

THESIS

POOL OF FORMS: SPEED AND PAINTERLY ECONOMY

Submitted by

David Roholt

Art Department

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 2006

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

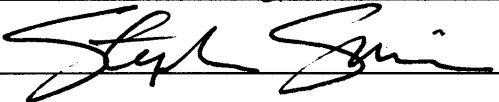
March 29, 2006

WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY DAVID ROHOLT ENTITLED POOL OF FORMS: SPEED AND PAINTERLY ECONOMY BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

Committee on Graduate work



PATRICE SULLIVAN



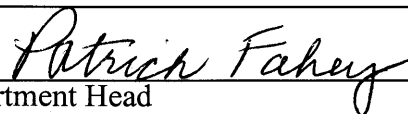
STEPHEN SIMONS



Matthew Cooperman



Adviser



Department Head

## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### POOL OF FORMS: SPEED AND PAINTERLY ECONOMY

This paper is a chronological examination of paintings, drawings, and prints of swimmers completed over a three-year period. Explanation is given on why swimmers have become a concrete fixture in my art making process. The topics of speed and economy will be discussed in the following ways: First, how time is placed on the overall completion of the work, and second, how speed functions as an aesthetic power, in addition to the emotive qualities of a raised tempo.

The work proceeds to focus on painterly economy as defined by a simplification of structure and mark bending on the realm of abstraction. The balancing of clarity, in terms of referential detail, and ambiguity, as related to abstraction, is examined. The role of photography and how it can be an effective tool when employed as a catalyst for decision-making is examined and clarified. Additionally, high and low chroma colors combinations, used in developing a more personal visceral vision is discussed, and in conclusion, historical and contemporary influences, also insights on the positive nature I feel concerning the creative process.

David Roholt  
Art Department  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, CO 80523  
Spring 2006

## POOL OF FORMS: SPEED AND PAINTERLY ECONOMY

During graduate school various observed environments, most particularly swimmers shaped my creative process. I started with sketches and photographs of swimming competitions at Colorado State University, and the University of Utah. I have used swimming imagery for the past three years, and will continue to “go poolside” in search of inspiration. Therefore, the obvious question is also the most common I have encountered: why swimmers?

My earliest depiction of swimmers developed as an attempt to place the figure in an environment free from academia. I wanted to place the human form in a setting that makes visual sense. In the initial stages I recall being drawn to Edgar Degas’ ballerina series. The dancers are in perfect harmony with their intended surroundings, as opposed to conveniently poised figures surrounded by an arbitrary background. Degas’ subjects make sense whether they are a jockey, a laundress, or a bather.

As a painter, I have little desire to paint my own versions of dancers. After visiting many galleries, and museums over the years a slew of preconceived and outdated subject matter is all too familiar. Consequently, I have felt that the best work is an inventive reflection of one’s own lifetime. The easiest answer to this question is personal experience, I have spent years both swimming competitively, and as a lifeguard, so chlorine saturated interiors became a natural choice.

Certainly swimmers have been painted numerous times before, and are without question linked to bathers depicted throughout art history. This is illustrated in the work of artists Rembrandt van Rijn, Paul Cezanne, Thomas Eakins, George Bellows, to Eric

Fiscal, David Hockney, and many others. Like countless artists, the question of swimmers ultimately has become a challenge to personalize a familiar subject.

By looking at my work chronologically, an evolutionary transition and artistic journey of speed and economy can be understood. Examples of this initial struggle for a viable conversation on swimmers are shown in plates 1, 2. My vision and painting abilities were still in their infancy, and these works reflect such developmental stages. Although, in retrospect, one of the most exciting aspects of starting something new is the transformation from start to finish.

Typical pieces of this first year are characterized by a stronger investigative interest in a referential narrative. The arena of swimming, among other sports, brings collaboration between the audience and the athletes to the forefront, as demonstrated in plates 3, 4. Watching and being watched in a non-voyeuristic manner, lead to spectatorism as an imperative component of the image. A subtle humor can be decoded between the athlete being viewed by the spectator, and the spectator likewise being seen by the viewer of the actual artwork. And yet most works completed at this time were tedious in construction, and filled with many unanswered technical questions. Frankly, at this junction I felt that color, mark making, and over all drawing sensibilities were still unresolved.

Fortunately, during year one, I was invested in creating a body of monotypes plates 5, 6. I experimented working with a variety of inks, and found Speedball water-soluble block printing ink as the most flexible. I completed these monotypes by using watercolor brushes on beveled sheets of Plexiglas. By working in this manner I discovered that it was possible to pull multiple prints by reworking the “ghosts”.

The most significant lessons from the monotypes came unexpectedly; as I learned about speed and the power it can have aesthetically, I became aware that this was a significant mental leap in my creative approach. Moreover, I took to heart these words from Robert Henri's *Art Spirit*:

Work with great speed. Have your energies alert, up and active. Finish as quickly as you can. There is no virtue in delaying. Get the greatest possibility of expression in the larger masses first. Then the features in their greatest simplicity in concordance and dependence on the mass. Do it all in one sitting if you can. There is no virtue in delaying.<sup>1</sup>

My long drawn-out paintings were quickly replaced by 30-minute portrait studies. As a result the sketches and the paintings started to emerge as more confident explorations of color and mark making as seen in plates 7,8. I discovered that the ability to make an effective mark, lose it, and then capture it again, is crucial. I feel that before one can truly enjoy the craft, a certain amount of freedom and pure love for the paint needs to be embraced free from illusionism. Something magical starts to happen once an artist is able to bind all the years of study together intuitively flinging juicy blobs of paint. This can easily be done once the tempo is increased. I took a direct lesson from swimmers and often make painting a race against the clock. By establishing a time limit to a painting, one can make it an event rather than a task. Each race with paint becomes a recordable highlight during my time spent behind an easel.

On rare occasions I begin with a conte or charcoal drawing prior to painting. Such preliminary drawing is done largely without any consideration of exhibition, and seldom moves beyond a quick study done for a change of pace. My drawings plates 9,10, completed during year two, as compared to the year one examples, have become more

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Henri, *Art Spirit* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1984), 26.

lively and quick. During the creative process I am convinced that some thought about composition and structure is necessary before beginning. And yet, once the paint flies off the brush there is a need to avoid over-analyzing the work. This delicate balance of spontaneity and solid structure is something in my paintings and process that I hope to obtain.

Georgia O'Keefe said, "Color is one of the great things in the world that makes life worth living."<sup>2</sup> Color has, in turn, become a daily obsession, and key for artistic expressionistic license in my works. Personally I find few things are more satisfying than a rich range of color. From one painting to the next, amounts and combinations of color are never exactly the same. I am convinced that color alone can provide a lifetime pursuit of exploration and variety. My swimmer images have focused on mineral and synthetic colors, with an emphasis placed on high and low chroma contrast. By perusing a more personal vision, I have normally focused on a persistent use of what I believe are less commonly utilized color combinations. I still have an endless number of palettes to discover by following and altering color to lane lines, suits, flags, and dotted swim caps.

In addition, to the fascination with murky greens, and the aqua blues of swimming interiors, the second year was in large a response to the swimmers poses and gestures. The movements of swimmers are elegant and scientific in water, resulting in a poetic motion of repetition, efficiency, and grace. But ironically, once "deck side", the opposite occurs to the sculpted athletes. Either the anxiety of a big race, or the little rituals of stretching and conditioning are manifested in the racers plate 11. Often the competitors' peculiar and awkward physical positions are easily captured through photography.

---

<sup>2</sup> Cowart, Jack, Juan Hamilton, *Georgia O'Keefe: Art and Letters*, (Little Brown & Company, National Gallery of Art, New York Society Graphic Society Books, 1987)

Plates 12,13 demonstrate this fact, and are typical examples of my documentation. In my imagery, photography is a visual catalyst. I utilize snapshots as a tool, or as a jumping off point, rather than the finishing line. Photos are characteristically a simplified facsimile that accentuates the darks and the lights, while narrowing the true nature of color. I find most attempts to build a painting in a photorealistic manner boring and unsophisticated, with the exception of Trompe l'oeil and Vanitas painting traditions. In clarification, I believe that painters like Richard Estes, William Beckman, and Chuck Close are successful at using photo-based references. This is due to the fact that their works are skilled manipulations containing various choices outside of their reference materials. In my case, I try to capitalize on the blurring effects and translate the loss of detail in an intuitive and efficient manner. On occasion smeared figures lost in the lack of focus, act in a manner in fitting when working towards describing the movement of the athletes. Normally I use only select parts of the photographs, while other segments are ignored for the sake of the compositional effects. To me, the important thing is to be in control of the photograph, as opposed to having the captured image dictate the work.

By the third year, paint strokes began to merge with more ambiguous under linings. I have enjoyed creating a vernacular that balances abstracted elements in contrast to more referential forms. I want my paintings to make the viewer actively participate by becoming visually conscious in determining areas of both clarity and ambiguity. As a result of creating areas of optical rest and activity, I started to pay closer attention to the works of William DeKooning, Richard Diebenkorn, and Jenny Saville.

In short, the latest efforts of the "swim series" have been aimed at painterly economy as evident in plates 14, 15. I have been consumed with the amount of detail



used in creating the indication of a swimmer. Once deconstructed further, abstract elements are encountered and added to the visual conversation. For example the indication of suit and swimmer can be built by only four or five single strokes of paint. But once each single stroke is isolated, the marks can be filled an emotion, mood, or movement. I have been fascinated by the change that can occur through mark making. By merely adding as little as two or three key brush strokes total forms can emerge in a direct and uninhibited manner. I have found, starting blocks, pool gutters, and lane lines as perfect vehicles for efficiently quick and spontaneously painted surfaces. At root level painters are dealing with colored dirt, and I enjoy art that is a reminder of the material's raw properties.

Prior to my third year, the works were simply built using oil paints and turpenoid. In searching for a larger variety of mark, not to mention healthier alternatives, I started to experiment with dilutents or non-evaporating additives. I have utilized a water resist method after attending a lecture given by Jenny Saville. By letting a layer dry completely I painted with a water encrusted brush loaded with yellow pigment over the surface see plate #16. Water works as a natural resist giving a broken stroke, even when a lot of pressure is applied to the brush. The water resist effects are linked to a subtle scumblem-like mark. During my limited use of this resist technique, I have found it to be most effectively linked to thinner dry layers.

Additionally, I started using walnut oil and safflower oil. These natural substitutes have helped me to employ paint differently. The paint can be mixed with the diluent giving a sloppy fluidity perfect for the wet drippy world of swimming.

Unexpected separations also occurred in the painted surface see plate 17. By capitalizing

on many of the controlled accidents, I find that they add to the aesthetic mystery and power of each individual work.

Over time the swimming canvases have become linked to the abstracted brush mark. The referential narrative of swimmers has become nearly absent, operating on a much more elemental and visceral level. By the third year I have become more interested in what the paint can do, as opposed to focusing on only the illusionary possibilities. Moreover, I hope that the viewer will spend some time struggling to make out information. In fact, I find it a bonus when the subject of swimmers for example takes time to piece together. This to me is a signal that the work has moved beyond the stereotypical clues of a familiar imagery; my viewers now must actively participate.

By dividing the paintings of my last year into smaller details, the images can operate independently as slices of abstraction see plates 18-21. I enjoy the idea of having small abstract passages collectively make up a larger more readable painting. Chuck Close's portraits demonstrate how smaller amounts of seemingly arbitrarily placed dots of paint can create a larger collective picture once viewed as an entire unit. I have wondered how else could this type of painting be done, and what would the effects be if the construction were further removed from that of a geometric grid understructure? How could a painting operate if it was to be built by DeKooning-like brushwork, of which would form a larger collective image? These are questions that I hope to discover more effectively in the future.

As a result of all these ideas, and by creating smaller sub-sections of simplified forms and painterly spaces, my curiosity has opened to the realm of abstraction, and to more non-referential constructional practices. This venue to me is still largely untapped,

and has emerged unexpectedly by mentally breaking strokes and color to a more emotive and gestured field of painting. To a great extent this aesthetic developed by exploring how few marks are needed to communicate a range of forms that include a jump start, a pool lit from beneath, or the smell of chlorine in the air. By taking inspiration from abstract elements in my work I have begun to explore the economy of subject in a more fundamental and basic level. I feel that the work is further removed from the objective realm, yet it is still tied to the overall organic construction of swimmers see plates 28, 29.

In conclusion, Pierre Bonnard once said, “What I wanted, at all costs, was to escape the monotony of life.”<sup>3</sup> I have never completely understood the depressed undertones shared by artists dressed in black, or notable members of the New York School. Like Bonnard I am a vibrant painter, and seek the simple pleasures supplied in abundance by exploring the materials. Ultimately, I find the process of painting more rewarding, fulfilling, and valuable than the final product. When painting I don’t feel a huge anxiety or a bohemian angst for the work as depicted in regurgitated Hollywood screenplays. I have a passion and joy for the chance to make a visual product from seemingly insignificant blobs of paint, and ordinary rolls of canvas. Often painting is likened to a drug. I think that there is some truth to that, yet thankfully we can experience the joy of painting without life destroying ramifications. To me, there is no better way of life than contemplating the inner workings of artists, and building personal quotations in paint.

---

<sup>3</sup>Elizabeth Hutton Turner, *Pierre Bonnard: Early and Late* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2003) 208.



Plate 1, *Pool Side*,  
oil on canvas, 16" x 20", 2003.



Plate 2, *By the Blocks*,  
conte on paper, 8" x 16", 2003.



Plate 3, *Spectators #1*,  
oil on wood, 9" x 21", 2003.



Plate 4, *Spectators #2*,  
oil on canvas, 18" x 24" 2003.



Plate 5, *On the Blocks*,  
monotype, 11" x 14", 2004.



Plate 6, *Deck Side*,  
monotype, 24" x 30", 2004.

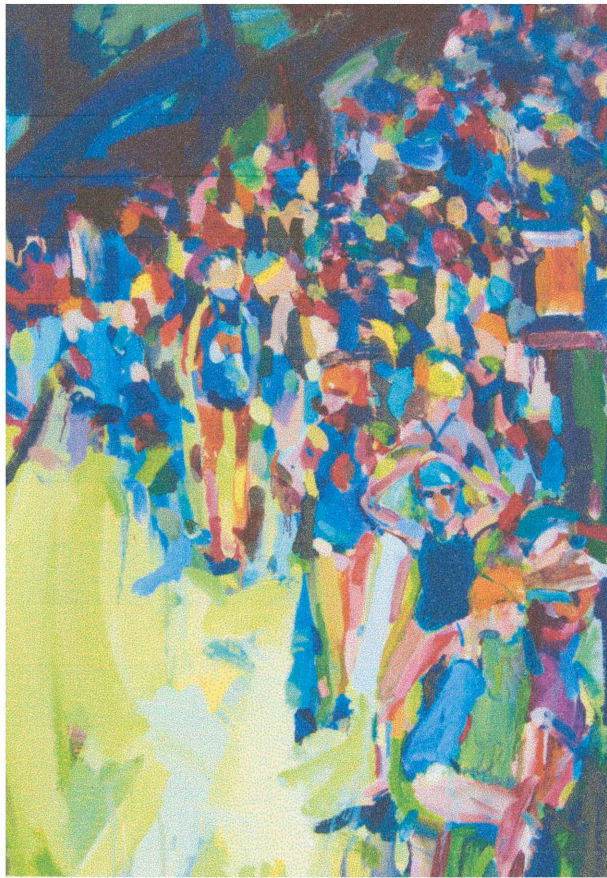


Plate 7, *Swimming Interior #1*,  
oil on canvas 24" x 36", 2005.

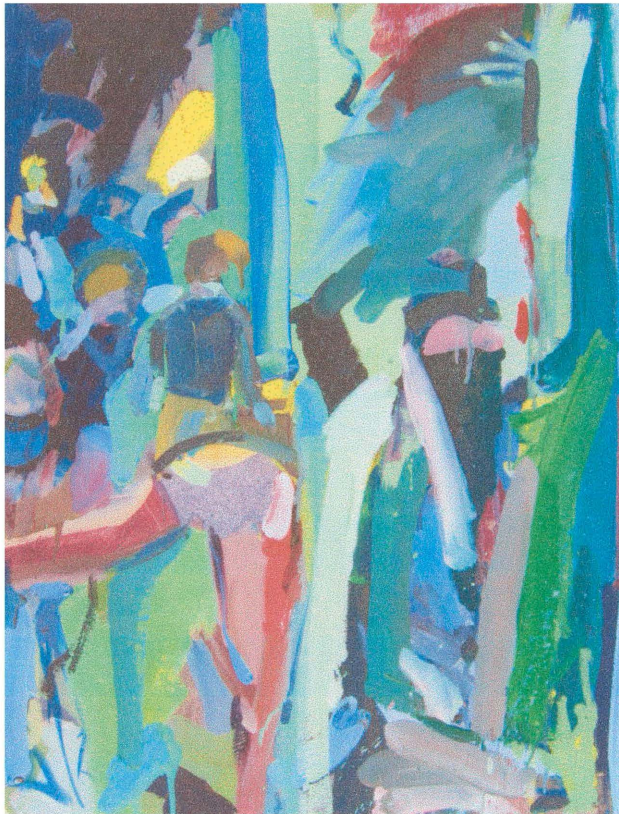


Plate 8, *Swimming Interior #2*,  
oil on canvas, 20" x 30", 2005.

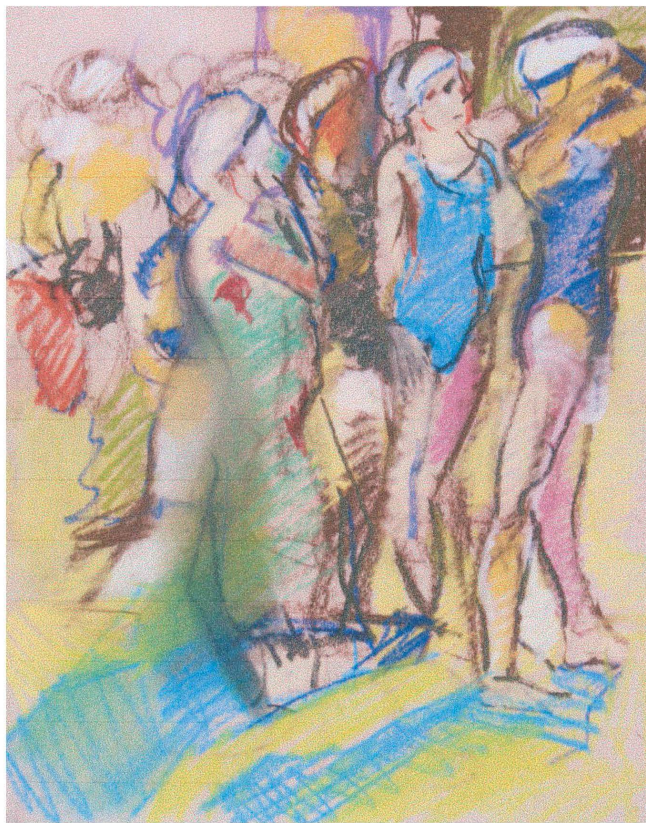


Plate 9, *Pool Side #2*,  
pastel on paper, 8'' x 10'', 2005.

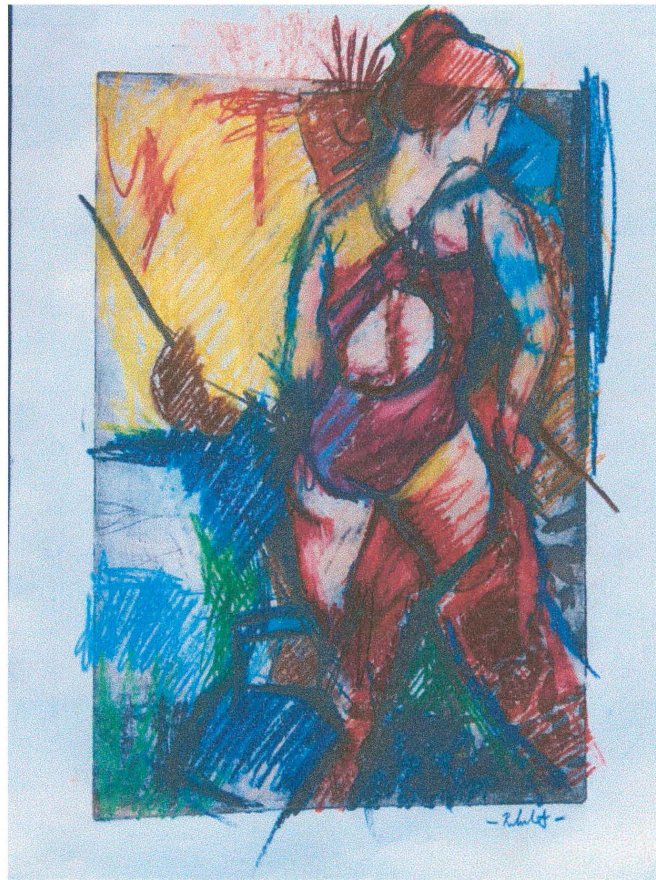


Plate 10, *Warm-up*,  
dry point and pastel on paper, 18'' x 24'', 2005.



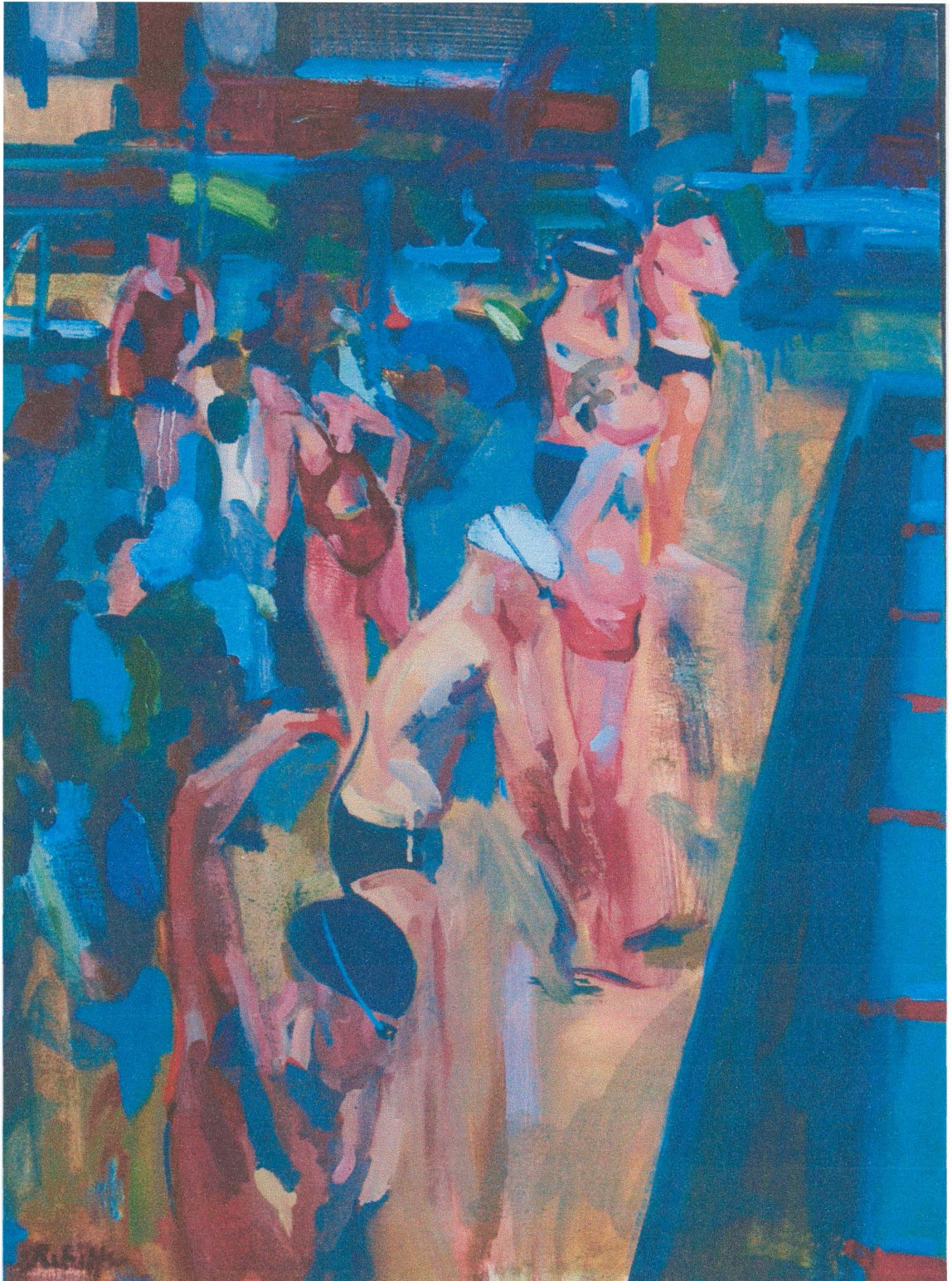


Plate 11, Deck Side #3,  
oil on canvas, 24" x 38", 2005.



Plate 12, *Untitled*, SLR 35mm photograph, 2003.



Plate 13, *Untitled*, SLR 35mm photograph, 2003.



Plate 14, *Pool of Forms #1*,  
oil on canvas, 3' x 5', 2006.

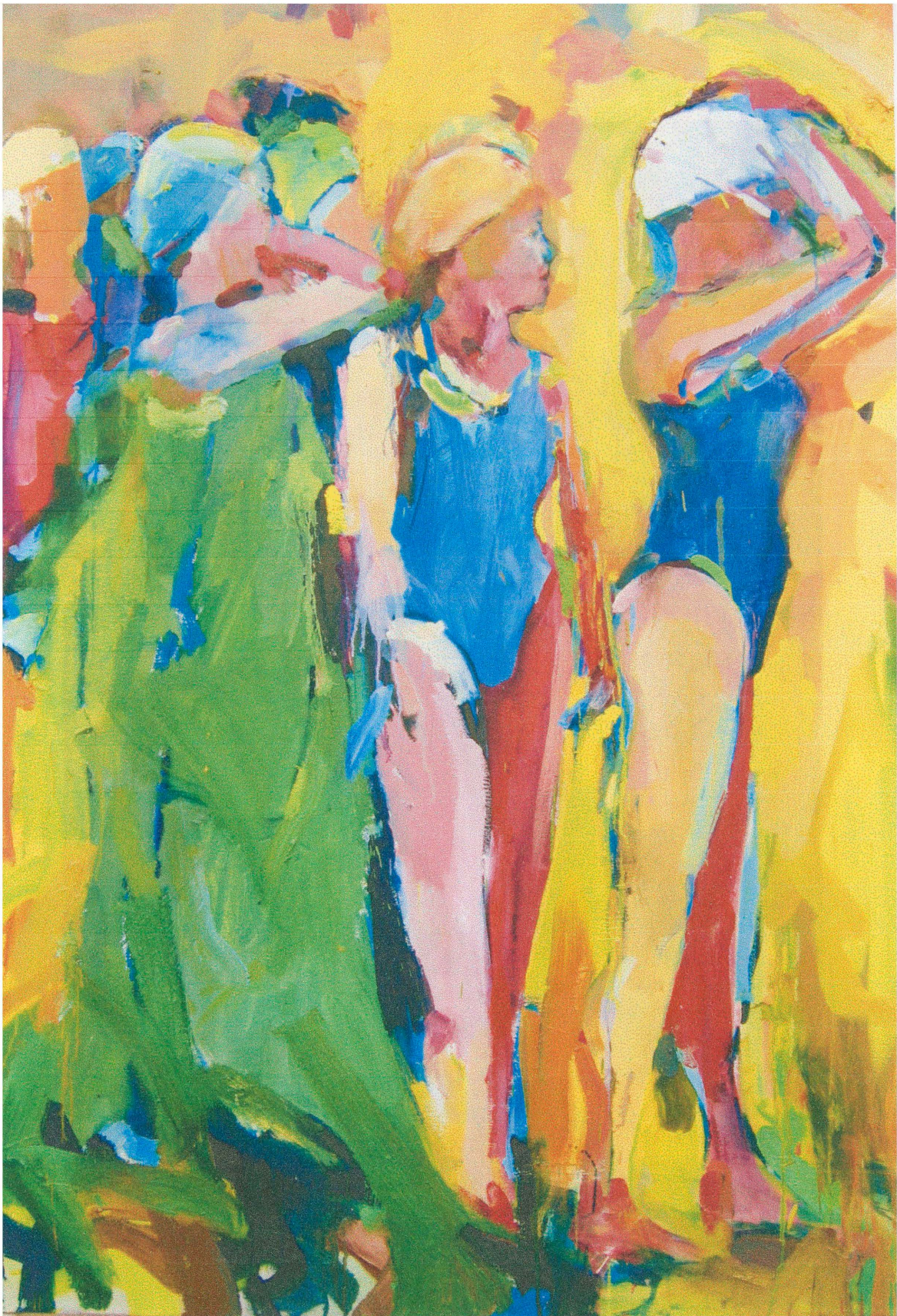


Plate 15, *Pool of Forms #2*,  
oil on canvas, 3'x5', 2006.



Plate 16, detail from *Pool of Forms #1*,  
oil on canvas, 3' x 5', 2006.



Plate 17, detail from *Deck Side*,  
oil on canvas, 24" x 36", 2006.

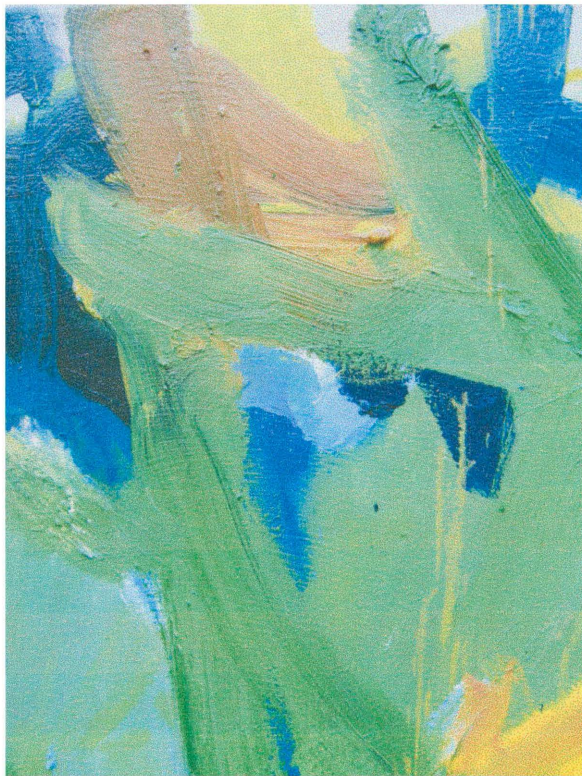


Plate 18, detail from *Pool of Forms #2*,  
oil on canvas, 3' x 5' 2006.

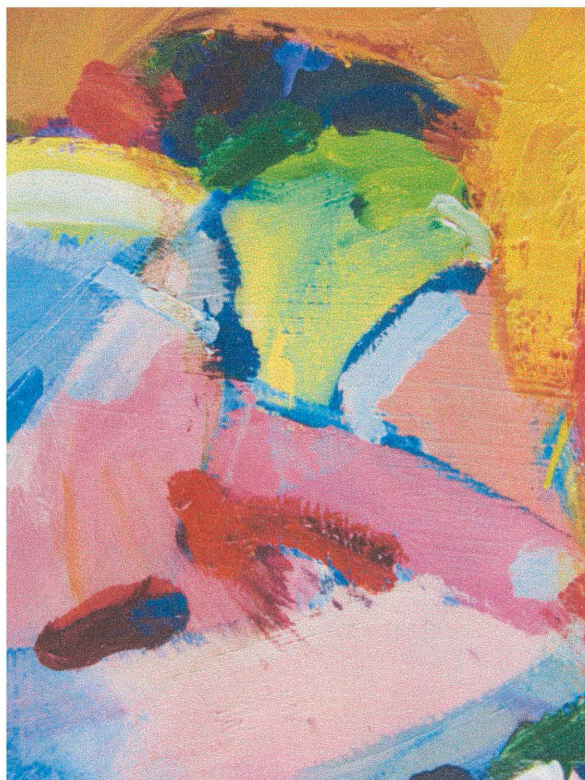


Plate 19, detail from *Pool of Forms #2*,  
oil on canvas, 3' x 5' 2006.

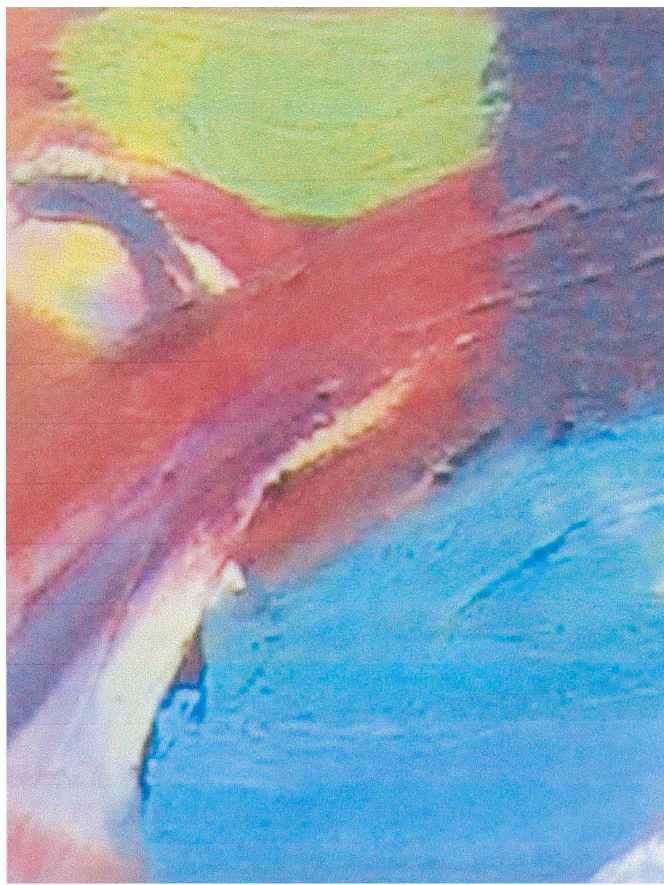


Plate 20, detail from *Pool of Forms #1*,  
oil on canvas, 3' x 5' 2006.

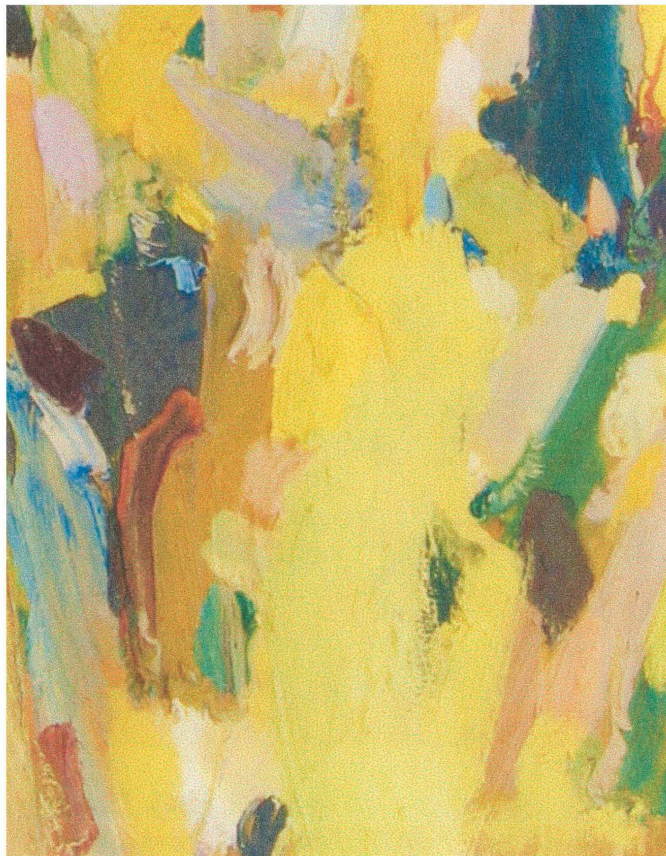


Plate 21, detail from *Deck Side # 4*,  
oil on canvas, 24"x 36", 2006.





Plate 22, *Deck Side #5*,  
oil on canvas, 12'' x 16'', 2006.

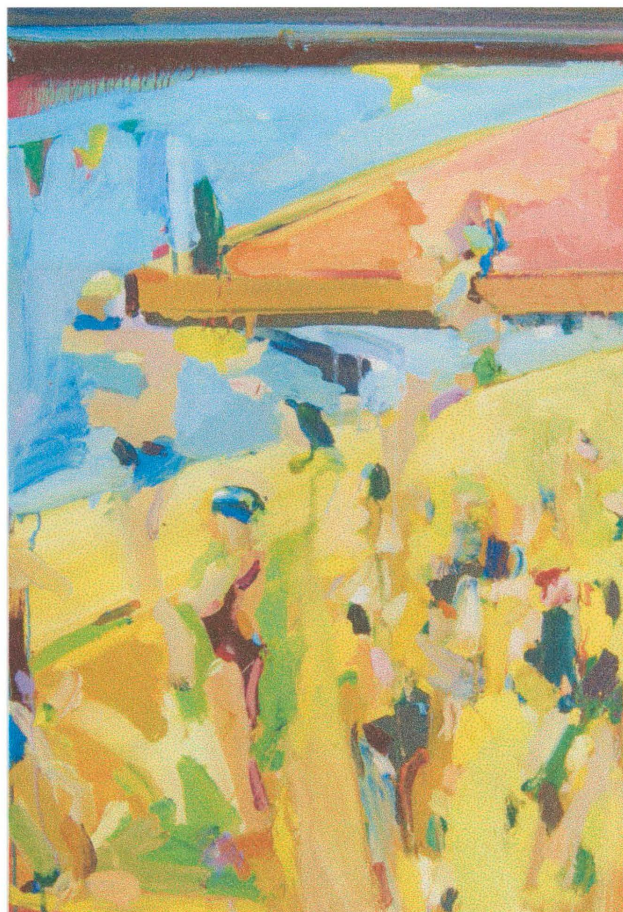


Plate 23, *Deck Side #4*,  
oil on canvas, 24'' x 36'', 2006.



Plate 24 *Deck Side #7*,  
oil on canvas 12" x 12", 2006.



Plate 25, *Deck Side #9*,  
oil on canvas 6" x 6" 2006



Plate 28, Enduce #3,  
encaustic on wood, 12" x 17", 2006.



Plate 29, Enduce #5,  
oil on canvas 24" x 30", 2006.