

THESIS

THOUGHT-SOUNDS AND MUSTARD JARS

Submitted by

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION
BY MARGARET ANN SHARKOFFMADRID ENTITLED THOUGHT-SOUNDS AND MUSTARD JARS
BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER
OF FINE ARTS.

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS
THOUGHT-SOUNDS AND MUSTARD JARS

These works exist in order that I may manifest my internal "thought-sounds." The vertical bands and the resonant stains which connect and/or isolate them are the means I have chosen to communicate about sensation, emotion, thought, humanness, and time past and present.

The selection of every color is a critical process, as each is chosen for its emotive quality and its tone. Through many additions and judgments each color is achieved, and consequently an acknowledgment is due to the role played by the mustard jars.

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Thought-sound is an invented term I have chosen to describe an internal tone or pitch or resonance which I think I hear going on inside my head. This occurs only when everything in the external world is still and quiet and to the greatest extent, only when I am by myself.

Sometimes the thought-sounds may be a remembrance of an instrument or piece of music, but more often it is an internal humming of an undetermined source. For example I enjoy violins, harps, harpsichords, tubas, french horns, flutes, chamber music, and baroque music, so when listening to any of these I feel very visually inspired. When I can pinpoint the exact inspiration for a painting, I will include it in its title such as BB^b Bass, or Vivaldi for Nicholas. However most of my works stem out of something more difficult to label; the sound is internal and always has been until it comes out as paint on canvas. The thought-sounds, therefore, are the inspiration and subject for these thesis works.

My father lived by his saying, "Whistle or hum a merry tune,"¹ and perhaps it is his attitude of music being capable of sustaining and uplifting the human soul which I feel so compelled to communicate to others. For me this interchange happens to occur visually rather than audibly, however it is the concept itself which is paramount: that we have thoughts and emotions, that we are human.

I do not feel these issues of essential reality could be adequately addressed through known images. Instead I have chosen to place a great

¹Louis J. Sharkoff, 1922-1978.

deal of dependence upon my own inner source. This independence is what maintains my enthusiasm towards working in a non-representational manner. The choices I make concerning imagery, shapes, colors, etc., are not determined by the object of another's making. The images I work with all come from within, and it is the cross-inspiration from music, dance, my surroundings, and my faith which I count on to keep this inner well filled.

Because these issues being addressed are of a metaphysical nature, I feel completely ad libitum in selecting my image. I cannot recall ever making a conscious decision to paint stripes. Rather it was an evolutionary process which began several years ago with the Sac Dancers Series. These paintings of elongated, abstracted figures always seemed to work the best in the center, where vertical forms overlapped and became many long lines and bands. As I enjoyed these central areas the most, I began to eliminate the tops and bottoms of the paintings. Without realizing it, I was beginning to paint solely the overlapped lines. I have now put aside all reference to the physical image of man in favor of the crucial issues of the mind, but the vertical bands and stains have stayed. They seem to be an easily accepted shape; the viewer does not get tangled in the imagery so much that he cannot get straight to the sensation, to the color, and to the sound.

The bands and stains seem to be the physical result of time passing. The stains are the overlapped echoes of each previous band; they are the resounding chord for the melodic bands to play through. There is a pulsation happening, as the up and down tapping of one's foot to a rhythm. As the bands are beating, the stains are reverberating. Sometimes the stains connect the beats; sometimes the bands isolate the

stains. Occasionally I imagine the bands as actual pizzicato strings or staccato notes. The works can be seen as the visual equivalent of a single instant in listening to an internal musical composition.

The initial impact of these paintings and their ability to sustain one's interest is due primarily to the scale of carefully selected color. Every color and the amount of it used is based on emotive aspects. Each hue has its own mood or tone and is capable of changing according to the others it is around. Therefore the color selection cannot occur ahead of time, but is an integral, spontaneous part of the actual creative act.

The amount I feel is needed of a particular hue often dictates the scale of the final piece. Clement Greenberg, in discussing Barnett Newman stated, "More blue is simply bluer than less blue,"² and to me more blue sounds different than less blue. This is not to overlook that tiny amounts of some colors are capable of speaking in grandiose ways. Every hue and value must be clear and precise, as if another very similar one, or less or more of the same, just could not have worked as well.

I keep a drawing/idea book with me most of the time, although I never paint from drawings. Perhaps if I did, the degree of successfulness would be more constant, but I feel something would be lost. The physical aspect of each painting begins and ends on the canvas. The entire give and take evolutionary process is completely there to be seen. To stand in front of a seven or eight foot square piece of blank canvas with only sounds in my head is a wonderful

²Clement Greenberg, New York Painting and Sculpture, 1940-1970, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1969), p.368.

feeling. It is a drive, a thrill, which I am sure is the cause of the final image seeming so full of life.

There is definitely something flowing and uplifting about the verticality of these works. Their positivism, strength, encouragement and spirit all depends on their verticalness. The movement of the stripes is up and down and up, continuing well off and above the top edge of the canvas. For this reason I never intend for them to be framed, or viewed horizontally. Emphasizing a horizontal edge would interrupt the upward motion. The actual paint on canvas would be the same, but the sensation and impact would be dulled or slowed.

It seems a bit of a dichotomy that the sensation when viewing is upward while the actual process of creating is downward. All of the stains and bands are poured onto the vertical, unstretched canvas from the top. I feel as much in command of this process as a painter using a conventional brush. I am able to control the width, depth, opacity or transparency, direction, and frequency of each band or stain. The paint running down by itself creates a much smoother, uninterrupted texture than if I were to brush it on. The canvasses are stretched when completed, in order that I may leave off the irregularities of where the shapes began and reached the bottom.

Often times I place two narrow bands very close together. This can be interpreted as a subliminal repeat sign as in music, but is more apt to be an alternate method of pouring one wider band. They are simply the two outside edges of a single band which has a different center. A variation of this is when two bands are poured on top of each other, the first one being slightly wider than the second. The thin stains are layered on until the desired value, color, and feeling of depth occurs.

Knowing when to stop is a very personal decision between myself and the painting. I am not interested in the number of colors or stripes used but rather the overall communication. I do not feel I am creating minimal art; I am simply leaving out everything I feel is non-essential.

The role of the mustard jars is very crucial. Every color I use is of my own creation, and the jars happen to be of the perfect size and shape for the constant mixing and remixing of paint. They are as important to me as a tool is to the sculptor or a press is to the printmaker. It is where the color comes from. When I see them sitting empty I feel it is as if they are somehow challenging me. I feel anxious and excited to have them filled. I get a wonderful shot of zeal when looking into a jar of gorgeous color. To open up such a jar is to turn on the music.

I can easily imagine each of these paintings as animate objects for they cannot hang on the wall and do nothing. They play, sing, ring out, hum, harmonize, and perform. When the viewer is observing the paintings and looking inward simultaneously, the paintings carry on a special rhythmic, melodic dance. As soon as the viewer comes out of his trance the paintings stand still, but an event has occurred. This viewer could not go away empty-headed but instead must hum, dance, sing, or think his own thought-sounds. To this cognizant viewer, these paintings should seem filled with melodies.



Figure 1. #14: For Michael. acrylic on canvas, 76" x 63".



Figure 2. Untitled #16. acrylic on canvas, 78" x 78".



Figure 3. #21: BB^b Bass. acrylic on canvas, 78" x 78".

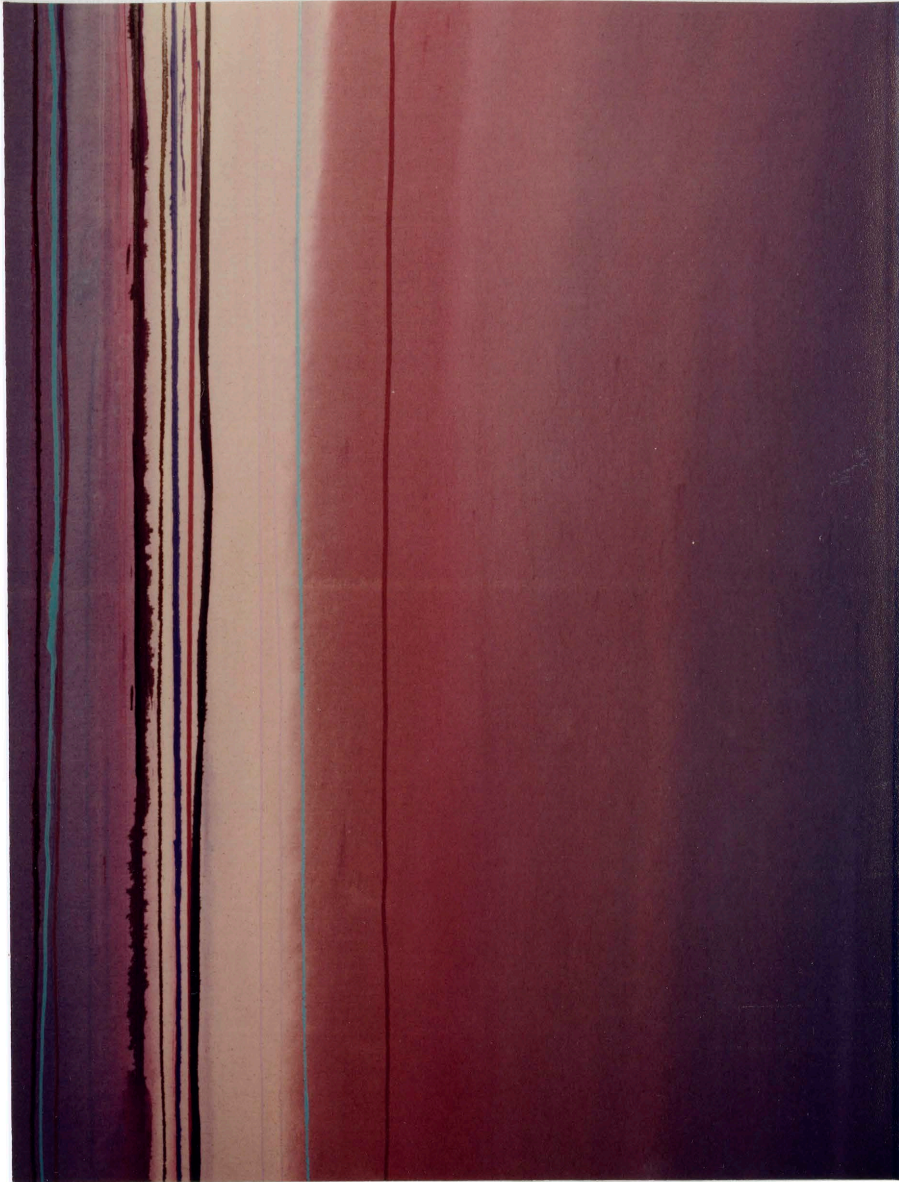


Figure 4. #23: Purple Baby. acrylic on canvas, 60" x 48".



Figure 5. Untitled #24. acrylic on canvas, 78" x 54".

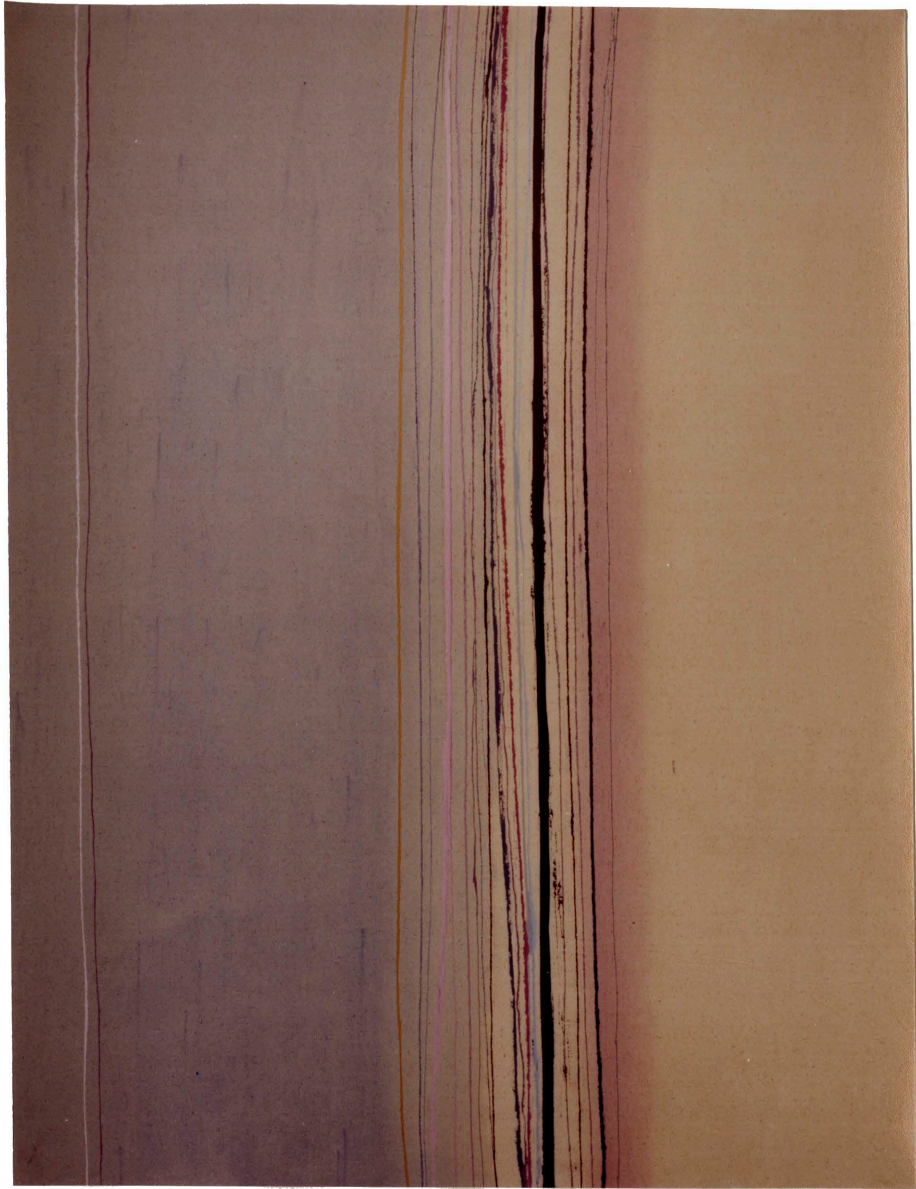


Figure 6.

Untitled #25. acrylic on canvas, 78" x 60".



Figure 7. Untitled #26. acrylic on canvas, 76" x 68".

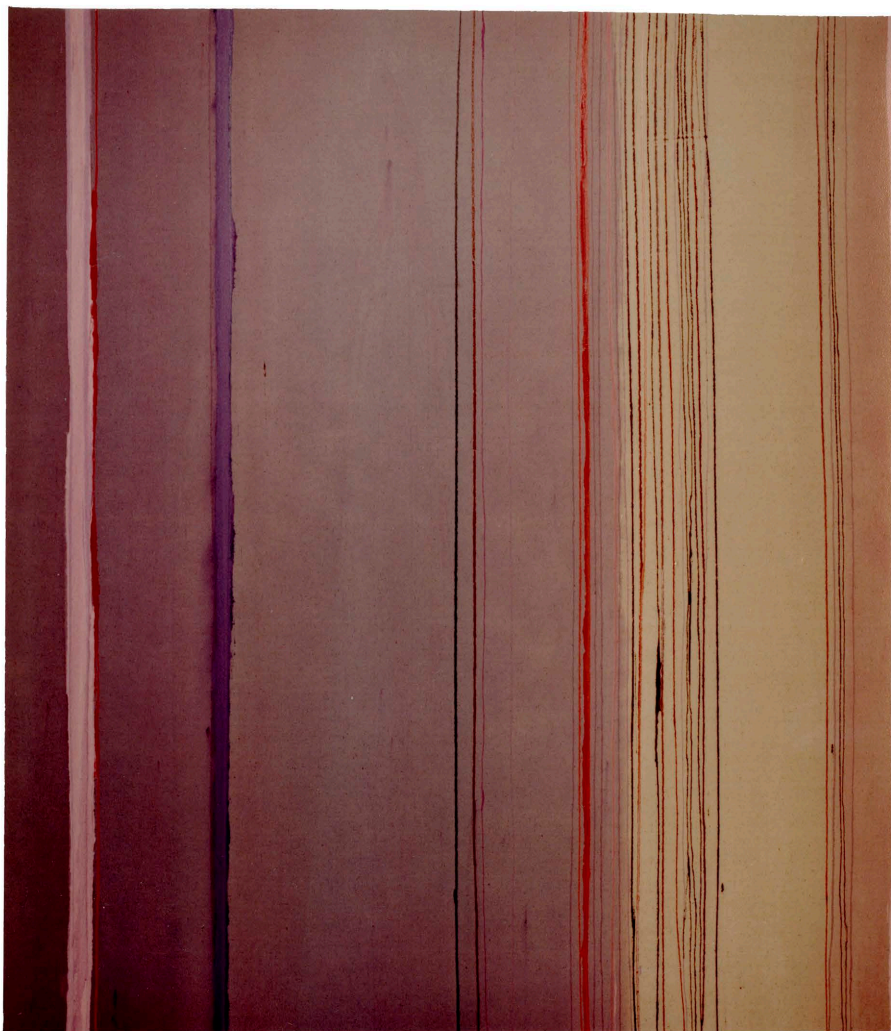


Figure 8. Opus 30: The Mustard Jars. acrylic on canvas, 78" x 68".



Figure 9. Opus 31: Vivaldi for Nicholas. acrylic on canvas, 76" x 66".



Figure 10. Opus 32: Bells for the Pocket. acrylic on canvas,
78" x 72".