

THESIS

METAPHORS OF THE LANDSCAPE:

LAYERING THE POETIC

Submitted by

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY HELENE ENGLANDER RYAN ENTITLED METAPHORS OF THE LANDSCAPE: LAYERING THE POETIC BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

METAPHORS OF THE LANDSCAPE: LAYERING THE POETIC

The natural landscape provides a stage for dreams and reflection, for connection and renewal. It awakens the senses and quiets the mind. My paintings embody my imaginative contemplations similar to my experience in nature. Just as time and weather forms the land, my paintings are formed by many painting sessions, layering my poetic and visual responses. By working additively and subtractively, I intend to reveal the history that is embodied in the work.

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My work today is the culmination of seven years of technical, intellectual, spiritual, and visual development. The decision and commitment to become a fine artist began eight years ago after the birth of my second daughter. Prior to this time, I spent ten years in various facets of commercial art. I was paid to adjust my vision and work to accommodate a changing audience, my client's audience. Throughout this time, while developing professional skills as a commercial artist, I took drawing classes once per week. These classes became progressively more important to me and mark the beginning of my commitment to the fine arts.

My daughter Erika was born in 1989. She was born with a congenital heart defect, and went into congestive heart failure when she was four days old. Her health was maintained by powerful medication and heart surgery was imminent. Erika recovered exceptionally well from surgery with a repaired heart and a surgical scar that reminds us of that critical year in our lives. When confronted with a life crisis, one often emerges with the tenacity to assess the value of one's life, eager to seize the opportunity to make changes that will enhance personal meaning. I emerged from my daughter's life crisis knowing I could no longer make art to accommodate clients' needs. Freelance curator and author Linda Weintraub discusses contemporary art issues in a recent article in the *New York Times*: "When you think about art, you have to think about life. If art doesn't sensitize us to something in the world, clarify our perceptions, make us aware of the decisions we have made, it's entertainment."¹ I realized that being an artist meant much more than making pictures, that the source of my work must come from self awareness, and from a conscious engagement and interaction with the world and the people with whom I come into contact. I was

¹ Linda Weintraub, "Is It Art? Is It Good? And Who Says So?" *The New York Times : Arts and Leisure* (Oct. 12, 1997): p. 36.

ready to take on the challenge of developing and exploring my own vision. This time marks my transition from the commercial to the fine arts.

Many artists will tell the serious art student that women must choose, between having a family and pursuing the all consuming path of making art. I am sharing this part of my story to affirm that I became an artist, not in spite of my domestic reality, and not at the neglect of my family responsibilities, but as the fruit of my role as a mother.

I entered an interdisciplinary Masters Degree program at Dartmouth College in 1990, focusing on painting and drawing. I immediately departed from rendering the appearances of things and embarked on a creative journey that became and remains a search for meaning, and a way to process the multitude of thoughts, feelings and experiences I am left with at the end of each day. I began to explore how subject matter, i.e.: a pet, a shell, a flower could become a vehicle or metaphor for personal experience.

As a beginning painter, I read ravenously and discovered how artists of the past often asked the same questions as artists today. Ben Shahn, in his classic book The Shape of Content, summarized these questions: Why do I paint? How do I paint? What do I paint? While the answers may differ depending on historical and cultural climate, the realization that I belong to a community of people that transcends time remains profoundly significant. Each pivotal painting seems inseparable from important artists and teachers, past or present, who have accompanied me on my journey.

While drawing was direct, immediate, and physical, I was taken by the difficulty and complexity of the painting endeavor. Painting required more formal technique and an aesthetic distance that seemed an obstacle at first. From Cezanne, I learned about painting from perception, about the interpenetration of figure and ground. I spent many hours exploring perception and developing

technical painting vocabulary, working additively with the brush and palette knife, subtractively by scraping and wiping, developing my color sensibility by mixing colors and looking at the work of many painters, past and present. I became more specifically interested in not just the objects, but the environment in which they exist.

I studied artists such as Cezanne and Matisse, discovering abstract issues through observing the landscape and still life arrangements. I found the dialogue struck between myself and the painting more interesting than the observed subject matter. I became progressively more interested in spatial ambiguity, where a form appears both flat on the picture plane and also deeper within the illusionary image. Creating spatial tension remains a major concern in my work.

When I arrived at Colorado State University as an MFA student, I chose to plunge into abstraction. I felt I rode the fence of representation and abstraction long enough. I looked very closely at abstract painters such as Cy Twombly, Philip Guston, Joan Mitchell, and Joan Snyder. During my first semester, I reconnected with nature, this time as an abstract painter. Rather than seeing the painting's edge as a window into an illusionary world, myself removed from the place I was creating, I imagined myself to be traveling unhindered by a schematic itinerary. I simply explored the painted world as I created it. My language was the dialogue between the formal concerns of color, light, space, shape, and edge, and my impulsive response to the image as it unfolded. I was specifically aware of how a particular color or mark could effect the whole image.

During my second semester, I continued to find the work of Joan Snyder inspiring for her passion for oil paint, her physical engagement with the painting surface, and for her sensitivity to subject matter that radiates from and beyond her personal history. My paintings became larger as I explored the interaction

between vertical and horizontal forces, and between fractured and unified passages. I became interested in multiple panel paintings and created a 4' x 12' triptych. I was especially intrigued by the poetic space that related each panel. The two edges connecting the three panels were synaptic, implying transformation.

At this time, I needed to test my position once more on the continuum of representation and abstraction. My work came to feel disconnected from real life experience and painting sessions were difficult. I studied the work of Howard Hodgkin who always begins a painting rooted in a particular memory, yet manages to create images that are poetically mysterious and capable of evoking many associations. I chose to explore how I too could draw inspiration from specific memories. My first painting at this time began as an emotional response to the cool colors and turbulence of being in the Atlantic Ocean with a pending storm darkening over the horizon. Another painting was inspired by the perceptual shifting of color and space at the woods edge at Veda Wu in Wyoming. I was deeply moved by an early autumn snowfall my second year at CSU. The snow bearing down on tree branches still covered with leaves, branches torn, many trees too damaged to be repaired left me with an impression equivalent in weight. This experience was the point of departure for another painting at this time. Having a specific memory as the subject of my painting proved to be very helpful as I explored the difficult challenge of knowing when to stop working on a piece. I identified with how Howard Hodgkin resolves his paintings. For Hodgkin, a painting is finished when the subject returns.

With this body of work, I succeeded in bringing personal meaning back into my studio by beginning with specific memories. My work was becoming gradually more referential to realistic visions of the land, and I questioned my motivations. I realized I was being seduced by the lure of making my work more

accessible to a larger audience by testing the edge of illusionism. For me, working abstractly from my experiences with nature offered many challenges. My instincts again directed me towards further abstraction.

The paintings began moving in two alternate directions. In some, I created very ambiguous atmospheric fields of color, relating indirectly to an earlier interest in spatial ambiguity. These works were characterized by subtle changes in color temperature, color intensity, tone and gradual shifts in value.

The second direction began as a materials exploration. I added different substances to the oil paint such as wax medium, dry unfired clay powder, sawdust, and sand. I also reduced the size of my paintings to a more intimate scale, and explored how line quality could create space, and add edge and clarity to my work.

My materials investigations culminated in a body of small oil paintings on etched zinc plates. I perused what the printmakers call the "old bones" pile, a pile of disposable etched plates. I searched the etched image until I found an abstract passage that appealed to my sensibility, and cut them into small single or diptych pieces. I lined the cropped and prepared plates against the wall along the perimeter of my painting area, watching them peripherally for days or weeks. When the etched markings on these plates inspired me, I nailed them onto my studio wall at eye level to begin painting on them. These paintings were allegorical landscapes. They were not referential to specific memories. Shapes or forms emerged as enigmatic identities, evoking an ambiguous presence in the natural environments I created. This materials exploration renewed my passion for oil paint, for those inherent qualities that distinguish this particular medium from all others. I became aware that the painting's physical presence was as real as the thought and image described.

Prior to my arrival at CSU, drawing always played an important role in my work, for its directness of expression, the purity of mark and gesture, and for my tendency to be less preoccupied with outcome while I work. My interest in painting on etched plates led me naturally into printmaking. The physical activity and the unexpected surprises born from translating marks on a zinc plate into a black and white image reignited the spark of creativity, restoring the creative freedom I experienced when I drew. I allowed this more spontaneous and physical print making approach into my painting process as I explored the relationship of line quality to the more ambiguous spatial atmospheres of color fields and shapes.

I have always been interested in the natural landscape, and with how nature serves as a retreat from the pressures of everyday life. The landscape provides an ambiance for dreams and reflection, for connection and renewal. I identify with painter Colleen Randall who says of her abstract paintings: "I do not represent nature but seek to capture the weather of the soul, it's spirit."²

My creative process is very intuitive. It involves formal concerns of space, form, color, and light, and the intuitive decisions that guide the formation of an image. I am often surprised at the evolution of a given piece. Again, I quote Colleen Randall: "The paintings begin with what is known, a place, a time, a sensation, and then enact a departure to explore the unknown."³ The physical activity of painting and the contemplative act of reflecting on what emerges synthesize in a visual image that raises as many questions as it does answers. I hope to learn something new each time I go into my studio.

I am currently utilizing various insights gleaned from my explorations as a graduate student. I continue to mix substances with my oil paint such as

² Colleen Randall, [Video of Slide Lecture, Dartmouth College](#), (1996)

³ Colleen Randall, [Video of Slide Lecture, Dartmouth College](#), (1996)

unfired clay powder and sawdust as they help to create subtle modulations of texture. I find my response to the painting as I work is more intuitive with a variety of materials and painting tools. I move my abstract paintings in progress from the wall to the floor, in order to consider many ways of perceiving its possible development. I am once again intrigued with multiple panel paintings to further investigate how the whole can be greater than the sum of the parts, and to question the poetic juncture of edges. I enjoy using the gesture of my body when working on a larger surface, yet I am also fascinated with how a smaller painting invites a more private and intimate relationship between audience and viewer. I embrace the freedom to utilize everything I know as a painter.

I am inspired by painters such as Per Kirkeby, for his fluid brushwork, his unusual color palette, and for his ability to keep his imagined landscapes rough and fresh. I identify with his creative process. ARTnews correspondent Paul Levine describes how Kirkeby builds his paintings. "Kirkeby's work reveals the signs of struggle that comprise the painting process...We see how Kirkeby first quickly fills in the canvas and then painstakingly refashions it. The painting is built up in layers in a process resembling geological sedimentation."⁴ In a similar way, I too begin with many colors, shapes and marks, and then begin the process of editing using paint, clay powder, sawdust, various scraping tools, oil bars and graphite as I build a visual history. Like Kirkeby, my surfaces gradually become textured, reminiscent of geological development. Rather than masking the layers of paint applied over time, I am able to expose more of the painting's history and growth, revealing the passage of time. Kirkeby says his method is comparable to planting. In his own words, "This metaphor is very important to me, because when I paint I like to think of myself as a gardener. My canvas is the plot of land and my colors, that is, the matter of the paint itself, are the soil, the flower beds,

⁴ Levine, P. "Thinking With His Hands," *ARTnews* (Oct. 1997): p. 140.

with their different components and varying textures."⁵ In the past, I found this approach to painting painful, as I laboriously considered and reconsidered my aesthetic decisions. Kirkeby provided me with an analogy that affirms this more gradual way of building a painting. I have grown more patient.

I am also moved by painter Howard Hodgkin for his poetic subject matter, and his bewildering and visually ambiguous references to specific memories and places. While my own work no longer begins with a specific memory, I relate very much to the mystery Hodgkin creates by visually understating his personal associations. I hope my work achieves enough mystery to inspire many readings as well. I am once again drawn to Joan Snyder for her intuitive approach, who discovers her subject when a painting is half painted, and whose sheer love of paint and painting is a source of inspiration. I admire Jake Berthot for his ability to fuse philosophical inquiry with a passion for paint in a way so apparently natural, one forgets the academic schism that divides these two disciplines. And finally, Anselm Kiefer whose profound ability to integrate image with texture leaves me simply awestruck. I am deeply grateful to all of these painters for continuing to infuse the enterprise of painting with life at a time when art theorists are critically questioning painting's viability.

My thesis work is the culmination of all of my struggles to date as I broaden my formal painting vocabulary, and identify what is ultimately honest and crucial. My work is not didactic. I am not teaching a lesson or espousing social truths. The language of my work is visual and relies on a visual connection. Jake Berthot addresses the limitations of language paradoxically by incorporating written passages from the cultural critic, writer and teacher, Adorno (1903-1969) into a set of six drawings he titled *For Adorno* (1989). *For*

⁵ Paul Levine, "Thinking With His Hands," *ARTnews* (Oct. 1997): p. 140.

Adorno, #2 reads: "Philosophy says what art cannot say. Although it is art alone which is able to say it: By not saying it."⁶ In a catalog essay called *Human encounters*, John Yau comments on the pertinence of Berthot's *Adorno* drawings. "Both Adorno and Berthot are concerned with "spirit" or what is unnamable...[Berthot] is concerned with what he cannot name rather than with all the names he can use."⁷ As my art matures, I find words insufficient for communicating the content of my work. I intend for my art to communicate on a visual and visceral level.

During this last semester as an MFA student, as I prepare for the transition into an artistic life that will sustain me, I sit and contemplate what is most enduring in my work. I refer again to Ben Shahn who asks all painters the quintessential questions: How? What? Why? Perhaps the most honest articulation of why I paint, and what I hope my paintings will inspire is this: in a person's life, one has moments of clarity, of spiritual clarity that deeply informs how one lives, and how one will continue to live. Perhaps I paint to break out, to acknowledge and entice those moments of spiritual clarity for myself and for those who are compelled to pause and contemplate my work.

⁶ David McKee Gallery. Jake Berthot, Recent work 1988-89. exh. cat. (New York, NY, 1989)

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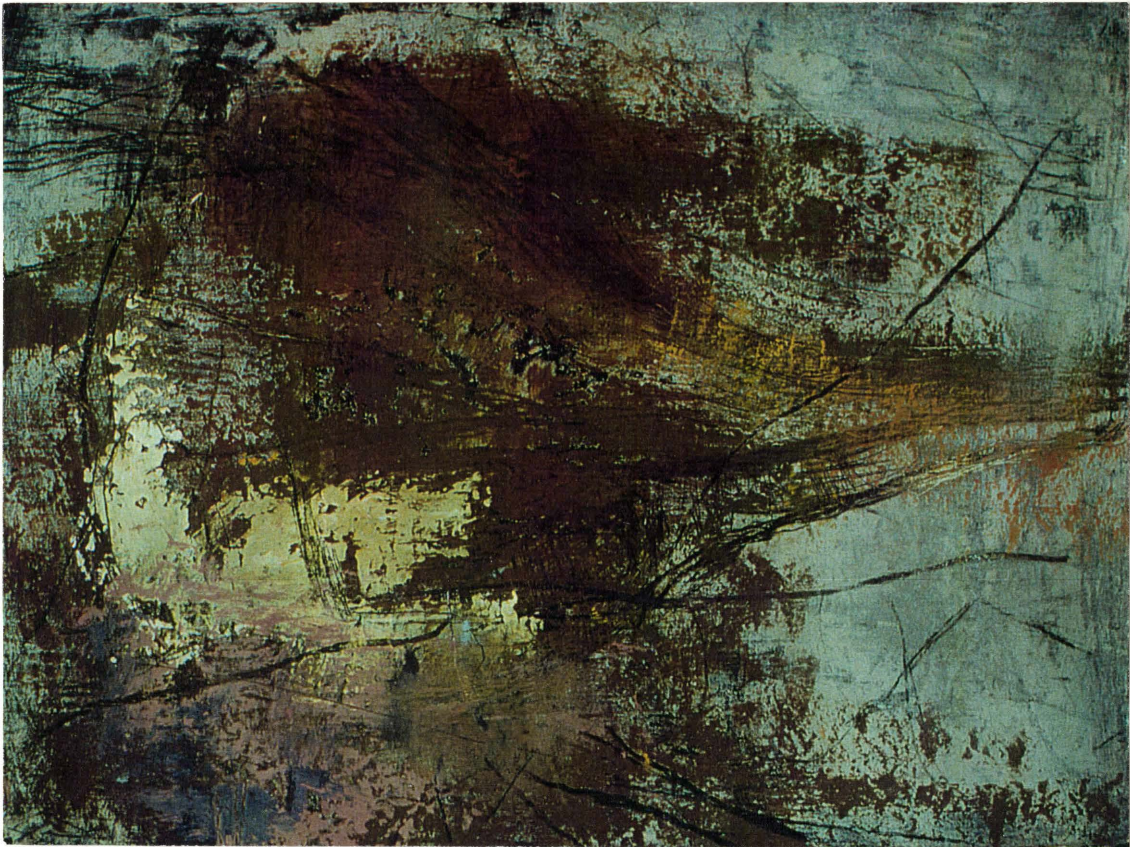


Plate 1. Untitled. 1997. Oil, clay powder, pencil on wood. 12" x 16".



Plate 2. Untitled. 1997. Oil, clay powder, on wood. 12" x 16".



Plate 3. Untitled. 1997. Oil, clay powder, pencil on wood. 12" x 16 1/4".



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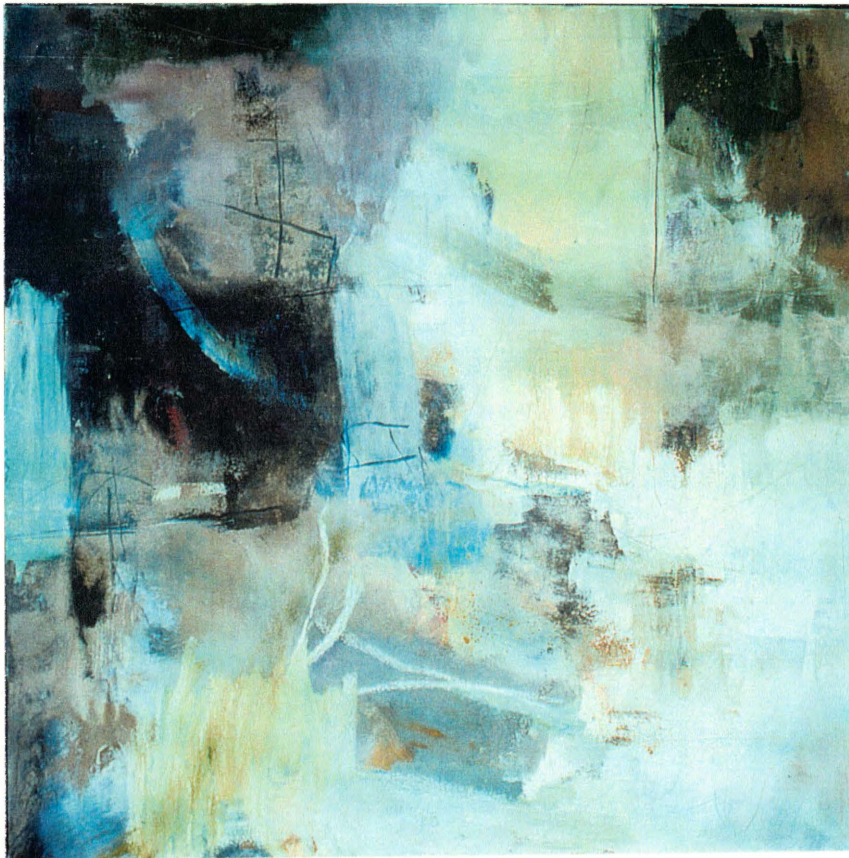


Plate 6. Untitled. 1997. Oil, sawdust, clay powder, pencil on canvas. 48" x 48".

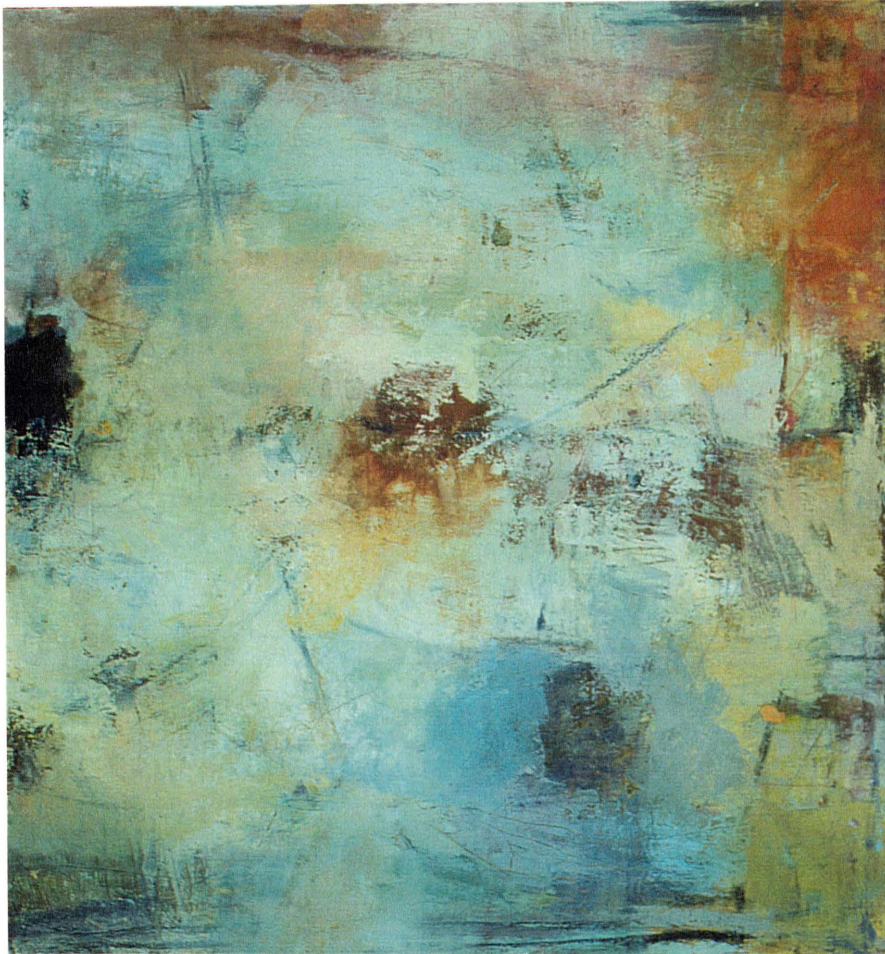


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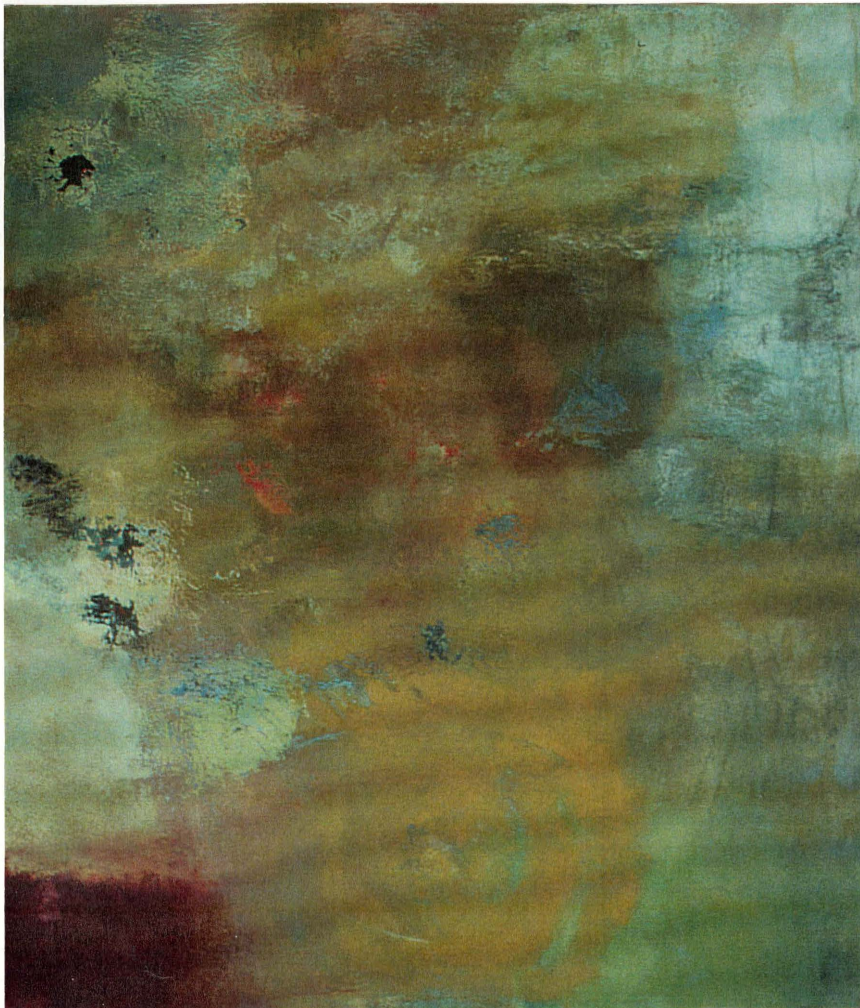


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