



Robert Rauschenberg Abstract Expressionist

Rauschenberg

Robert Richenburg: Abstract Expressionist

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Homage to Valery,
1960, oil on canvas,
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Preface

I was unaware of Abstract Expressionist Robert Richtenburg's work until it was brought to my attention by distinguished Clark University art historian Bonnie Grad, who had herself discovered it only by chance in 1986. As she had been, I was immediately impressed by the work's vision, scale and ambition, and I likewise shared her desire to bring Richtenburg's achievement—widely acknowledged, I would learn, at the time that it was forged, yet subsequently bypassed in historical accounts of the New York School—to a larger audience. Such is the purpose of this exhibition, which the Rose Art Museum is proud to sponsor. For the opportunity to do so, I am grateful to guest curator Bonnie Grad, without whose selfless and dedicated efforts the project could not have been realized. Equally, I am grateful to the artist, for his inspiration and the visual rewards of its expression.

Carl Belz
Henry and Lois Foster Director

Acknowledgments

This project would not have happened without the support of many individuals and institutions. However, it is the work of Robert Richenburg that constitutes the exhibition, so first honors must go to him. From the time of my first viewing of Bob Richenburg's paintings in his East Hampton studio and garage seven years ago, both he and his wife, Margaret Kerr, have answered countless questions, uncovered long-unseen paintings and drawings, helped move unwieldy canvases out for viewing, unearthed 30-year-old clippings, recalled the circumstances in which paintings were created or career decisions made, and, in general, have patiently participated in a retrospective review of 75 years of life. Thanks to them both and, most, to Bob for having fashioned works worthy of such effort.

Having a brilliant corpus of paintings to exhibit is one thing, bringing "unknown" works by an older artist to the public eye is another. This exhibition would not have appeared without the willingness of Carl Belz of the Rose Art Museum to look at unfamiliar paintings, and, then, to sponsor a show of them. Helen Harrison at the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center and Rhonda Cooper at the University Art Gallery at the State University of New York at Stony Brook were equally supportive in committing their institutions to an exhibit of "new" work, and thanks are also due to Nancy Jarzombek, formerly of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University.

Key encouragement in the form of financial assistance came with a grant from the Richard A. Florsheim Art Fund of Tampa, Florida. Clark University awarded me a Faculty Development Grant as well, and a Mellon Grant from Clark enabled me to take a class to East Hampton in 1987 to visit galleries and studios, including Richenburg's.

Clark also deserves thanks for accommodating my leave of absence to work on this project at Brandeis.

Some of the ideas in this exhibit I was able to explore in a preliminary way in my "Art Since 1945" classroom at Clark. My students' projects on "The Uses of Black" in the art of this period uncovered some relevant sources. One student, Lynne Moulton, went on to become an invaluable research assistant, working both in Boston and in East Hampton on many aspects of this project. Among other contributions, she was primarily responsible for the chronology included with this catalog. Valuable assistance was also provided by Rebecca Clark and Beth Fritz.

Over the course of research a number of other individuals discussed Richenburg's art with me or reviewed aspects of work of the period or the organization of the exhibition. Among these should be mentioned Ibram Lassaw, Peter Kahn, Bernice Steinbaum, Professor Ellen Landau of Case Western Reserve (a former student of Richenburg's), Jeffrey Wechsler at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers, Tibor de Nagy and Andrew H. Argot, Assistant Director of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery.

Additionally, I thank the staffs at the Boston Public Library, the Archives of American Art, the Robert Hutchins Goddard Library at Clark University and the Rose Art Museum and Goldfarb Library at Brandeis University. I am grateful to the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Hirshhorn Museum of Art and the Chrysler Art Museum in Norfolk, Virginia, for their help in providing access to Richenburg's works in their collections.

I also thank my father, Julius Grad, and my husband, Gary Wolf.

B.G.

Robert Richtenburg: Abstract Expressionist

*"I wish to borrow
from the (visible) world
only forces—
not forms, but that
which makes forms...."*

Paul Valery,
*Monsieur Teste*¹

When 28 year old Robert Richtenburg returned to New York City in 1945, following military service in Europe in World War II, he soon established himself as an innovative younger abstract expressionist. By 1950, while still a student of Hans Hofmann, Richtenburg exhibited the second year in a row at the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (the future Guggenheim), and the next year Leo Castelli invited him to participate in the historic Ninth Street Show. This same year, George McNeill asked him to teach at Pratt Institute, where he, Franz Kline, Adolph Gottlieb, Jack Tworkov, Philip Guston, Milton Resnick and Tony Smith became colleagues. (This teaching position would provide a reliable, though modest, income for Richtenburg for the next 13 years.) Sculptor Ibram Lassaw, who was to become a lifelong friend, invited him to join the now legendary Artist's Club, where Richtenburg participated in and organized several of the famous Friday night panels. He was also a regular at the Cedar Tavern, where he got to know Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, John Cage and Ad Reinhardt, among others.

Richtenburg soon began to exhibit at the Artists' Gallery at the New School for Social Research and the Stable Gallery Annuals, among other visual forums for the emerging New York School,² and before long his paintings were included in group exhibits at the Museum of Modern Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art. He participated in "New Talent in the USA: 1960," organized by the American Federation of Arts. In 1959, John Bernard Myers of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, became his dealer, and his solo shows soon won reviews by Dore Ashton, Fairfield Porter, Donald Judd and Lawrence Campbell, among others.

By the early 1960s, Richtenburg had created an outstanding body of paintings that attracted almost universal acclaim.

Irving Sandler wrote in *Art International* in 1961 that "Richtenburg emerges as one of the most forceful painters on the New York Art Scene."³ In the *New York Post*, Sandler declared that his art was "individual, vital, and commanding."⁴

The next year, Emily Genauer reported in the *New York Herald Tribune* that Richtenburg was a "powerfully individual abstractionist...[who] shows stunningly forceful symbolical paintings."⁵

Major collectors of contemporary art purchased Richtenburg's paintings, among them Walter Chrysler, Joseph Hirshhorn, Patrick Lannan, James Michener, Albert and Muriel Newman and Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Weisman. Chrysler and Michener, in particular, were avid followers of Richtenburg, and in an essay in *Art Voices* in 1962, author Michener recounted how Harvey Arnason and Irving Sandler had pointed him in Richtenburg's direction.⁶ The Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, among others, added his work to their collections. In 1961, when Sandler published his words of praise, Richtenburg was 44 and at the height of his career.

This success was not to last. In 1964, Richtenburg argued with the Pratt administration over academic freedom. What might have been only a squabble became a showdown over his right to teach as he saw fit, which meant, in this case, to encourage radical directions in his classroom. Grace Glueck reported in *The New York Times* the details of the controversy over the "well-known abstract expressionist painter" and his teaching philosophy, coming to a head over the work of his female student who created

"assemblages of tinfoil, rags and other objects bound together in plastic."⁷ The administration told Richenburg to rein in his students. He refused. In the end, he resigned.⁸

Just as he had experienced as a student at Hofmann's, Richenburg encouraged an open, experimental environment in the classroom, despite the fact that his own art was rooted in the New York School. In contrast to many suddenly "old guard" artists who were shocked by new ideas, he acknowledged the new approaches to art that his students were exploring, among them directions that challenged abstract expressionism, as pop, assemblage, conceptual, minimal, environmental art and happenings all would. Many of the radical ideas that Richenburg nurtured would show up soon in New York galleries, and a number of his students went on to establish themselves in the art world.⁹

Richenburg's inviolable integrity came at a high price. The loss of his teaching position of 13 years meant finding new employment elsewhere. He left New York City with his wife and son, forfeiting the momentum he had established over these years, and soon found his ties with the art world ruptured, his sponsorship by the Tibor de Nagy Gallery terminated. He moved to Ithaca, New York, to teach at Cornell University, and he stopped exhibiting his work from the New York years. His monumental paintings were rolled up, to remain unseen for more than 20 years. The problems of working on large and unwieldy canvases, including the expense, the necessity of maintaining a large studio and the sheer physical strength required for such a grand scale, conspired to lead him to work small, although he did not abandon painting.

Creating now on a more personal scale, out of the public eye, Richenburg purposefully pursued ideas from his painting, which in turn generated new ideas, as did his new materials and techniques. Thus, the adversity that sundered his career also launched him into a rich, virtually unknown period of creativity. He created an exceptional, diverse series of works on paper. These reveal his engagement with endless experimentation and "play" with all sorts of techniques, incorporating collage, torn paper, decalomania, printing, applying paint with a roller and painting on paper. Often exploring themes inherent in his paintings of the previous decade, these works on paper are at times brilliant exercises that extend and enrich the directions of abstract expressionism. While Richenburg went on to pursue such experimentation with other materials and in other media, these 1960s' paper works stand as an oeuvre closely related to his earlier monumental oils. Together with these paintings, they represent an unknown excursion in the art of the New York School that deserves recognition.¹⁰

It was during a serendipitous visit to his and his second wife's recently completed East Hampton studio in 1986 that I first saw Robert Richenburg's art, just unpacked from over two decades slumber. My immediate impression was astonishment. How could work so fresh and forceful have been forgotten? At that moment, I became convinced that an important body of art of the New York School had undeservedly fallen into obscurity, and I pledged to bring his art to light. With the bold support of Carl Belz, who continues the Rose Art Museum's long-standing commitment to the art of this era, I undertook this exhibit. Presenting Robert Richenburg's paintings and related paperworks from 1951-67, this exhibition offers the singular opportunity to rediscover an exceptional artist and to expand our understanding of the inheritance of abstract expressionism.



Robert Richtenburg
Provincetown
Massachusetts, 1952

Among Robert Richtenburg's early works, his "Dark" paintings and "Painting/Assemblages" of 1950-51 represent among the most intense investigation of the psychological trauma of war by any artist of his generation and foreshadow themes in his later, mature work. Born in 1917, Richtenburg was drafted into the army in 1942 and was sent to Europe where he served for three years, unlike the first generation of abstract expressionists, most of whom were too old for the draft.¹¹ Richtenburg became a combat engineer, a nondescript title for a position of high risk. He travelled throughout England and France in a truck loaded with TNT and other explosives and trained troops in demolitions, mines and booby traps. His life revolved around the "custody" of these agents of destruction, even at night. For four hours at a time he marched back and forth, as he recalls, "pulling in the immense, haunting blackness around me, becoming one with it. I continuously had the feeling of things moving in on me. One night I heard peacocks shrieking, making noises that sounded like humans screaming. That night was filled with terror."¹²

Richtenburg's account of his nocturnal vigils in a land ravaged by war brings to mind Tolstoy's vivid night scene in *War and Peace* where he used darkness to heighten the sense of the anguish of war, although Tolstoy's sounds were the real thing:

*In the darkness, it seemed as though a gloomy unseen river was flowing always in one direction, humming with whispers and talk and the sound of hoofs and wheels. Amid the general rumble, the groans and voices of the wounded were more distinctly heard than any other sound in the darkness of the night. The gloom that enveloped the army was filled with their groans, which seemed to melt into one with the darkness of the night.*¹³

1.
Proclamation
1952, mixed media
60 x 50 inches



While other abstract expressionists dealt with the war metaphorically through various means such as primitivism,¹⁴ Richenburg invented painting/assemblages as a way to create the equivalents of battle grounds. (This was before Robert Rauschenburg, the “other Bob” with whom Richenburg would later be confused, developed his assemblages.) *Proclamation* (1952, figure 1) is one of nine works in which small naked baby dolls are attached by wires to painted canvases. The most dramatic of these, *Proclamation*, displays 18 dolls, seemingly strewn across a battlefield. Each doll appears to have “fallen” dead in its tracks on a mound of sand that the artist painted black to resemble scorched earth. Across the canvas, fragments of wrinkled cloths evoke collapsed tents. Richenburg covered much of the canvas with black paint, which serves to unify the chaotic array of mixed media, while it conveys the sense of a bombed-out wasteland. The perspective of the viewer appears to be that from an airplane, looking down upon the devastation.¹⁵ In such works Richenburg graphically suggests physical annihilation. Elsewhere, he evokes the intensity of explosions. In *Unceasing* (1949), Balla-esque strokes of blue and red paint radiate from the epicenter of the canvas, where one lone doll lies wired. Richenburg cites Edvard Munch’s *Scream* as his direct source, although the painting is also indebted to the violent energy of futurist brushwork. Richenburg traces his openness to using such “found objects” in his art to the inspiration of Picasso and Duchamp. Whatever their sources, these violent assemblages convey the artist’s belief that “Life is basically tragic.”¹⁶ At the same time that they present his personal experience, they confront the viewer with the ugliness of history.

While Richenburg exorcised the memories of the physical devastation of war through the literal incorporation of three-dimensional human figures in his assemblages, he turned in the “Dark” paintings to abstraction and the symbolic use of black to deal with the themes of devastation and death. Despite its victorious conclusion for the Allies, the war led, for many, to a loss of faith in humanity and to a demoralization so complete it could not be accounted for or even grasped by the human heart and mind. Churchill described Europe as “a rubble heap, a charnel house, a breeding ground of pestilence and hate,” and Sartre wrote that “...the dying war leaves man naked, without illusions, abandoned to his own forces....”¹⁷

In Richenburg’s *Slumber* (1951, figure 2), the artist covered the entire canvas with dense layers of dark grey paint, nearly obliterating an unidentifiable white form in the center. Above is a black sun, barely visible. Close inspection reveals what appears to be a dead body wrapped in swaddling clothes. When Richenburg began *Slumber*, he sketched in a complete human figure, but later he eliminated the arms and legs, “washing” over them with darkness. What we see is horrific, but not in a specific sense, as in, for example, Henry Moore’s drawings of figures crouching in the subway tunnels of London during the bombings. In *Slumber*, we are presented with an unknown, a white presence suspended eerily in space just beyond our reach in an impenetrable darkness. Although the image is abstract, Richenburg’s painting is clearly about death visualized at its most disturbing, as a result of something gone amok in the world-at-large and not as a condition that has unfolded as part of a normal life cycle.

Slumber recalls the work of Francisco Goya, an artist with whom Richenburg shared the most profound social and psychological affinities. Richenburg had



2.
Slumber
1951
oil on canvas
60 x 50 inches

discovered Goya in 1941, when he was an art student at the Corcoran School of Art. At that time he had made 10 drawings (now lost) from Goya's *Disasters of War* and *Los Caprichos*. After the war, Richenburg recalls that he once again turned his attention to the study of Goya's *Disasters*, although he made no more drawings from them. *Slumber* may be seen as a tribute to Goya, an imaginative recollection of the Spanish master's *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* of 1799 (figure 3, Metropolitan Museum of Art) in which he portrayed a sleeping artist surrounded by owls and bats, which have been seen as symbols of ignorance and vice, and which evoke the darkness and irrationality of history.¹⁸

Richenburg shared with Goya his rage in the face of human atrocities and blind, ignoble ignorance. He too came to identify black with darkness, death and evil, and effectively used it to serve historical as well as personal necessity. Richenburg shared something deeper with Goya too: just as Goya had become deaf from an illness, a trauma to which his own "Black Paintings" relate, Richenburg had experienced a terrible accident that had irreversibly transformed his life. When he was two, a pot of boiling tomatoes had accidentally fallen on him, burning him so severely that he almost died. Much of the scalding contents landed on his head, permanently scarring him and leaving him partly bald. From this age, he was visibly "branded" as different from other children, and the incident left permanent psychological scars as well. He grew up with an intense self-consciousness and with feelings of being an outsider. As if the physical deformation weren't pain enough, as a teenager he was traumatized by a recurrent nightmare, which he traces to

this accident, in which he descended to the darkness of a cellar, illuminated by burning embers and filled with monsters whose forms he could not decipher. Richenburg believes that his deepest motivation to explore blackness derives from this accident and his dream.¹⁹

Richenburg became aware of the symbolic power of black not only through Goya, but also through his readings over the years of Wassily Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Kandinsky explained that "...black is a silence with no possibilities.... Black is something burnt out, like the ashes of a funeral pyre, something motionless like a corpse. The silence of black is the silence of death."²⁰

Why so much psychological power is associated with black is discussed by Rudolph Arnheim in *Art and Visual Perception*, in a passage that evokes *Slumber*:

*When darkness is so deep that it provides a foil of black nothingness, the beholder receives the compelling impression of things emerging from a state of non-being and likely to return to it. Instead of presenting a static world with a constant inventory, the artist shows life as a process of appearing and disappearing.... The frightening existence of things that are beyond the reach of our senses and yet exercise their power on us is represented by means of darkness.*²¹

Richenburg's friend Ad Reinhardt, who also painted dark and monochromatic paintings in the early 1950s before turning to his totally black works of the 1960s, associated black with "criminal death, doom, darkness," but with "heroism" as well.²² In his book entitled *The Devil*, the scholar Jeffrey Burton Russell develops the negative meanings of black:

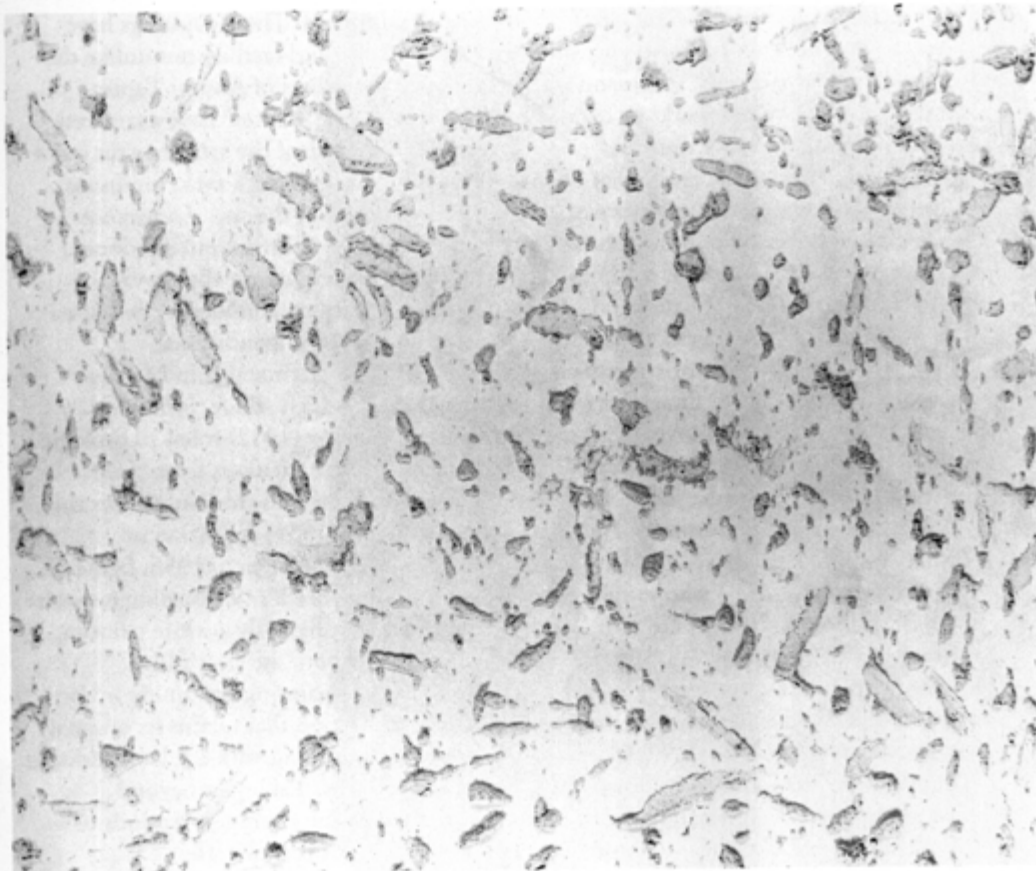
Blackness possesses an immense range of negative and fearful associations. Basically black is the color of night, when your



3.
Francisco Goya
The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters
1799, etching
8½ x 6 inches
all rights reserved
Metropolitan Museum
of Art, Gift of M.
Knodler & Co., 1918

enemies can surprise you and when...nameless, shapeless beings can attack you unexpectedly. Cosmogonically, blackness is chaos; ontogenically it is the sign of death... non-being, the void; ...psychologically it signifies the fearful land of dreams and the unconscious....²³

Richenburg frequently identified darkness with mental processes. His paintings and collages such as *Villainy* (1950), *Dark Consent* (1953), *Dark Power* (1955), *Obedience* (1956), *Dark Applause* (1960), *Dark Thinking* (1960), *Dark Thoughts* (1962) and *Dark Below* (1962) evoke the horror of recent history as well as the artist's personal trauma. The Western association of darkness with evil has a long tradition that may be traced at least as far back as the Gospel of John (3:19): "men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil."²⁴ These Richenburg works conjure evil forces and recall dark deeds of the immediate past. *Dark Consent* (1953) is a brooding painting, much like *Slumber*: a dark, yet translucent veil of blackness blankets many barely-perceptible colors that appear as dim and fading presences, in the process of being snuffed out. *Obedience* (1956), painted in a deadly, opaque grey, is a profoundly negative statement about the meaning of obedience in history, when the blind acceptance of authority all too often leads to tragedy. The personal meaning of *Obedience* may be discovered in the artist's vivid recollection of his own rebellion against obedience—that required of soldiers in the army (as well as of professors of art). He felt "soldiers were forced to be slaves, who were punished for disobedience."²⁵ In fact, Richenburg had volunteered for the dangerous assignment of combat engineer in order to free himself of the strict regimentation of the average soldier's life.²⁶



4.
Lactescence
1951, oil and sand
on canvas
50 x 60 inches



5.
Moonspots
1956, oil and sand
on canvas
60 x 50 inches

While these images of darkness and despair provide a dominant theme in the artist's work of the early 1950s and foreshadow the masterworks to come, his small series of "White Paintings," also of the early 1950s, reveal that he simultaneously explored concepts of creation and regeneration. In contrast to a direct relationship between the images and history, as in the "Darks" and the "Painting/Assemblages," these white abstractions appear ahistorical in their celebration of a mythic time when the world was pure and inviolate. Yet they too take their impulse directly from the aftermath of war: the search for new beginnings was a deep concern and a basic psychological need of many other abstract expressionists, who sought to eradicate the past in their art and, metaphorically, in life, to begin, as it were, from scratch, to create a new world order.²⁷ Richenbourg used white to suggest the "primal" as described by Kandinsky: "White has the appeal of the nothingness that is before birth, of the world in the ice age."²⁸

Through the use of whiteness, Richenbourg created images that convey optimism and spirituality. The idea to make these white paintings was sparked by Hans Arp's white "Constellation" reliefs that Richenbourg saw at the Sidney Janis Gallery in 1950.²⁹ Although Richenbourg was attracted to these as formal exercises, they nevertheless embodied spiritual values. For Arp they conveyed "nature's endless cycles of dissolution and regeneration."³⁰ Using white, Arp achieved what has been described as a "weightless, immaterial quality."³¹ His title, "Constellation," suggests the universe, or a piece of it.

In contrast to Arp, who used wood relief, Richenbourg painted on canvas, gaining depth and texture through mixing white

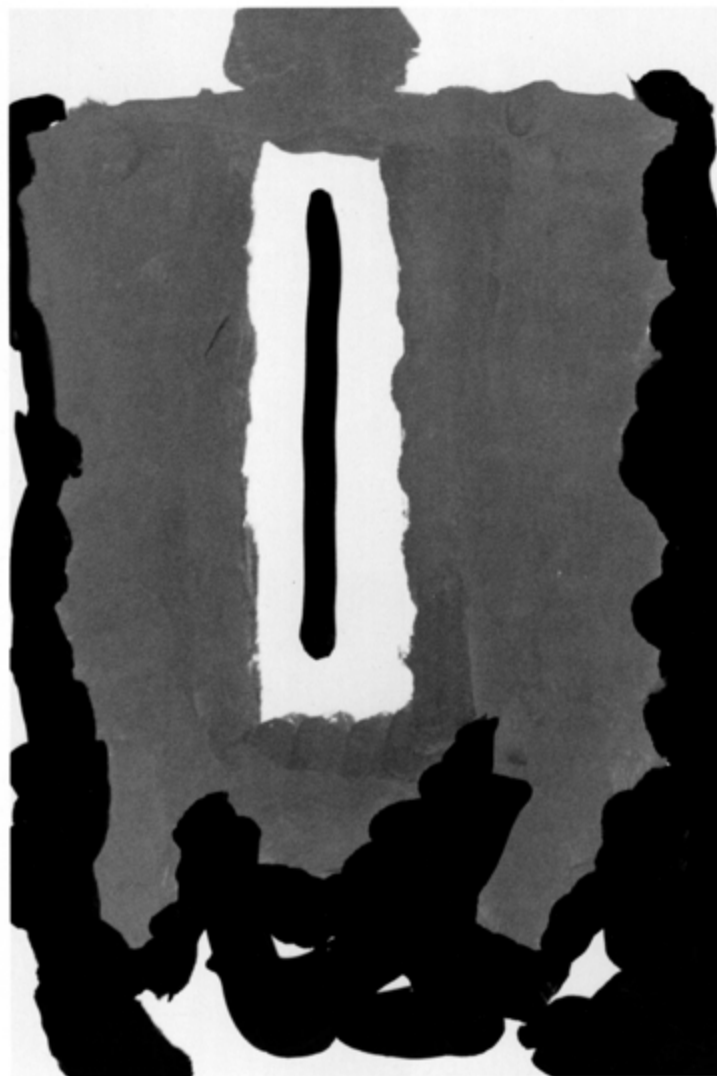
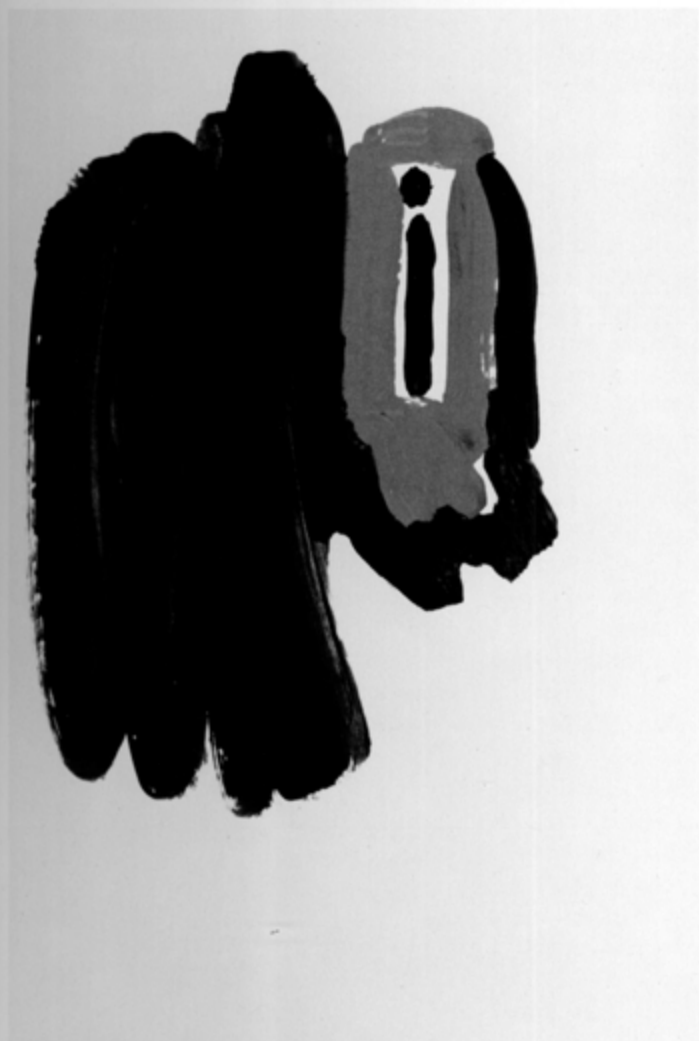
paint with sand. These paintings have a materiality and tactility not unlike the "matter" paintings of Antoni Tàpies. Richenbourg's "Whites" have a concrete presence; it is as if the artist has cut out a section of a beach or a rock, luminous with the light of the sun. *Lactescence* (1951, figure 4), with sand distributed generously throughout the canvas, bespeaks teeming abundance, perhaps a reference to an unconditional nourishment attributable to Mother Earth from which all life, ultimately, arises. *Alabaster* (1952) refers to geologic time and the miraculous formation of rare and precious substances over the eons. *Renew* (1951) is a vision of regeneration. *Moonspots* (1956, figure 5), with its large black ovals floating on white ground, was originally a white painting. The "moonspots" he later added. It is the only painting remaining in the artist's collection that retains its original white surface along with the later addition of black forms. Taking us beyond the realm of the earthly, it reminds us of the creation of the universe.

While in these "Darks" and "Whites" Richenbourg reduced his artistic means by using primarily black or white, he also used them together in works other than *Moonspots*, and, elsewhere, he used vigorous color to suggest a primordial energy. In a series of small black and white ink drawings on paper from 1956, and a series of small black and blue tempera paintings from 1955-56, he explored further a key theme of abstract expressionism, mythic creation. *A New Day* (1956, figure 6), a black and white abstraction that suggests the slow awakening of life, pays homage to Barnett Newman's *Genesis—The Break* of 1946 (The Menil Collection, Houston, Texas). *Source Man* (1956, figure 7) and *A Real Moment* (1955, figure 8), each marked by a significant line that recalls Newman's primal "zip," suggest the beginnings of life out of dark, inert and mysterious origins.

6.
A New Day
1956, gouache on paper
15 x 10 inches



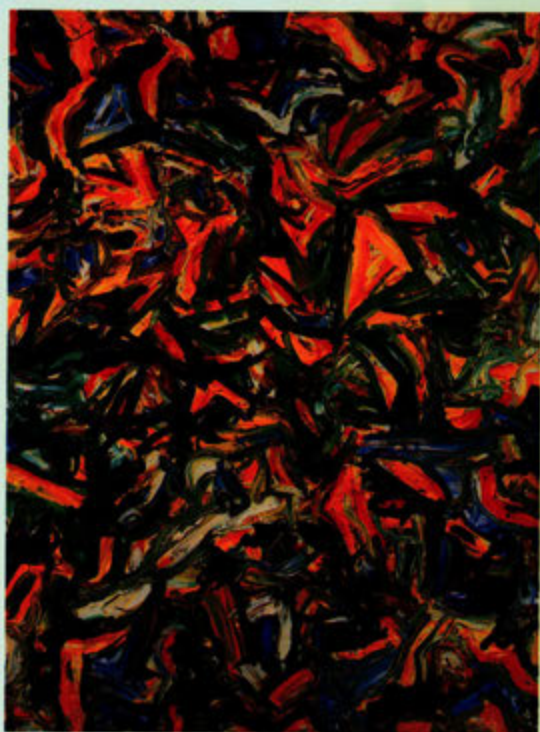
7.
Source Man
1956, gouache on paper
15 x 10 inches



8.
A Real Moment
1955, gouache on paper
15 x 10 inches

The "Black" Paintings: 1958-64

9.
Yellow Triangle
1959, oil on canvas
76 x 56 inches



In 1956, Richtenburg began a series of experiments with black and color in which we find themes of destruction and creation integrated in the same painting, with an underlying energy throughout. Black now begins to take on a broader range of associations, implying at times the creation and destruction of the cosmos rather than the negativity of personal and historical experience. In the first of these monumental new "Black Paintings," Richtenburg presented a visual meditation upon the idea of blackness as "nothingness" and as infinity. After exploring a series of pure color abstractions between 1953-56, such as *Yellow Triangle* (1959, figure 9), which directly reflect the work of Pollock and de Kooning, he began applying black over sections of these paintings and then scraping away the color with the palette knife. In *Tangle* (1956), he covered the top quarter of a colored abstraction with black to create a threatening landscape, which reads as blackened sky above an earth overpowered by unhealthy, chaotic vegetation. In *Undercover* (1958-59), an irregular black border surrounds the color on all four sides. By covering the lower half of *Dark Opening* (1959) with black, the painter suggests the eerie darkness of an entrance into realms unknown. *Disintegrate* (1959, figure 10) evokes the energy of dissolution through the combination of several processes: first Richtenburg painted a color abstraction, he next subtracted paint by scraping it away, and finally he added a black grid overlay. The "residual" color left behind by this "erasure" of paint gives these works a ghostly pallor.

One day, instead of scraping the color off in this manner, he covered the entire, colorful painting with black; when it had dried, he peeled, scraped and scratched off the black to reveal brilliant patches of color underneath. As he worked the painting further, he began to unveil color in a regular pattern by scraping areas of

black, row upon row. On top of this, he then superimposed a structure of small black rectangles by applying black once again, in a more or less regular grid. In some places this structure is so subtle, it is barely visible, while in others, it is quite evident. The artist worked these different "layers" one after another—the original color, the black overlay, the subtractive scraping of this black, and the introduction of another layer of geometric forms in grids. The result was a tremendous, explosive energy. *Black Mirrors* (1959, whereabouts unknown, figure 11) was the breakthrough painting.

Richtenburg began an extensive investigation of this technique, probing its potential and pursuing the dynamic tension and energy generated by the contrast and interplay between color and blackness. Over the next seven years he crafted a monumental series of over 60 "Black" paintings.³² Often grand in size—as large as 8 feet by 11 feet 4 inches—these canvases were environmental and overwhelming in effect. When John Bernard Myers, the director of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, visited his studio in 1959, it was these "Blacks" that he saw. He invited Richtenburg to solo at the gallery that very year.

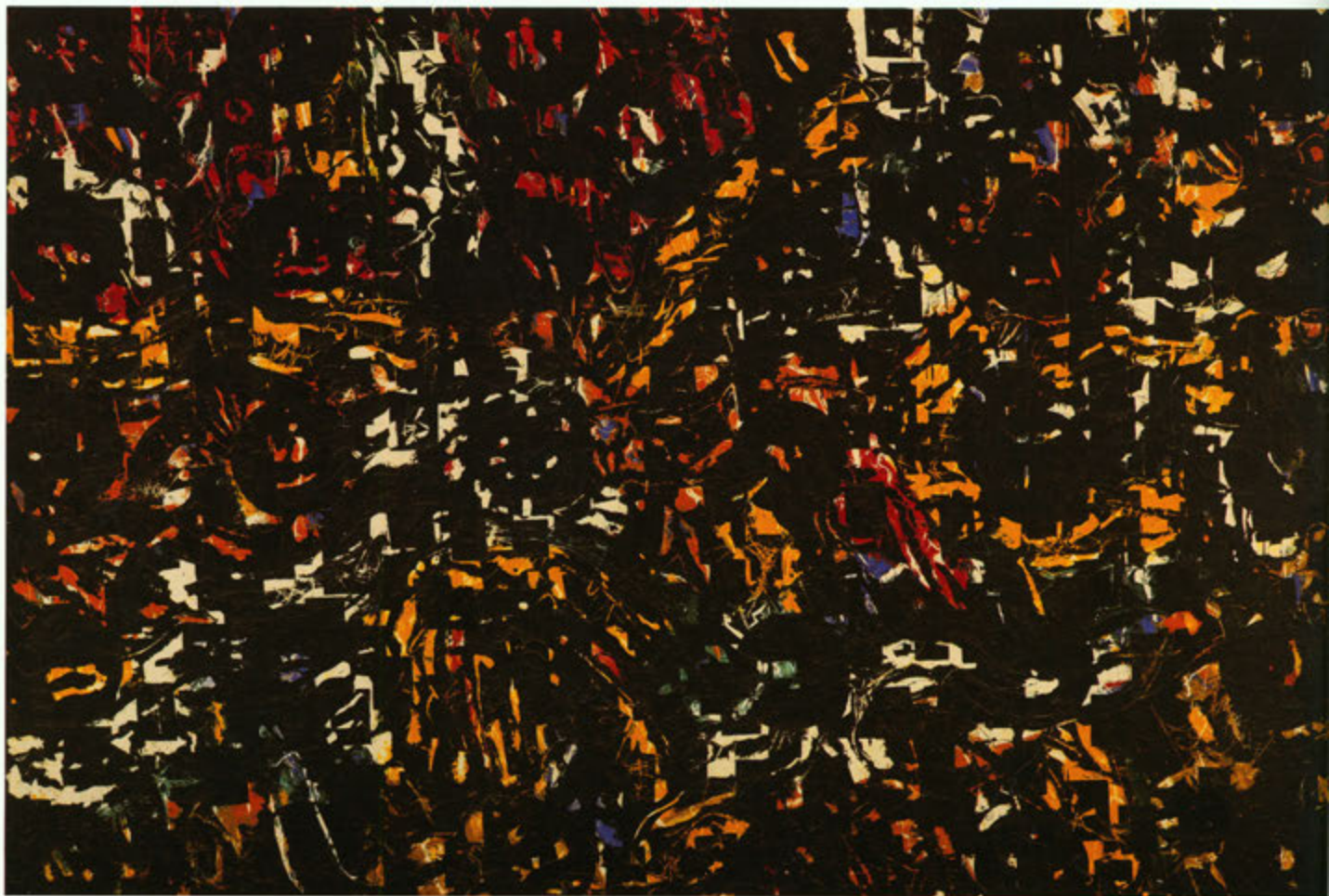
Richtenburg's first exhibition, with eight large paintings, attracted favorable reviews in major publications. Dore Ashton, who had begun to follow Richtenburg's work in 1957, wrote in *The New York Times* of an unnamed black painting, possibly *Black Mirrors*:

A huge intricate abstraction dominates Robert Richtenburg's exhibition at Tibor de Nagy.... This painting must symbolize the

10.
Disintegrate
1959, oil on canvas
75 x 54½ inches

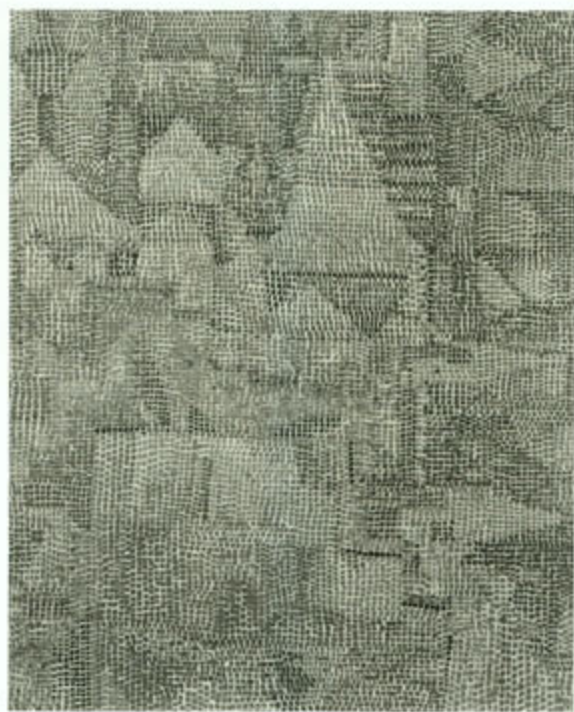


11.
Black Mirrors
1959, oil on canvas
96 x 132½ inches



12.
Summer's Night
1960, oil on canvas
96 x 132 inches

13.
Paul Klee
Castle Garden
1931, oil on canvas
26½ x 21½ inches
[R12]
Museum of Modern Art
New York
Sidney and Harriet Janis
Collection Fund



most terrifying aspects of metropolitan life. Its dominant color is a bituminous black, pitched at several different light intensities. Careening in and out of the tarry plaques that form a surface pattern are little shocks of white and a few reds and oranges. Disks and squares, at several points in space, provide an insistent crazed beat. All forms hurtle fiercely from a central maw, a great Kafkaesque subway station.... His exasperated and well-wrought image is the other side of the moon and the other side of the city.³³

Lawrence Campbell wrote in *Art News* that the artist "...seems to work in an automatist trance, weaving a wonderful complexity, tossing paint into a sea of multicolored surf. Then he pulls across it a curtain of paint as black as Egypt's night...."³⁴

From this exhibition, Albert and Muriel Newman bought *Black Mirrors* (1959), which eventually entered the Los Angeles County Museum, but was auctioned off and remains unlocated today. In the Tibor de Nagy Gallery Archives, a letter of November 4, 1959 from Myers to Richenburg informs him of the Newmans' interest in an unspecified black painting for \$2,500.³⁵ Myers suggested that the artist "would be doing the right thing to accept this price, particularly since the Newmans have one of the best collections of contemporary art in America."³⁶ Also in this letter, Myers mentioned that he was trying to interest the Museum of Modern Art in acquiring one of Richenburg's paintings. Indeed, in December, *Uprising* (1959)—a work that was not a "Black"—entered the Museum of Modern Art.

Two years later, Richenburg's 1961 solo show at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery contained 13 large-scale paintings executed between 1959 and 1961. All paintings now received titles, many of which referred to the city, the country, the seasons or weather, as had some painting titles of the early 1950s. Richenburg received considerable critical attention, much of which focused on the fact that his abstractions evoked the urban and nocturnal. Ashton wrote in *Art and Architecture*:

His image of a pitch-black place cut through by flickering neon light is persistently urban and nocturnal.... Pinwheels, discs, rectangles, and squares refer to the mechanical forms of the city. Jagged bursts of light—the light seen through the angular city maze—insist on identification with Times Square. Their primary loudness, for [his] accents are bright orange, red, and yellow, reinforces the city associations. Jarring color and dense blacks pulsate with the cosmopolitan rhythms familiar in Edgar Varese's music.³⁷

Irving Sandler wrote in *Art International*: [he] turns his dialectic into a titanic conflict between light and dark. Small black overlapping oblongs, spotted rhythmically over the surface, are interspersed with red, orange, and white fragments that glow incandescently in the night.³⁸

That same year, another solo show traveled first to the Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles and then to the Santa Barbara Museum. Using language that recalls the New York critics, Larry Rottersman wrote:

[his] canvases flicker and dazzle with nervous energy...[they] bristle with leaping, shimmering flashes of light that evoke a subterranean imagery. One thinks of neon lights bursting on and off in hotel rooms and the nightmare alleys in cities after dark.³⁹

Indeed, while we might trace some of Richenburg's explosive color juxtaposed with black back to his war-time experience, the illuminated city at night, which he saw from his apartment near Brooklyn Heights, made a deep impression on him. He cites it as an inspiration for such "Black" paintings as *The City* (1960), *Summer's Night* (1960, figure 12), and *Night Cascade* (1961), the latter shown at Tibor de Nagy in 1962. (Richenburg had, in fact, found inspiration in New York's night as early as the late 1940s, when he completed the works that were shown at the Museum of Non-Objective Painting in 1949 and 1950.)

With respect to his artistic precursors, the paintings of James McNeil Whistler, Joseph Stella, Paul Klee and Mark Tobey all provided guidance. As different as these artists appear, they offered Richenburg examples of how to visualize flux and process in his own nocturnes, and he selectively used what he needed from each of them. Whistler's nocturnes revealed the beauty and mystery of night illuminated by lights. Richenburg first saw Whistler's *The Lagoon, Venice: Nocturne in Blue and Gold*, (1879-80) at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, where he had been a regular visitor from the age of 13, when he won a scholarship to study in the museum for two hours each day. Later, when he studied at the Corcoran in 1940, the artist saw the many Whistler nocturnes at the Freer Gallery of Art. These images of the darkness punctuated by city lights, fireworks or stars, provided a nearly abstract interpretation of night and its evanescent effects of which Whistler wrote: "Oh! The magic of night, night with its everchanging forms!"⁴⁰ In

Whistler's *Nocturne: Trafalger Square, Chelsea—Snow* (1875-77), which is in the Freer Collection, darkness envelops the city, obliterating forms, although the orange and red and yellow lights of street lamps punctuate the night. Richenburg's *Summer's Night* (1960), an abstract image of pitch blackness punctuated and penetrated everywhere by multicolored bands of light, is an abstract descendent of Whistler's nocturnes.

However, in contrast to Whistler's more contemplative nightscapes, Richenburg sought to generate an explosive energy. He found one significant precedent in futurism, in Joseph Stella's painting. He saw Stella's work at the Zabriskie Gallery, where it was exhibited every year from 1958 to 1961.⁴¹ An early work, Stella's *Battle of Lights, Coney Island*, (1913-14, Yale University Art Gallery), is an excellent example of how Stella generated a seemingly uncontainable energy. From the subject matter of the exciting amusement park, with its whirling, turning and tumbling rides, Stella used futuristic faceting of forms to create a highly-dynamic composition. A variety of abstracted forms collide and interpenetrate to convey the speed of fast-moving machines. As an abstractionist, Richenburg created an analogous effect directly through his complex technical process, while eliminating altogether the "intervening" object. In *Summer's Night*, Richenburg scraped away the black paint in hundreds of areas across the canvas to allow a host of vibrant colors to emerge from beneath the blanket of black. The multiplicity of what appear to be colored lights registers perceptually as glowing, flickering and blinking on and off, almost stroboscopic in effect. The monumental size of this painting renders the perceptual experience almost environmental.

Richenburg also knew and admired Paul Klee's "black paintings," in which Klee removed black paint to reveal beautiful colored forms beneath, as in *Castle to be Built in a Forest* (Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart). Richenburg read and reread Klee's *The Thinking Eye* over the years and studied his paintings at the Phillips Collection when he was at the Corcoran and later at museums in New York. Richenburg's adoption of a grid was directly influenced by Klee, whose art he admired for its uncanny combination of mystery and order. While Klee often imposed structure on his painting through geometric order, it was usually an irregular geometry and lacked predictability, as in *Castle Garden* (1931, figure 13) in the Museum of Modern Art. Richenburg used a grid both to create stability and to intensify energy: he frequently superimposed a grid of small black rectangles—sometimes circles or squares—which nearly lose their identity in the welter of visual activities. The viewer becomes aware of the presence of a grid, but then immediately loses it, being visually swept away by adjacent colors and lights, only to rediscover and then lose the grid or any given color, again and again. The viewer becomes perceptually engaged in a visual process of flux and mutability.

One other reference was Mark Tobey's dramatic nocturnal urban abstractions. Tobey's paintings of the spectacle of New York ablaze with thousands of electric lights, as in *Electric Night* of 1944 (figure 14, The Seattle Art Museum), provided a precedent of a nocturnal landscape pulsing with intense energy. Through his dynamic, fluid white script, which Tobey called "white writing," he suggested neon lights and currents of electric energy. This writing unifies the multiplicity of visual events and interconnects them in a continuum. He believed he could "...symbolize light as a unifying idea which flows through compartmented units of life...."⁴²

Richenburg's "Black Paintings," while visually quite unlike Tobey's, were also charged with energy, as Fairfield Porter wrote in *The Nation* of one of his paintings in which he overlaid the form of a window frame:

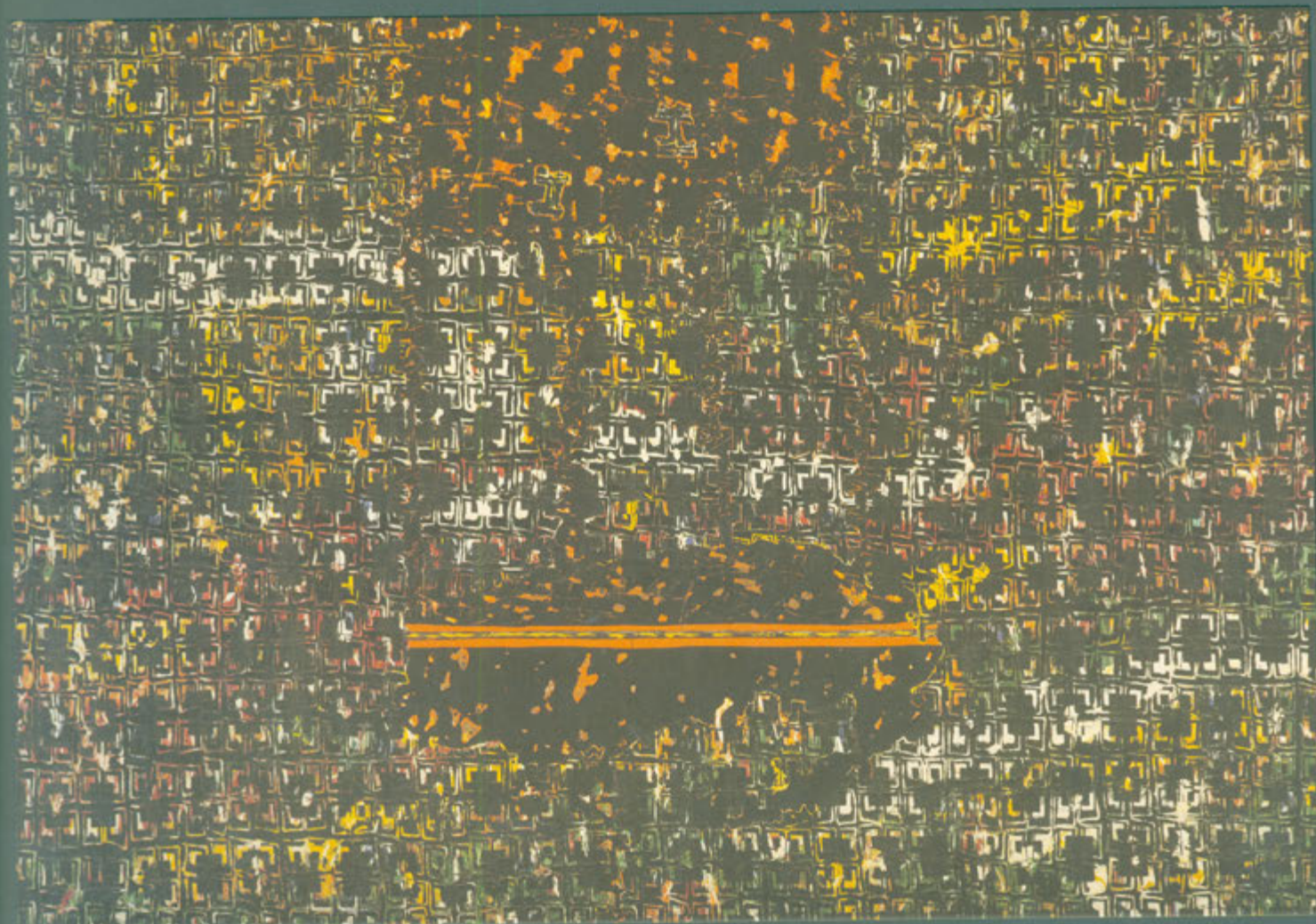
...Richenburg's paintings...seem to be specifically about energy. Bright colors, at maximum intensity, in swirls like sunset clouds, fires, explosions or electricity, are seen through holes in an overlying black, like very thick bars of a window. One sees that the black overlaps, and this forces the black, usually a receding color, to the surface;...and the colors which by their brightness naturally come forward, seem to be forcibly pushed back.... Each canvas exists at the highest possible energy level.⁴³

Through Richenburg's inventive technique, he had found the means to convey energy through this tension, and also as seemingly broken down into small constituent units or "particles," as it were. A sense of mystery arises as well. He generates a radiant energy through the revelation of a multiplicity of visual events appearing simultaneously throughout the pictorial field, as a result of the subtractive process of scraping away black paint. The viewer is barraged by countless charges of colored light. Mysterious worlds flicker from beneath the black, as poet Marianne Moore suggested to Richenburg when she visited his studio and saw the painting that he subsequently named *Secret Boxes* (1961, figure 15). He recalls that she saw "all these little boxes opening up each a little world of its own," and said that the painting was, to her, these "secret boxes."⁴⁴ This Klee-like grid of geometric shapes or boxes superimposed on the rows of color engages the viewer in further negotiation



14.
Mark Tobey
Electric Night
1944, Tempera on board
17½ x 13 inches
The Seattle Art Museum
Eugene Fuller
Memorial Collection

15.
Secret Boxes
1961, oil on canvas
96 x 136 inches



with the tension between surface and depth. Row upon row upon row of changing colors become the highly-activated transmitters of energy. In his largest paintings, 8 feet high and over 11 feet long—*Summer's Night*, *Night Cascade* and *Secret Boxes*—the effect is synesthetic. The viewer confronts not only visual energy, but an expectation of the sound of the crackling, irregular noises of fireworks, if not of the explosives with which Richenburg had worked during the war.

Richenburg cites specific readings that contributed significantly to his concept of energy, and to his understanding of art and creativity. Carl Jung was a reference for him as for other artists of the day,⁴⁵ and the writings of Paul Valery, most specifically, *Monsieur Teste*, became so important to him that he dedicated one of his major paintings to the author, *Homage to Valery* (1960, cover). On the level of artistic influence alone, Valery, as a writer, often created effects that Richenburg must have admired. In the introductory chapter, "An Evening with Monsieur Teste," for example, Monsieur Teste, in attendance at the opera, observes the audience rather than the performance. The scene occurs at night, and Valery used the setting to draw a vivid picture of the contrast between the dimming lights in the theater and the glow of the "thousand little faces" of the audience⁴⁶: "and when [the light] was quite low...there remained only the vast phosphorescence of a thousand faces."⁴⁷ Valery's sensuous evocation of the scene has been described by the scholar C.A. Hackett in terms that might equally describe Richenburg's "Black" paintings, and particularly *Homage to Valery*:

It is like a rich and complex painting with color and light, yet almost mathematical in its structure, with verticals and horizontals, and clearly marked planes. But it is essentially animated and dynamic. Everything seems to seethe and burn as in a huge cauldron; and the audience acquires from the dazzling lights of the chandeliers a kind of electric vitality....⁴⁸

Homage to Valery might be interpreted as an abstract evocation of this very scene. The rows of colors and the superimposed black grid are more clearly and logically organized and legible—like Valery's mathematical structure—than is customary in Richenburg's black paintings. Richenburg also added some "écriture" to his painting, incising the names of Monsieur Teste and Valery across the canvas, inextricably associating writing and words with the process of painting, just as Valery had created the sensation of sensuous color and light through his "synesthetic" written descriptions. Furthermore, Richenburg scratched circles around some of the color-light areas. While these do not literally visualize the thousand faces of the audience or the dazzling lights of chandeliers, they suggest the same effect of teeming energy. (It is interesting to note that in Marianne Moore's essay, "Preface to Monsieur Teste," she quotes a translation of this scene that reads in a more abstract vein: "in a darkness of faces peopled by hundreds of small pebble-like ovals."⁴⁹

Richenburg exhibited *Homage to Valery* in his 1961 exhibition at Tibor de Nagy. Reviewing this show in *The New York Times*, Stuart Preston appreciated the artistic resonance between *Homage to Valery* and the text:

The title...given by [the artist] to one of his abstract oils...is neither so irrelevant or pretentious as might be supposed. For Valery's conviction that the creative act is in

itself the subject and theme of artistic creation is certainly paralleled in abstract painting, and [the artist's] insistence on clarity of form and intellectual control of the medium is followed with considerable faithfulness....⁵⁰

In *Monsieur Teste*, Richenburg found both the philosophical justification for his abstraction and an articulation of the meanings of abstraction that made sense to him. In a passage that occurs after the scene at the opera, Monsieur Teste and the narrator discuss the power of music, which the narrator ascribes to: "abstract sensations, delightful images of everything I love—change, movement, mixture, flux, transformation."⁵¹ Such paintings as Richenburg's *Shifting* (1960), *Changing* (1961) and *Night Cascade* (1961, figure 16) refer directly to the nature of process: the abstract patterns of color and light appear to move before our very eyes in a state of mutability. Later, in "More Excerpts from the Logbook of Monsieur Teste," Monsieur Teste noted: I wish to borrow from the (visible) world only forces—not forms, but that which makes forms. Not history, not decoration and scenery, but the feel of matter itself, rock, air, water, vegetation—and their elemental powers.⁵²

This became Richenburg's intention as well, and his achievement.

Richenburg's first readings in the late 1950s of Heinrich Zimmer's *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* also influenced his concept of energy as dynamic and in a state of expansion. Zimmer identified Hinduism as the Indian religion most expressive of "the phenomenon of the growing, or expanding, form."⁵³ He wrote, The notion that there is nothing static, nothing abiding, but only the flow of a



16.
Night Cascade
1961, oil on canvas
96 x 136 inches



17.
Broken Continuity
1962



18.
Hot Radiance
1963, oil on canvas
90 x 80 inches

19.
Centrifuge
1966, acrylic on paper
23 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 17 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches



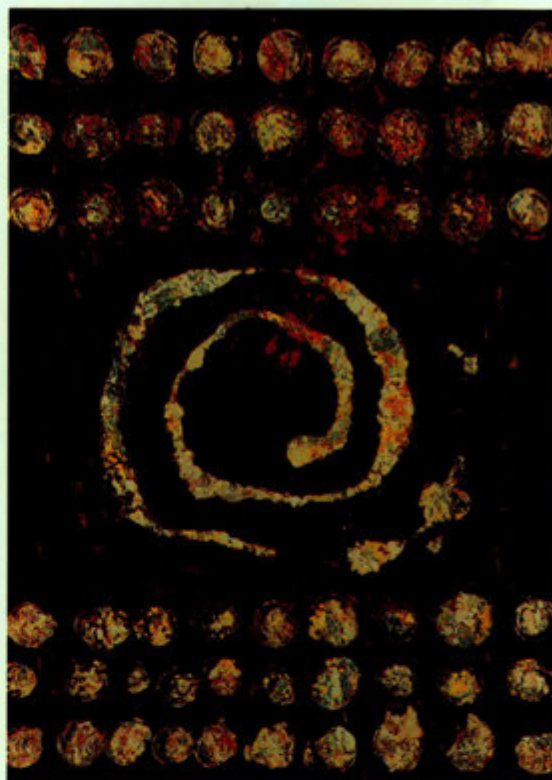
relentless process, with everything originating, growing, decaying, vanishing—this wholly dynamic view of life, of the individual and of the universe, is one of the fundamental conceptions...of later Hinduism.⁵⁴

Richenburg's *Study for a Large Column* (1962), which was on view in "The Jean Outland Chrysler Collection" in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1963, and the column itself, *Broken Continuity* (1962, figure 17), might be interpreted as a meditation on Zimmer's discussion of "The Origin of the Langham," a myth represented by the Hindus in phallic stone columns. This myth, Zimmer relates, "opens with the familiar primeval situation: no universe, only water and the starless night of the lifeless interval between dissolution and creation."⁵⁵ Vishnu floats in this space approached now by Brahma, with "the swiftness of light, shining with the brilliance of a galaxy of suns."⁵⁶ The two presences argue in the "timeless void" when they see, "rising out of the ocean a towering lingham crowned with flame, growing and growing until it bursts. It now revealed Super-Shiva, who embraced the Creation, the Maintenance and Destruction of all."⁵⁷

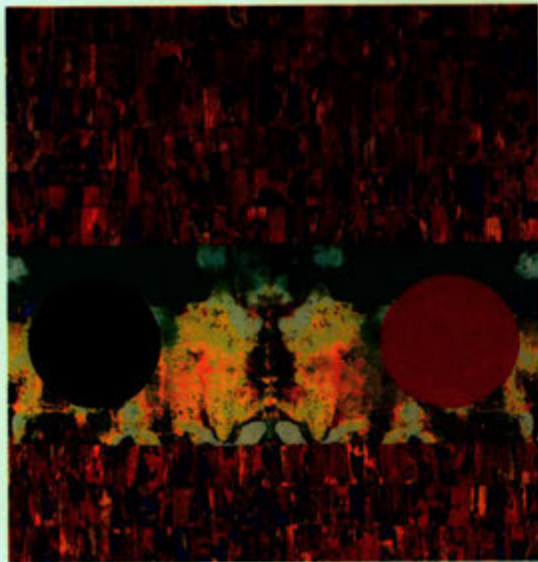
Richenburg experimented with highly-graphic ways to suggest the unfolding of physical processes at high velocity, processes that emitted intense heat and light. He placed large bursts, splashes or powerful explosions of flame in the center of his already highly-energetic black

and colored pictorial field. In *Hot Radiance* (1963, figure 18), a fireball of vibrant yellow flame appears either to have crashed into the painting or to be hurtling toward us. While the shape of this "fireball" initially recalls Gottlieb's "Bursts" of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the effect is altogether different. Gottlieb's paintings have a quietude about them, as the viewer contemplates a moment of silence after the creation, as the "bursts" settle down. Richenburg's splashes are loud, explosive, brilliant and very "hot," almost searing. Similar paintings include *Blaze* (1961), *Breaking Tide* (1961, Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, University of Texas at Austin, Gift of Mari and James Michener), *Intersection* (1961) and *Yellow Breakthrough* (1960, in the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Wilfred P. Cohen when it was included in H.H. Arnason's exhibit at the Guggenheim in 1961, "American Abstract Expressionists and Imagists").⁵⁸

It is not clear from these paintings whether the great explosion we are seeing is a visual reenactment of the creation or of the end of the world. The rich ambiguity of these paintings reflects Richenburg's readings of Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, which both his friend Ibram Lassaw and John Cage recommended to him. Richenburg embraced Suzuki's mystical view of the interrelatedness of all things, and he underlined passages as he read, such as the unanswerable Zen koan: "All things return to the One: where does the One return?"⁵⁹ *Centrifuge* (1966, figure 19) features a ball of turning and churning smears whirling through the black void of space. Is this the beginning of time or the end of time? Is the ball in formation or in dissolution? The blackness is mysterious and elusive, and we find no answers within the work. We might pose the same question when we ponder *Sign of Darkness* (1959-61, figure 20). Does this radiant, glowing spiral announce the



20.
Sign of Darkness
1959-61, oil on canvas
77 x 57¼ inches



21.
Genesis
 1964, acrylic and collage
 on canvas
 96 x 96 inches

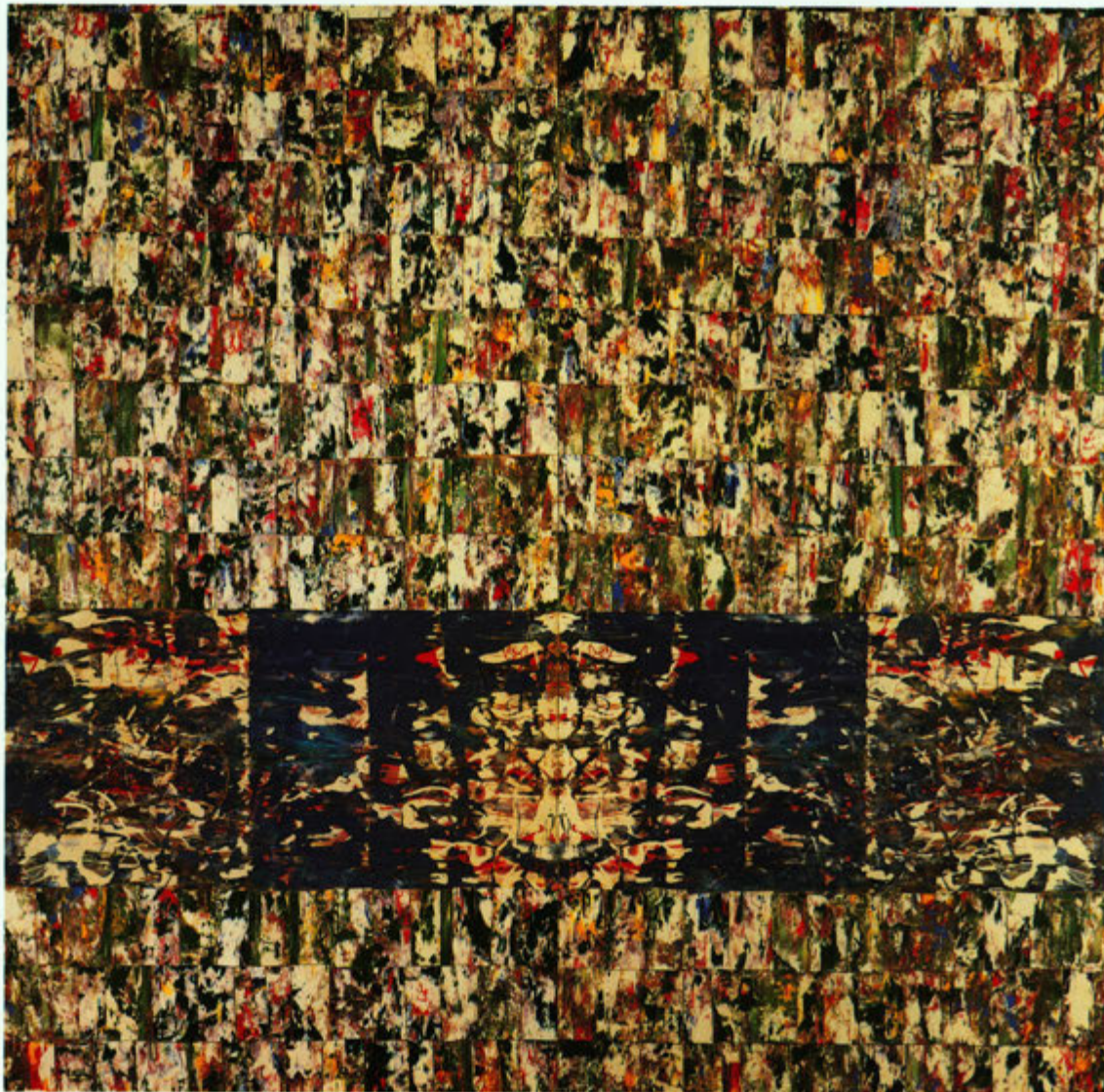
formation of a galaxy, or its death? The spiral appears to whiz through the blackness of space surrounded everywhere by buoyant colored orbs of light that seem to glow and sparkle. Richtenburg's title recalls the proclivity of prescientific cultures to interpret celestial events as portents of good or evil.

In one work, *Genesis* (1964, figure 21), Richtenburg was unambiguously dealing with the concept of "the beginning." In contrast to the spirit of his silent *A New Day* or *Source Man*, previously discussed, he interprets the beginning of time as an explosive, intense, loud event in *Genesis*. Two orbs, one black, one red, reside within a band or opening of blazing, blinding light; above and below the orbs is a field of energy composed of rows of multicolored boxes cut from another canvas and fastened to the host canvas by staples. (We remember that Richtenburg previously had layered canvas on canvas in such innovative early works as *Proclamation*.) These are organized row upon row like the grids in the black paintings. We sense here a cosmic explosion *ex nihilo*—out of nothingness—with the orbs being ejected, as it were, from a powerful field of uncontainable energy. Although this is a vision of the genesis, it does, nevertheless, remind us of the thin line between destruction and creation, for the field of energy before us seems endowed with atomic capabilities. This is among the most intense interpretations of the genesis in the history of abstract expressionism, where it was a recurrent theme.

Richtenburg appreciated the relationship between his subject matter and his own creative process. In his copy of Suzuki, he underlined Suzuki's discussion of Sumiye and calligraphy, which the writer likened to that of creation:

*The brush must run over the paper swiftly, boldly, fully, and irrevocably just like the work of creation when the universe came into being.... There is always an element of unexpectedness...in Sumiye.*⁶⁰

Richtenburg's underlining in this volume also calls attention to Suzuki's frequent reference to the "neglect of form," which characterizes all forms of mysticism. Suzuki encouraged the meditator and artist to think imaginatively, in abstract terms: "The special merit of a picture is to be sought in its spiritual rhythm and not in its compositions; in its invisible atmosphere and not in its visible forms."⁶¹ (Richtenburg drew an arrow to this passage in the margins of his book and pencilled in the words "mystic rhythmic presence.") *Emperor's Wall* (1963, figure 22) is just such a painting, where the rhythms alone carry the viewer into, through and across pictorial space in the absence of reference to visible form. Related paintings, such as *Chinese Wall* of 1963, in the Whitney Museum of American Art, draw from this Oriental concept as well. Elsewhere Suzuki admonished the artist to "...create living objects out of our own imagination. As long as we all belong to the same universe, our creations may show some correspondence to what we call objects of nature...."⁶²



22.
Emperor's Wall
1963, oil and collage
on canvas
96 x 96 inches



23.
Dark Thinking
1960, collage
on illustration board
22 x 28 inches

While Richtenburg's works on paper from 1964-67 represent a decisive break in his art, as well as in his life, as we have discussed earlier, in these essentially private works we find the free expression and development of some of the ideas that he had been exploring in his paintings. While he had always made exploratory paintings on paper and collages as part of his working process, he had never worked primarily with paper or on a small scale. The artists of the New York School valued "grand" painting above all as the most appropriate vehicle for sublime art, as Richtenburg's monumental paintings express. However, his abrupt shift in format reveals the often overlooked potential of small size.

Drawing from the innovative method of his black paintings, he invented new techniques that engaged him in a dialectic between additive and subtractive processes. He experimented with collage and integrated painting and/or printmaking with it. His renunciation of the unspoken dictum to work large scale, and his rejection of what he believed to be "arbitrary" distinctions between media, enabled him to work without inhibition, following the lead of his materials and living in the moment in his art—like Valéry's *Monsieur Teste*, whom Richtenburg believed lived like a Zen Master.⁶³ Richtenburg revelled in the arbitrary and the unexpected, as he tore and glued papers, applied paint with a roller or a brush, tore holes in his working surface or employed the surrealist technique of "decalcomania," which entailed separating from one another two sheets of paper that had been pressed together with paint. Indeed, his playful experimentation with paper, materials and techniques that led him along an undefined road to an unpredictable end, recalls the similar experiments of Max Ernst.

Of all his works on paper, the series of six black collages made on illustration boards is most reminiscent of the "Black Paintings." In fact, Richtenburg initiated this "Board" series in 1960 with *Dark Thinking* (figure 23). These collages began as illustration boards that the artist first painted black. He then cut into them and tore paper away, usually in a more or less regular grid, as in his "Black Paintings." This reveals both the gray and the white layers of paper that constitute the illustration board. The artist explains that "what remained after cutting and tearing were various rhythms of black shapes and light backgrounds."⁶⁴ Over this background Richtenburg further pasted additional torn forms, as in *Dark Thinking*, or rectangles, as in *MOMA Collage* (1960). (This work was entitled "Paper Collage III" when it was included in "The Art of Assemblage" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.)⁶⁵ *Heavy Snow* (1966, figure 24) is the only collage in which he simply tore the paper away, for the effect was so engaging that he stopped in this first stage. The many white torn forms give the impression of pine branches laden with the weight of snow. Despite being abstract, this work seems to recall Charles Burchfield's winter scenes!

The "Poked Paintings" of 1966, named after their many "poked" out shapes from one sheet of paper superimposed over another, also recall the technique of the "Black Paintings." But in contrast to the "Blacks," with their grandeur, or the "Boards," which have a ponderous quality about them, *Tic Tac Torn* (1966), *Window Poke* (1966, figure 25, Collection of Robin Radin, Tokyo, Japan), *Poked Painting* (1966) and *Four Torn* (1966, figure 26), are all playful and lyrical. The artist explained how he arrived at his technique:

24.
Heavy Snow
1966, torn paper on paper
22 x 28 inches





25.
Window Poke
1966, acrylic collage
on paper
24¼ x 18 inches
Collection Robin Radin
Tokyo, Japan

26.
Four Torn
1966, acrylic on paper
18¼ x 24¼ inches





27.
Meadow
1966, acrylic on paper
8¾ x 8½ inches
Collection Robin Radin
Tokyo, Japan



28.
White Cliffs
1966, acrylic on paper
19½ x 15½ inches

The sheet of paper was printed using rollers with relatively thin paint; then paint was applied a second time; then holes were poked in the paper and torn out, which created a kind of rhythm not unlike that in the "black pictures."⁶⁶

The sheet of paper was then superimposed over another sheet of paper, so the viewer actually looks through one layer to the next. While these generally read as abstractions, *Window Poke*, with its division of the paper into four fields, encourages the viewer to read the poked "droplets" as rain. It relates to the "Black" painting of 1960, *Black Windows*, which is likewise framed by a window frame form.

In the "Pastoral" collages that he began in 1964, Richenburg created works that are quite different in feeling from almost everything else he had produced until then. In these, he rolled paint between two sheets of paper, pressed the papers together and then separated them. Often the paper would get stuck to the paint, and the textures that resulted were "coated" unevenly with the residue of the white paper that was pulled away. *Meadow* (1966, figure 27, Collection of Robin Radin, Tokyo, Japan), with its surface blanketed by a soft, almost cottony whiteness born of tearing and sticking, conveys a pastoral calm. So too does the exquisite, economic *White Cliffs* (1966, figure 28), with its four incisive lines—the product of a roller—that cut through space to define, it appears, the fissures of cliffs. Here, again, the separation of the pages resulted in what appears to be an atmospheric white film covering the abstract "landscape." *North Woods* (1966, figure 29) reads like a luxuriant forest thicket with its red and green fragments of paper, densely packed together, with traces of blue, the blue of the sky. This collage was created from cut and torn scraps of painted paper that were then reassembled.

In these paperworks in particular, Richenburg becomes impressionistic, alluding to the transitory nature of time. He delights in the accidental and the arbitrary, as in Dada and Zen. These collages may be understood by a statement made by Arp to explain his own collages:

*I had accepted the transience, the dribbling away, the brevity, the impermanence, the fading, the withering, the spookishness of our existence. Not only had I accepted it, I had even welcomed transience into my work as it was coming into being.*⁶⁷

Finally, Richenburg's series of black and white acrylic "Spray" collages of 1966-67 bring us to another dimension of experience. In contrast to all else that we have seen, they are singularly "quiet." Created from the dialectic interplay between papers placed on a sheet of paper, sprayed with black paint and then torn, we sense the process of change and dissolution as it silently unfolds before our eyes. In *Fraught Geometry* of 1967 (figure 30), a square comes apart at its edges, dissolving like a cracker that has become wet. Bits and pieces of the corners—and the center—come undone in *Flipped Corners* (1966, figure 31), while pieces and chunks along the edges of the square come undone in *Dark Out Light In* (1966, figure 32), while the corners remain intact.

The most allusive collage is *Green Spots Rounded Surface* (1967, figure 33), where Richenburg has suggested the emptiness of the beyond, in contrast to the explosive, energy-packed "Blacks." He has created a cosmic frame in which he has suspended turquoise spheres: inside the frame is emptiness. In his copy of Suzuki's book, Richenburg underlined the following passage, which seems to speak to this work's meaning: "If God is the ultimate ground of all things, he must be Emptiness itself..."⁶⁸

Bonnie L. Grad



29.
North Woods
1966, acrylic on paper
11¹/₁₆ x 8¹/₄ inches



30.
Fraught Geometry
1967, acrylic collage
on paper
23 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 18 inches

31.
Flipped Corners
1966, acrylic collage
on paper
23 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 18 inches



32.
Dark Out Light In
1966, acrylic collage
on paper
23 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 18 inches



33.
*Green Spots Rounded
Surface*
1967, acrylic collage
on paper
23 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 18 inches

Footnotes

1. Paul Valery, *Monsieur Teste*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1948, pp. 86-87.
2. These exhibitions are documented in Richenburg's chronology included in this catalog.
3. Irving H. Sandler, "New York Letter," *Art International*, vol. v3, April 1961, p. 39.
4. Irving H. Sandler, "In the Art Galleries," *New York Post*, October 29, 1961, p. 12.
5. Emily Genauer, "The Galleries—A Critical Guide," *The New York Herald Tribune*, vol. 121, February 24, 1962, p. 11.
6. James A. Michener, "On Richenburg," *Art Voices*, November 1962, pp. 22-23.
7. Grace Glueck, "Teacher Backed in Pratt Dispute," *The New York Times*, May 11, 1964, p. 38.
8. Robert Richenburg, conversation with the author, June 8, 1992. Between the years 1986 and 1993, the author talked with the artist on numerous occasions over the phone and in person. Information about the artist's life and any of his opinions or recollections not otherwise documented in this catalog derive from these conversations.
9. Richenburg's former students include artists Ed Koren, Merle Lederman-Uceles, Robert Moscovitz and Raphael Ortiz, among numerous others.
10. Recent years have seen the "rediscovery" of other artists active in this period. *Abstract Expressionism, Other Dimensions: An Introduction to Small Scale Painterly Abstraction in America, 1940-1965*, organized by Jeffrey Wechsler at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University in 1989, integrates major and lesser-known artists, such as Gerome Kamrowski, Ralph Rosenborg and Harold Shapinsky, into a concise history. Other articles concerning lesser-known abstract expressionists include Roberta Smith's "Report from Washington: The 50's Revisited, Not Revised," *Art in America*, November, 1980, vol. 65, and Lawrence Weschler's "A Reporter at Large: A Strange Destiny," *The New Yorker*, December 16, 1985.
11. Only James Brooks and Ad Reinhardt went into the military, according to Steven Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 18.
12. Conversation with the author, June 8, 1992.
13. Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1942, p. 208.
14. Polcari, *op. cit.*, see Chapter 2, "Propadeutics, The Intellectual Roots of Abstract Expressionism," p. 31-56. Polcari examines many of the sources dealing with the primitive and the archetypal, to which the painters turned.
15. Helen Harrison, director of the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center in East Hampton, made this observation to the author while reviewing some of Richenburg's early works, June 9, 1992.
16. Telephone conversation with the author, July 9, 1992.
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28. Kandinsky, *op. cit.*, p. 60.
29. Richenburg recalled seeing the "Constellations" in this year in a conversation with the author. The catalog *Arp, 1886-1966*, from the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1987, records that Arp's work was shown at this gallery in 1950.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
32. Richenburg estimates that he painted 64 "Black Paintings" between 1959 and 1966.
33. Dore Ashton, "Works by Richenburg Shown," *The New York Times*, October 29, 1959, L44.
34. Lawrence Campbell, "Robert Richenburg," *Art News*, November 1959, pp. 42-43.
35. Letter from Myers to Richenburg, November 4, 1959, Tibor de Nagy Gallery Archives, New York City.
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38. Irving H. Sandler, "New York Letter," *Art International*, vol. 3, April 5, 1961, p. 39.
39. Larry Rottersman, "Richenburg Works Personal, Vital," *Santa Barbara News Press*, August 4, 1961. n.p.
40. David Curry, *James McNeill Whistler at the Freer Gallery of Art*, New York, W. W. Norton and Co., 1984, p. 121.
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45. Terree Arabenhurst-Randall, *Jung and Abstract Expressionism: The Collective Image Among Individual Voices*, exhibition catalog, Hofstra Museum, Hempstead, N.Y., 1986.
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Chronology: Robert Richenburg

1917

Born 14 July, in Boston, Massachusetts, third of four children to architect Frederick Henry Richenburg and Spray Edna Bartlett Richenburg.

1926

Begins drawing at age nine, copying cartoon strips.

1930

Enters cartoon drawings and copies of paintings and still life in annual city-wide contest for scholarships to classes at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Wins scholarship and draws from casts and tapestries at the museum during afternoons throughout high school.

1933

At the height of the Depression, while still in high school, works for older brother Fred delivering ice, oil and coal to help support family.

1934

After graduation, at age 16, starts his own ice, oil and coal business with the help of his brother, postponing plans to become an artist.

1935

Begins night classes at Boston University, studying history and English while still working full-time.

1936

Attends George Washington University in Washington, D.C., studies art history and decides to be an artist.

1939

Drops out of George Washington University to paint; spends four months camping and studying nature in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and returns to Washington, D.C., to study at the Corcoran School of Art.

1940

Studies at the Art Students' League in New York City with George Grosz and Reginald Marsh.

1941

Leaves the Art Students' League; spends a year at the Metropolitan Museum of Art copying Rembrandt, Daumier, Cezanne, Renoir and El Greco; later, on his own, studies Picasso, Mondrian, Miro, Rouault, Surrealism and Dadaism.

1942

Marries Libby Peltyn, and is drafted two weeks later; serves two years in the army in Europe; after being a member of a camouflage outfit, becomes a combat engineer traveling around England and France training troops how to make and dismantle mines, demolitions and booby traps.

1945

Discharged from the army. Teaches art classes at Schrienerham American University in Schrienerham, England. Returns to United States.

1946

Settles in Provincetown where he and his wife live for a year.

1947

Moves to New York. Under the G. I. Bill, studies with Amedee Ozenfant. Meets and becomes friends with Ibram Lassaw. With Lassaw, visits Willem de Kooning's studio, which leaves a lasting impression upon him. Son, Ronald, is born. Begins to teach night art classes for the College of the City of New York, Extension Division, earning \$10 for each night of teaching.

1948

Leaves Ozenfant to study in the more open atmosphere of Hans Hofmann's school. Hofmann praises his work at weekly critiques. Work of Picasso, Hans Arp, Miro and Hans Hartung influences him. Begins summering in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

1949

Lassaw invites him to join the Artists' Club shortly after its establishment in 1949. He organizes several of the weekly Friday night panel discussions. Included in Loan Exhibition at the Museum of Non-Objective Painting.

1950

Included again in a Loan Exhibition at the Museum of Non-Objective Painting. Included in an exhibit at Provincetown Art Association.

1951

Begins teaching evenings at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. Leo Castelli selects "White Cross" for the Ninth Street Show. He exhibits alongside work by the charter members of the Artists' Club, including Kline, de Kooning and Reinhardt.

1952

Included in exhibits at the Provincetown Art Association and the Hendler Gallery. Participates in session on "The Accidental in Art, II" at the Artists' Club in New York.

1953

Shows at the Stable Gallery Annual; one-person exhibition at Hendler Gallery, Philadelphia.

1954

Teaches at Cooper Union, New York. Exhibits in second Stable Annual.

1955

Exhibits in third Stable Annual.

1957

One-person shows at the Artists' Gallery, New York, and at Hansa Gallery, New York.

1958

Walter Chrysler buys 13 works; one is the featured work in a special preview at the Chrysler Museum in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Work and statement by Richenburg included in "It Is," a new magazine for abstract art.

- 1959
One-person show of "Black Paintings" at Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York. Bernard Myers, director of the gallery, becomes his dealer.
- 1960
Included in "New Talent in the USA 1960," a traveling exhibition circulated by the American Federation of the Arts. One-person show of "Black Paintings" exhibited at Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles. Exhibits in "Four Young Americans" at the Rhode Island School of Design. Second one-person exhibit at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery. Teaches at New York University.
- 1961
One-person show at the Santa Barbara Museum, California. Third show at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery. Exhibits in five major group exhibitions: "The Art of Assemblage," Museum of Modern Art, New York; "Abstract Expressionists and Imagists," Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; "Contemporary Paintings—Best of 1960-61 New York Exhibitions," Yale University Art Gallery; "Annual," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; and "Collector's Choice," Baltimore Museum of Art.
- 1962
One-person show at the Dayton Art Institute, Ohio. Exhibits work in group exhibitions, including "International Selection of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture," Dayton Art Institute; "Twentieth-Century American paintings" (James A. Michener Foundation Collection), Rockhill Nelson Gallery, Kansas City, Missouri; also exhibitions at the Allentown Art Museum, Pennsylvania State University and the Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock.
- 1963
One-person show at Tibor de Nagy Gallery. Selected works shown in "Biennial of Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture," Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, Urbana; "Biennial of American Painting," Corcoran Museum of Art; "Hans Hofmann and his Students," a Museum of Modern Art traveling show; the Annual sponsored by the Whitney Museum of American Art; and "Art Dealers Review of the Season," Parke-Bernet Gallery in New York.
- 1964
Resigns position at Pratt due to issues of academic freedom. Accepts a professorship at Cornell University. One-person shows at the Andrew Dickson White Museum at Cornell and Tibor de Nagy Gallery. Selected work in the "Dedication of the Old Hundred," Larry Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut; and "A Decade of New Talent," an American Federation of Arts traveling show.
- 1965
Exhibits in "The Emerging Decade," Seattle Art Museum.
- 1966
Exhibits in "Hilles Collection of Paintings and Sculpture," Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
- 1967
Moves back to New York to teach at Hunter College where he receives tenure. Exhibits in "Recent Acquisitions in Modern Art," University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley.
- 1968
Exhibits in "Painting as Painting," University Art Museum, University of Texas at Austin; "The Square in Painting," organized by the American Federation of Arts; and the Whitney Museum Annual.
- 1970
Teaches at the Aruba Research Center, City University Program, Netherlands, Antilles. Returns to Ithaca to join the faculty of Ithaca College. Retrospective show at the Picker Gallery, Colgate University and the Ithaca College Museum of Art.
- 1976
One-person show at the Upstairs Gallery, Ithaca, New York. Included in "Abstract Expressionist and Imagists, A Retrospective View," at the University of Texas in Austin.
- 1977
Death of Libby Peltyn.
- 1979
Summers in East Hampton, Long Island.
- 1980
Marries artist Margaret Kerr in Ithaca. Returns to East Hampton for the summer.
- 1981
Second one-person show at the Upstairs Gallery, Ithaca, New York.
- 1982
Exhibits in "The Unexpected," Elaine Benson Gallery, Bridgehampton, New York; and one-person show "A Roving Eye," Graduate School of Business, Cornell University.
- 1983
Retires from Ithaca College; moves to East Hampton for summer. Exhibits selected work at Guild Hall Museum, East Hampton; the Bologna/Landi Gallery, East Hampton; and the Cornell University Laboratory of Ornithology.
- 1984
Selected sculptures included in "Outdoor Sculpture 1984: Fifteen Ithaca Artists," Ithaca; and "Ordinary and Extraordinary Uses: Objects by Artists," Guild Hall Museum, East Hampton.
- 1985
Exhibits a self-portrait in "Photography Exhibition," Vered Gallery, East Hampton.
- 1986
New studio building is finished behind East Hampton house; unpacks oeuvre and remounts oversized "Black Paintings"; Bonnie Grad visits studio and begins planning this retrospective exhibition. Exhibits in "1+1=2, Paintings and Sculpture by 40 Artist-Couples," Guild Hall Museum; and in "Jung and Abstract Expressionism," Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York. One-person show at the Benton Gallery, Southampton, New York.
- 1987
Exhibits at Hood College, Maryland, and the Benton Gallery.
- 1988
Exhibits in "This was Pratt: Former Faculty Centennial Exhibition," Pratt Institute. One-person show at the Benton Gallery.
- 1990
Participates in "Artists Roundtable Discussion of the Fifties" at the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, East Hampton.
- 1991
Exhibits in "Four Decades," Benton Gallery.
- 1992
Judged "Best in Show" at Guild Hall Museum members' show by Barbara Haskell, curator, Whitney Museum of Art, for a small wood, wire, paper, canvas and acrylic sculpture. One-person show "Robert Richtenburg: A Fifty Year Survey," at Guild Hall Museum.

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"The Influence of Jungian Theory on Art," Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY, Nov. 21, 1986. In conjunction with the exhibition "Jung and Abstract Expressionism: The Collected Image Among Individual Voices." Terree Grabenhorst-Randall, moderator; other participants: Mark Hasselriis and Ibram Lassaw.

"Artists Roundtable Discussion of the Fifties," Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, East Hampton, NY, Aug. 30, 1990. Dore Ashton, moderator; other participants: Herman Cherry, Sydney Geist, Ray Hendler, Ernestine Lassaw, Ibram Lassaw, Mercedes Matter and David Slivka.

Video and Audiotapes

"Robert Richenburg: A Studio Visit," Focus on Art, Produced by the Tompkins County Public Library in cooperation with area video archives, Ithaca, NY, 1982: Interviewed by Johnnie Parrish. (videotape)

"Robert Richenburg, Artist," *Art Beat*, vol. 1, #2, taped at LTV studio, East Hampton, NY, 1986: Joe Stefanelli, Host. (videotape)

"Artists Roundtable Discussion of the Fifties," Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, East Hampton, NY, Aug. 30, 1990. Dore Ashton, Moderator; other participants: Herman Cherry, Sydney Geist, Ray Hendler, Ernestine Lassaw, Ibram Lassaw, Mercedes Matter and David Slivka. (videotape)

"Robert Richenburg," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Oral History Collection, 1965: Interviewed by Dorothy Seckler. (audiotape)

"American Abstract Expressionists: Robert Richenburg, Artists of the 9th Street Show," edited by Marika Herskovic, Ph.D. and Brett Blear; produced and directed by Thomas Herskovic, 1992. (videotape)

"An Afternoon with the New York School Artists, November 8, 1992," participating artists: Ann Arnold, Edward Dugmore, Eadle Dugmore, Harlan Jackson, Ibram Lassaw, Conrad Marca-Relli, Ruth Nivola, Lillian Orlowsky, Charlotte Park, Robert Richenburg, Leatrice Rose, David Slivka and Joe Stefanelli; participating art historians: Yvonne Hagan-Stubing, Arthur Jones, Sandra Kraskin and Ann Williams. Edited by Marika Herskovic and Brett Blear. Produced and directed by Thomas Herskovic, 1992. (videotape)

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Bastow, David, "Otto and Numinous Experience," *Religious Studies*, vol. 12, June 1976, pp. 159-176.

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Brunelle, Al, "Rollin Crampton, Modest Master," *Art News*, vol. 68, May 1969, pp. 52-55.

Cavaliere, Barbara, "Theodoros Stamos in Perspective," *Arts Magazine*, Dec. 1977, pp. 104-116.

Cherry, Christopher, "Miracles and Creation," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Winter, 1974, pp. 234-245.

Collins, Bradford R., "Clement Greenburg and the Search for Abstract Expressionism's Successor: A Study in the Manipulation of Avant-Garde Consciousness," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 61, no. 9, May 1987, pp. 36-43.

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Davis, Mary, "The Pictographs of Adolph Gottlieb: A Synthesis of the Subject and the Rational," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 52, no. 3, Nov. 1977, pp. 141-147.

Firestone, Evan, "Herman Melville's 'Moby Dick' and the Abstract Expressionists," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 57, no. 7, March, 1980.

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Wechsler, Lawrence, "A Reporter at Large: A Strange Destiny," *The New Yorker*, December 16, 1985, pp. 47-84.

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Exhibition Checklist

Paintings

1.
Slumber
1951, oil on canvas
60 x 50 inches
2.
Lactescence
1951, oil and sand on canvas
50 x 60 inches
3.
Proclamation
1952, mixed media, oil and
toys attached on canvas
60 x 50 inches
4.
Moonspots
1956, oil and sand on canvas
60 x 50 inches
5.
Yellow Triangle
1959, oil on canvas
76 x 56 inches
6.
Disintegrate
1959, oil on canvas
75 x 54½ inches
7.
Homage to Valery
1960, oil on canvas
90 x 80 inches
8.
Shifting
1960, oil on canvas
77 x 57 inches
9.
Sign of Darkness
1959-1961, oil on canvas
77 x 57¼ inches
10.
Summer's Night
1960, oil on canvas
96 x 132 inches

11.
Night Cascade
1961, oil on canvas
96 x 136 inches
12.
Secret Boxes
1961, oil on canvas
96 x 136 inches
13.
Emperor's Wall
1963, collage and oil on
canvas
96 x 96 inches
14.
Hot Radiance
1963, oil on canvas
90 x 80 inches
15.
Genesis
1964, acrylic on canvas and
collage
96 x 96 inches

Works on Paper

16.
*Fidelity**
1955, gouache on paper
15 x 10 inches
17.
*Key Ingredient**
1955, gouache on paper
15 x 10 inches
18.
*Setting Things Straight**
1955, gouache on paper
15 x 10 inches
19.
*Limited Utility**
1955, gouache on paper
15 x 10 inches
20.
*Great Mischief**
1955, gouache on paper
15 x 10 inches
21.
*A Real Moment**
1955, gouache on paper
15 x 10 inches
22.
*Fern Thoughts**
1955, oil on paper
17 x 13¾ inches
23.
*Blue Joy**
1955, gouache on paper
15 x 10 inches
24.
*Resting**
1955, gouache on paper
15 x 10 inches
25.
*A New Day**
1956, gouache on paper
15 x 10 inches
26.
*Source Man**
1956, gouache on paper
15 x 10 inches
27.
*Fast Move**
1957, gouache on paper
15 x 10 inches

28.
*Measures Unturned**
1957, gouache on paper
15 x 10 inches
29.
Catacombs
1960, collage on illustration
board
22 x 28 inches
30.
Dark Thinking
1960, collage on illustration
board
20 x 28 inches
31.
MOMA Collage
1960, collage on paper
22 x 28 inches
32.
Silent Thoughts
1961, collage on paper
22 x 28 inches
33.
Crowded Room
1961, collage on paper
22 x 28 inches
34.
In the Forest
1962, acrylic and paper on
paper
12½ x 19½ inches
35.
Tight Place
1964, acrylic collage on paper
23 x 17 ¾ inches
36.
Heavy Snow
1966, torn paper on paper
22 x 28 inches
37.
In and Out
1966, acrylic collage on paper
23½ x 18 inches
38.
Squared Off
1966, acrylic collage on paper
23½ x 18 inches
39.
Flipped Corners
1966, acrylic collage on paper
23½ x 18 inches
40.
Fraught Geometry
1967, acrylic collage on paper
23½ x 18 inches
41.
Dark Out Light In
1966, acrylic collage on paper
23½ x 18 inches
42.
Green Spots Rounded Surface
1967, acrylic collage on paper
23½ x 18 inches
43.
Meadow
1966, acrylic on paper
8¾ x 8½ inches
Collection of Robin Radin,
Tokyo, Japan
44.
White Cliffs
1966, acrylic on paper
19½ x 15½ inches
45.
Econoline
1966, acrylic on paper
22¾ x 14¾ inches
46.
North Woods
1966, acrylic on paper
11½ x 8¾ inches
47.
Tic Tac Torn
1966, acrylic on paper
20½ x 20½ inches
48.
Window Poke
1966, acrylic collage on paper
24¼ x 18 inches
Collection of Robin Radin,
Tokyo, Japan
49.
Window Poke II
1966, acrylic collage on paper
24 x 19 inches
50.
Poked Painting
1966, acrylic collage on paper
24¼ x 18 inches
51.
Four Torn
1966, acrylic on paper
18¼ x 24¼ inches
52.
Centrifuge
1966, acrylic on paper
23½ x 17½ inches
53.
Dead Center
1966, acrylic on paper
13¼ x 17¼ inches
54.
August Century
1967, acrylic on paper
23½ x 17½ inches

* Works 16-28, included in the Rose Art Museum exhibit will form a separate exhibition at the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, April 30-July 30, 1994 and will not be included with the exhibit when it is displayed at the University Art Gallery at Stony Brook.

(All works are courtesy of the artist unless otherwise indicated)

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