



Into the Canvas

1.15.16–3.25.16

Post-Painterly Abstraction in Cleveland



the museum of northeast ohio art



Into the Canvas

Christopher L. Richards

Abstract painting in the late 1950s and 1960s developed beyond the realm of the action painters' exploration of expressing raw internal emotions. A number of American artists, including Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis, began to allow diluted paint to soak into unprimed canvases, removing the physical gestures of painting and creating the flattest paint surface possible. Art critic Clement Greenberg called these works Post-Painterly Abstraction. Greenberg advocated passionately for these new developments in art as reaching the most pure result of Modernism in painting. He argued that flatness became "the only condition painting shared with no other art, and so Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness..." By allowing the pigments to stain the canvas, the artists were rejecting the three-dimensional tactile application of paint, therefore stressing the flatness of the picture plane.

Carl Krabill, Barbara Smukler, and William Ward each began exploring the technique of staining unprimed canvas in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Cleveland. Color became the visual theme of their works as they applied thin layers of paint allowing them to unify the image and support in strict two-dimensionality. They allowed for a controlled chance to determine paint flow, with the often large format of these works permitting the viewer to meditate on the emotional impact and become enveloped by the atmosphere created within the paintings.

Each of these artists embraced new techniques and styles that both mirrored and advanced ideas of abstract art in the early 1960s and they continued to push these artistic developments well into the 1970s and beyond. Shifting away from the emotive gestural paint stroke of Abstract Expressionism gave these artists the ability to focus on concept and color. The stained paintings created by Krabill, Smukler, and Ward present a unique look at how artists of our region responded to national artistic movements.

left to right:

High Pull, 1975
Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 50 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Untitled, 1970s
Acrylic on canvas, 34 x 44
Courtesy of the artist

cover:

William Ward
Agni Raga, 1960s
Acrylic on canvas, 36.5 x 38.5 in
Collection of Artists Archives of the Western Reserve

Multiflex, 1970
Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 68 in.
ANI986-318

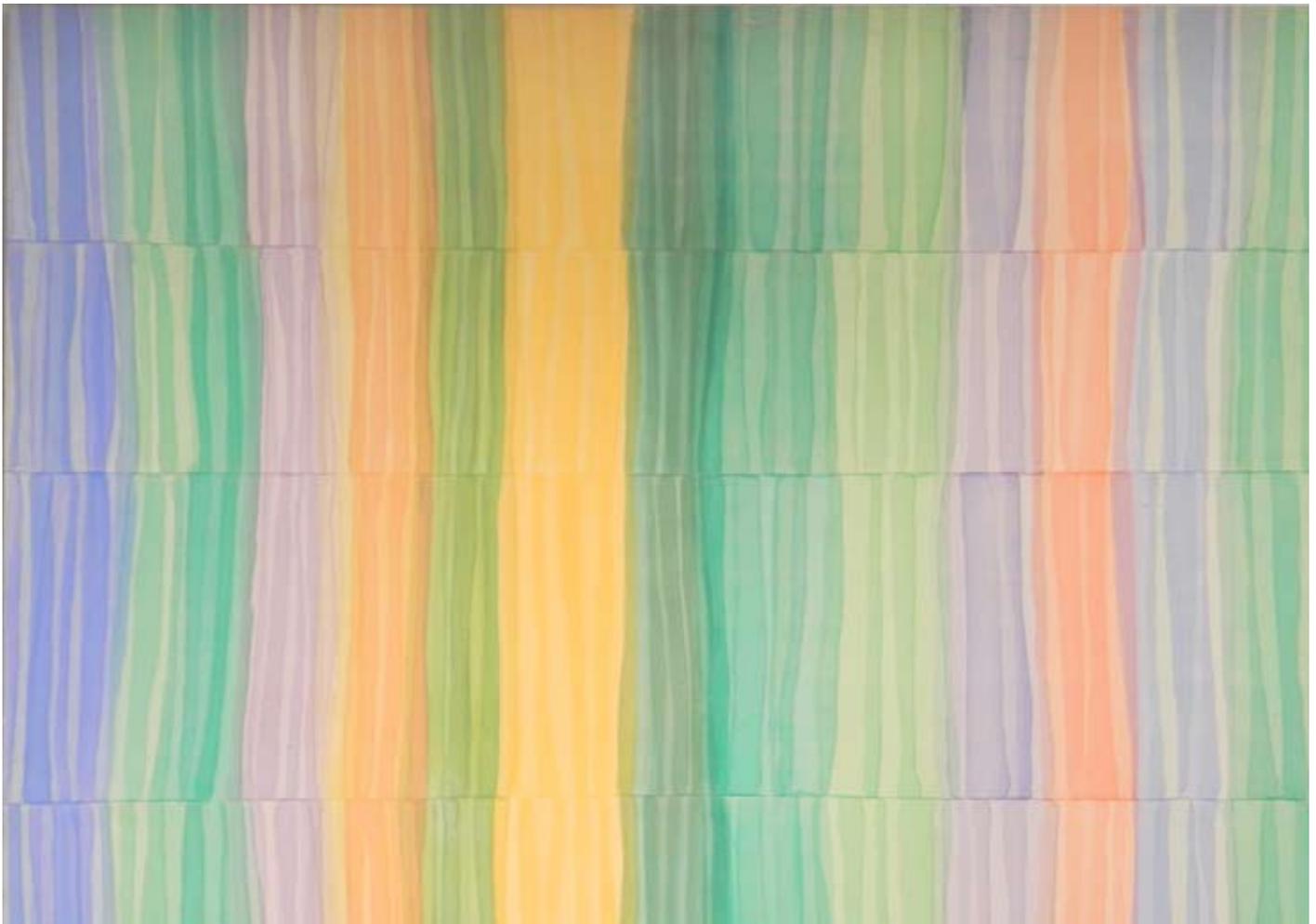


Carl Krabill (American, born 1930)

Carl Krabill began painting stained dot compositions in the early 1960s when he was a graduate student at Oberlin College. Layering color on color gives the work a sense of shifting light. The paintings recall Claude Monet and Larry Poons, artists who his mentor Ellen Johnson taught about in her art history courses at the university. Johnson, an important influence in promoting contemporary art, exhibited the works of artists such as Poons and Bruce Nauman at the Allen Memorial Art Museum in Oberlin before they became widely known. This penchant for seeking out younger artists led her to support Krabill with the help of a Learned Society Grant.

After graduation, Krabill took a teaching position in the Shaker Heights school system. While there, he tried to convey the idea that “art is an expression of beauty that happens to you—it’s how you feel about and experience it.”¹ Krabill’s atmospheric abstractions capture the feeling of a moment frozen in time, with titles like *Into the Water*, assisting in defining the esoteric qualities of the works.

Describing his paintings as colors “marching across the canvas from left to right as one would write across the page,”² his use of densely stained dots show a relationship to the rhythmical compositions of Mark Tobey’s *White Writings*. Krabill’s works are intended to be contemplated, challenging the viewer to stop and consider the often subtle fluctuations of tonalities that create a unified experience.





Hush in the Waiting Room, 1969
Acrylic on canvas, 34 x 48 in.
Collection of Mark and Jan Smukler

opposite, clockwise:
Prelude #11, 1975
Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 36 in.
Courtesy of the artist's estate

Letters to Scarlatti #3, 1975
Acrylic on canvas, 37 x 58 in.
Courtesy of the artist's estate

Spring Reflections II, 1973
Acrylic on canvas, 66 x 87 in.
Gift of William C. Tregoning, III
AN2007-181

Barbara Smukler (American, 1932–2014)

Barbara Smukler lived and worked most of her life in Cleveland, Ohio. She attended the Cleveland Institute of Art, earning a degree in 1967, and taught at the Institute from 1968 through 1972.

Using the rectangle and oversized scale as a guide, Smukler created lyrical, striped bands of color on a grid system. In a statement, she wrote, "I have had a love affair with stripes and lines... They are marvelous units to work with."³ Rectangular areas define the freely drawn lines that emphasize the stretchers on which the canvas is wrapped, an idea that Greenberg had advanced as acknowledging the limitations of the support. By doing so, Smukler had reaffirmed that flatness was vital to the process. Her slowly built-up transparent washes create a system of undifferentiated marks that overlap which are both seen and barely seen. Applying this all-over composition leads the viewer to understand that the image could continue on vertically and horizontally infinitely.

The scale of the works becomes imposing on the viewer both visually and physically. They require the interaction of the viewer to pick up on the rhythmical organization and the subtle suggestion of vertical and horizontal movement. The cinemascope-like format of Smukler's paintings, with no beginning and no end, expresses the importance of the subject of color. The undulating tones and hue create an environment of systematic groupings that intend to evoke emotions.



clockwise:

Mountain Cove, 1960s

Acrylic on canvas, 27.5 x 32 in.

Collection of Artists Archives of the Western Reserve

Indication 3, 1970s

Acrylic on canvas, 32 x 38 in.

Gift of Christopher L. Richards and Shaun Edwards
AN2015-007

Maguey 2, 1980s

Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 26 in.

Collection of Artists Archives of the Western Reserve

William Ward (American, 1922–2004)

Born in Cleveland, William Ward went to West Tech High School, where he excelled in the arts. He attended the Cleveland Institute of Art, and continued graduate studies in Buddhist Art at Columbia University. While he was well known for his work as exhibition designer at the Cleveland Museum of Art, where he also served as an assistant in East Indian Art, Ward continued to pursue painting and photography. Ward's paintings show an influence of both Western and Eastern art, allowing cultural differences to blend into a unique style.

William Ward's stained landscape paintings reflect the influence of Helen Frankenthaler, and the impact that the Mexican landscape had on his sense of color. Many of the titles for these stained paintings are derived from locations in Mexico where Ward, and his wife, Evelyn Svec Ward, repeatedly traveled beginning with their honeymoon to Oaxaca Valley in 1952. Ward saturated paper or canvas with water, requiring him to work quickly as he created momentary visual impressions of the landscape.

Ward worked simultaneously in a bolder striped style he called his *Liquid-Stripe* series. These calligraphic marks layer stripes of color in a curvilinear technique. The effect is one of total pigment saturation of the canvas with an all-over composition and show the influence of Japanese calligraphy. Having taught the subject at the Cleveland Institute of Art, Ward stated that, "calligraphy builds discipline in a person. If you make a mistake, you start all over."⁴ That attention to detail and sense of discipline is visible in his finely executed abstractions.

Exhibition Checklist

Carl Krabill (American, born 1930)

High Pull, 1975

Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 50 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Into the Water, 1976

Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 50 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Multiflex, 1970

Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 68 in.
AN1986-318

Untitled, 1970s

Acrylic on canvas, 34 x 44 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Barbara Smukler (American, 1932–2014)

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Acrylic on canvas, 34 x 48 in.
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AN2015-007

Maguey 2, 1980s

Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 26 in.
Collection of Artists Archives of the Western Reserve

Mountain Cove, 1960s

Acrylic on canvas, 27.5 x 32 in.
Collection of Artists Archives of the Western Reserve

Sun Shower, 1960s

Acrylic on canvas, 22 x 24 in.
Collection of Artists Archives of the Western Reserve

Lenders to the exhibition:

Artists Archives of the Western Reserve
Carl Krabill
Estate of Barbara Smukler
Mark Smukler

End Notes:

1. Relihan, Cecil, "Quick-Change Artists," *The Plain Dealer: Women's Pages* (Cleveland, OH), November 8, 1974, p 25.
2. Ibid.
3. Smukler, Barbara, *Artist Statement*, 1981, ARTneo Artist Files.
4. Ulsh, Jacqueline J., "Modern Craftsmen Try Their Hand at Ancient Writing Art," *The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), July 1976, p C-1.



Carl Krabill
Into the Water, 1976
Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 50 in.
Courtesy of the artist

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Post-Painterly Abstraction in Cleveland

Presented by ARTneo: the museum of northeast ohio art
at 78th Street Studios

January 15 - March 25, 2016

Opening Reception: Friday, January 15, 5-9 pm



1305 W. 80th St., Suite 016
Cleveland, OH 44102
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artneo.org

gallery hours
Wednesday, Friday,
and Saturday: 12-5 pm
Thursday: 12-8 pm
Third Fridays: 12-9 pm

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