

THESIS

MIRAGE

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 1997

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

April 9, 1997

WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR
SUPERVISION BY MICHAEL F. MAGADA ENTITLED MIRAGE BE ACCEPTED AS
FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE
ARTS.

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

MIRAGE

The results of my involvement with abstract form, subjective content, and referential imagery have evolved into my thesis work which is a series of landscape paintings collectively entitled *Mirage*. Thematically, the paintings are symbols of the daunting process of coming to terms with self and the world.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures page v.

Text pages 1 - 7.

Figures 1 - 15 pages 8 - 22.

LIST OF FIGURES

1. *Night Illusion I*, 48" x 48", oil on masonite, page 8.
2. *Broken Plain*, 74" x 64", oil and acrylic on canvas, page 9.
3. *Heaven and Earth*, 50.5" x 58.5", oil on canvas, page 10.
4. *Ice Field*, 78.5" x 71.5", oil and acrylic on canvas, page 11.
5. *Frozen Crossing*, 54" x 79", oil on canvas, page 12.
6. *Frozen Lake*, 66" x 74", acrylic on canvas, page 13.
7. *Badlands*, 60" x 53", oil on canvas, page 14.
8. *Colored Sand*, 61" x 68.5", oil on canvas, page 15.
9. *Witness*, 60" x 47.5", oil on canvas, page 16.
10. *Night Illusion II*, 48.5" x 48.5", oil on canvas, page 17.
11. *Apparition*, 60" x 45", oil on canvas, page 18.
12. *Watercourses*, 65" x 102.5", oil on canvas, page 19.
13. *Flood*, 67.5" x 72", oil on canvas, page 20.
14. *Lake*, 48.5" x 48.5", oil on canvas, page 21.
15. *Chasm*, 60.5" x 48", oil on canvas, page 22.

The painted surface offers unique perceptual possibilities. Oil paint both as substance and color can create truly compelling visual structure; it can create an image both illusory and physical, dynamic and still. A great painting transcends its subject matter; its power of image stimulates the viewer's psyche in ways unrelated to the imparting of narrative or illustrative information. A great painting is experiential. As a painter I want to make great paintings.

During the act of painting the artist can reach a point when the accumulated layers of information on the canvas begin to subvert the artist's original conceptual intent and become the primary source of inspiration directing the evolution and completion of the painting. As this occurs the painting begins to transcend its generic idea and the image becomes the most vital aspect. I find that I cannot reach this point in the process without the impetus of a personally meaningful subject that I want to explore in pictorial form. One begins by being faithful to the vitality of the mental concept and then switches allegiance to faith in the vitality of the growing image, sometimes significantly altering the original conceptual bias. I find this transformation both fascinating and difficult. Mentally, I can conceive of a painting that acts as a vehicle to accurately convey a message, philosophical idea, or a story, but I can't actually physically execute it. Painting is a language unto itself. It is a language unsuitable for achieving a unity of interpretation or a collective meaning. A painting is not a literary mechanism; its meanings are not as

clear and concrete as written words. The viewer with his or her peculiar emotional and cognitive stance is not a passive but an active participant in the painting's explication, and therefore, an uncontrollable variant making undiluted thematic dissertation impossible. Often it is very hard for me to subordinate my desire to express content and enter into an intimate dialogue with the painted image as a thing of meaning in itself, but doing so is crucial. My series of thesis paintings is an exploration of this change in stimulus and motivation. I have completed fifteen paintings based upon a complex narrative thematic structure. My intention while creating them has been to both develop and transcend this theme.

My initial awareness of a painting's potential to express something more than literal subject matter developed from looking at post-World War II abstract expressionism. I realized that this type of painting was capable of creating a tremendous emotional and symbolic presence quite without the aid of any overt pictorial metaphor. I sensed that the myriad optical relationships created by the applied paint itself were portentous and full of potential meaning and metaphor. I sensed that painting was a unique form of language with a language's attendant complexities and capacities.

Usually, I find abstract paintings to be more pregnant with meaning than representational ones. Webster's dictionary defines abstract as "expressing a quality thought of apart from any particular or material object". I call a painting abstract when the creator of the work was not compelled to render observed subject matter with faithful attention paid to proportion, linear perspective, and natural light. The abstract painting that interests me

places its emphasis instead upon the evocation of intangible phenomena. An example would be a painting that inspired intellectual and emotional associations within the mind of a viewer without incorporating naturalistically depicted forms drawn from the physical world. A purely abstract painting is one that is nonobjective, meaning completely devoid of reference to the observable material world of objects. My problem as an artist in graduate school is to translate the influence of abstraction into paintings that aren't primarily derivative of established styles, but are a unique personal synthesis. Midway through my graduate program I was creating abstract work that approached a purely nonobjective visual format, but I reached an impasse. These paintings either too readily recalled the work of an established style or artist, or I found them to be decorative formal explorations devoid of meaning. A sincere and uncompromising expression of emotional and/or intellectual content has always been one of the bases for my interest in the fine arts. An affinity with post-World War II abstraction is not a contradiction of this statement. On the contrary, the canvases of the modern and contemporary painters I admire most, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Julian Schnabel and Gerhard Richter, would not contain their power and presence without the intention of a distinct personality dictating their visual form. Desirous of instilling personally meaningful content or subjective experience into my own work, and of transforming this content into an imagery that is symbolic and evocative, I re-introduced recognizable subject matter into my paintings. I find that having a personal statement to express is necessary, it provides entrance into the painting process, and allows a passionate connection with the work throughout its execution. The results of my involvement with referential imagery,

abstract form, and subjective content have evolved into my thesis work which is a series of landscape paintings collectively entitled *Mirage*.

The works are large, primed canvas rectangles painted with oil applied using a variety of techniques and a wide range of color. The paint application ranges from very thick to very thin, often within the same painting. This range of application is carried out with the intention of both creating the illusion of a spatial vista and asserting the essential flatness of the picture plane. The success of this visual dichotomy between flatness and depth is important in its role of awakening the viewer to the unique perceptual possibilities inherent to a painted surface. Upon this painted surface I both describe topographical and geological features of the scene and I paradoxically deny or dissolve them, either by imposition of suggested atmospheric or lighting effects, or by ambiguities and details peculiar to the application and color of the paint itself. A vagueness or enigmatic character of the landscape is important to the thematic content of the paintings and also allies them to trends of abstraction in twentieth century painting. Throughout the series I have placed an emphasis on painterly inventiveness. In service of both expressing the thematic content and creating a compelling image, I utilized a wide range of paint application techniques. *Night Illusion I*, (figure 1), was painted using thin glazes; *Broken Plain*, (figure 2), was painted by dragging thick paint across the canvas with wide spatulas; *Heaven and Earth*, (figure 3), was done with impasto; *Ice Field*, (figure 4), incorporates multiple techniques within one painting, as do most of the other paintings in the series.

Thematically the paintings deal with the essential isolation, fragility and courage of the individual and his/her psyche within the framework of human existence. A re-examination of personal experiences and their influence on my ideas about existence have inspired the imagery manifested in my thesis. This theme is not the result of a focused research into philosophical or psychological theory, but is based upon my own experience as an individual trying to come to terms with the world and himself. The human issues I used for inspiration weren't those of overcoming physical obstacles or assuring corporeal survival, but of confronting loneliness, self doubt and self identity.

I have moved through life believing myself to be a misfit ill-equipped for financial and social success within the cultural context of contemporary American society. Often I find life's challenges to be daunting: bearing regret, guilt, disillusionment, and unfulfilled expectations; maintaining faith in human nature amidst selfishness, greed and cruelty; nurturing a belief in God amidst godlessness; balancing self-absorption with compassion for others; setting boundaries and clarifying morality in a climate of situation ethics; and conquering the financial and psychological hardships of being an artist. But just as often, I find myself inspired and motivated by qualities of beauty in such things as human compassion, nature, humility, art, and ideas. The paintings I have completed for my thesis are symbols of the daunting process of coming to terms with self and the world.

The landscapes are vast and appear treacherous. Apart from the viewer, they are devoid of inhabitants and barren of vegetation. The scenes are of frozen lakes, desolate plains,

canyons and ravines, flood plains, volcanic craters, dunes, rock strewn valleys, badlands, and fantastic skies. Nature here is aloof from and indifferent to human presence and endeavor; it is a stranger. Nature, in this depiction, can also serve as a metaphor for God. These landscapes look inhospitable and dangerous to cross; they appear unforgiving and alien. They also appear strangely and sometimes majestically beautiful. This sense of strangeness is reinforced by the sometimes unearthly point of reference of the viewer and the skewed, distorted nature of parts of the landscape. As I painted these works, the landscapes became metaphors for the self, for the plight of the individual set apart, struggling through life ill at ease with others, in doubt of his own judgments, and unsure of his place in the world, but also seeing enormous potential in everything. The mystery and cold indifference of the settings and the purposeful ambiguity in the way they are painted represent the world view of an isolated being whose experience of life and the world is overwhelming, confounding and at times surreal.

These landscapes symbolize a part of this individual's journey through life. Within the cycle of the fifteen paintings I have tried to represent hardship, deprivation, loneliness, disillusionment, delusion, fantasy, hallucination, awe, and redemption through beauty. In all the paintings I infer an austere beauty. This essence of beauty symbolizes redemption from psychic turpitude. The implication is that the struggle of the individual to come to terms with self and the world may ultimately function as a crucible, rendering a refined being. The series title *Mirage* means something that falsely appears to be real. The fictitious protagonist knows his symbolic view of the world is not real, but he does not know what is.

The frozen landscapes of *Ice Field*, (figure 4), *Frozen Crossing*, (figure 5), and *Frozen lake*, (figure 6), represent emotional devastation or a winter of the spirit. The wastelands of *Broken Plain*, (figure 2), *Badlands*, (figure 7), *Colored Sand*, (figure 8), and *Witness*, (figure 9), represent feelings of isolation, disillusionment, and struggle. *Night Illusion I*, (figure 1), *Night Illusion II*, (figure 10), *Apparition*, (figure 11), and *Heaven and Earth*, (figure 3), represent moral and spiritual delusion, and the refuge of fantasy. *Watercourses*, (figure 12), and *Flood*, (figure 13), represent reconfiguration by ordeal.

It is not crucial or even probable that anyone other than myself will interpret the paintings in this way. The importance of this narrative concept is in its function to inspire and direct me as a painter. The premise allows me a very personal emotional connection with the imagery; a passion I find necessary in order to create. The premise also allowed me wide parameters regarding the degree of abstraction to which I was able to push the imagery.

FIGURE 1

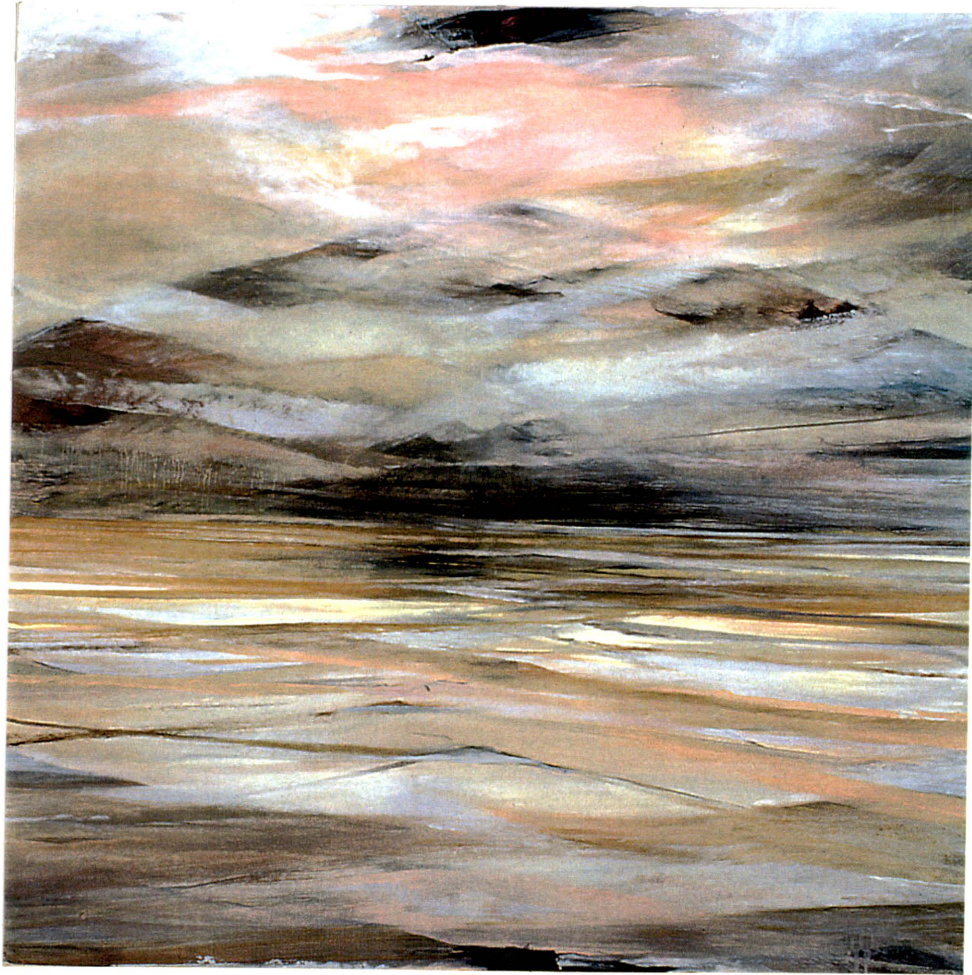


FIGURE 2



FIGURE 3

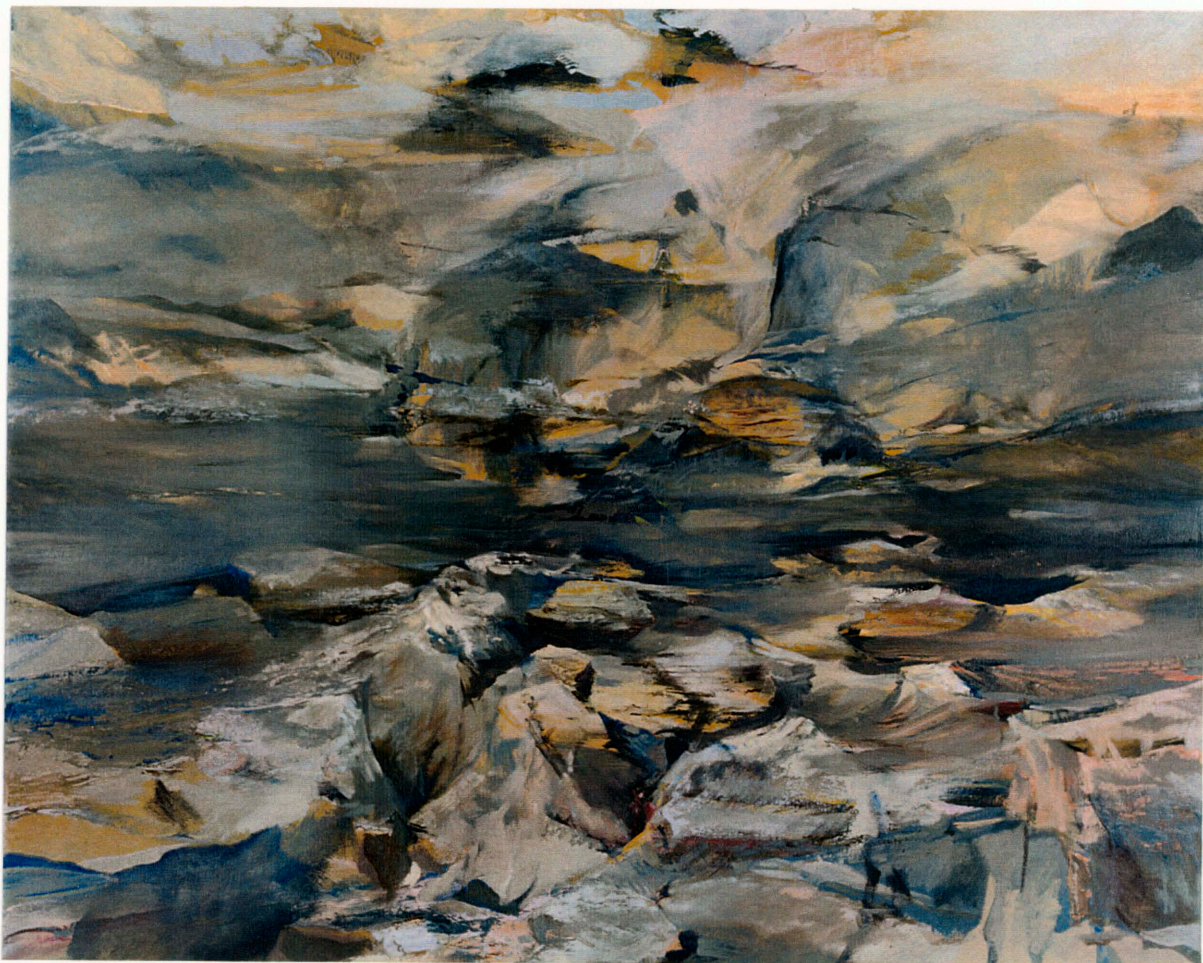


FIGURE 4



FIGURE 5

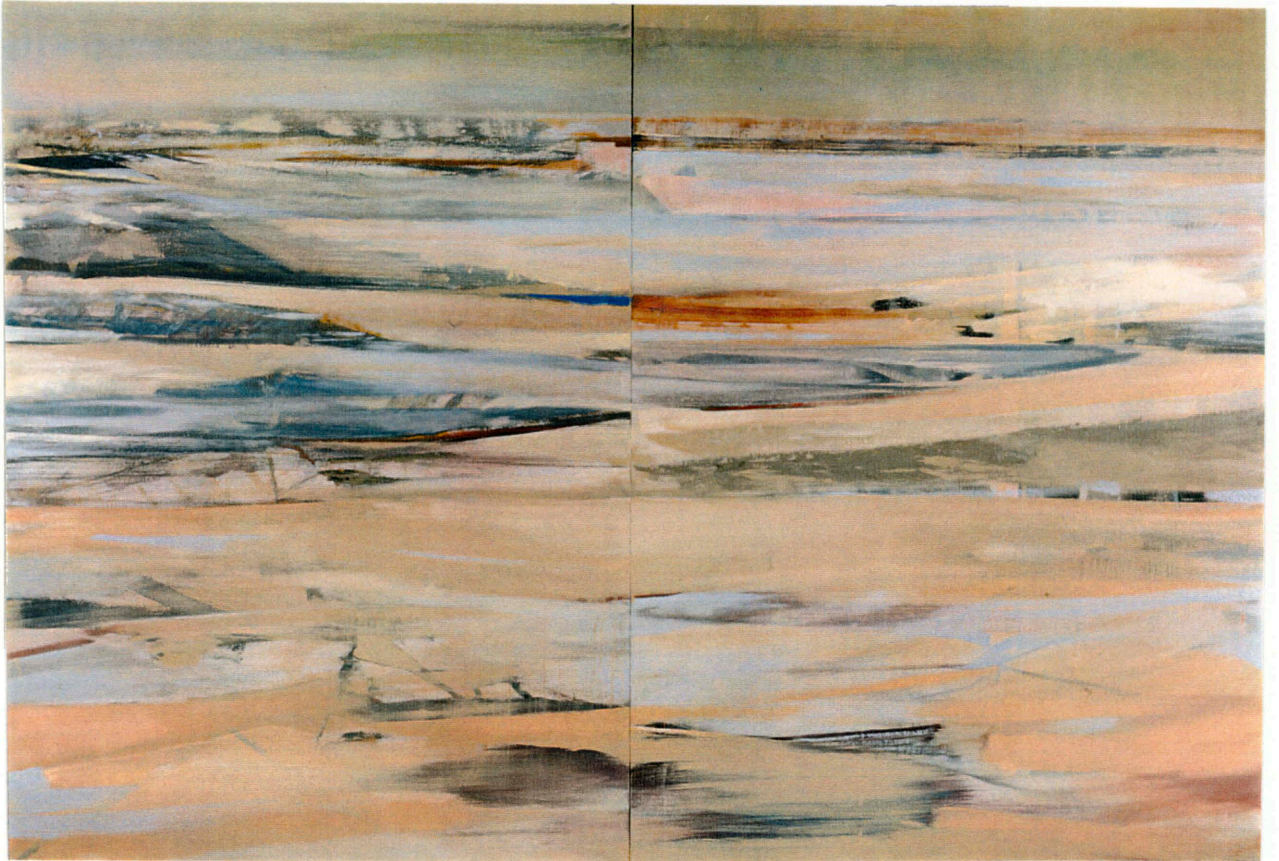


FIGURE 6



FIGURE 7

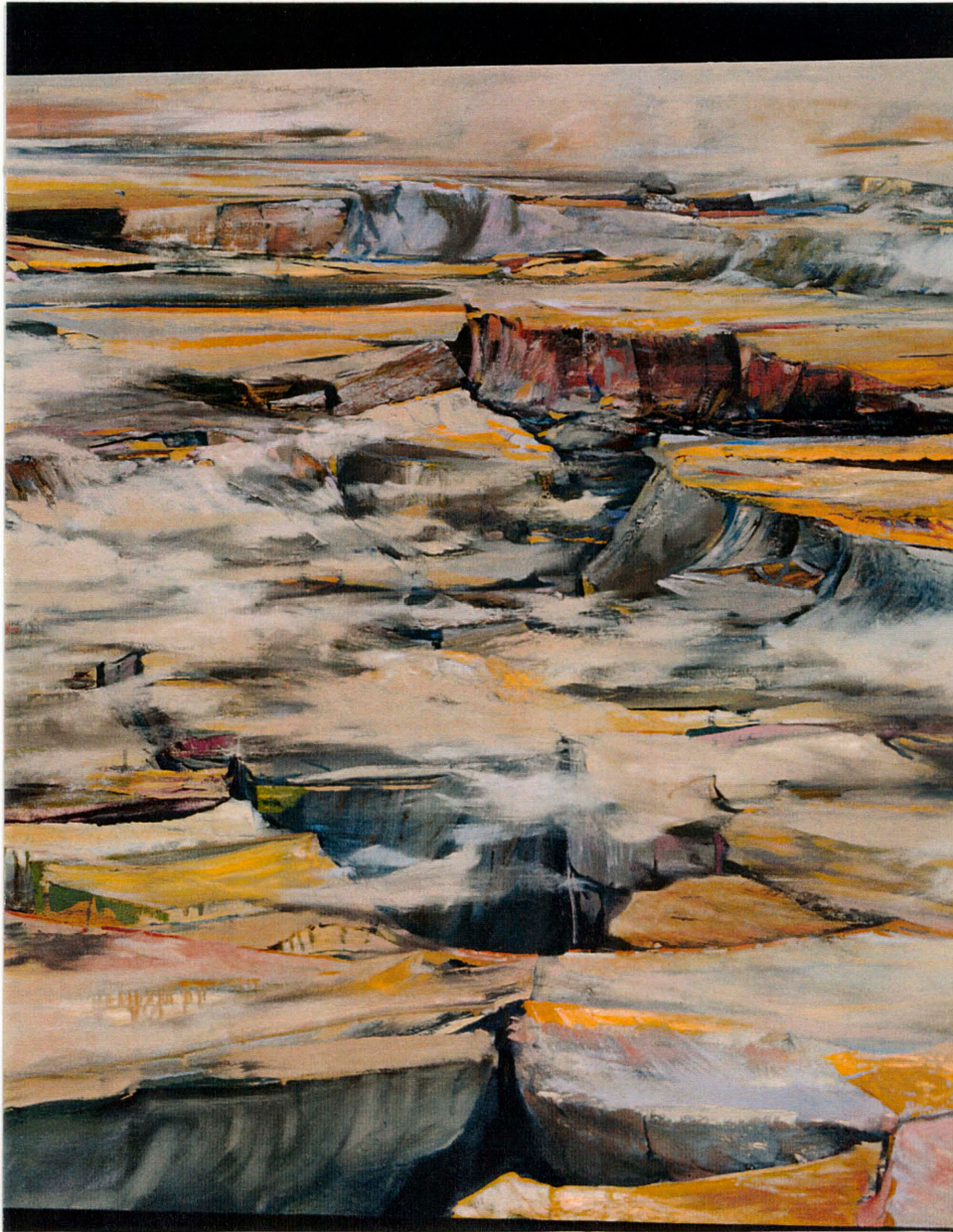


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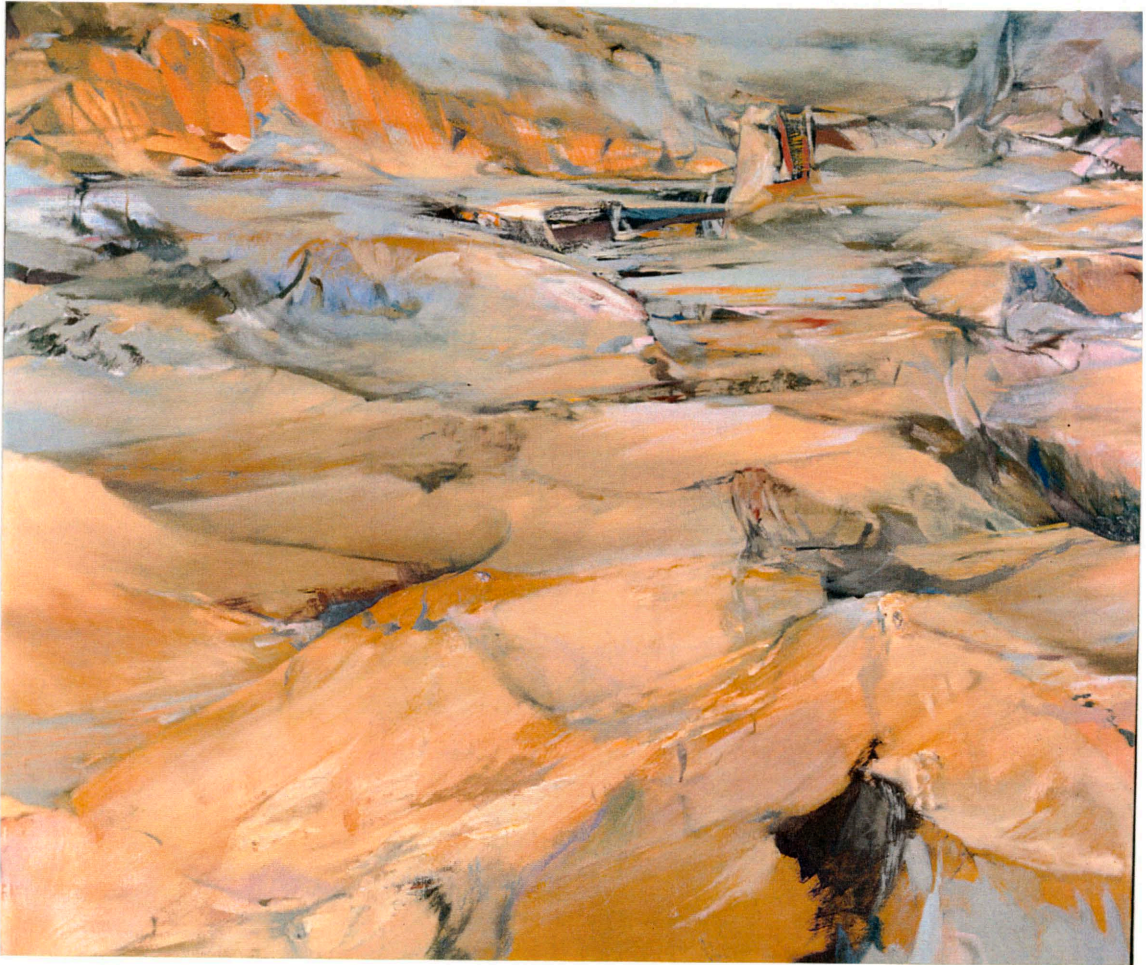


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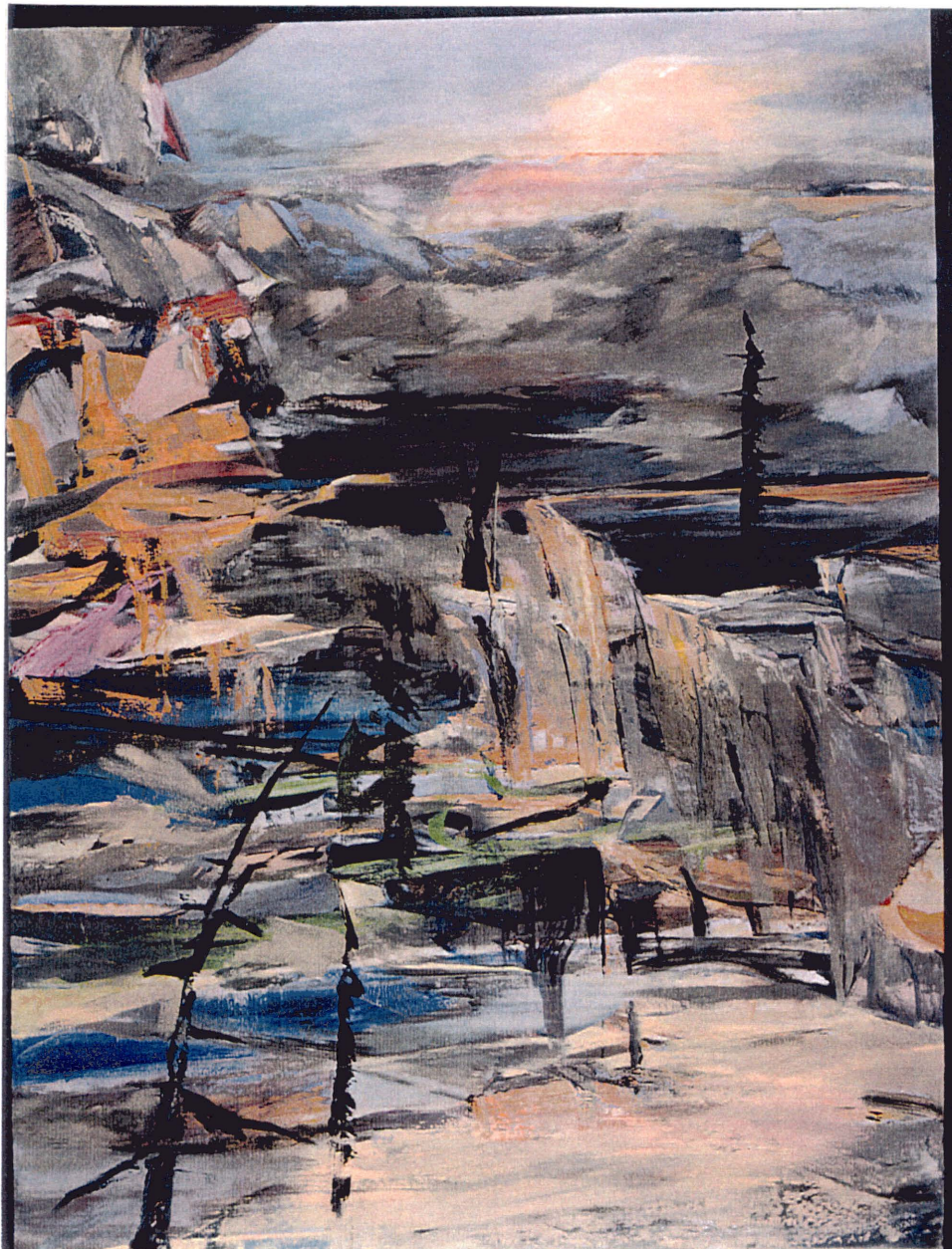


FIGURE 10

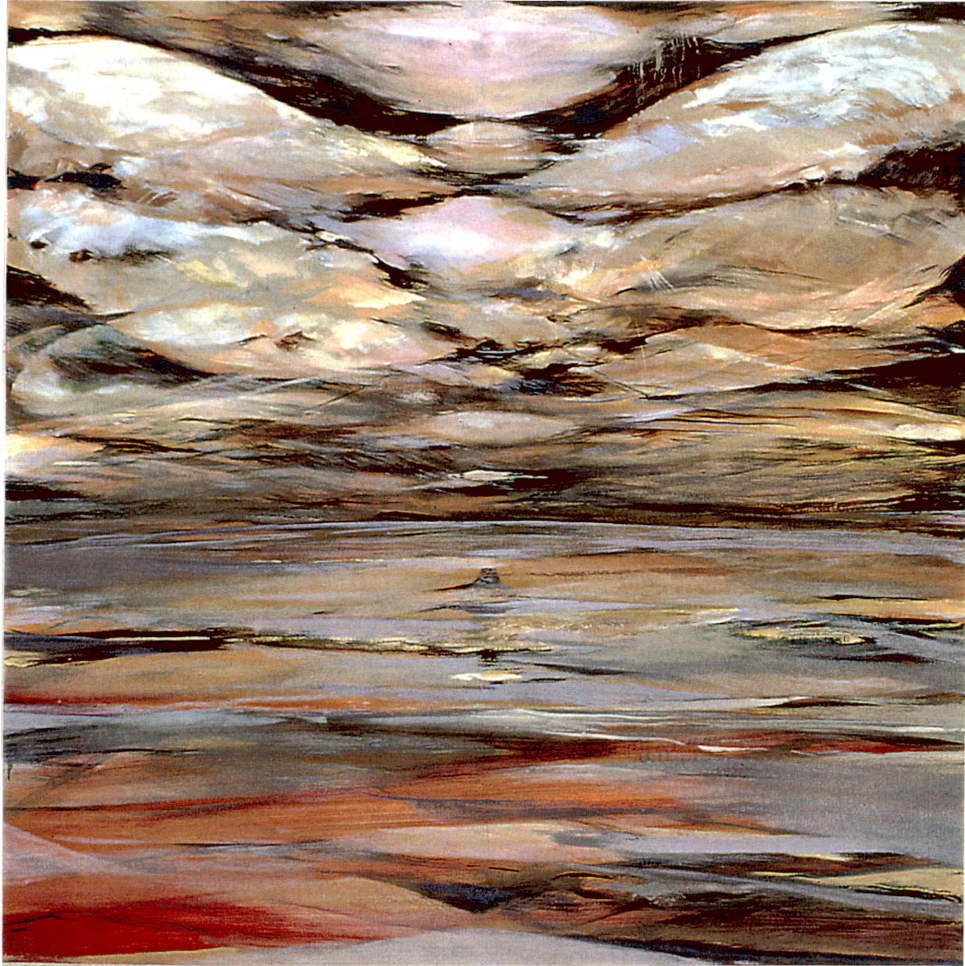


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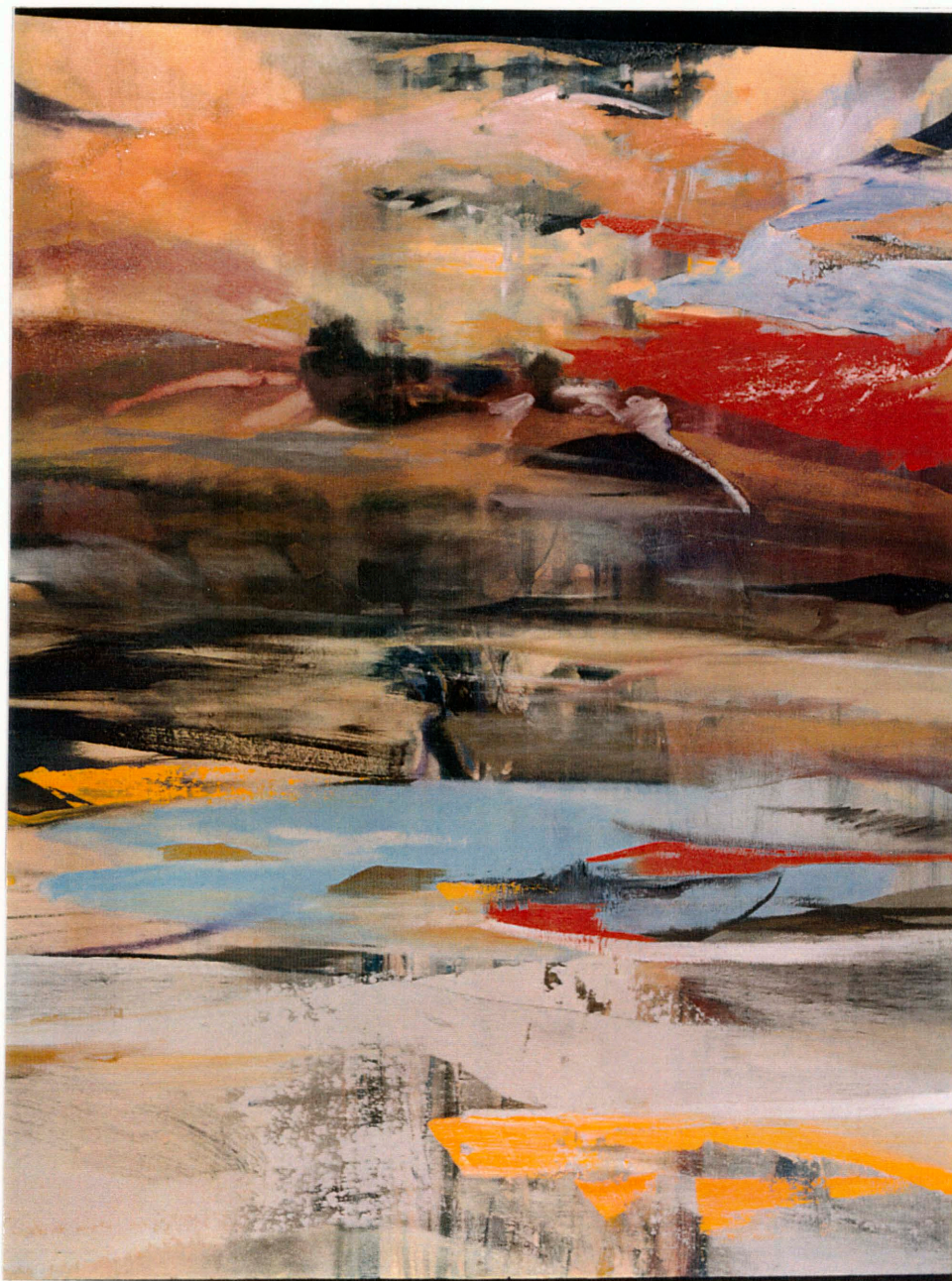


FIGURE 12



FIGURE 13



FIGURE 14



FIGURE 15

