content will always be individual. Religion, too, has been debased by that search."¹ This remark is still true and can be taken as something of a warning. It seems to me that the reason painting and especially abstract painting is still a viable medium is because it can express the indescribable and the individual. The search and discussion of content going on now can be somewhat misleading and has led to the production of a lot of uninteresting art. The introduction of a kind of pop imagery in graffiti art, for instance, seems reactionary. It's an obvious but superficial way to solve the dilemma of how to deal with the dissatisfaction in seventies painting.

Mondrian explains further that the only problem in art is to achieve a balance between the subjective—aesthetic expression of oneself—and the objective—direct creation of universal beauty. If the terms of the balance are changed to be between the general—those aspects which refer to a larger world—and the specific—the internal elements, then Mondrian's comments could still apply. One might say then that the balance got slightly out of whack and weight has to be shifted. The problem is to establish a contact and tensions between seemingly opposite or contradictory elements. It is to make the familiar seem unfamiliar and vice versa. A feeling for the complexity of life which can exist seemingly resolved is the most pleasurable and uplifting.

© Tiffany Bell March 1984

1. Piet Mondrian, "Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art" (1937), Herschel B. Chipp, ed., *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 349ff.

ABSTRACTION: 3 BRIEF PARAGRAPHS

Abstraction sets itself in opposition to the idea that something doesn't exist until we name it. It sets an image before us that doesn't correspond to the world we've catalogued and says *name this*. It is descriptive of states and attitudes that defy labeling. Sometimes the image itself seems to be awake. A late Rothko painting isn't simply "brooding" (to use the cliché), it appears to brood upon itself. It possesses a corporeality even as it opens up onto a chromatic infinite. Such a painting is both figure and space, shell and volume.

Abstraction is paradoxical because it is always a painting, a sculpture, an occasion. It superimposes its unknowability on a familiar vehicle. It is paradoxical because once the image is given form it is appropriated by the world of things whose total inclusivity it attempts to deny. Rothko maybe saw the veil, or beyond it, but he could only *reproduce* his vision in the earthbound materials of wood, cloth, and paint. Thus abstraction is representational even as it claims not to be. And yet it is an art that perhaps more than any other exists in the realm of unattainable ideals, summoning the unsummonable. It is inherently elegiac—whether it works or not depends on how vividly it renders an absence. Formal complexity and opulence are not enough and often not necessary.

There is no conflict between abstraction and representation. To deny abstraction isn't wicked, merely timid. To deny representational work for the sake of abstraction is to deny abstraction a content for existence.

© Stephen Westfall April 1984

ARTHUR DOVE DEFINES ABSTRACTION

My dear Mr. Eddy:

You have asked me to "explain as I would talk to any intelligent friend, the idea behind the picture," or in other words, "what I am driving at."

First of all this is not propoganda, there has been too much of that written on modern art already. It is simply an explanation of *my own means* in answer to the above question.

After having come to the conclusion that there were a few principles existent in all good art from the earliest examples we have, through the masters to the present, I set about to analyze these principles as they occurred in works of art and in nature. . .

Arthur Dove to Arthur Jerome Eddy, 1914

In 1910, Arthur Dove painted his first series of abstract paintings, *Abstractions Nos. 1-6*, and in 1912, opened the "Arthur G. Dove First Exhibition Anywhere," an exhibition of abstract pastels, at Stieglitz's "291" Gallery. This was a year before the Armory show, a year before the official arrival of European abstract painting in America. It was also a year before any other American artist is known to have exhibited work of a non-representational style.

So there is a question of models, of paradigms, for Dove's abstract painting. If proximity dictates influence, it is the fields and skies of "Beldon Pond," the artist's farm, and not other artists or their work who affected Dove. Dove himself speaks only infrequently of other artists—on almost all of these occasions it is Cezanne who he mentions—rather he speaks of nature.

"A Way to Look at Things," a poem by Arthur G. Dove, 1925:

Works of nature are abstract,
They do not lean on other things for meaning.
The sea gull is not like the sea
Nor the sun like the moon.
The sun draws water from the sea.
The clouds are not like either one—
They do not keep one form forever.
That the mountain looks like a face is accidental.

Georgia O'Keefe notes that there is an obvious comparison to be made between the formal elements in Dove's work and the topographical characteristics of the area surrounding Lake George where she, Dove and Stieglitz spent summers. "Dove is the only painter who is part of the earth," wrote O'Keefe.

The point should also be made that Dove's models were not entirely the European abstract painters who were his contemporaries. Although one cannot call Gorky a contemporary of Dove, he would come to embody the teachings of European abstract painters for American artists, and so makes a good comparison. In his book on Walther Murch (*Walther Murch, The Rhode Island School of Design, 1966*), Daniel Robbins describes the explorations of Murch and Gorky.

They went out a lot on ferries, up to the Bronx, in Central Park, around the docks. Gorky would look down side streets and at groups of rocks and trees often waving his hand and saying "all wrong." He meant that the given, the observed, could be wrong; he criticized views that were dull or insipid. He dared to criticize nature.

Finally, one can find no obvious models for the first non-representational paintings done in America. As a fellow creative force, Dove would follow nature's example as an artist. He would not, however, let natural vistas dictate the appearance, abstract or otherwise, of his work. It was rather a desire to be without models that would be Dove's driving force.

I would like to make something that is real in itself, that does not have to be explained—like the letter A for example.

From Arthur Dove's unpublished notes.

© Christine Burgin

SNAKE OIL FOR SPRAINED HEARTS:

Julio Schnitzel speaks to Joe Masheck.

Halt' den Schnabel!

Hi, fellas. Suffer today? The best part is when it just starts to hurt, just enough to seem like, you know, no pain, no gain. Then it's an OK feeling and you can get good art. Really putting your all in it makes your butt sweat, so suffer right till your butt starts to sweat and you know you'll do fine.

Up,

down,

all around;

the hurt, the smart, the self-satisfaction (are the gradations of different plays. You could say they are the same one thing, which can be one huge fake-out).

It's your head that does it:

whatever they tell you, it has to be big;

you have to keep it pumped up
to use for feedback,

like a chimp in a lab or one of those rubber blood-pressure gizmos, or a CB radio when you hear yourself making yourself yell too loud to get cold feet.

Fans are funny.

Take it from me, getting your face on throwaway mags is nothing, what with their ceaseless upsets and all the socio-political orbits spinning at once like crazy tops.

Don't play for the fans; play for yourself, number one:
anyway, just take their minds off stocks and give them something else to bet on
and they'll beg for more.

Not just art, but life, the big game, has penalties for walking, so just picture what it means to go running backwards or something. You will have to learn that even old pals won't see their way

to give you the time of day.

But the stats, the bottom line, this is the true artist's comforter to blanket his sprained soul snugly
in the lonesome casket

that this is the void caused by the gushing up and flushing over of the artist's relation to time.

As I myself once said to an old star, "Since a convergence is the same as a start, and style is as quantitative as any symbol (watch how I don't stop [dribbling, I mean]), the best I can do for you, mister, is to look you over and take some pointers for the good of all concerned."

There is truly a mistake about the causes of why the plays an artist makes are a lot of times like ones by him or her or somebody else. One thing is, if you don't read too much, chances are you can't be doing "quotes," as they call it; and if you do make a mental note of everything, really everything they say, you couldn't even put "quote" marks in if you wanted to. Some people, such as pacifists, hate to make literary allusions, no less quotings, whilst others hold all members of art alike, going just by feel; others still have the total record for one whole collage that they can re-cut up and re-put together again to give a little kick to any normal love affair with art. Having a similarity go for an interpretation also diminishes because it just might be only a sprain in your other leg from a different day altogether. As Buff Buffon said, way back when, having style proves your very own type of gumption. Try old plays over for yourself: it can be a help, a trick, a total joke, maybe even a complete gas. But remember, get it to look like it just started opening up those glands. So many American guys keep ignoring the obvious depth of Yves Klein that wipes me out. With similar plays you can keep up the game of life over and over, though.

My own supposedly expressionistic plays

really are that way but not for why people think; no way. See, you have to be so big that it's like the whole world feeling inside just your own gut; like, if you could be the king then everybody could have you being sad for him or her and not just for your selfish sad self.

This feeling is true greatness in all art; it kinda tingles too. What is truly modern and way up there forever is not what you think. It is not about getting some canvas stretched neat so the weave is as squared-away as the seams of nylons on a correct female person's legs, or with boiling wax to make your every move look kind of sucked, smack-tight, against a blackboard. No, being modern has to seem like true heartburn and no less. You'll know when this seems to happen: all of a sudden it will look fine.

Never do I myself tire of playing re-runs in my own mind of all I have already done at my age.

This is like watching a cute hamster, or getting slobbered with wet affection from another pet source.

It's funny that I can't tell where I am unless thenceforth I shall have removed myself elsewhere.

Such is what the time does tell, heedless of all cause and effect. Upside down or right-side up has little bearing, being fine inside or out, either way. Frankly the bigger I get the more there is sweet to go around, at least once I can be sure I have enough to be really big. I will be big enough to take the entire world's temperature at one time, front or back.

I have a wife and kids.

and a beach house and a bunch of lookers for buddies:

what more could any stud want?

Just plain everybody is talking about me; in fact, I hear America singing, not to mention Europe, and of me they sing. Yet do not read me wrong, since oftentimes they will all talk about everyone.

They do buy it too, all of it,
like there's no tomorrow
and comparisons are odious,

which just goes to make me bigger; and the bigger I get the happier they are too,
just to see me seem so happy, making the game so great. I get to feel like some
gas balloon, bigger and happier all the time. I think I like this feeling, yes, I am
practically sure.

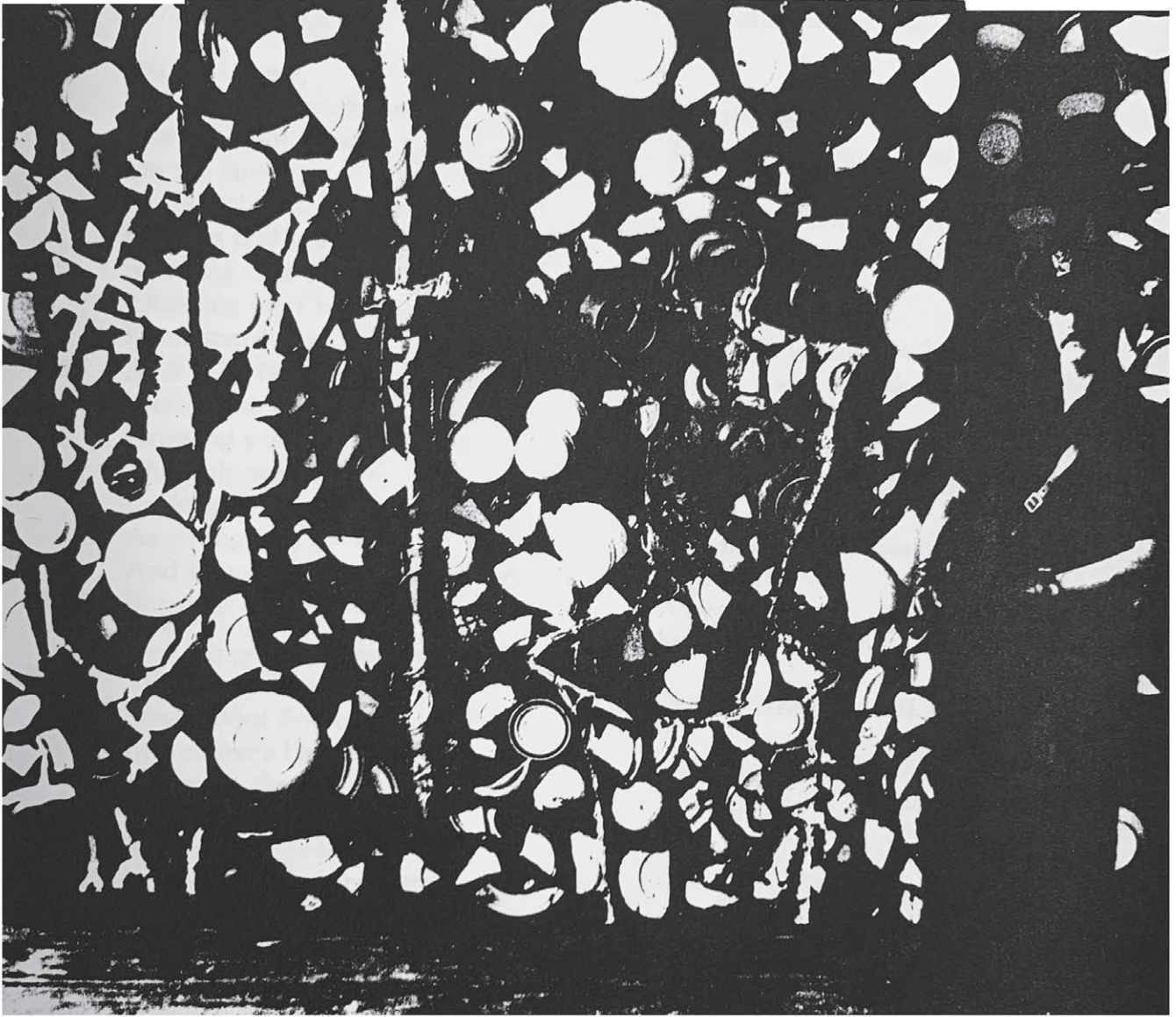
Already I can do anything I want.

If I wanted, right now, I could set up New Wave laundromats everywhere, or
open an exclusive restaurant serving huge steaks, all ultra-rare, with unlimited
champagne and only famous people and quiet agents, sitting nude, maybe, on
red velvet banquettes. Who knows what I can do, who can say. My freedom is
yours, guys; look, it has no limits. I am famous, famous, famous, real big-
league, blue-chip. This I feel makes me feel wanted. Nowadays I almost have to
grit my teeth to break a plate, it's so gross, even though I used to break them all
the time from nerves, overworked in a little hashhouse, nowhere. But even I
have to worry because it might get harder and harder to keep myself psyched up
so I can spread my chest, I mean my wings. I fear that some day I, even me, shall
no longer be able to suffer even mild heartburn on behalf of the whole huge
world, being perhaps too dead to care.

That's enough, though. No more, thanks. I feel a little stuffed already. But when
I am really big, do not thank me, boys, I mean me personally. Just think about
what matters in the great big game that will probably keep going on even after
the likes of me:

just remember my plays,
my great hysterical plays,
and most of all my big gorgeous scores.

© Joseph Masheck 1984



Mike Bidlo, *Original Schnabel Simulacrum* (courtesy of Rodchenko), 1983. Mixed media.

Few Things Have Changed

Walk with me,
Few things have changed.
The kids that hung out
On the corner,
On bicycles, on skateboards,
Flipping frisbees still remain,
Smoking cigarettes,
Chipping your brownstone's
Front steps away,
As if their hands
Were Time's:
Growing younger each year
Through our decline,
Looking quite the same
As young and vivid
And remorseless as children are,
But with different names.

Few things have changed.
The long parade of trees
Down West End bends
In summer's heat and haze,
Still quite the same,
Now carved with names
That stood eye-level
With loves who grew apart
Or learned that sex
Contrives to hide
What hearts can only give
Through passions of the mind.

Walk with me
As we did one day
On College Walk
And talked of Dostoevsky's
Inquisitor who saw
Knowledge as an agony
That burns away
All laws of life's
Complacent lies and
Writhes with pity
When ego's hands
Turn love aside.

For Rufus Mathewson, 1918-1978

Few things have changed.
The park, the buildings,
The cars are settled
Under soot and starlight
Where the river winds
To ocean shoals
That ride the coast
To Maine where you lay
For days and shrank
In cobalt to a ball
That fit Death's hands
To play his sullen games
On broken steps,
Standing in his ordinary way
Among the rest
As you passed,
Still quite the same.

Steven Henry Madoff

METROPOLITAN ENJOYMENT MANUFACTORY
a stressless cannibal

Magnesium wires care and feeding. Dilettante contra profession time-lapse regret passes through backlit horizon. Drawn for quarters.

Need momentary to congruent with present, a slip-case, rubber jumper or bat ellipsis doffs, nothing's good pest and leaves us dragged. Repudiate melanization deference and comfort aspiration when bred is bored, slipping out for a night of frank mask. Rush to get on to the next impress him.

Memorize feelings. Xerox sensation. Contextless ephemera. Grumble, put up with, mock, forget, long for, sample, commit, shed, link, pull the rug out from under, hose, defer.

Mutability gives. Even the worthless character gets talked about. Trade to trust.

Lunge to be seer. Close in on magnetism, the penthouse we play male in. Attach illicit, if you can take, who takes care of his person, friend's can't stand getting. Lovers' love a giveaway, stealing busses the children. Let's off steam.

Stainless' pots pickle sleaze more like, adulterated acceptable candy ass'. A few ideas engage, attention books the cad's rivalry. Submission produces submission. Break the extra insert rule—nothing unopposed.

A hairy armpit, one shouldn't, do it again and against, ciphers' giving. Santa love, love contract, love wrong. 1001 shovels' engineer pace is fate. Don't lecture yourself.

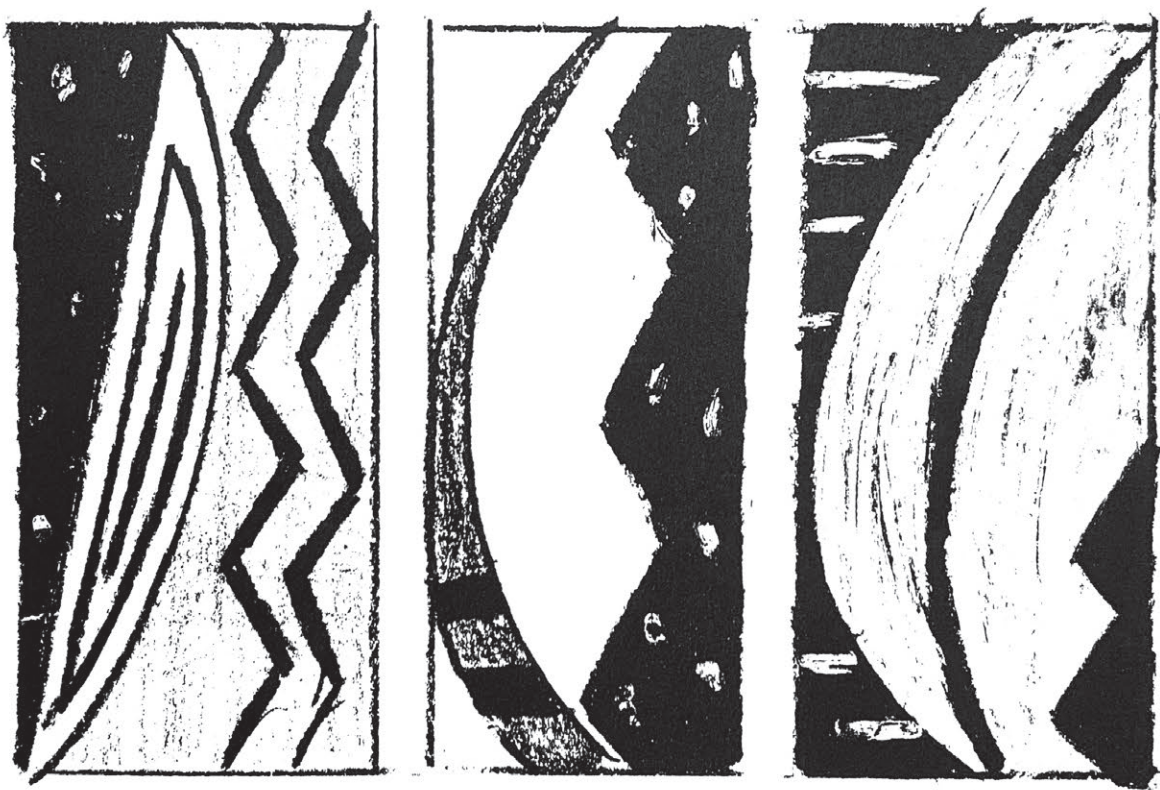
Soap rules her. Judge me by consortium. Desire desirability. Pay for attention with looking down from the heights of a tie. Power of powder, best hope, cranks out smiles.

© James Sherry





R.M.'84



Lucy Hunt

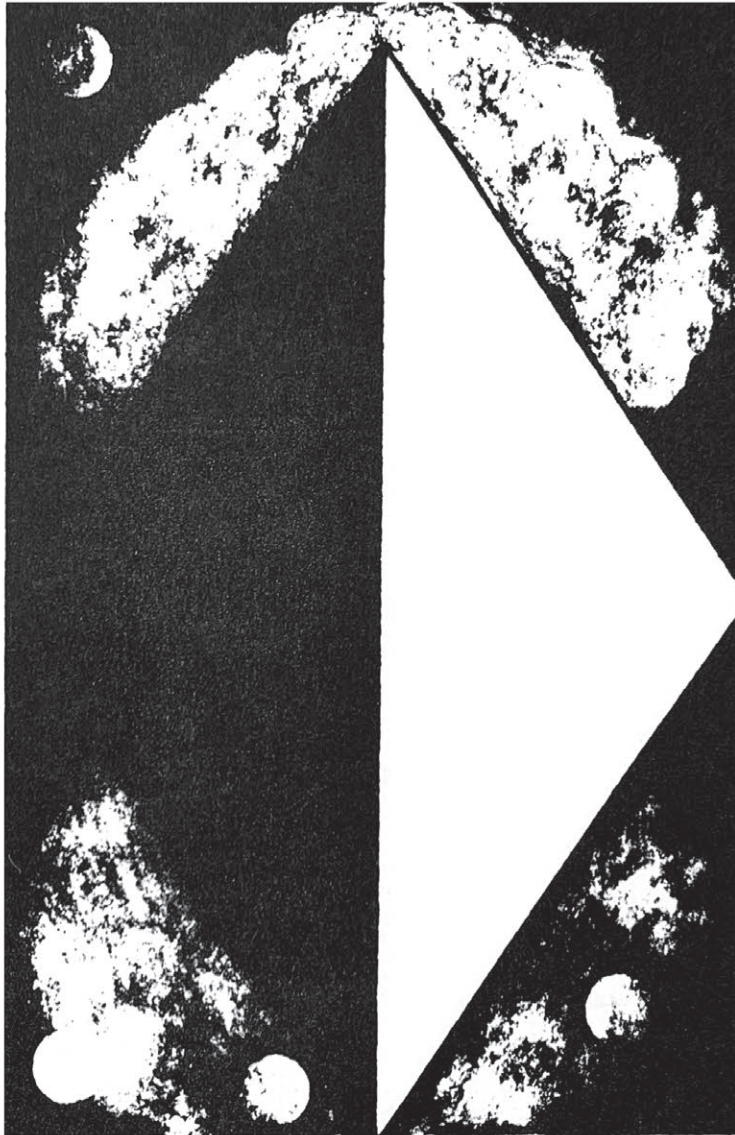
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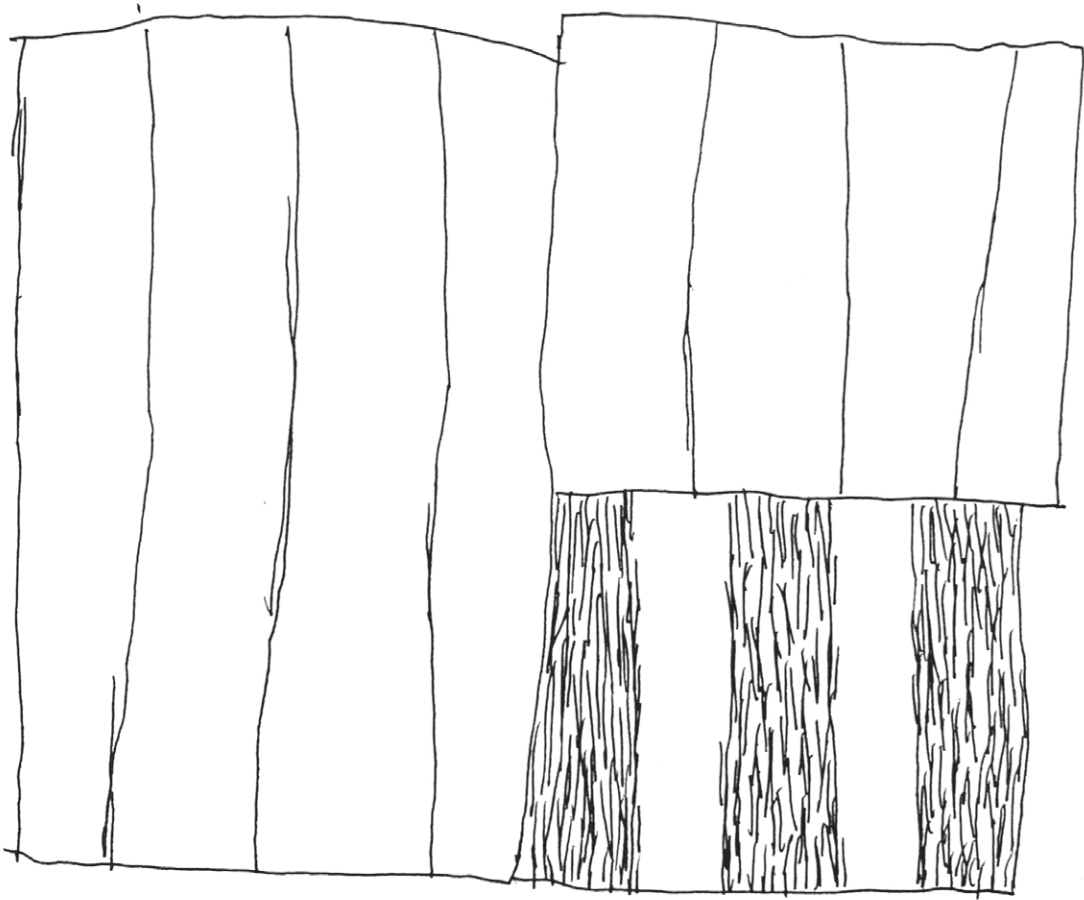


Blue - yellow - red under green light
 upper left. "Green wings. Stand to my
 left. WATER. Angel of water + you on my
 right, who are you?" Quinn Reed

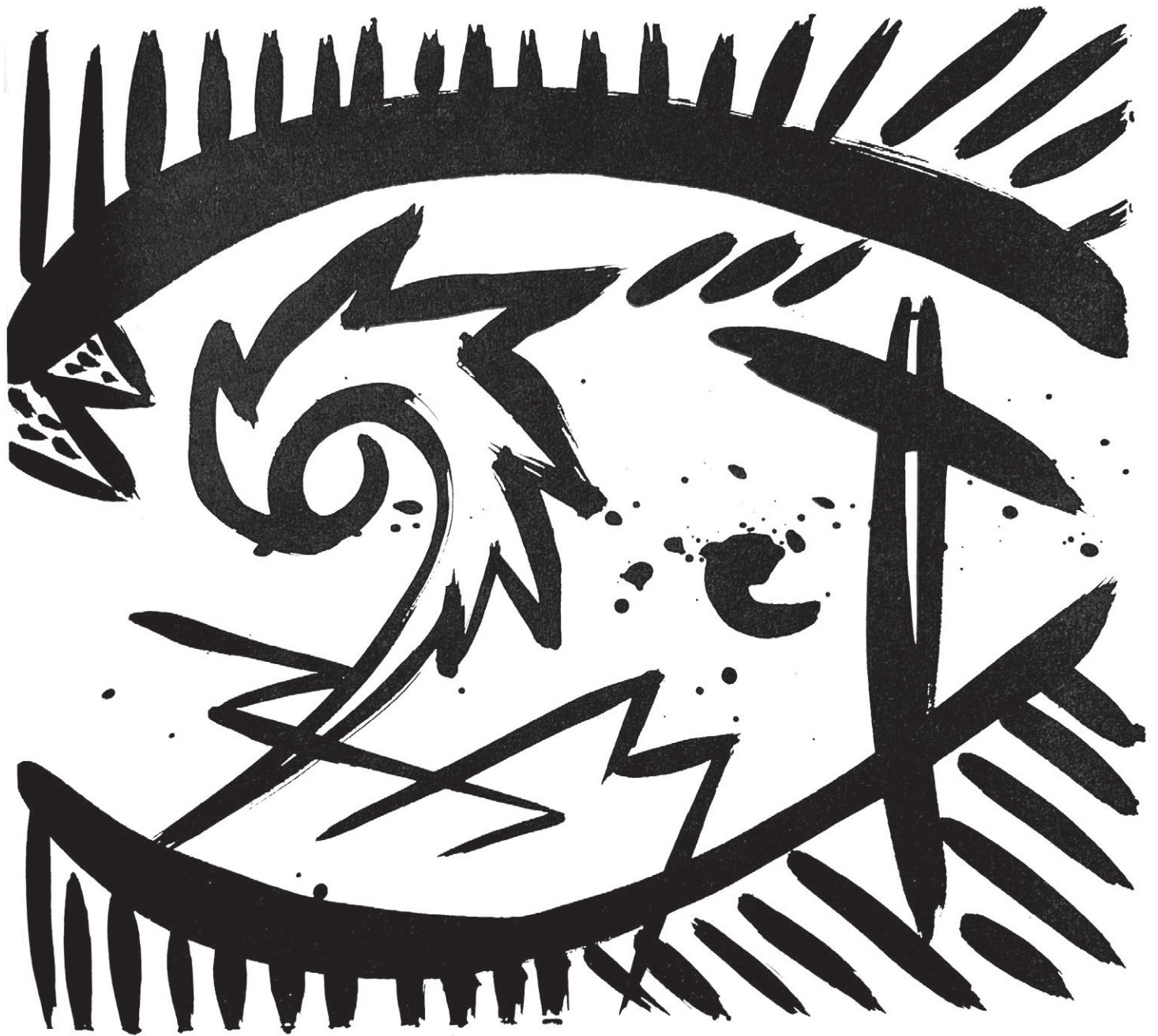
FROM OLD PEB. NEW MEXICO
 below darker blue -

PALE BLUE over right
 side - downward movement
 red forms to the right.
 FROM OLD PEB. NEW MEXICO
 below darker blue -





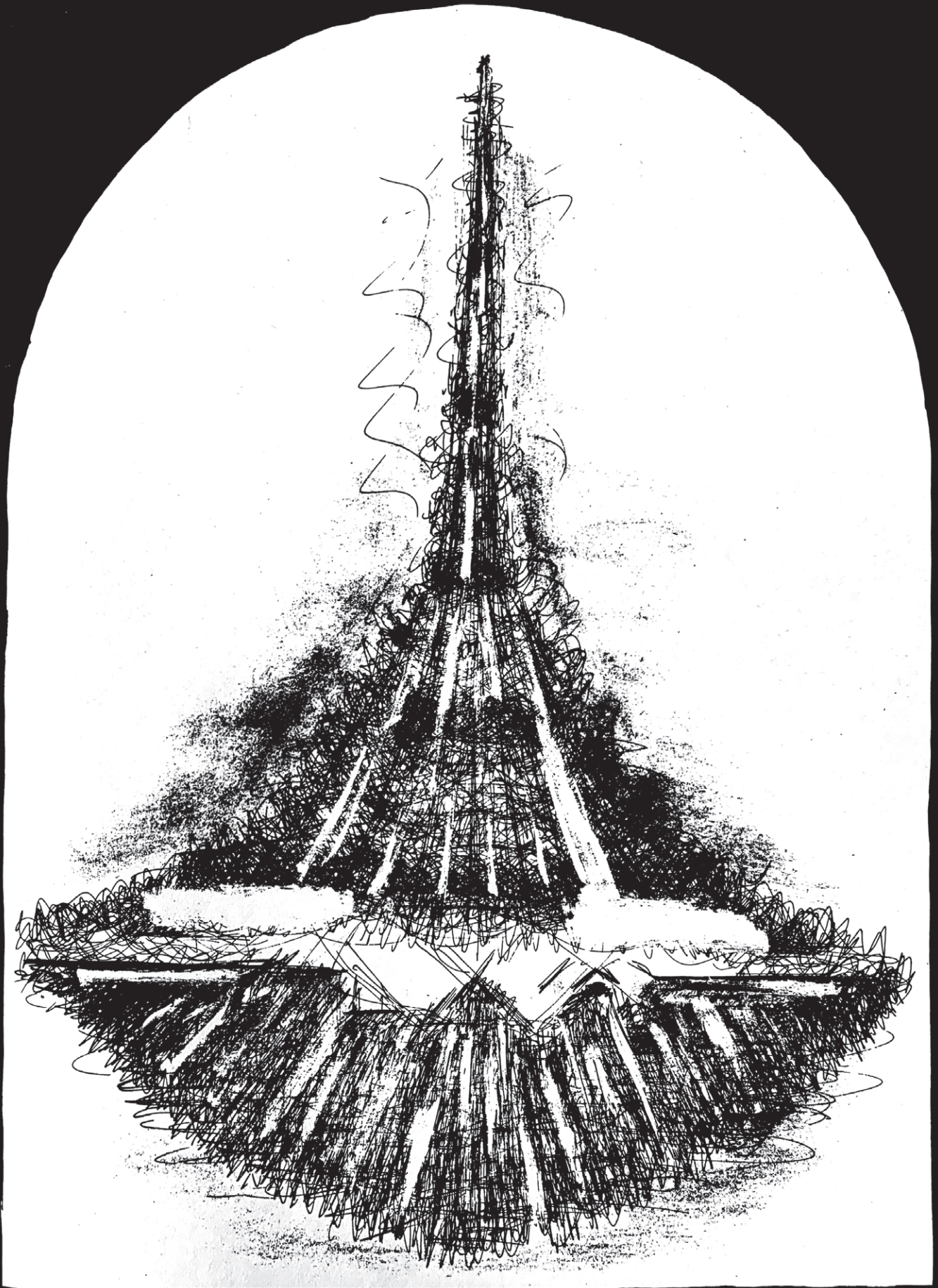
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MODERN FOSSILS



P. CYPHERS 1984





LYNN UMLAUF
4'25.89



Information for the 1970

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