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CONCEPTS OF FORM AND CONTENT IN PAINTING

A THESIS

Presented in Conjunction with a Painting Exhibition in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Department of Art in the School of Fine Arts  
Southern Illinois University

by

Reuben Aldridge Hale, Jr., B.F.A.  
The School of the Art Institute of Chicago

1961

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SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

The Graduate School

JULY 19 \_\_\_\_\_, 1961

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY

REUBEN ALDRIDGE HALE, JUNIOR

ENTITLED CONCEPTS OF FORM AND CONTENT IN PAINTING

BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Ben P. Watton's  
In charge of Thesis

Bennett H. Shupock  
Head of Department *For Ink*

Recommendation concurred in\*

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Committee

for the

Final Examination\*

\*Required for doctor's degree but not for master's.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis is presented in conjunction with an exhibition of non-objective paintings. The exhibition, held in the Allen Gallery from July 15 to August 4, 1961, was a selection of paintings from those produced during graduate study at Southern Illinois University. It is the purpose of this thesis to illuminate, in some respects, the paintings of the artist.

To gain insight into the totality of the work of any particular artist, it is helpful to look into the influences and concepts behind the paintings. In the case of autonomous painting, the conscious ideas of an artist cannot completely explain the content of his painting. Art relies as much upon the subconscious, the feeling area, as it does the conscious concepts of the world and art. The environmental influences of the artist, his education and training, his ideas at different periods, not to mention the influences of a more intrinsic nature, have all played their significant part in shaping his painting of today.

To expose, in any entirety, all the aspects pertinent to the development of an artist is presumably impossible; consequently, this thesis is concerned with the broad phases which are closer to an objective relationship to painting.

## CHAPTER I

### INFLUENCES OF THE ARTIST

The writer, Reuben Hale, the son of an automobile dealer, was born June 29, 1927, at Belzoni, Mississippi. His family moved when he was six years old to Greenwood, Mississippi, where he attended the public school, graduating from high school in 1945. He then entered the United States Navy and served two years in the South Pacific. Following separation from the service he attempted to enter an art school. The critical school situation following World War II, which restricted out-of-state students, and the fact that there was no art school in the State of Mississippi, prevented the study of art at that time. The writer consequently began a liberal arts program at the University of Mississippi and in 1949 began formal study in art.

The writer does not remember any specific age at which he became interested in art; nor does he remember ever not drawing or being involved in some form of visual activity. His interest in art was evolutionary.

Since there was no access to formal art training during his

youth the writer was self-taught until the age of twenty-one, conforming to the norms of the extremely materialistic area in which he lived. Shut off from an immediate contact with art, the artist easily substituted a pragmatic approach to externals for deeper aesthetic values.

The past experiences of any artist, upon which all of his actions are based, invariably throw light upon the interpretation of his work; however, those leading to intrinsic values are naturally intangible, and must be perceived (in the case of painting) through the visual aspect of his paintings. The candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree has decided in favor of discussing influences related directly to the more formal sense of depicting visual images.

The work of a student is eclectic, as it should be. He absorbs, rejects, and uses ideas that fulfill his needs or his sensitivity at different levels of development. During certain periods of growth, especially that phase which may be called transitional, elements which have influenced him strongly may not at all be apparent in his work. These influences may be absent only to return at a later time, to manifest themselves in an entirely different form.

At twenty-one, the writer entered The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and began his formal study with his early concepts of photographic rendition in mind. It was here, however, that a sense of unrest became manifest in his work. This was due, not so



much to the influence of instructors, but more to the immediate contact with the paintings in the museum.

After leaving The Art Institute, the writer spent some time in Mexico, where he was impressed temporarily with the socio-political themes of Mexican painting. Leaving Mexico he lived for a short time in the West and then returned to Mississippi, where, to earn a livelihood, he embarked upon a career of portrait painting that lasted for seven years.

It was during this period that the greatest changes took place. Expression, subordinated to the realistic description of the figure, became an untenable artistic position. New sensitivities were being formed and at that point portraiture became but a shadow of art. The process of evolution during this period was changing one set of intellectual dogmas for another. Feeling more and more dissatisfied with the dogmatic control of systematized methods of painting, the artist needed and looked for a more spontaneous approach to expressing his visual experiences. It was felt that greater opportunity for expression would lie with the New York painters, but financial necessity prohibited an immediate move. This does not imply that he wished to squander the values of earlier accumulations of his past study merely for being modern, but to work toward the evolvement of these values through a new concept which he feels more natural to himself.

Not until meeting Warren Brandt did the writer feel that an artist could be a full time teacher and still be an active painter.

With the aim of preparing himself to teach, the writer entered Southern Illinois University to obtain a Master of Fine Arts degree. It was felt that this school could offer the qualities found in the New York painters. Studying under Al Newbill, the artist was encouraged to do whatever seemed necessary for him as an individual, to free himself of old intellectual concepts, -- to strive for a more spontaneous approach, eliminating any pre-conceived idea for automatic responses to his feelings. This effort, which sometimes resulted in mere therapy, eventually pointed to a creative rebirth, which reverses the procedure of beginning with an abstracted conscious image painted in a spontaneous manner, to the complete freedom of building an image intuitively. It is in this transitional state that the artist remains at the writing of this thesis.

CHAPTER II  
SIGNIFICANT ASPECTS OF THE WORK OF ART  
AND ITS CREATION

In an effort to discuss the art of painting, the writer has selected what he feels to be of significance to its creation. The following statement represents his views:

" . . . , A work of art is not the outline or the graph of art as an activity; it is art itself. It does not design art; it creates it. Art is made up, not of the artist's intentions, but of works of art. The most voluminous collection of commentaries and memoirs, written by artists whose understanding of the problems of form is fully equaled by their understanding of word, could never replace the meanest work of art. In order to exist at all, a work of art must be tangible. It must renounce thought, must become dimensional, must both measure and qualify space. It is in this very turning outward that its inmost principal resides."<sup>1</sup>

Art, the common denominator between reason and feeling, is a force that attempts to manifest visually basic attitudes and perceptions. Artists carry on a dialogue with the world in terms of

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<sup>1</sup>Focillon, Henri, Life of Forms in Art, New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1948, p. 2 f.

visual language, and through an expression of imagination, they strive for an interrelation of the elements of painting with form and content; this expresses the interrelations of life which the individual artist feels and perceives in terms of the concepts of his time.

To oversimplify, since the time of the Renaissance the Western World has been conditioned by the methods and thinking of a rational science. This method of science paralleled and carried toward completion the material, measurable, logical concepts expressed in the three dimensional perspective of Renaissance painting. We are the recipients of cultures, societies, philosophies, art forms, and even religions which are based on logical structures, geometrically conceived, where each part fits a symmetrical whole.

At the turn of this century, mathematics found ways to use margins of error, probabilities, and intuition as working factors and was concerned with investigation into the base of existence. This resulted in new ideas concerning the world; time was added to space, and in art, movement was added to vision. These new concepts are continually infiltrating all parts of our lives. It is these new concepts that the artists of today are involved, and through this involvement is found his utility.

Man's experiences are based upon nature. Our new sciences, astrophysics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, etc., have shown us the conditioning factors of man's thoughts and feelings. The idea of the artist is not to express a single experience, but

to synthesize in his expression his total experiences. Consequently, each new work involves a fresh and total act of creation. Each work is unique and is a new experience.

Today, nature, the basis for all experience, is composed of many points of view. The fixed image of the Renaissance World has been transformed into a fluid interchangeable thing. This new view of the world or nature has added a new dimension to art, despite the traditional physiological means. The "self" of the artist has become more significant in the creation of his art. A new content has been revealed.

Instead of imitating the appearances of nature, artists work emotionally, instinctively, and not in accordance with a pre-conceived intellectual order. In so doing, the work of art reveals subjective content reflecting a vision of the totality of life. There is an intuitive involvement with the essence of things, a direct identity or transference into objects. Through intuitive identification, matter undergoes metamorphosis. It is no longer a fixed image visually, but an area of contained energy. It is the vibration of color, a kind of force, a movement, and synthesized into a work which is expressive of our existence. This direct relationship, of instantaneous quality, denotes the vitality and intensity of painting and life today.

"The message of the senses elicits an immediate, simultaneous perception. All you have to do is to open your eyes, and you perceive at a glance a complex



whole, a totality. Contemporary man needs such total perceptions, which alone are compatible with the speed that governs his life."<sup>1</sup>

A work of art expresses both a total order and the individuality of the artist, and relies upon invention and subjectivity. It is not the aim of artists merely to demonstrate his skill or illustrate a particular doctrine, but to produce a work of art which is an original entity with no existence outside itself. To have value, the work of art must have meaning for the artist, meaning in the nature of "feeling", not an intellectual idea. It is conceived through spontaneous responses, not as a result of calculation. A technique built upon this primacy is evolutionary. It is always in a state open to change and dependant upon the artist's experiences and ideas.

The initial concern of artists deals with means and content. The means are indissoluble and inherently bound to the content, however, for discussion it is necessary to make a distinction. The means consists of recognizing and preserving the expressive power of the tactile aspects of the painting craft. The canvas remains a two dimensional surface. Color is color, not only a descriptive agent, but psychologically expressive in itself. Space is not merely three dimensional perspective within a scene, but a factor

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<sup>1</sup>Huyghe, Rene, Ideas and Images in World Art, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1959, p. 41.

which is capable of expressive manipulation. Shape, regardless of what it is describing, is psychologically potent in its own right. The same applies to line, value, etc. The elements of the craft of painting are not the mere tools of literal description, but contain a life of their own. Thus the new concepts of today have freed the means, from a technique with hidden expression, to a part of expression.

The means being indissoluble from content does not imply that any one of these factors is content. The content is revealed when they are organized into a unified totality.

The painting achieves unity through the composition. This organization denotes not only a certain relationship of the formal elements, but the injection of the "self". The visual elements that comprise the structure of the painting and the spiritual elements that permeate it must work together as a single entity. A communicable expression of a state of reality is achieved when this totality is a successful integration of nature and "self". Through the images resulting from this fusion the artist transmits emotion to others.

CHAPTER III  
AESTHETIC CREED

It is thought by the writer that the role of artists in society is to formulate in concrete, transmittible form the concepts of contemporary man -- to conjoin in the minds and sensitivities of his fellowman can better fashion himself. Fulfilling this purpose is the artist's contribution to society. Our art will be valid if it communicates the truths of our time.

Artists are no longer interested in the three dimensional rendition of presumably beautiful objects, as in the Renaissance, no matter how significant as symbols they may be, nor is the aim to paint nature through individual temperaments. The writer feels that artists must try to find in the object, in the symbol, and in the material of the paint itself, an expression of an inter-relationship which may liberate the energies felt in himself concerning his environment. It is necessary to subordinate the symbol, and the close observation of nature to the intuition of the spirit, not of an individual soul nor of the collective soul of a people, but a oneness with the total energies of the universe of

which man is a natural part. This is the content of painting today.

Painting is a struggle with the means because of an evocative content; a content which is apart from the ego and aimed toward universals. The results are always revolutionary and inventive. It is not possible to work with the means alone; there can be no separation of the means from the content. Any attempt to link the means of today with the content of the past, or the means of the past with the content of today, would result in a pseudo-modern technique and would be highly unfruitful.

The writer, acknowledging this purpose as that of artists, and pointing out the restrictions he believes to bind modern art, attempts in his painting no more nor less than to express, as honestly as possible, the truth as he sees it.

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS OF PAINTINGS IN EXHIBITION

Painting no. 16, oil, 37" X 29"

Figure 11, page 29

A large, dark, massive shape rises upward and slightly to the left, toward the top of the painting. This area, alizarin in color, vibrates with surface area, and is held in place by the horizontal nature of three strong bands that surround it. The eye is brought down quickly by a blue-gray inverted triangle that grows lighter and more intense to its apex in a white area on the bottom edge of the canvas. This white area sends the eye curving back to the left through a small, bright yellow, spot left of the triangle. The eye is then brought to the center of the left side of the canvas and back into the broken, slightly curving, horizontal band that falls beneath the massive dark shape of the painting. All of this seems to lie in front of a calm shallow plane of light gray, orange, and dark gray, which emphasizes the activity of the surface planes.



633, oil, 44" X 48"

Figure 2, page 20

The painting is dominated by a large blue area covering most of the upper half, and a large dark form in the bottom half which has a feeling of moving in and obliquely upward through the area of blue. Both large areas are composed of pulsating color and texture. Smaller areas at each edge indicate a shallow space. A smaller movement of cadmium red begins mid-way of the left side, rises slightly, and runs off the canvas in the second quadrant. Mid-way of the right side is a small area of brightly colored spots. This focal point sets up the position to begin the large dark movement again.

16:12, oil, 50" X 44"

Figure 7, page 25

The painting contains a movement from the upper left corner in a downward direction toward the lower right. This movement is comprised of two contrasting parts -- one dark and agitated, growing larger to fill the entire lower right quadrant -- and a fast moving, off-white, simpler form interlocked with the dark area, helping to speed the eye in this major direction. The primary movement is contrasted by two stationary, but inwardly moving, white images that seem to fall toward the lower left, red corner. One is floating in the dark third quadrant, and the slightly larger

other one is almost sliding to the bottom of the canvas. The bright red area and a triangle of brightly colored spots just above the lowest white image, start a secondary movement from lower left to upper right. The entire painting is unified by a use of contrast in value and color, agitated contours, and pulsating surfaces into a shallow space.

12:44, oil, 48" X 60"

Figure 8, page 26

This painting, dominated by a compulsive diagonal thrust from lower left to upper right, is made more dramatic by extreme contrast and bright use of color. The strong diagonal thrust is controlled by the white area comprising the entire right side, a small red and blue spot on the right edge, and also by lesser secondary movements going diagonally from right to left. The larger areas appear to be light and flying in space due to the fast movement of the individual areas and a calm horizontal treatment in breaking the canvas plane.

15:33, oil, 66" X 52"

Figure 1, page 19

A large, light blue area descends into the painting from the upper left quadrant. This large area is contrasted by a darker, blue and black, diagonal movement from the bottom to the side of the upper right quadrant. A sweeping gray movement running

horizontally across the bottom of the canvas holds both in tack. Bright warm colors and white are used in smaller areas which play in depth, pushing the larger cool areas to the foreground. Texture, an important part in this painting, produces vibrations which help push the cool areas forward and emphasize their smooth surface and subtle color change.

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Figure 1. 15:33  
Oil, 66" X 52"



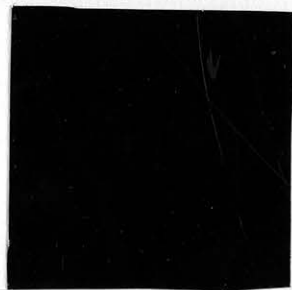


Figure 2. 633  
Oil, 48" x 44"









Figure 3. Number 23  
Oil, 14" x 18"



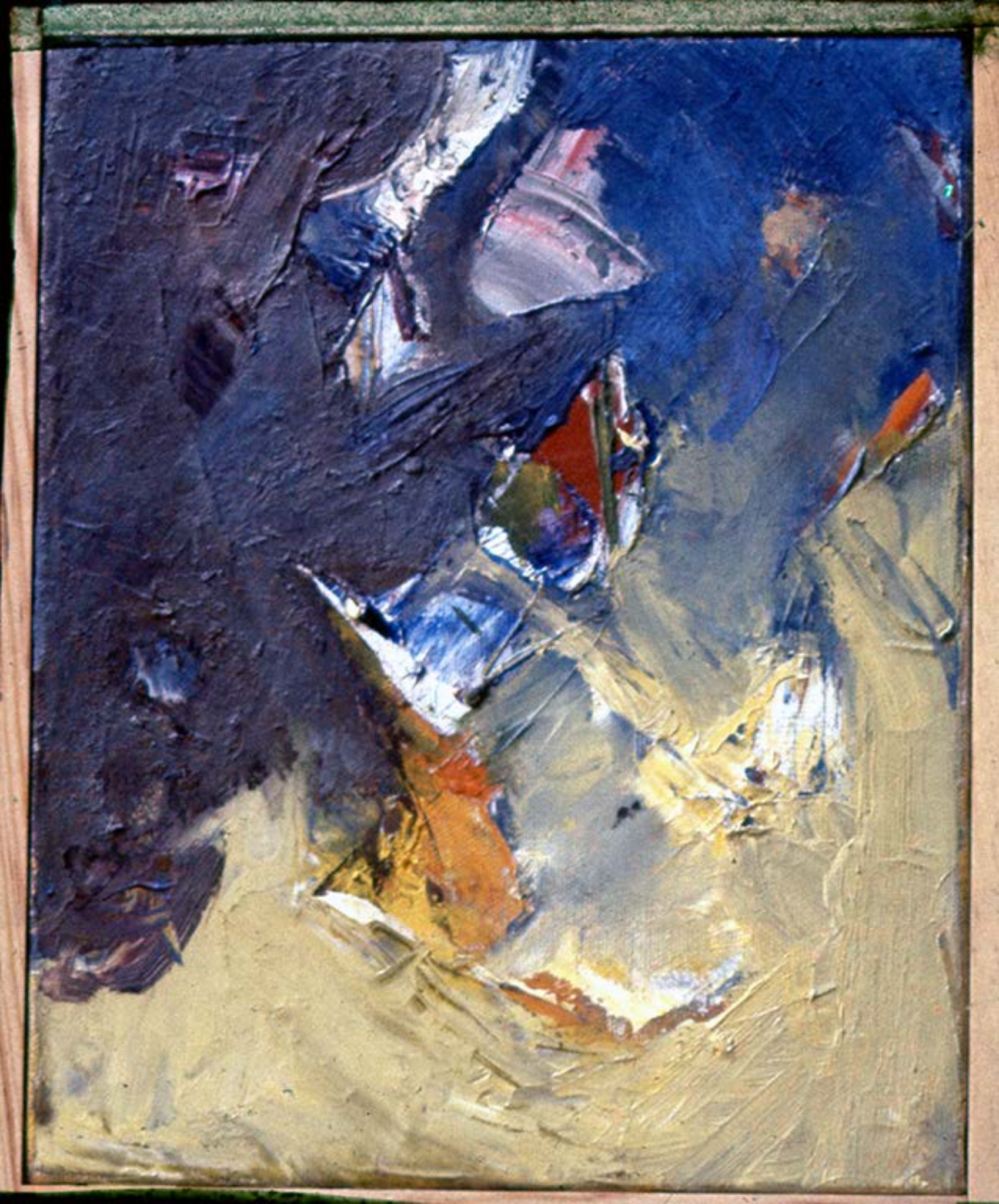






Figure 4. Number 68  
Oil, 28" X 36"









Figure 5. Summer Landscape  
Oil, 28" X 24"







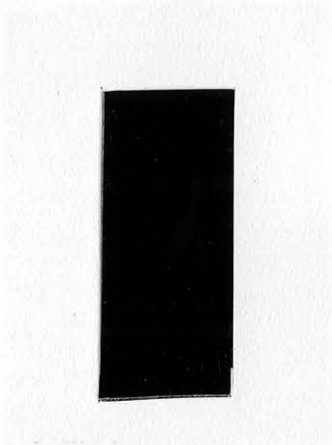


Figure 6. Countdown  
Oil, 11" X 24"







Figure 7. 16: 12  
Oil, 44" x 50"

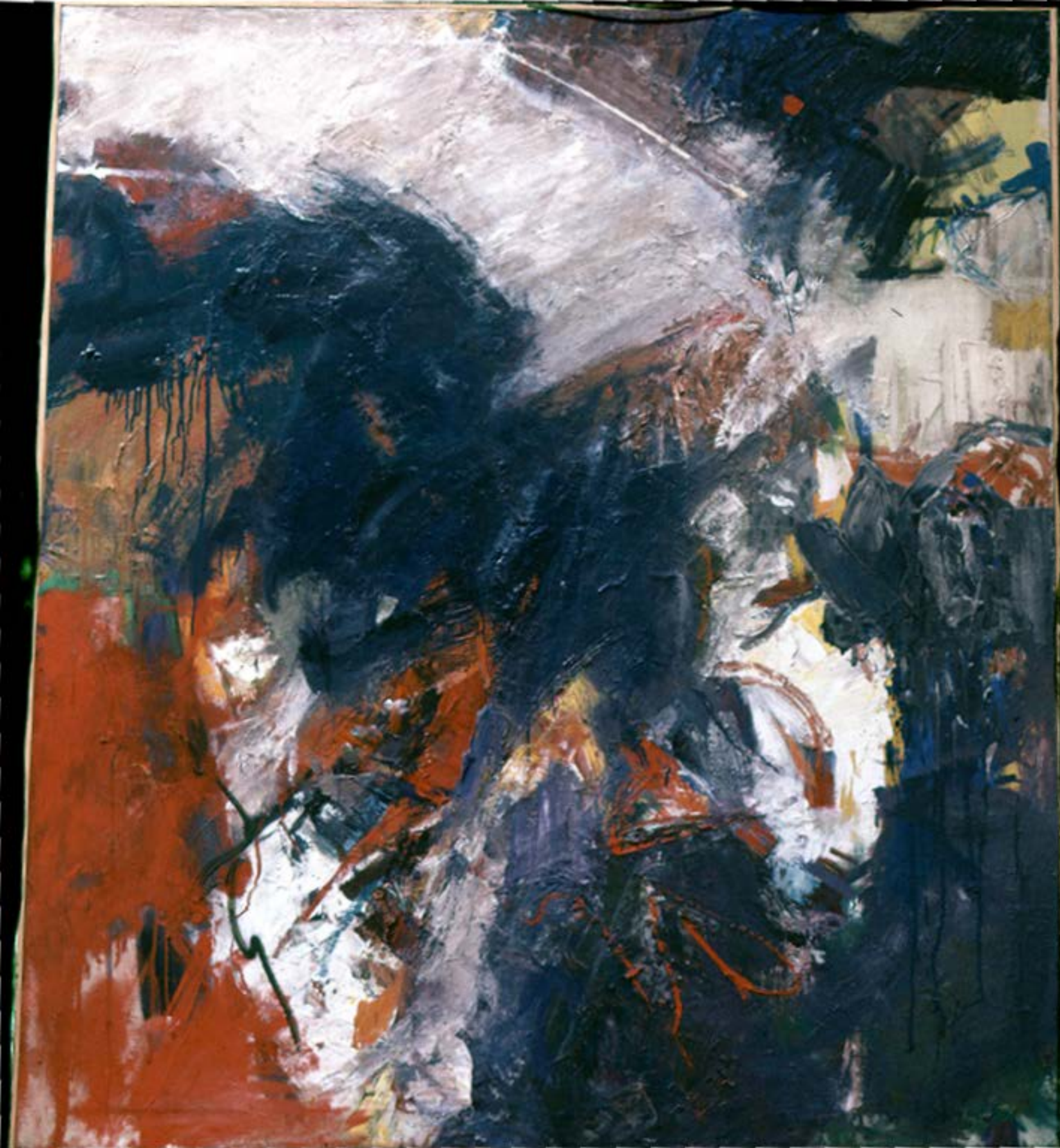






Figure 8. 12:44  
Oil, 48" x 60"









Figure 9. Counterpoint  
Oil, 16" X 24"









Figure 10. Number 20  
Oil, 19" X 13"







Figure 11. Number 16  
Oil, 29" X 37"

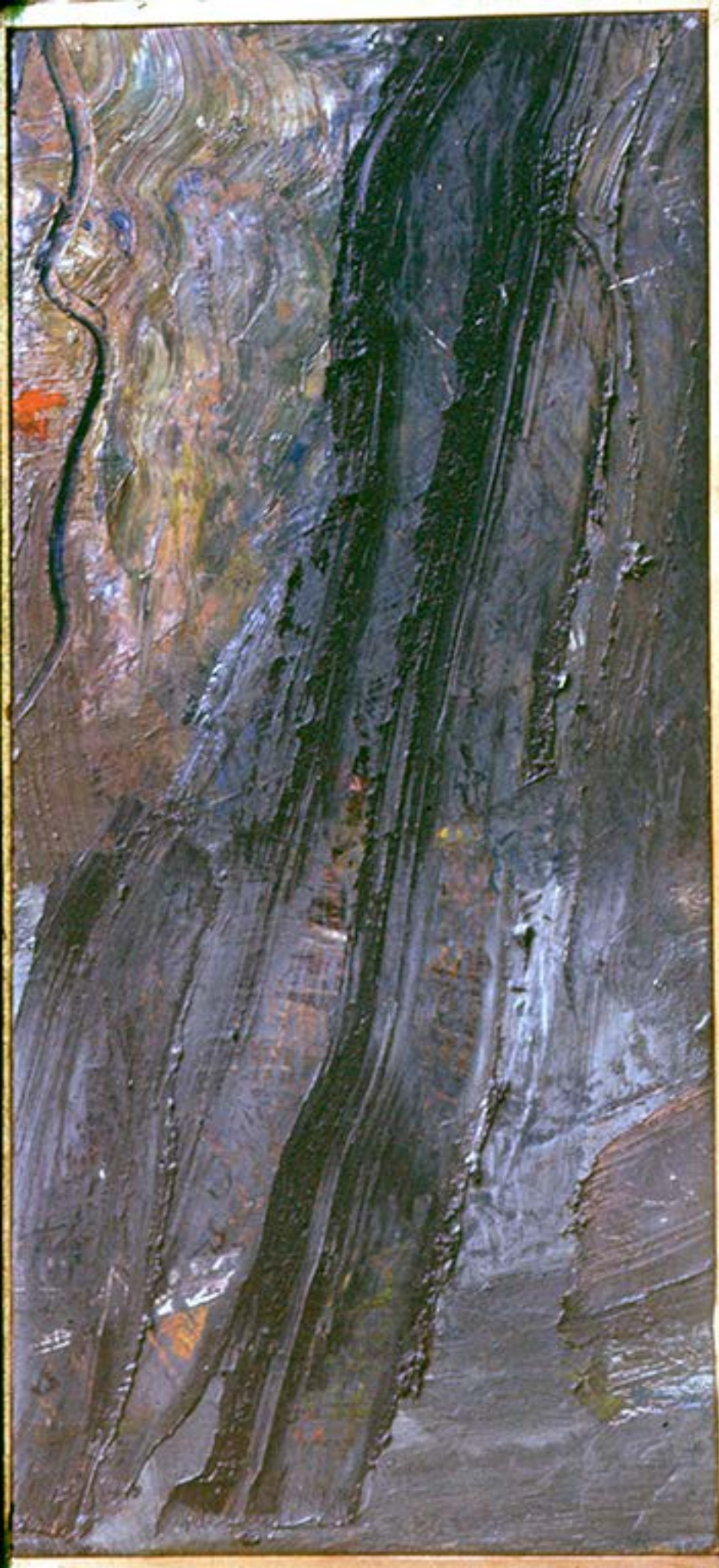








Figure 12. Moonway  
Oil, 2¼" X 1¼"



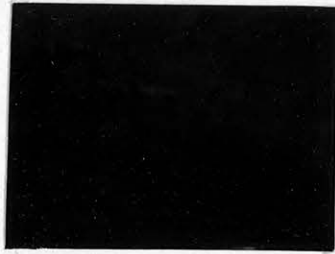


Figure 13. Red Landscape  
Oil, 22" X 30"









Figure 14. Landscape  
Oil, 40" X 30"







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