

MODERNISM AND POST MODERNISM: THE DEBATE
SEEN THROUGH THE PAINTINGS OF
PAT STEIR AND JOAN SNYDER

Submitted by
Helene E. Ryan
Visual Art Department

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INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the relationship of Modernism and Post Modernism in Twentieth Century abstract painting. It traces the roots of Modernist Abstraction to the tradition of the Western Sublime. Art Critic Suzi Gablik and Psychologist Deldon Anne McNeely help to clarify the terms of Post Modernism from a feminist perspective. Both identify Modernism as a patriarchal art movement characterized by obsessive individualism and social neglect. They offer a feminist critique, suggesting a need for balance between the feminine and masculine aspects of our society. Pat Steir and Joan Snyder are contemporary abstract painters caught in the tumult of these two opposing art movements. Modernism supplied them with the formal language of their medium, and with an appreciation for aesthetic quality. Post Modernism insists social agenda be the mandatory focus of all artistic enterprises, and that the Modernist urge for the Sublime is antithetical to its cause. I explore how painters Pat Steir and Joan Snyder manage to synthesize the fundamentals of both Modernist and Post Modernist painting, and arrive at a position uniquely their own.

DUALISM IN WESTERN ABSTRACT PAINTING: MODERNISM AND POST MODERNISM: THE DEBATE

The history of Western art is rooted partially in dualism. Many artists and critics perceive Modernism to be an art movement which neglects social responsibility. Suzi Gablik, in The Reenchantment of Art, offers a feminist critique of Modernism based on a philosophy of ethics for the artist. She believes artists hold an ethical responsibility to consider social, environmental and ecological needs when creating artwork. According to Gablik, Modernism was an era of non-purposeful art in which artists were committed to "severing bonds with society."¹ She believes artistic freedom for the modernist means freedom from community and from obligation to the world; it means freedom from relatedness. Gablik proposes a Post Modern paradigm of participation for artists where the thinking shifts from making objects to making relationships. She references David Michael Leven from Northwestern University who writes about "the opening of vision and the cultivation of what he calls the Listening Self as principles for a new and more feminine mode of Being based on interdependence and the intertwining of self and other."² Gablik draws additional insights from Catherine Keller who identifies a fundamental dualism in Western culture: "In the western mainstream, world has been scraped out of soul as surely as soul has been ground out of world."³ Gablik suggests artists reframe their notion of artistic freedom in light of a more holistic model, from unyielding individualism to a system of participation that takes community into account. She perceives this shift as a movement from the masculine to the feminine functions of the personality.

¹ Gablik, Suzi. *The Reenchantment of Art*. New York: Thames and Hudson Inc. 1991, p.5

² Ibid., p10

³ Ibid., p.11

Jungian Psychologist Deldon Anne McNeely addresses this problem in her book, Mercury Rising, when she diagnoses our Western society as clinically narcissistic, lacking balance between the feminine and masculine archetypes. "Our abstract notions of God pull us like kites toward spiritual freedom. The problem is, a kite or balloon-spirit, fleeing from the messiness of nature, signifies a schizoid attitude about its own body. It is not only nature that is messy, but our thinking becomes messy when we try to integrate intimations of the soul's immortality with the clearly demonstrable mortality of the body, soul's temple."⁴ As a narcissistic culture, McNeely believes we are out of balance with the feminine (yin) aspects of our personalities. She believes this accounts for our resistance to learn from other societies: "Like a narcissistic personality who disdains the experience of others, a narcissistic society tends to overlook the wisdom and information conveyed by the philosophies, arts and music of other cultures, which are often much more sophisticated and differentiated than its own."⁵ McNeely's insights correlate directly with a feminist critique of Modernist Abstraction and illuminate the problems of disembodiment. Rooted in the tradition of the Sublime in Western art, abstract painting was primarily a function of what McNeely refers to as the masculine (yang) archetype. Post Modernism, as defined by Suzi Gablik, denies the Modernist tradition of spiritual transcendence as a valid aspect of human experience, worthy of artistic exploration. She feels artists must work in service to healing society, and associates this as a feminine attribute sorely lacking in Western Culture.

Pat Steir and Joan Snyder are contemporary abstract painters who maintain a liminal position on the cusp of Post Modernism. They engage in a dialectic discourse between the Modernist urge for transcendence and the Post

⁴ McNeely, Deldon Anne. *Mercury Rising, Women, Evil and the Trickster Gods*. Woodstock, Connecticut: Spring Publications, Inc. 1996, p.84

⁵ Ibid., p.82

Modernist urge for embodiment. Through the act of painting, they search for a way to transcend their inherited culture of opposing dualities without severing their artistic roots. They embrace the formal aesthetics of Modernist Abstraction, yet draw their content from the concrete world of subjective experience. Pat Steir is an academically trained artist who engages art history as she raises questions for herself and her paintings, while Joan Snyder is primarily self-taught and avoids intense dialogue with the history of art. It is my perception that although they approach painting from very different sensibilities, they both achieve a spiritual balance between the traditionally opposing desires for transcendence (Modernism, the masculine) and embodiment (Post Modernism, the feminine.)

Malevich's *Black Square* painting (1914-15) was a primal moment in the emergence of Western abstract painting, according to McEvilley.⁶ It pointed painting's way into a metaphysical condition beyond image and beyond the world represented by image, into a dark vision that aligns with Edmund Burk's concept of the Sublime. Burk contrasted the Beautiful with the Sublime; the Beautiful depicting the finite things of the world and the Sublime as immense, shapeless, threatening to annihilate the limited selfhood of the viewer. The Sublime was considered a reality that threatened to remove the individual from everyday life. Malevich accounts for his development from figurative to non-figurative painting. *Black Square* represents the fading away of the vision of the world, leading to "a desert beyond form yet realer than form."⁷ This echoes the priorities of mystics of all ages. For example, it is stated in the Katha Upanishads: "There are two aspects of things, the formed and the formless; the formed is unreal, the formless is real."⁸

⁶ McEvilley, Thomas. *Pat Steir*. NY: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 1995, p.8

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Pat Steir is a painter who grew up during the Abstract Expressionist era. Her work constantly addresses and questions stylistic and philosophical trends. Her evolution as an artist maps the history of abstraction in the Twentieth Century. Pat Steir finds notions of the Sublime troubling, as it associates with patriarchal art practice of the past two centuries. She connects the Sublime with "the urge associated with male aggression, to establish control through the imposition on reality of a claimed absolute or universal. A termination of vision."⁹ Steir was trained during the Abstract Expressionist era, when the spirit of quest led the dominant artists of the New York School into modes of abstraction which they felt bridged them to the collective unconscious, to the inner world of primal forces. Steir's *Altar* painting (Plate 1) expresses her perception of male stewardship of the realm of spirit, in so far as abstract painting resides there. Two sentinal figures, part man/part animal, guard a gateway suggesting limited access. In the tradition of western art, this painting is symbolic of the passage between different realms of being; between the everyday world and the spirit world, the world of figuration and the world of abstraction. This passage is also analagous to Burk's concept of the Beautiful and the Sublime. For Steir, this clearly states her life long investigation of the relationship between the eternal and the chronological. The problem of male stewardship somehow possessing the secrets of abstraction, the realm of the spirit, and also controlling those who were allowed access is clearly stated in her *Altar* painting.

Both Modernist art and Post Modernist art relate very self-consciously to the concept of history, though in different ways. The Modernist relationship to history is sequential, each formal development leading to the next in a linear fashion. Post Modernism is multi-relational; history flows more circuitously,

⁹ Ibid., p.9

"retracing, reanalyzing and rearranging the past, layering and reduplicating its memories so as to reconceive the network of connections."¹⁰ In late Modernist, Post Modernist periods, historical context has come to seem at least as important as a description of the work itself.

Abstract Expressionist painting, an art movement informed by Modernist concerns, intended to give visibility to the invisible, to take the ahistorical and give it historical form. But Modernist anxiety grew during the post WWII era. For the abstract painters of this time, the pending end of history and the end of form were immanent. Where, then, could painting lead, once stripped of the linear narrative of history and visible imagery? This sheds light on an on-going concern throughout this century regarding the death of painting.

"A prominent part of the late Modernist mysticism of painting has been the treatment of the surface of the canvas as a metaphysical membrane between being and nothingness, a surface not purely passive but, like the surface of the primal ocean, able to yield up forms from within itself when properly stimulated."¹¹ Steir operates within this context though certainly not without skepticism. While inheriting the vocabulary of Modernist Abstraction, she questioned the pertinence and pretension of paintings that "betrayed the real space of everyday life in which things come apart and get put back together in various and often unpredictable ways."¹² Steir was not seeking a transcendental abstraction, but one that would supply a historical reference. In *Line Lima* (Plate 2), she uses Malevich's *Black Square* reference to set up a dialectical relationship. Unlike Malevich's *Black Square* as the negation of form, Steir's black square functions as a permeable veil, a membrane which allows interactive encounters between the formless and the formed. *Line Lima* is a powerful emblem of this passage from the "featureless flow of time, which

¹⁰ Ibid., p.11-12

¹¹ Ibid., p.30

¹² Ibid.

is not so unlike eternity, into the actual rigor and bondage of history."¹³ As in her *Altar* painting, the dialogue between the formless and the formed, which could also be interpreted as the ahistoric and the historic, is reasserted as a continuing subject of Steir's work.

Joan Snyder's *Landscape of the Spirit* (Plate 3) is a painting that bears remarkable resemblance in content to *Lime Lima*, although handled with a very different aesthetic sensibility. Like Steir, Snyder also references Malevich when she uses a night blue rectangle as a symbolic gateway to the spiritual Sublime. Unlike Malevich, her black square is just one part of the story. While her painting is more emotional than Steir's, Snyder is an example of another woman trained in the vocabulary of abstract painting, under the auspices of the Abstract Expressionists. Like Steir, Snyder discovered a way to paint using the inherited vocabulary of Abstract Expressionism yet in a direction that led her confrontationally into the aesthetics of subjective perception. Snyder's subject is deeply felt human emotion born from personal experience. Art critic Dore Ashton aligns Joan Snyder with "one the many Heraclitan currents flowing through the history of art - the current that bears direct testimony to the need to express through shaping matter, the strongest and often deepest emotions common to human beings."¹⁴ She elaborates that artists like Snyder who "need to communicate a strong response to experience in the most unmediated way, presupposes an instinctive faith in what modern philosophers call transsubjectivity. In making a painting, or looking at one, we want, as Snyder says, 'to have our own experiences confirmed'."¹⁵

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Nielsen Gallery. *Joan Snyder*. Boston, MA. p.1

¹⁵ Ibid.

Snyder's stroke paintings of the Seventies deconstruct the language of painting and "provide what might be referred to as painting primers."¹⁶ They refer to nothing outside the language of painting other than the urge to make a mark (Plate 4). Joan Snyder says of this series, "I was painting paint strokes. The strokes became a physical reality, not an illusion."¹⁷ The stroke paintings were painted on the grid, acknowledging the Modern equivalent of Renaissance perspective; the grid as a way of organizing information on the two-dimensional surface, affirming the painting's flatness.

Joan Snyder deconstructed painting down to its fundamental parts only to recreate her own syntactic system of meaning which was at once personal and historically pertinent. With the stroke paintings, Snyder explored the expressive potential of painting. Once this investigation was completed, she reached a crossroads where she had to change. "I had nowhere to go but into my own past again, into my own iconography: it was either less strokes and minimalizing the image, or it was going backwards and maximizing the image. And that second choice is what I did."¹⁸

The stroke paintings represented Snyder's encounter with the tradition of Modernist criticism. Her subject matter, as it began to develop in the mid-Seventies, became more personal. It was and continues to be about her longings, feelings, memories and thoughts; in short, her work is an emotional response to her experience as a woman living in this world (Plate 5). Concurrent with Snyder's newly realized freedom to paint from and about her life, Pluralism began to dominate the art world. "A diversity of individual voices had supplanted a hierarchy comprising the mainstream and its subsidiaries."¹⁹

¹⁶ Rose Art Museum. *Joan Snyder Painter*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University. 1994. p. 11

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Rose Art Museum. *Joan Snyder Painter*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University. 1994. p.15

¹⁹ Rose Art Museum. *Joan Snyder Painter*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University. 1994. p.20

Pluralism today can be viewed positively as artistic freedom, engaging the self as well as the world outside the studio. Joan Snyder illuminates her position regarding art and freedom with the following quote: "Speaking about abstract painting, I read a quote where Frank Stella spoke about his ideas about abstract painting and holding a line. He said he often fantasizes about putting a naked woman or Donald Duck into his painting, but he feels he has to hold the line and not let any of that in. I don't hold any line. I mean, if Daisy Duck or a naked woman wanted to come into my painting, I'd probably let them in. I don't hold the line."²⁰ *Of Art and Angels* (Plate 6) and *Field Memory* (Plate 7) illustrate Snyder's flexibility in regard to subject matter. Some paintings reveal feminist content. For example, her painting, *Lady Blacklines*, expresses how it sometimes feels to be a woman today, while paintings like *Field /Memory* evoke memories of experiences in nature. Her paintings emerge from her life experience rather than from a pre-determined agenda. For this reason, we can embrace the range of her work.

Steir and Snyder made a commitment in the Seventies to personalize abstraction. Both deconstructed painting down to its constituent parts: the dot, line, shape and solid for Steir, and for Snyder, the stroke and drip. They utilized the language of abstract painting to create personal iconographies and gave the metaphysical aspirations of abstract painting an earthly and historical reference.

As previously mentioned, both Steir and Snyder maintain a liminal position on the cusp of Post Modernism. Artist and critic Carl Belz warns us of the risk of rebounding to the Modernist's neglect of worldly and socially responsive content: "The perception of form totally eclipsed by content is as reductive and trivializing as its reverse, and equally nagging."²¹ He implies

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Rose Art Museum. *Joan Snyder Painter*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University. 1994. p.32

both form and content, representing Modernism and Post Modernism respectively, must be considered in all works of art. The main character in Wallace Stegner's novel, The Angle of Repose, reflects on his belief in the value of chronology and grieves for what we risk losing when we react to the past by denying it: "I believe in time and in the life chronological rather than the life existential. We live in time and through it; we build our huts in its ruins, or used to, and we cannot afford all these abandonings."²² It is my opinion that Pat Steir and Joan Snyder, artists who developed their voice and vision under the influence of Modernist Abstraction, have maintained the integrity of this tradition. With great fortitude, they have each taken this aesthetic into a new era by infusing their work with meaning born from personal experience, thus reconciling, for themselves, the Modernist/Post Modernist dilemma.

Steir's recent investigations directed her to the subject of water in the Chinese, Japanese and Western traditions. In the Taoist painting tradition, which underlies much of Chinese and Japanese art, landscape painting reflected the balanced interaction between the masculine (yang) force and the feminine (yin) force. The conjunction of mountains and water was the classic subject of this landscape tradition. In the Taoist tradition, water is symbolic of female energy. Steir emphasized the yin aspect in her water paintings as it relates to both her feminist concerns as well as to the Taoist belief that contemplation of the yin element is said to have tonic effects on the personality. The Western tradition uses the symbol of water as purifier and as an oceanic soup from which identities separate and emerge into visibility. In the early eighties, Steir's *Wave Series* were based on works by Courbet and Turner (Plate 8). They were not so much a regressive yearning toward the Sublime as they were "an art historical homage to

²² Stegner, Wallace. *Angle of Repose*. NY: Viking Penguin, ,1971

the tradition of the Sublime in Western art."²³ In 1987, her *Wave Series* paintings gradually transformed into waterfalls (Plate 9). Steir emphasized Pollock's drip technique for these later works. The early Waterfall paintings had painterly brushwork which eventually was replaced completely with the drip method. Pollock developed the drip method in the Fifties. He painted his canvases on the floor, able to control the paint's direction and gesture. Steir worked her paintings on the wall, allowing the force of gravity to determine the "destiny of the fluid, which as the Tao Te Ching says, always seeks the lowest place humbly."²⁴ Unlike Pollock, Steir's was a method of minimal control, stressing the conceptual nature of this technique rather than emphasizing expression. Her use of this drip method was more a homage to the tradition of painting than it was an expressive gesture performed for its own sake. Unlike Pollock who poured his paint, Steir's drips were made by either stroking the paint surface with an oversaturated brush or by flinging the paint without ever touching the canvas. This references the Chinese or Japanese flung-ink style.

Steir continued to relinquish personal control with the early Waterfall paintings by eliminating coloration, aligning with Chinese *bokugwa* and Japanese *sumi-e* genres (Plate. 10). These paintings connect her eclectically to the Abstract Expressionists (Pollock) and to Japanese and Chinese traditions. With her mature work, the drip becomes, in essence, the waterfall it represents, reminiscent of how word and picture are unified in Zen calligraphy. Steir took Pollock's drip one step further by combining it with image (Plate 11). Her creative process was both meditative and athletic; she patiently watched and waited for the right moment to fling the paint.

²³ McEvilley, Thomas. *Pat Steir*. NY: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 1995. p. 58

²⁴ McEvilley, Thomas. *Pat Steir*. NY: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 1995. p. 64

In 1991, the Waterfall paintings became colorful. With *Inner Lhamo* (Plate 12), Steir uses a palette of bright primary and secondary colors based on the colors of Tibetan *tanka* paintings. The color mixes were made both intuitively and randomly. She poured one primary color over another, allowing the paint to mix itself, arriving at an unexpected range of colors. As with the Tibetan *tanka* tradition, she questioned what particular emotions were evoked by the colors. Kandinsky discusses the spiritual effects of color in his classic book, Concerning the Spiritual in Art. This is another example of how Steir interweaves Eastern and Western sensibilities.

CONCLUSION

Western art, and specifically Twentieth Century abstract painting, as emblematic of our culture, continues to be embroiled in the Modern and Post Modern dialectics of transcendence and embodiment, personal growth and social agenda, and in the conflicting motivations of the feminine and masculine functions of society. McEvilley, Gablik, and McNeely address the challenges that confront any Westerner working today as he or she inherits this split consciousness.

Pat Steir and Joan Snyder are examples of abstract painters who position themselves critically between opposing artistic movements. Like the Zen painting tradition which is rooted in non-duality, they are neither Modernist nor Post Modernist, and their work refuses categorization. They paint at a particular moment in time in which the challenge for artists is how they can shape a present and future that nourishes the individual and the community without severing their cultural roots. Many contemporary artists and art critics mourn that, in recent years, form has been sacrificed to content. The paintings of Pat Steir and Joan Snyder integrate formal quality and content. As they question and express the truth of their experience, their integrity lies in the honesty they bring to the painting endeavor, and in their refusal to accommodate current philosophical trends.

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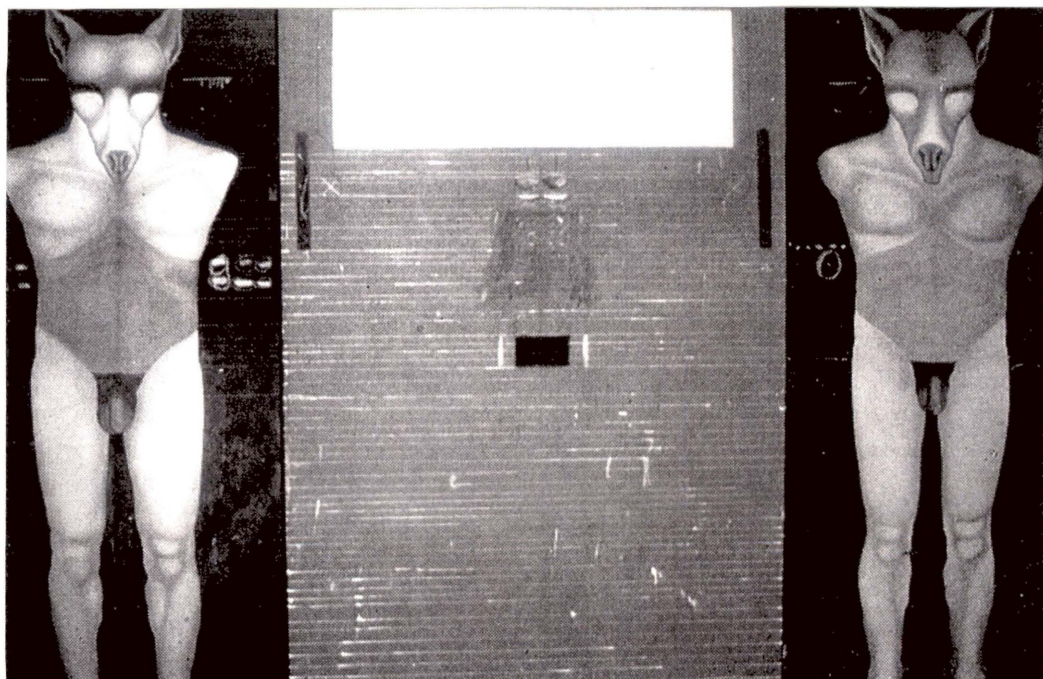


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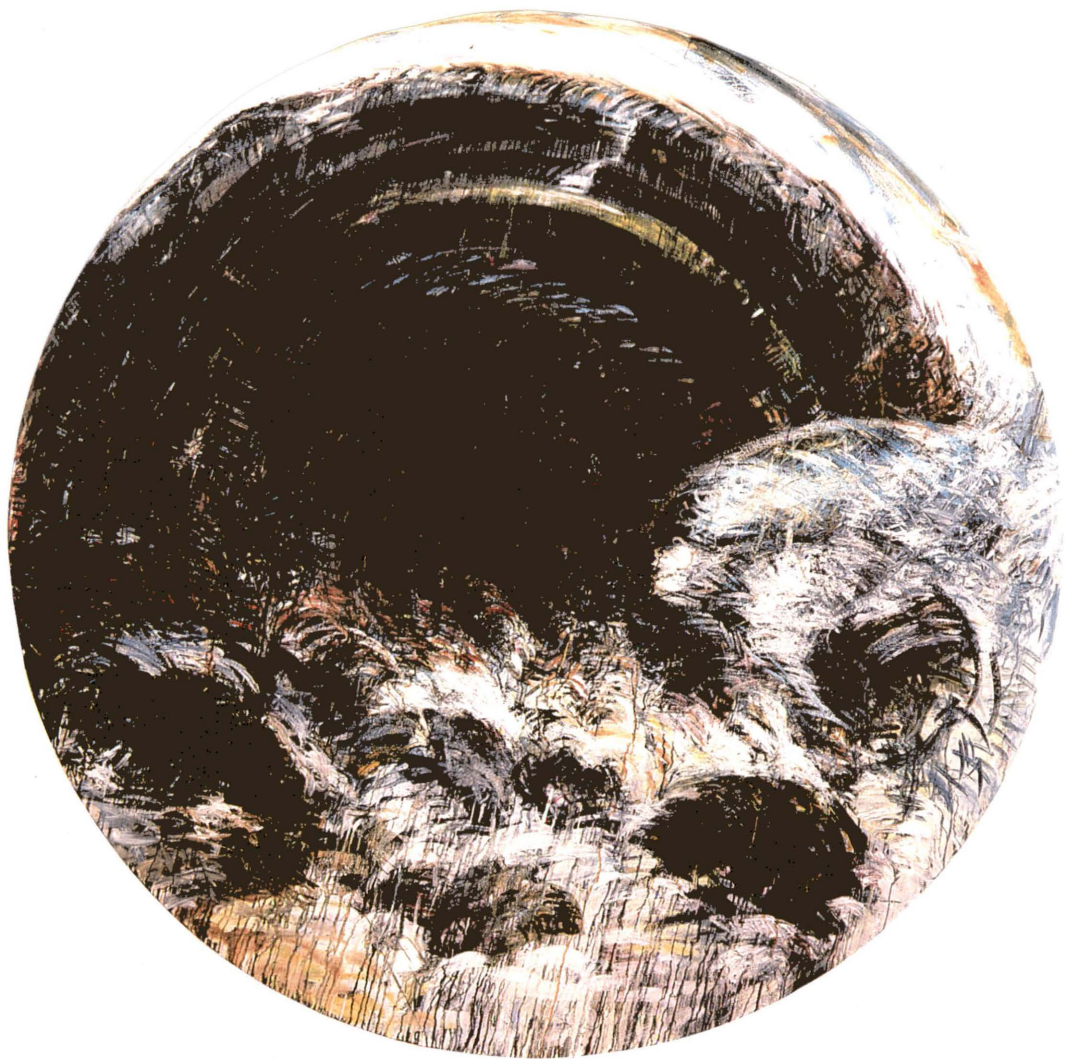


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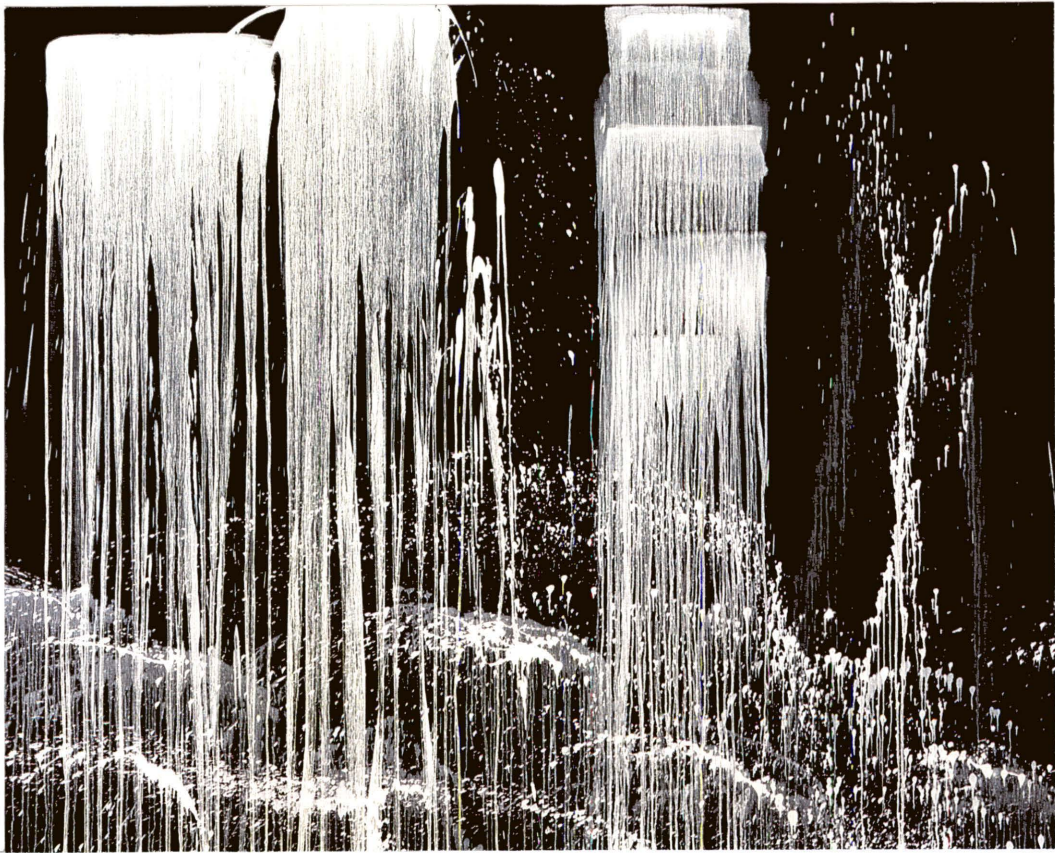


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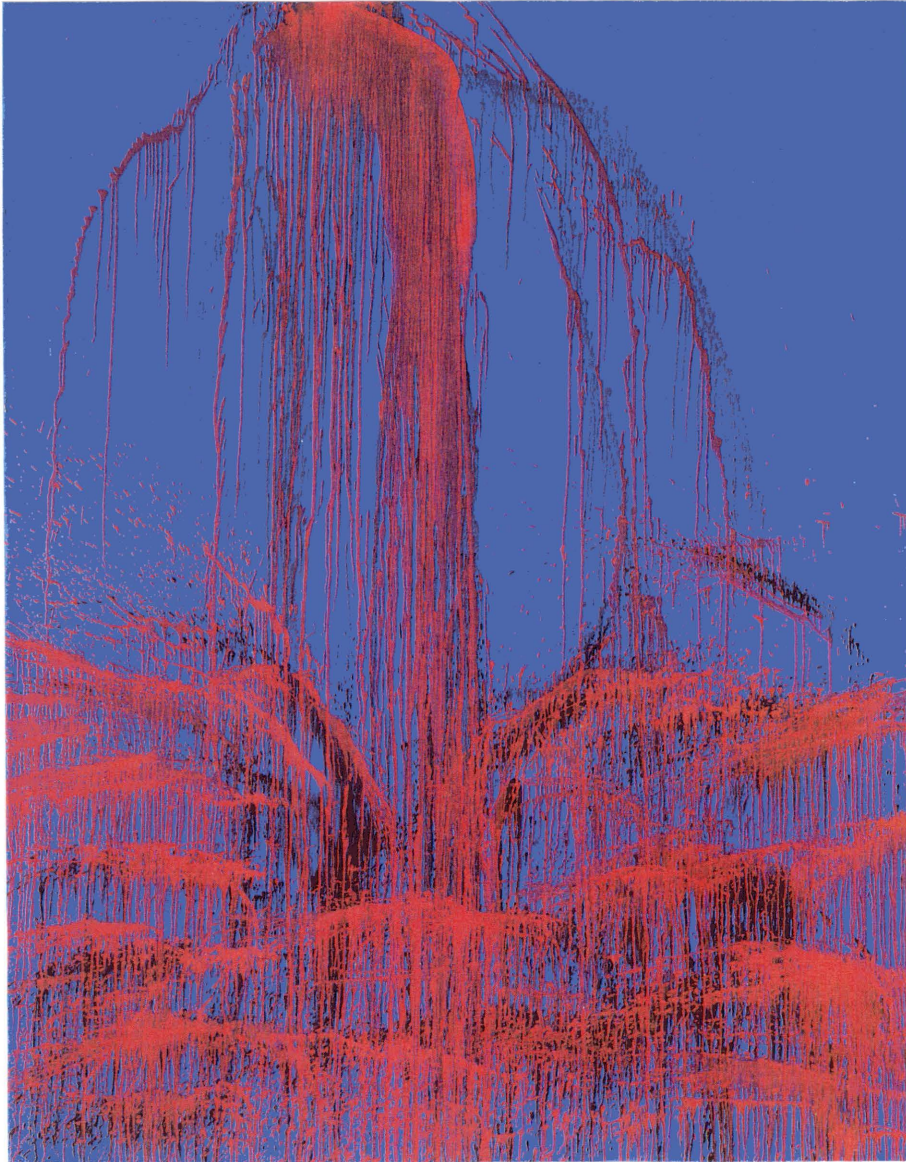


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