

Los Angeles Painting in the Sixties:

A Tradition in Transition

The decade of the 1960s was the significant moment for painting in Los Angeles. The city had always looked promising as Stanton Macdonald-Wright, Morgan Russell, the Arensbergs, Frank Lloyd Wright, Man Ray, and a host of others observed with affection and enthusiasm. It was a place to come from, a place to visit, a place linked to older more cultivated cities. They described it as a city of great vitality holding the promise of things to come. In the sixties the era of the cultivated visitor ended, and the era of the dynamic, unabashed, plain-speaking native began. At long last, the promises started to come true.

In abstract art the groundwork had been laid as early as the thirties in the highly personal, innovative work of Oskar Fischinger and Peter Krasnow. By the early fifties, painters such as Lorus Feitelson and John McLaughlin had established a tradition of abstraction that combined modernist reductivism with idiosyncratic but rigorous interpretations of the means and purposes of abstract art.

The impact of San Francisco in the fifties was important, too, especially the Abstract Expressionism practiced by Bay Area artists as diverse in style as Richard Diebenkorn, Jay DeFeo, Sonia Gechtoff, Frank Lobdell, David Park, Hassel Smith, and others. These artists had been exposed to the tradition of Abstract Expressionism as early as 1930, when Hans Hofmann accepted his first American teaching position at Berkeley. A decade later this involvement with abstract painting was further encouraged by Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, and Ad Reinhardt, each of whom taught at the California School of Fine Arts for a brief period of time.

By the late fifties a great number of the gifted young Los Angeles painters were adapting the loose, calligraphic forms of Abstract Expressionism to their own purposes. The early work of John Altoon, Robert Irwin, Craig Kauffman, Ed Moses, and Paul Sarkisian, although diverse in many ways, shares this basic structure. Many of these artists had studied and worked in San Francisco and most had also spent time in New York, where they came into contact with the work of the second generation of New York Abstract Expressionists. There they discovered their own restlessness mirrored in the attitudes of young New York artists who shared a growing determination to break through to a newer, fresher situation more completely their own.

When the Ferus Gallery opened in March 1957, this generation of younger California artists came into focus for a broader public. The first Ferus exhibition included some of the more prominent Bay Area expressionists: Richard Diebenkorn, Sonia Gechtoff, Hassel Smith, and Clyfford Still. Soon, however, the undeniable energy of Southern Californians such as John Altoon, Billy Al Bengston, Wallace Berman, Craig Kauffman, Ed Kienholz, and Ed Moses asserted itself and became the central force of the Ferus scene. Founders of the gallery—Walter Hopps and Ed Kienholz—and, later, director Irving Blum, projected an aura of professionalism and reached beyond the boundaries of Los Angeles to make Ferus part of a national scene. For the first time the art of Southern

California commanded the attention and respect of a national audience. As Bengston observed, "that was the time when we all decided to go professional."¹ The ambitiousness and verve of the Ferus environment drew artists such as Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, Ken Price, Ed Ruscha, and others to itself within a short time.

In abstract painting the critical breakthroughs of the Ferus artists during the late fifties were subtle, based more upon nuances of sensibility than their brash public images might indicate. John Altoon's softened, tactile forms and open, light-filled fields projected a vibrant sexuality laced with irony. His imagery spoke of tangible experiences—the wisdom of the body, not the grander, more cerebral metaphysics associated with the later phases of New York Abstract Expressionism. If Abstract Expressionism had become an academy, Altoon played truant with such high spirits and obvious gifts that his irreverence could only be viewed with delight and a measure of relief. Important, too, was the lightness of his palette, the transparency of his color, the throbbing sensuality he projected upon even the most mundane and everyday objects and events. This stood in contrast to the studied seriousness of much of the painting admired during this period, such as the late work of Still, Newman, and Rothko. Altoon was one of several Southern California artists who turned the language of expressionism into a living thing of the city streets, immediate and direct, without philosophical or literary pretensions.

The work of Ed Moses and Craig Kauffman during the late fifties shares some of these stylistic qualities—the open forms, the frank eroticism, the sureness and elegance of tactile, calligraphic passages (cat. nos. 82 and 66). Moses' drawing of the late fifties exhibits a great intensity of focus and touch as individual areas are confidently delineated, then warmed and enriched by soft tonal areas and the physical interaction of overlapping forms. Moses had uncovered the possibility of working across the entire plane, shifting the placement of his imagery to suggest a space with multiple points of visual access. His floral and phallic images suggest an up-front eroticism while the casual sureness, indeed virtuosity, of his line gives evidence of a fine-tuned aesthetic sensibility.

After an almost two-year stay in New York, from 1958 to 1960, Moses returned to Los Angeles. In December 1961, at Ferus, he showed a number of large-scale drawings. These were fields of floral and leaf forms placed at regular intervals across a highly textured, subtly modulated field of soft graphite. Moses transformed the rose pattern of an ordinary piece of Mexican oilcloth into a highly structured planar field. Dealing with a basically graphic form derived from a printed source—not a real rose but a picture of a rose—he exposed its true identity by barely outlining it and flattening the form, then giving it three dimensions by pushing the graphite to near-black, then allowing the rose to flatten once more and fade into the soft gray of his modulated background. This work gave evidence of his awareness of the issues of

¹Conversation with the artist, September 1980.

modernist painting of the early sixties. It was a self-confident, personal exploration of the issues of graphic imagery, something which was at the same time occupying the thoughts of Johns, Rauschenberg, and others in New York in more direct and obvious ways. This work also revealed Moses' basic modernist sensibility, the aestheticism which would remain the hallmark of his career, handled at this point with a warmth that was immediate and physical, full of the traces of the artist's own character.

The following year Moses pushed this format further, achieving an even more impressive level of intensity in his drawing. In a large format, some forty by sixty inches, he shifted the figure-ground balance of his imagery to place major emphasis upon the ground (cat. nos. 83–89). Covering the plane with acute gestural passages, he embedded the by now almost unreadable roses within a dense graphite structure. Light is trapped and partially reflected by the soft layer of graphite, sending a shimmer of metallic gray across the surface of the work. One is acutely conscious of the presence of the medium on the paper, recalling certain Japanese printmakers' use of mica to achieve a state of absolute physical density on the surface of their prints. Moses' drawing of this period stands as a technical tour de force, achieving a studied awareness of the medium by redefining it, using it not as a tool for delineation but as a means of establishing a material presence on the plane of the paper.

By all accounts, one of the most gifted and precocious of the Ferus artists was Craig Kauffman. Confident and accomplished beyond his years, Kauffman was only twenty-five when he took part in the Ferus opening exhibit of 1957; even more surprising, he had already had a one-man show at the prestigious Felix Landau Gallery in 1953. Kauffman's paintings of this period are high in color and his line is buoyant; his imagery playfully erotic, with vast bright fields of open space suggestive of the physical and emotional landscape of Southern California.

Another of Kauffman's strengths was his cosmopolitanism, also unusual in so young an artist. He spent time in San Francisco from 1959 to 1960, he had already been to Europe in 1956, and would go again in 1960–61. His knowledge of New York art included a grasp of the concepts involved in color-field painting. Most important of all, Kauffman had the ability to transpose this wealth of information and observation into his own key, one which seemed so appropriate to the time that it immediately established a stylistic base for a host of other California artists.

One who acknowledged the importance of Kauffman's spatial and coloristic vision was Billy Al Bengston, a perceptive iconoclast with unusual resources of his own. Bengston came to Los Angeles as a teenager and enrolled at Manual Arts High School in 1948. After a somewhat troubled but productive period as an art student he found employment as a beach attendant during the summer of 1953. There he discovered a life-style uniquely suited to his needs at the time, a life of swimming and surfing and making art which he shared with his friend Ken Price, whom he met at the beach during

that summer of 1953. Bengston and Price also shared an intense involvement in ceramics. For Bengston, the opportunity to study with Peter Voulkos at the Otis Art Institute was especially significant. Bengston also pursued his own study of Japanese ceramics, which led him to the decorative and refined aesthetic of Oribe and Shino ware as well as the more widely known and much-admired Raku ware.

The rich diversity of Bengston's life, especially his serious pursuit of motorcycle racing and his knowledge of techniques involved in their maintenance and repair, made him expert in the use of sprayed enamels and lacquers and the action of such paint upon metal surfaces. Unencumbered by academic biases concerning high and low art forms, Bengston was capable of a remarkable synthesis. He went about making a painting with the cool confidence of someone constructing a well-tooled object. Bengston's centered images can and should be compared to Johns' targets and flags, which the younger Californian saw at the Venice Biennale in 1958. But with the loose parallel of a centered format the similarity ends. Bengston's work of the early sixties is all gleam and gloss and shiny hard, achieved by applying the devices of layering and spraying he had learned so thoroughly while working on the smooth surfaces of motorcycles. Choosing Masonite instead of canvas, he found a hard surface that would receive the pigment without absorbing it and altering its physical qualities.

Bengston's paintings of this time also exhibit the ambitiousness of scale that was so typical of this moment in American art. His magnified, large-scale chevrons (cat. nos. 10–13) and irises and concentric circles challenge the viewer to place them in a new lexicon of graphic imagery. Suggestive of the emblems on uniforms, of floral imagery on decorative screens, or of a host of other contexts, they are none of these. In order to serve as signifiers in the usual sense, they would require a human—that is to say, an intellectual—context, a world of related imagery in which to reveal their identity. Within Bengston's paintings such images can only discover their physical location. Even their physical situation has been so neutralized, plunged so completely into a controlled world of evenly modulated pigment, of graded light and symmetry, that the image may be said to be engaged in a solo flight within an enclosed environment. If there is anything metaphysical about these emblems, it is more likely to be revealed by their physical situation within the painting than in the meanings of the symbols themselves.

Bengston's decision to work within a symmetrical, centered format is part of a desire, very common among his generation, to evade or destroy the issue of composition, particularly Cubist-derived concepts of dynamic asymmetry. Johns' targets, Stella's symmetrical stripes and chevrons, Noland's concentric circles, and many other examples might be cited as contemporary parallels. When questioned about this, however, Bengston's motives seem to differ significantly from theirs: he speaks of eliminating or "locking in" the aspect of composition to get on with the job of making a painting, freeing himself to ad-

dress the compelling issues of surface, imagery, and physical structure. For whatever reason he has adopted it, Bengston's symmetry is anything but calming and cerebral; it creates something of a confrontation between viewer and image, between the viewer and that object which is the painting. Like so many of his contemporaries in Los Angeles, Bengston sought to eradicate the possibility of seeing the painting as a window or even as a metaphor. Relentlessly, Bengston made the painting so completely a physical presence that it could not possibly be mistaken for anything else.

The power of these paintings to affect the viewer is all the more surprising in view of their cool factuality, not unlike that cool outward posture masking controlled tension which was so carefully cultivated in the social sphere of the sixties. Bengston chooses to show us the result, not the process; he offers a finished object, a state of being sufficient unto itself. His paintings are as real and unromanticized as the bare facts of contemporary life: they repel sentimentality and iconographic interpretation. Now, twenty years later, this may seem a cool and unrelieved attitude, but it is one which requires a good deal of discipline and clearness of vision, qualities that are perhaps still to be admired.

During the early sixties in Los Angeles, New York, and elsewhere, long-held assumptions concerning the basic physical structure of a painting were being torn apart and redefined. During the era of Minimalism, paintings were frankly acknowledged to be objects, a special class of objects, perhaps, but ones that existed in the real world of tangible physical space. In New York, Frank Stella's shaped canvases required the viewer to become aware of the outward contours of the painting, to see and acknowledge the shape and thickness of the stretcher bars and the visible grain of the canvas itself. Ellsworth Kelly's painted metal planes functioned in much the same way: they were vivid, assertive, based upon the primacy of shape and a merging of color and physical contour. In the work of these artists and many others of this time, the boundaries between painting and sculpture broke down, the variety of media available to the artist expanded, and the old world of canvas, easel, and brush was abandoned, if only temporarily, in favor of a brave new world of contemporary technological form.

By the early 1960s a particular aesthetic began to be identified with Los Angeles. It was lean, cool, well-crafted; it involved unusual materials such as metal, new plastics, glass, resins, and industrial pigments. The "L.A. Look" was never completely defined but found its most typical expression in certain works by Larry Bell, Billy Al Bengston, Robert Irwin, Craig Kauffman, John McCracken, and Ed Ruscha. As the careers of these artists have unfolded, we may now see more differences than similarities in their work. It is likely that these differences were there all along.

The softened, painterly forms of Craig Kauffman's paintings of the late fifties had depended upon their clear if uneven contour lines for physical definition. During the early sixties, Kauffman invested his buoyant, playfully

suggestive forms with a new clarity and rigor. He began working with Plexiglas, employing crisp, flat shapes with beautifully rounded contours and intense areas of color. They had the sleek good looks of a well-made machine, animated by strong sexual overtones. As such, they are late twentieth-century counterparts to the mechaneroptic visions of Duchamp and Picabia.

Kauffman's ability to employ complex technology developed along with the deepening clarity of his imagery. By 1968, two years after the end of the Ferus era in Los Angeles, Kauffman produced a group of large, vacuum-formed Plexiglas works which seemed to place color and light into a state of pure physical suspension (cat. nos. 67-72). In these works, colored air is made to hover in space. We look through and into the form, never discovering its source of support, so diffuse and subtle is Kauffman's handling of the layers of material from surface to ground. He has exchanged the earlier erotic imagery of his art for a direct embodiment of an exquisitely controlled but powerfully sensuous form. At its best, the hard gleam of the "L.A. Look" is able to produce precisely this paradox, a cool, fine-tooled form exhibiting a refined but seductive sensuality. Departing from the somewhat more conceptualized form of New York Minimalism, exponents of the "L.A. Look" celebrated the lush physicality of their art, pushing their imagery and material to new heights of tactile, coloristic, and technical complexity.

In 1965 Ron Davis moved to Pasadena from San Francisco, where he had been studying and working. At the time, Davis was making enormous shaped canvases in separate panels positioned to form interlocking geometric configurations. His was ambitious work, even if it was somewhat more involved with the abstract formal issues of painting than that of many of his contemporaries in Los Angeles. Within little more than a year, Davis had changed the physical structure of his work and modified his imagery to allow the interplay of a radically altered form of perspective. The paintings were now made of polyester resin and fiberglass. They were large, intensely colored, strong geometric forms with translucent interior depths capable of trapping light within the layers of their material.

Davis, moreover, achieved a daring, unexpected equivalence of literal and depicted form. He had created the graphic image of a three-dimensional geometric object that appeared to exist in real space, cut free from the confining edge of the rectangle. During a decade that prided itself upon a frank admission of the literal flatness of the painted plane, Davis' powerful illusionistic forms appeared to overturn cherished norms of the period. In a 1966 *Artforum* essay, "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings," New York critic Michael Fried had argued for "the primacy of literal over depicted shape."² Davis, on the other hand, had just achieved a congruence of literal and depicted shape.

In the same essay, however, Fried went on to suggest

²Michael Fried, "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings," *Artforum*, vol. 5, no. 3, November 1966, p. 19.

that the advent of Minimalist painting had opened the door to a reconsideration of purely fictive, optical imagery. Quoting Greenberg, he found support for his own intuition: "The heightened sensitivity of the picture plane may no longer permit sculptural illusion, or *trompe l'oeil*, but it does and must permit optical illusion. . . . Only now it is strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension."³ It is just this distinction between *trompe l'oeil* and pictorial illusionism that marks the critical boundaries in Davis' art. Davis does not show us a slice of the visible world but uses the pictorial convention of perspective to propose a reality of his own making, to convince us of the reality of a powerful illusion sharing our own space. Not only did Davis' hovering forms appear to exist in the rooms they inhabited, their acute two-point perspective expanded these rooms as if the interior perspective of the painting were connected to a space more grand and expansive than the real contours of the room itself.

In 1967 it was Fried who recognized the important step Davis had taken. Reviewing Davis' one-man show at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York, Fried expressed his enthusiasm for the young Californian's work: "What incites amazement is that ambition could be realized *in this way* that, for example, after a lapse of at least a century, rigorous perspective could again become a medium of painting."⁴ If Davis' particular accomplishment was unusual for his time and for Los Angeles, so were his sources which involved a reconsideration of long-standing traditions. Davis was an avid admirer of the Renaissance painter and mathematician Paolo Uccello, who opened up grand vistas in his painting through the use of the new art of perspective. Also important to Davis was the then neglected art of Patrick Henry Bruce, the early twentieth-century American whose clear, conceptualized still-life compositions have a compelling beauty prophetic of Davis' own ambitions for his work.

Davis' dodecagons of 1968 and 1969, measuring slightly more than eleven feet in width, are notable for their complex color, massive scale, and aura of completeness (cat. nos. 37-42). As Davis worked on this group of paintings, internal divisions of space shifted and clear tonal planes gave way to complex, densely painted areas of color. During Davis' progress from *Dodecagon* (63) to the later *Zodiac* (96), we see a change in his conception of this stable geometric form, seen first as an open, translucent configuration in which each segment is known, then as a heavier, nearly opaque structure in which each painted segment introduces another mood and direction, like the contradictory but interrelated phases of a complex cycle. Davis liked to observe these paintings on a large black wall in his studio, where they must have appeared as extraordinary phenomena, beautifully articulated visions cast within believable geometric forms. If there is a significant link between Davis' work of this time and that of Bell, Bengston, Kauffman, and

others employing unusual media, it is perhaps in the phenomenological aspect of their work, the way it is able to convince one of the beauty and believability of a world perceived and understood by the senses.

At the same time in Southern California another remarkable painter, John McLaughlin, pursued quite a different path in order to "liberate the viewer from the tyranny of the object."⁵ Although McLaughlin was born in 1898 and was much older than any artist of the Ferus generation, we are still in the process of understanding and discovering his art. McLaughlin was known in this area as early as the 1950s and had numerous shows at the Felix Landau Gallery in Los Angeles. But it was not until the late sixties and seventies that his work had its greatest impact upon the younger painters of Southern California. In one sense, McLaughlin was the oldest painter in this area; he had patiently absorbed and evaluated the traditions of European abstract art, of Malevich and Mondrian, while also penetrating the aesthetics and philosophies of the Far East. McLaughlin's art involved a well-reasoned rejection of the aesthetics of late twentieth-century formalism, a distrust of technical virtuosity as an end in itself, and a desire to achieve a state of unfettered clarity in his life and art. By freeing himself of dogma, symbolism, beautiful design, and even of his own willfulness, McLaughlin distinguished himself from his peers and remained the youngest and least time-bound of them all.

Born in Sharon, Massachusetts, McLaughlin had been a dealer in Japanese prints, a translator during World War II in Japan, Burma, and China, as well as a serious part-time painter. When he and his wife settled in Dana Point, California, in 1946, forty-eight-year-old McLaughlin made a decision to devote himself completely to his painting. His work matured during the fifties as he practiced a rigorous discipline, reducing the number of elements in his canvases, eliminating niceties of design, eventually producing paintings that were able to convince both the artist and the viewer of what McLaughlin termed "the power of withholding."⁶

Even a cursory examination of McLaughlin's work cannot fail to disclose his early influences: he admired Mondrian for taking the crucial step beyond Cubism and emulated the large, powerful, non-objective forms of Malevich. McLaughlin could not, however, accept many of the basic concepts motivating the work of these two modern masters and eventually came to regard their achievements as incomplete. For example, McLaughlin observed that, "Mondrian's greatness rests in his prodigious effort to bridge the gap between factual and the essential qualities of nature."⁷ But McLaughlin ultimately rejected the art of Mondrian because, to his mind, the Dutch artist had reduced his grasp of nature to a single concept, that of dynamic equilibrium.

⁵Archives of American Art, "John McLaughlin Papers," Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., West Coast Area Center, San Francisco.

⁶Ibid. ⁷Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Michael Fried, "Ronald Davis: Surface and Illusion," *Artforum*, vol. 5, no. 8, April 1967, p. 37.

In my mind there may be some reason to think that he failed in this because his was a "concept" and in a sense a discipline involved to some degree with morality. To him the real content in art was "the expression of pure vitality which reality reveals through the manifestation of dynamic movement." In this concept lies the paralyzing element of aggressive logic.⁸

McLaughlin applied the same kind of penetrating analysis to his study of Malevich. He particularly admired Malevich's painting *White on White*. Speaking of Malevich he offered high praise and some strong objections:

Here we witness the act of annihilation, the destruction of one void by the superimposition of another void. Malevich stated that his black square on a white ground "was by no means an empty space but the feeling of the absence of an object." While these paintings are singularly devoid of intellectualization, or of any other means that we regard as reasonable means of communication, they are in their simplicity, extraordinarily compelling because of their lack of a guiding principle. In other words, all resistance to the fullest possible participation was removed.⁹

These things he admired and we see them reflected in McLaughlin's art, but even so he voiced significant reservations about the physical qualities of Malevich's art and suggested an alternate stance, one which he was to pursue in his own work: "It is my own opinion that implementation of this profound aesthetic suffered in that the destruction of form takes on the appearance of a physical act. This is in contrast to the more effective means of destruction by implication."¹⁰

Some of the most difficult qualities to understand and accept in McLaughlin's mature painting are its quietude, its devotion to a peculiar form of symmetry, its plain craftsmanship, and the strange power that derives from McLaughlin's grasp of understatement (cat. nos. 77–81). He said that he wanted his forms to be neutral and that his desire for them was that they "destroy themselves by implication." Clearly, for McLaughlin, it was unworthy of an artist to strive for physical beauty in a painting; even less to be admired was the urge for self-expression. He viewed it as "presumptuous of me, or even narcissistic to present to the viewer my own feelings."¹¹ He was not trying to solve any problems or achieve some new style. What McLaughlin appeared to seek was a state of silence in his art, a type of focus in which the viewer would be encouraged to confront himself and contemplate his own relationship to nature.

In McLaughlin's art this is not to be accomplished by simply telling the viewer to do so, but by removing all specifics, all subjects, all theories, all forms which engage the mind and prevent it from seeing things whole. This, then, is the crucial difference between McLaughlin's approach to abstraction and that of most other abstract art of the twentieth century. His painting was not created to

embody some spiritual truth but to attain that state of quietude in which the viewer might approach wisdom on his own terms. As McLaughlin observed, "Quite naturally our objective is to attain a state of palpable wisdom. The real danger here is in believing that this has been achieved."¹²

If, as it is often said, Los Angeles has experienced a talent drain of its younger painters who have moved to New York and elsewhere, it has also been extremely fortunate to welcome other painters of great stature and vitality. One such artist is Sam Francis, a native Californian who was born in San Mateo and lived in virtually every part of the world before settling in Santa Monica in 1962. Francis' grasp of color and space is truly inimitable. No other painter in our time has even attempted to achieve the wonderful openness Francis can give to a canvas on any scale. His work redeems the very notion of beauty by giving bone and sinew to his complex passages of color, lending them dignity and articulation.

Crucial changes had occurred in Sam Francis' art just prior to his move to Santa Monica. The interiors of his paintings had opened and lightened, and a new vocabulary of forms now moved with buoyant grace within a breath-filled atmosphere. Assessing Francis' achievements of the early sixties, one thinks particularly of his brilliant *Blue Balls* series of 1960–62, paintings filled with an unusual and potent dynamism. Images in paintings have traditionally moved across the plane, from left to right or vice-versa. The Italian Futurists traced straight linear movements in vectors indicating speed. The photographs of Muybridge, the experiences of the motion picture, and centuries of Western painting (except perhaps in the Baroque era) have reinforced our pictorial conventions for movement in space. In Francis' *Blue Balls*, however, we witness movement as it typically occurs in nature. One form revolves around its own axis, another slides through space on a subtly curved path, other forms hover like microscopic particles in air or tiny organisms alive in a pool of water. His forms are as awkwardly beautiful as the legitimate creations of nature, no doubt finding their authenticity in the artist's own understanding of the biological world.

In Los Angeles during 1963, Francis spent a productive period at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop. Throughout the sixties his color brightened and intensified as raw, unmixed pigments were juxtaposed and even overlapped to create brash new combinations allowing the penetration of light. By the end of the decade, Francis' work projected a heightened sense of drama bordering on severity. He pushed his vivid areas of color to the edge of his compositions, laying open a large white field that Francis has likened to the white sails of a great ship. Not only did his interior space gain in importance, but the paintings attained a state of tension and compression.

The intensity of this time can best be seen in the emphatic *Berlin Red* of 1968–70, created for the Nationalgalerie in Berlin. Powerfully articulated islands of dense

⁸Ibid. ⁹Ibid. ¹⁰Ibid. ¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

color stand face to face across an open field of space. Lush color turns sober and dramatic as dark malachite, blood red, bright orange, blues, and greens collide and submerge each other. Working on a vast scale, some twenty-six by forty feet, Francis achieved in *Berlin Red* an emotionally charged, deeply evocative image of human confrontation.

Berkeley of 1970 (cat. no. 52), in the collection of the University Art Museum at Berkeley, is characterized by a similar, strongly asymmetrical space with dense, rough-hewn passages of pigment. Here Francis' color is bright and transparent, dominated by clear reds and red-purples. We experience these forms as constellations in a vast field, but they press toward each other across a highly charged irregular ground. In *Looking Through* (cat. no. 53) of the same year a new structure appears, one that ties edge to edge through a framework of strong diagonals. With this and other related canvases, Francis made a major move toward a heavier, firmer structure, alive with fluid, glowing pigment.

During almost two decades as a working artist in Los Angeles, Francis has lent his sophistication, deep social conviction, and lively wit to the artistic community of this area. More than any other artist in the city, Francis is a citizen of the world; his outlook as an artist, like his painting, removes and erases boundaries, embraces many cultures and makes them his own. His achievements have given the younger members of the community something to measure themselves against, not something to imitate but a generous attitude to take note of and comprehend.

In 1966 Richard Diebenkorn moved to Santa Monica from the Bay Area. A much-admired painter of major stature who had exhibited in Southern California many times and had already played a part in the artistic life of the area, Diebenkorn set up his studio in the Ocean Park section of Santa Monica and accepted a teaching post at UCLA. During the next year, 1967, he embarked upon a new group of paintings, shifting his direction from a rich, evocative, abstract form of figuration to a new, expansive abstraction in the paintings he now entitled Ocean Park (cat. nos. 43-47).

Among the enduring qualities of Diebenkorn's Ocean Park period has been his ability to offer the viewer an intense experience of space, light, and depth within an abstract format. Long vertical and horizontal lines span his compositions from edge to edge, measuring then declaring their dimensions, teaching the eye to move quickly, to traverse long distances with assurance. The work is powerful and clean though modified by complex tonal passages and remnants of the artist's handwriting. Diebenkorn's approach to the canvas is assertive, his process is reflective. The effect of scale is not always determined by size. Drawings in the Ocean Park group are often massive and spacious, while some of the larger canvases are quite intimate and tangible. The final measurement is one of the eye and the mind, based upon perceived equivalence as well as absolute and measurable scale.

Diebenkorn's Ocean Park paintings present an experience of space and light that is similar to experiences in nature but intensified, rendered more vivid and accessible. The high horizon lines of these paintings are unbounded and far-reaching, the space beneath is deep and limitless, the edges of the paintings open rather than enclose interior space. Diagonal cuts provide a dramatic counterweight to his horizontals and verticals, seeming to move easily beyond one plane and through another. Sensations of vastness, rapid passage through planes, the strength of large wedges of color—all involve physical experiences beyond the actual dimensions of the painting, suggesting an encounter with real space that might be found in soaring, in aerial mapping, or in the special qualities of the landscape of the western United States. But in the Ocean Park paintings such space is not distant and reduced; it is luminous, immediate, near to us, and wedged into a stable structure.

Responding to a question which suggested this relationship of pictured space to perceived scale, Diebenkorn replied, "I think it is something of the same kind of thing that—who was it, Fry or Bell?—who said, 'significant form.'... I think with space the same thing can be applied. You don't really think much of that area of two-dimensional space until it is related in such a way that it becomes, their word, 'significant,' not mine."¹³

The Ocean Park paintings of Richard Diebenkorn, begun in the late sixties and continuing to the present, are a profound achievement, a powerful synthesis which reflects the maturity of a lifetime of painting. They cannot be placed securely within any decade, being the product of a painter's patient, thoughtful cultivation of a refined and vital form. Within the artistic community of Los Angeles, Diebenkorn has made multiple contributions, most significantly of course as an artist of great breadth and vision, as a man of exceptional dignity and humor, and as one who shares his experience of the working process, its pleasures and pains, with fellow artists as both teacher and friend.

The presence of artists of major stature is important to the cultural vitality of any city, as artistic achievements give character and form to historical periods, show us ourselves, and become the living record of our time. The splendid natural climate of Southern California has attracted and sustained many gifted individuals, and it is hoped that the next two hundred years will witness a flowering of the cultural climate to rival the one nature has so generously provided.

¹³Conversation with the artist, July 1977.