

THE STAIN PAINTERS

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AR 695 HV

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Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 1983

During the late 1950's and early 1960's there was an ever-building force from artists who questioned, "After Abstract Expressionism, what?". This opposition was certainly not long in coming and grew with bewildering speed and multiplicity. A new movement appeared every few years, then almost every year - Pop Art, Op Art, Geometric Abstractions, Hard Edge Art, Minimal Art, Stained Paintings, Kinetic Art, Conceptual Art, and Photorealism - to name just a few. The variety and complexity of these reactions and outgrowths of Abstract Expressionism is immense to say the least. One of these outgrowths, Stained Paintings, seems a movement tied by its process, yet as highly unique as each individual artist's statements could become.¹

The method of staining absorbent canvas as opposed to the traditional applying of paint to a surface, was rooted in the works of Jackson Pollock in the early 1950's. He had experimented with Duco enamel thinned with turpentine and dripped onto unsized flat canvases from above. Unlike his previous works with their thick ribbons of paint, the third dimension in the Duco paintings was merely implied - the paint was part of the canvas surface, rather than an addition to it. These works created a very flat optical

¹Frederick Hartt, Art: A History of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. Volume II, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1976), p. 459.

experience - something to look at but not into.² It was his experimentation with this and other methods as well as his creative attitude which proved the inspiration for other artists to come. Figure 1.

Because his finished work was so distinctly his own, to imitate that work would be to duplicate it. Conversely, those artists who looked to Pollock's methods and attitudes were able to develop original works dissimilar to those of Pollock's. One of these artists would be Sam Francis. He chose a similar "all-over" format and included great flowing islands of color. Figure 2. These colors move across the canvas field in a very gentle fluid path; the emotional effects of depth seem intrinsic to the shapes of bare canvas and of colored canvas themselves.³ For Francis, this new method of staining allowed a "fluidity of expression not bound by the limitations of a brush gesture".⁴ In his more recent works, large expanses of white canvas create spaciousness and light, upon which his colors vibrate.

Perhaps the first painter to grasp the full import of Pollock's work was Helen Frankenthaler. Frankenthaler realized the revolutionary aspect of Pollock's work was his technique rather than his finished work. After visiting

² Dean Swanson, Morris Louis: The Veil Cycle, (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1977), p. 10.

³ Paul Vogt, Contemporary Painting, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1981), p. 54.

⁴ Pat Coronel, preface to Sam Francis at Colorado State University, (Fort Collins: Colorado State University, 1983), p.2.

Pollock in 1951, she apparently understood the importance of working with the canvas on the floor. The unstretched, unprimed canvas was a new surface for painting, and became the perfect ground for the lateral spreading of thinned paint. Frankenthaler's adaptation of this technique included the new dimension of color. Specifically, she dealt with illuminating, clear hues applied in large areas with diffused edges. In John Graham's Systems & Dialectics of Art of 1937 he wrote, "A change in technique necessarily predicates a change in form".⁵ Consequently when Frankenthaler, influenced by Pollock, gave up the brush and sizing it was inevitable that she would be heralding a new, fresh, revitalizing statement. Her responsibility in this connection has at times overshadowed her own work. In addition, her influence on the ways we have of thinking about the art of the last twenty years has been tremendous.

In his later works, Pollock was to question the figure - ground (painted vs. bare canvas) relationships in his paintings. In his paintings on glass, he attempted to suspend images against a transparent ground. This concept of unweightedness is one with which Frankenthaler also dealt. Through this exploration, she was able to redirect artistic thinking about two concepts which seem inherent to much painting; sculptural illusionism and the figure - ground

⁵ John Graham, quoted in American Painting, (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1969), p. 100.

opposition. She rejected the tactile, sculptured pigment of painting which had existed from the Renaissance until Cubism, in favor of purely optical space that did not so much as hint at the illusion of a third dimension. For her canvas was no longer a support for paint but was now a colored object in and of itself. She created a close identification between paint and surface by allowing the weave of the cloth to remain visible through the color. She further challenged the validity of the traditional picture plane, by allowing her floating colors to exist without the opposing ground that had hitherto been accepted as necessary.

There were two additional consequences for this staining method. Color could lose much of the materiality of the physical medium and associate itself directly with its airy essence. In addition, since the raw canvas was tangible, visibly real, and obviously absorbent, it became resolutely neutral, a no-man's land where the emotional distance from the eye in terms of non-color was a purely relative manner to be determined solely by the colors introduced into it.⁶

Frankenthaler's emotion emitting abilities came from her concentration towards creating atmospheric effects. Because she varied the intensities of her pigment, forms could be read as veils of color floating on the surface or at the same time, at any intermediate plane behind. She admittedly was

⁶E. C. Goossen, Helen Frankenthaler, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1969), p. 9.

influenced by organic, natural forms, and surely it is in this portrayal, that these sensations of great depth are made manifest.

In cataloging a collection from the Whitney Museum of American Art, Mitchell D. Kahan described the emotional impact of her works:

Her sort of organic abstraction is a sort of romantic classicism which combines transcendence with a variety of feelings. Sensations of lyricism, fragility, joy, serenity, stasis, mutability, and strength can be discerned, but these are always subordinated to the visual experience of the paint itself and the awareness of the canvas as an "other" outside of actual human experience. (Her titles alone often) signify an attempt to express feeling, significantly, the type of mood is indicated in terms of color and not by conventional adjectives applied to human emotions.⁷ Figure 3.

Throughout all her work, a spontaneous, improvisational approach seems regulated by her carefully guarded use of color. Thus, Frankenthaler's major contribution was not that she invented the staining technique, but that she was able to turn Pollock's technique towards the end of creating an art of pure and vibrant light and color.

In New York in 1953, Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis visited Frankenthaler and were deeply influenced by her work, Mountains & Sea, Figure 4., among others. Noland later spoke of the experience: "We were interested in Pollock but could gain no lead to him. He was too personal. But Frankenthaler

⁷ Mitchell D. Kahan, American Painting of the Sixties and Seventies, (Montgomery: Walker Printing, Inc., 1980), p. 39.

showed us a way - a way to think about and use color."⁸ Louis was similarly impressed, stating: "Frankenthaler is a bridge between Pollock and what is possible."⁹ After returning to Washington, Noland and Louis experimented with staining colors directly into raw canvas. For two or three weeks they even would work on the same canvas. After this intense period of joint experimentation, which Louis and Noland called "jam painting", both returned to their own works. Figures 5. and 6.

Noland was particularly inspired by Frankenthaler's colors which he was able to use in his own more structural ways. A typical example of his geometric motifs is found in Mesh of 1959. Figure 7. From here, his range of motifs included concentric circles, chevrons, horizontal stripes, plaid stripes, and currently he has returned to bands of color on irregularly shaped canvases. Throughout these works his aim as he stated was "to think about and use color". Diane Waldman, in writing Noland's biography stated:

His geometric form heightened the emotional impact of his color. The rational and the felt, distilled form, and sensuous color intermesh to create a magic presence. His space is color. His color is space. Color is all.¹⁰

⁸ Kenneth Noland, quoted in Kenneth Noland: A Retrospective, (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1977), p. 17.

⁹ Morris Louis, quoted in Swanson, p.6.

¹⁰ Diane Waldman, Kenneth Noland: A Retrospective, (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1977), p. 36.

It was however, Morris Louis who carried this idea of stained, expressive color the furthest. According to Noland, "It was as if Morris had been waiting all his life for information. Once given the information he had the ability to make pictures with it."¹¹ As a result of his tentative beginnings with Noland and Frankenthaler, a magnificent series of works, "The Veils", occurred during 1958 and 1959.

This first body of work, reveals the expressiveness of his style. These large scale, radiant images, consisting of overlaying, transparent colors seem to refer to natural processes. "The Veils" read clearly as alluding to growth, fluidity, light, air and water. Figure 8. Their moods seem mysterious, dramatic, musical, and uplifting depending on the colors used.

Louis' technique seems unseperable from his image. The various layers of pigment soak into the canvas so that the only texture we see is that of the woven threads. In some veils, various individual hues appear at the top or sides, giving us a clue as to what has previously occurred. He often used a dark neutral color as his last layer, thus creating his light from within feeling. His paintings cannot help but reveal his process, yet because of the ambiguity of that process we are fortunately unable to limit our comprehension at that level.

Within this group of veils, several variations occur which indicate his experimentation with compositional

¹¹ Kenneth Noland, quoted in Swanson, p. 10.

arrangements. Diane Headley of the Walker Art Center, has termed the first veils of 1958 "Triadic Veils".¹² These works contain vertical lines resulting from his structural support of the canvas, and show great diagonals of color. In some of these such as Tet, Figure 9., the color is interrupted by bare canvas, which may have led him to the "Split Veils", presumably painted around the same time. Here he has chosen to distinguish the shapes of color, and by his spacing of colored and bare canvas, creates a strong rhythmic feeling. Figure 10. These areas of bare canvas eventually closed together, and the "Vertical or Monadic Veils", Figure 11., came into being. One can't help but sense the oncoming series of stripe paintings which were to follow a few years later.

Before the stripes however, came the "Floral" works of 1959 through 1960. The bursts of color characteristic of this period evoke the greatest sense of depth from all his works. These are considered the least purely optical since the colors seem intended for the mind as well as the eye. Figure 12. His control of these colors is such that they appear to be emerging from the canvas itself and somehow, all occurring at the same instant.

Louis' involvement with the "Florals" led quite naturally into the body of works known as the "Unfurleds" of 1961. Here, the streaks of color came from the two sides and

¹²Diane Headley, quoted in Swanson, p. 11.

frame a great stretch of bare canvas in the center. Figure 13. This imagery seems to have inspired Noland in his use of chevrons, in that both artists were portraying great, forceful diagonals. Figure 14. Michael Fried of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, described the "Unfurleds":

The banked rivulets ... open up the picture - plane more radically than ever, as though seeing the first marking we are for the first time shown the void. The dazzling blankness of the untouched canvas at once repulses and engulfs the eye, like an infinite abyss, the abyss that opens up behind the least mark that we make on a flat surface, or would open up if innumerable conventions both of art and of practical life did not restrict the consequences of our act within narrow bounds.¹³

Louis's final period of painting before his death in 1962, resulted in a series of stripe paintings. These stripes of color run from top to bottom of long, narrow canvases which are viewed both vertically and horizontally. These bands of color invariably run parallel to each other, and in all but three works, are also parallel to the edge of the canvas. Figure 15. In recent years, this compositional arrangement has again been dealt with in the works of Gene Davis. His very large canvases are filled with vertical stripes from end to end. Figure 16.

In cataloging the show, "Morris Louis: The Veil Cycle", Dean Swanson evaluates the painter's ideal:

¹³ Michael Fried, quoted in Late Modern: The Visual Arts Since 1945, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 106.

In substituting the illusion of texture for actual texture, Louis achieved the appearance of a complex, modulated surface while maintaining a flat picture plane. If his technique of pouring paint down the canvas broke with the tradition of gestural brushwork, (his works) nevertheless remain as closely related in feeling to the complex, brushed surfaces of the action painters as they are to the evenly applied, flat color areas and geometricized forms of painting in the 60's. This technique was simply a means of achieving a desired effect; as such, it was devoid of the metaphysical significance that the action painters accorded to painting as an act of heroic self-expression. The relationship between the artist and his materials, the flow of thinned paint over the canvas surface, and the manner in which it soaked into and spread through the fibers, could be only partially controlled. Ultimately, Louis' paintings, because of the quasi-accidental process, became self-contained, organic entities,¹⁴

In conclusion, it was Pollock's revision of the traditional approaches towards technique, and Frankenthaler's sensitive usage of color which proved to be the inspiration for such stain painters as Noland and Louis. They in turn, have had a great impact on painters since; their colors and images being drawn upon, revised, and reexpressed. The forms, meanings, and boundaries in each of these artist's works combine to form individual worlds or ideals, and with sufficient concentration, the viewer can also begin to understand and experience these realms.

¹⁴Swanson, p. 13.

Fig. 1. Jackson Pollock. Autumn Rhythm. 1950.



Fig. 2. Sam Francis. Over Yellow II. 1958.



Fig. 3. Helen Frankenthaler. Blue Atmosphere. 1963.



Fig. 4. Helen Frankenthaler. Mountains & Sea. 1953.



Fig. 5. Morris Louis. Terrain of Joy. 1954.



Fig. 6. Kenneth Noland. Untitled 1955. 1955.



Fig. 7. Kenneth Noland. Mesh. 1959



Fig. 8. Morris Louis. Dalet Kaf. 1958.



Fig. 9. Morris Louis. Tet. 1958



Fig. 10. Morris Louis. Zayin. 1959.



Fig. 11. Morris Louis. Beth Chaf. 1959.

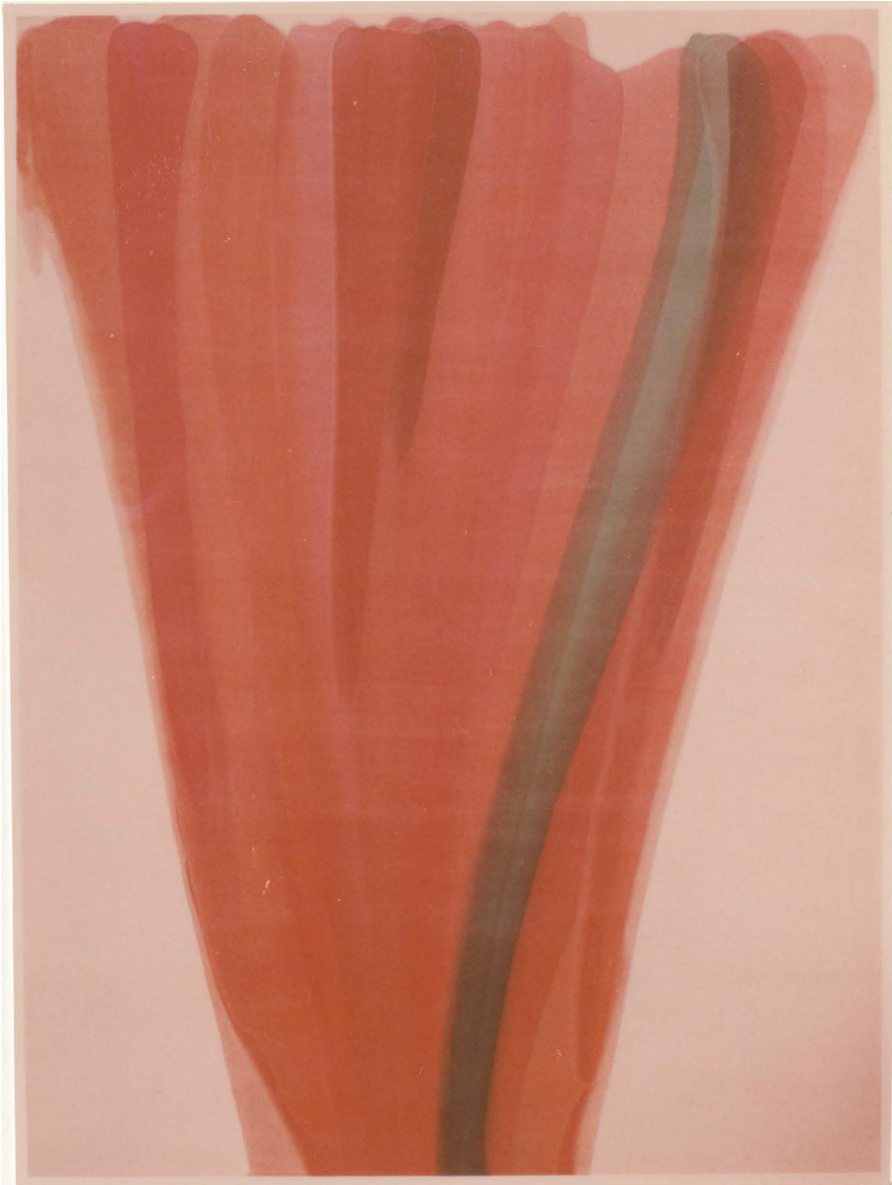


Fig. 12. Morris Louis. Aleph. 1960.



Fig. 13. Morris Louis. Beta Kappa. 1960.

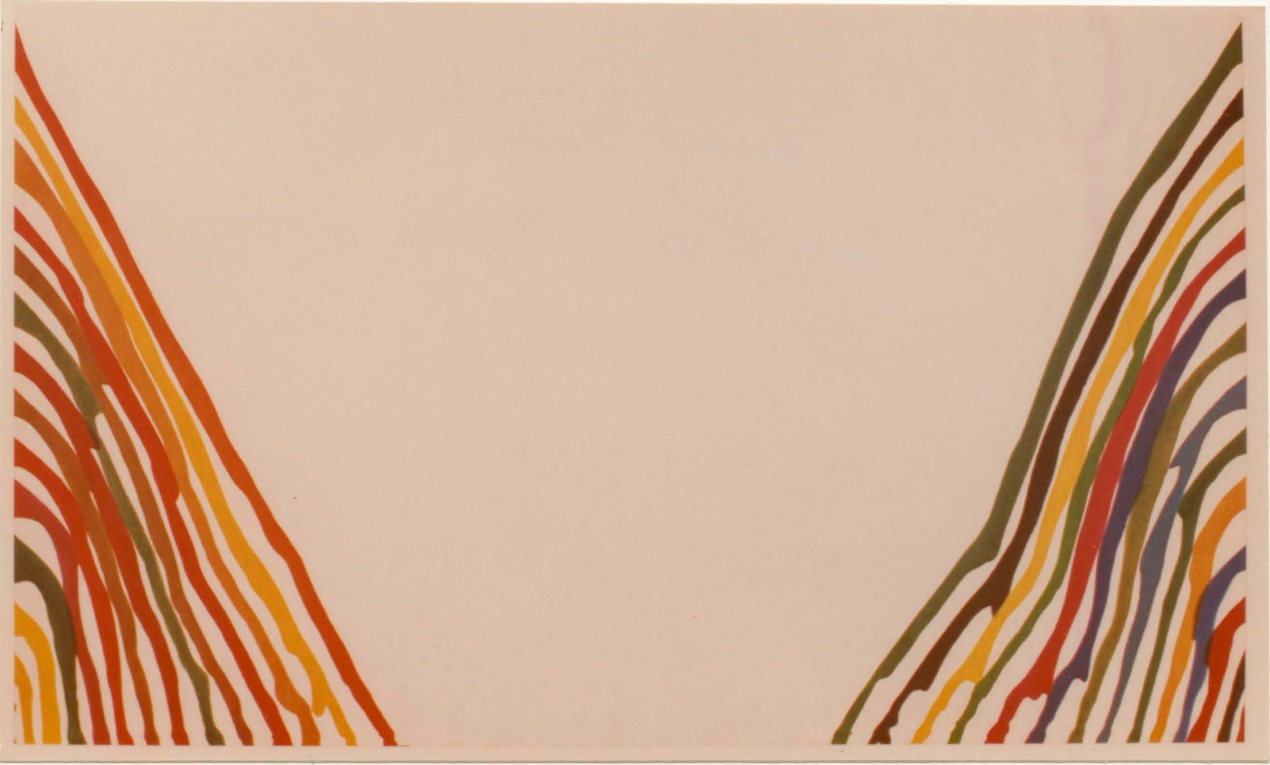


Fig. 14. Kenneth Noland. Dusk. 1963.



Fig. 15. Morris Louis. 2-63. 1962.

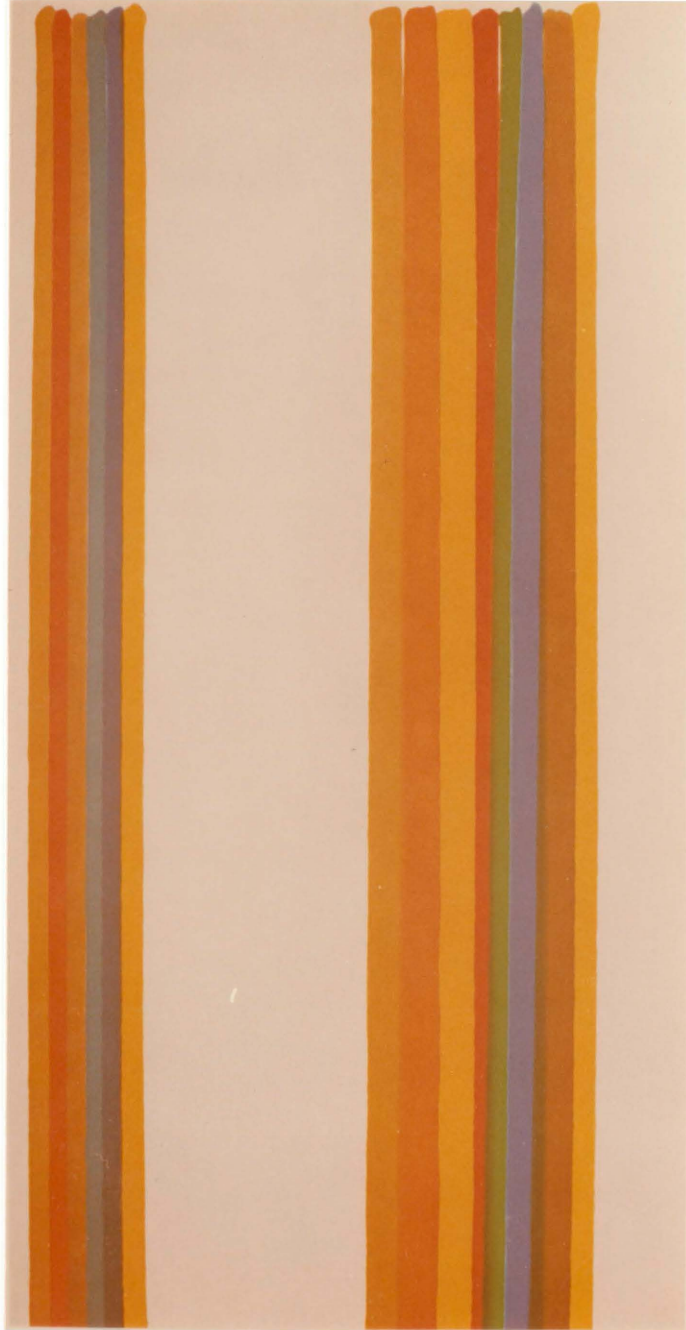
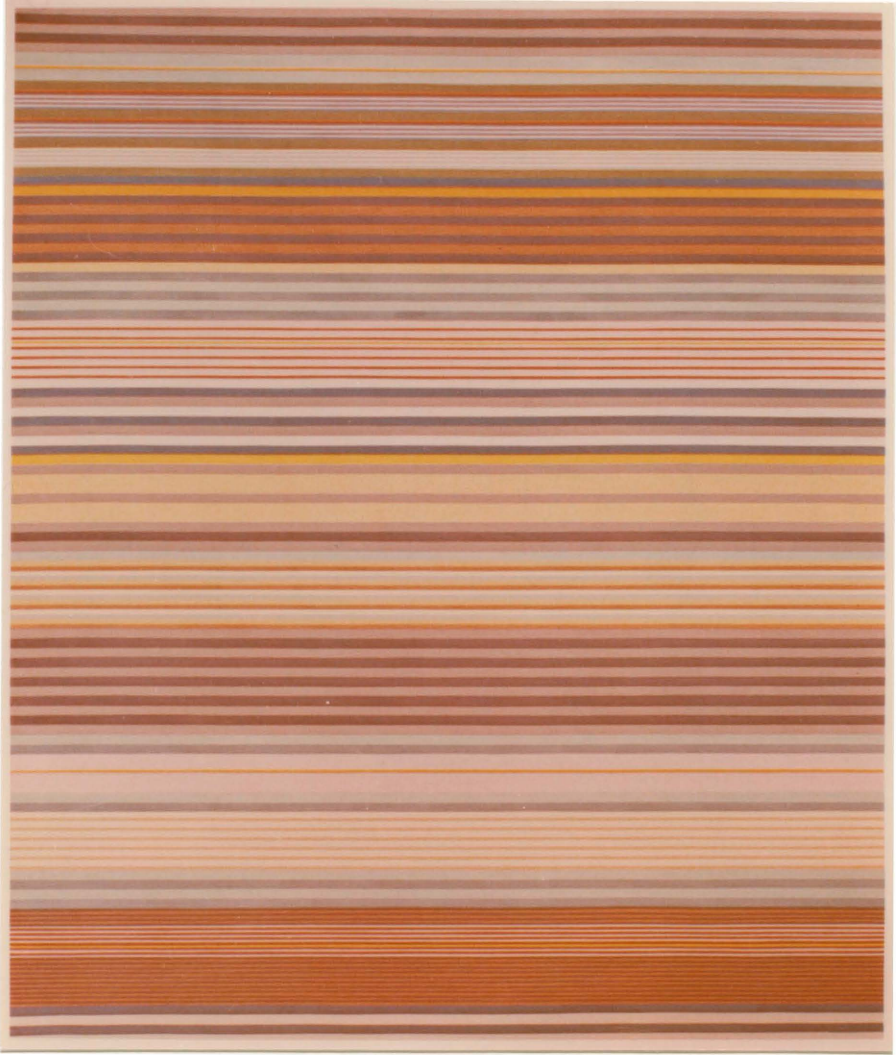


Fig. 16. Gene Davis. Royal Veil. 1971



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