

**WALTER  
HOLLIS  
STEVENS**





Stevens, ca., 1978

## **Walter Hollis Stevens**

**An Exhibition of Paintings, 1956 - 1980**

This exhibition is dedicated to Mrs. Wray Stevens  
in memory of her late husband, and to their  
children, Holly and Andrew.

### **The Author**

Frederick C. Moffatt is a graduate of Colby College and holds a M.A. from Arizona State University and a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago where he studied with Joshua Taylor. In 1977 Moffatt directed an exhibition of Arthur Wesley Dow's paintings and prints for the National Collection of Fine Arts in Washington, D.C. and also for Columbia University. He is author of Arthur Wesley Dow, which was published by the Smithsonian Institution Press in 1977, and has published articles on American art in various journals. At present he is producing a catalog for the James M. Cowan collection of American Art at The Parthenon, Nashville, Tennessee. An associate professor, Moffatt teaches the history of art at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.



## The Initiate

Walter H. Stevens was born August 5, 1927 at Mineola, Long Island, New York. He was the son of Walter H. and Marion Smith Stevens who had met while art students at The Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. The father, a commercial artist, died in 1940.

Stevens developed abiding interests in travel and music quite early. At Mineola High he sang and played classical piano. Family trips to New England would prove to be a valued part of his education. By chance, his older sister Jane (Mrs. Jane Andrews of Berkeley, California) entered Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa to study commercial art. Following his high school commencement in 1945 and a subsequent year spent as an Army payroll clerk, Stevens also entered Drake as a music major. After his first semester, however, he shifted his course of study to the art department and began taking instruction in painting, graphics, and sculpture from Richard Bealmer, Karl Mattern, and Richard J. Rasmussen.

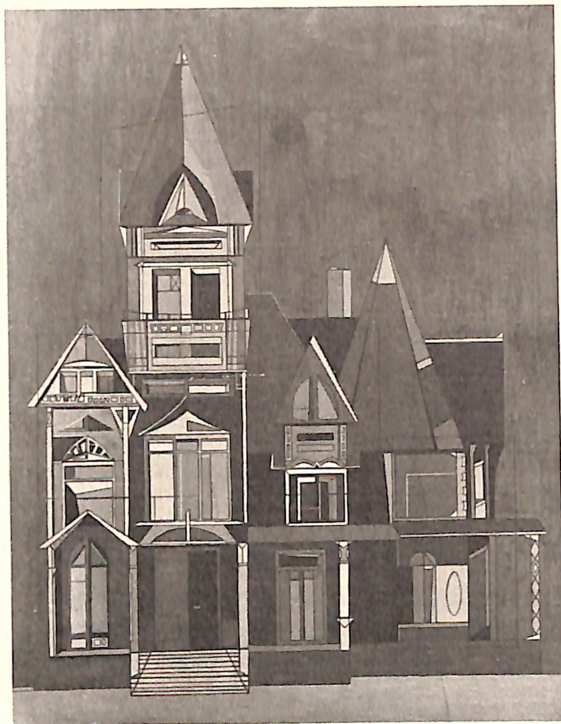
He wasted little time applying himself to the new discipline. He became active in the national art fraternity Delta Phi Delta, won several scholarships, began helping to administrate the Des Moines Art Center, and, in 1950, confidently launched his first one-man exhibition. To associates, Stevens' talent was obvious enough;<sup>1</sup> at the crossroads of graduation he might well have retired to a New York City garret. Yet a sensitivity to economic realities and a conviction that he must live in a "thinking society" and be a part of a "meaningful cultural group" directed him toward a teaching career. After graduation from Drake in January, 1951, Stevens married Wray Brown, a resident of Des Moines. The first job offer came from the bleak prairie town of Paris, Illinois. As art supervisor for Paris Public Schools, Stevens

had to establish art programs for four individual schools and attempt to meet 1,200 pupils individually each week. The assignment could not last long: "art in this situation had to go out the window in favor of the child, in all integrity to what I believe were my responsibilities as a teacher."<sup>2</sup> In the summer of 1953 the Stevens moved once again, this time only a few miles north to Champaign-Urbana where, in September, the young instructor enrolled in the M.F.A. program at the University of Illinois.

Photographs of works destroyed or no longer located and one extant oil indicate something of Stevens' painting style before his entry into graduate school. A common feature is a taut linear structure that either serves to frame flat color planes or screens open space beyond. Of this group only a 1951 depiction of a Victorian house (perhaps the only student work the artist did not discard) is based on an identifiable object (fig. 1). The others, oils produced from 1950 to 1952 (figs. 2, 3, and 4) present disembodied images ultimately derived from the classical Picasso and his legion of School of Paris followers, particularly Arshile Gorky, as well as German, Dutch, and Russian strains of Cubism. Whether tense and morbidly symbolic, gay and whimsical, or merely visually interpretative, it was a similar form of linear geometry that in 1950 had brought many young artists such as Ynez Johnson to the apogee of their careers and more seasoned painters like Lyonel Feininger, Karl Knaths and Ward Lockwood to second bloomings.

For these artists and their spokesmen as for Stevens, this "Northern" abstraction was much more than a winning formula; its practice affirmed values that could be passed on to a new generation. Constituted by international collaboration, it was universal. Perceived as an evolved stage of





**Figure 1.** *Untitled* 1951, Oil on masonite, (dimensions unknown)

30,000 years of art history, when certain essential laws of harmony and order prevailed, it was eternal. Regarded by its advocates as "pure" painting, it, nonetheless, uncovered astonishing parallels between the visual arts and physical science, mechanical engineering, language, mathematics, psychology, sociology, philosophy and music. Such considerations, as they were articulated in catalogs, magazines and in studios on college campuses were not particularly new. But at the moment when, as Attilio Salemmé phrased it, the "drip-and-blob" of New York Abstract Expressionism was threatening to disengage art from all past and present circumstances, the premise seemed worth repeating and the style worth defending anew.

Beyond his deep appreciation for musical composition, Stevens' confidence as an artist had thus far been bolstered by a trust in an evolutionary progression and a particularly strong moral disposition. In Des Moines, he built around himself the ideal image of artist as community leader. To intimates he was "Waldo," that nervously watchful nephew of blind Mr. Magoo. Bealmer found Stevens' initiative and sense of responsibility equal to his creative abilities. The manager of a Des Moines paint shop, where the art student clerked, noted approvingly his assistant was not given to drinking or gambling. Thus, in his early paintings, rectitude finds appropriate aesthetic expression in the intersection of line; each interchange records a moment of judgement and concern that is dealt with quickly and decisively. The evolving pattern, which evokes a plethora of imagery extending from stain glass and cathedral construction to a map of mid-western farmland, reveals itself finally as a multitude of solved problems. In a similar way, as in his daily life, Stevens attempted to follow diverging paths of art and education; he traveled a line equally direct and unswerving. In 1955 he wrote: "I have found the thread I must follow as a creative artist, as well as gained in my ability to transmit my ideas to



**Figure 2.** *Untitled* 1950, Oil on masonite, 23" x 36"



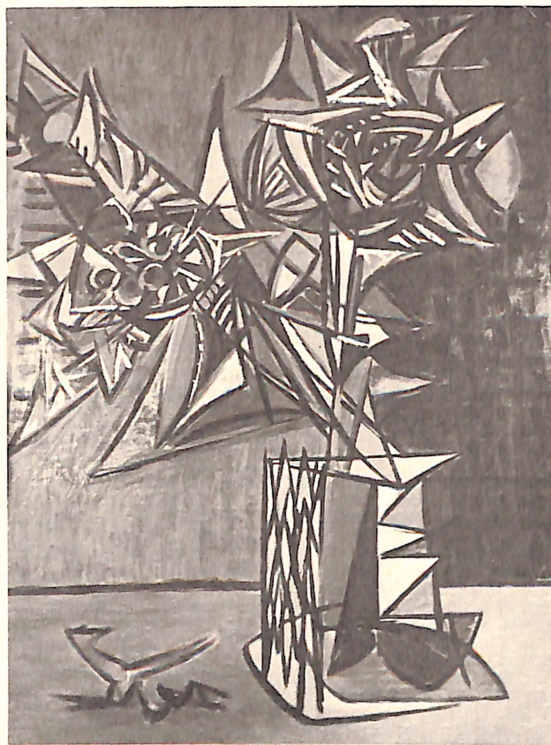
others."<sup>3</sup> Not always was the portrayal rigid and uncompromising; in fact, it was Stevens' sense of humor and friendliness that most impressed his classmates. His impulse to profusely diagram and garishly color a Gothic house conveys an almost Steinbergian impishness, but, as is true for the subtle characterizations of Grant Wood, witticism no doubt overlies a somewhat more serious regard for the virtues of plain living and strength of character.

### The Graduate

The temporary appointment of Abraham Rattner to its art faculty in 1952 and its well-publicized art festivals promoting abstraction and avant-gardism were making the University of Illinois an important disseminator of contemporary art in America's heartland. Annually since 1948, the festivals featured two months of exhibitions, lectures, and events in the fields of painting, theatre, dance, and music. As instruments for defending value in contemporary forms of abstraction, these events defined the academic's answer to the "malicious" and anarchistic principles of New York School. Leading these presentations was critic-historian Allen Weller, Dean of the College of Fine and Applied Arts, for whom Rattner's painting and teaching served as role-model for his own critical position. It was primarily Rattner's reputation that attracted Stevens to the Illinois graduate program.

In the early 1950's the graduate building was a "crazy place" where lights burned late into the evening, and its inhabitants a "crazy group," the self-proclaimed "Sixteen Internationally Unknown Artists" (fig. 5).<sup>4</sup> As Stevens joined this entourage, words like "abstraction" and "expression" were yet to become fast clichés. His colleagues all realized the path toward high personal

adventure led away from the old naturalism, but its furthest limits had not been charted. Augmenting this sense of freedom was the fact the graduate studio program remained unfettered by curfews or other administrative regimen, nor had most of the instructors commenced the soon



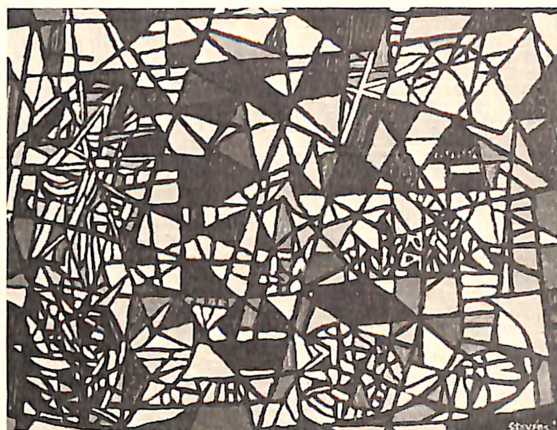
**Figure 3.** *Untitled* 1952, Oil on masonite, 26' x 36"

popular ritual of psychoanalyzing graduate students "like they are deciding the fate of the world."<sup>5</sup>

Besides Rattner, whose appointment terminated in Stevens' first year, he studied painting with Nicola V. Ziroli, printmaking with Lee Chesney, and art history with Weller. Had he entered Illinois a year earlier, he might also have taken a painting



class with Richard Diebenkorn, whose flight from Urbana to New York occurred in the Spring of 1953. With Weller, Stevens studied Northern Art; the neat crystalline paintings of the German and Flemish Renaissance captivated him. Alongside hand-printed class notes, Stevens illustrated Memlings and Holbeins with infinite patience. One of his assignments as a graduate assistant was teaching art history to architecture students. Rattner's presence in the Midwest after his long French exile came at an opportune moment insofar as the Stevens generation was concerned. Without Rattner's example and a timely national



**Figure 4.** *Untitled* 1952, Oil on masonite, 18" x 24"

review of French Fauvistic painting, the cold Germanic element in contemporary abstraction might have run its inevitable course into pure calculation, rendering impossible any compromise with Abstract Expressionism. Faced with such a prospect, a painting instructor bent on teaching a system of values could have only expected a career of isolation and bewilderment. But drawing upon the authority of assembled master colorists extending in a line from the Lascaux caves, Byzantium and Medieval Paris, down through the

Venetians and Turner to Van Gogh, Rouault and Soutine, Rattner could reassure his audience on the matter of expressive feeling in painting. Said he, "Color is to painting what sound is to music." The revelation of a spontaneous force of gesture, layered impastos and strident coloring he compared to religious acts. With Kandinsky, he believed the sources of inspiration were "the keys and chords of our inner being."<sup>6</sup> Expressionism, Rattner argued, should not refute subject but resurrect theme and symbol to their traditional place in art. At the same time, Rattner refuted the idea that color and line were necessarily inimical. Utilizing Rouault's emphatic black ribbon, which in his Urbana years tended to trace out diamond-shaped prisms occasionally intermixed with crescents and spiky rays, Rattner made structure and a "jewel-like" handling of paint equal partners in forging his expressive statements. It would seem that along with Weller, the "Internationally Unknowns" had in their visiting instructor a worthy guide to escort them cautiously out of the past.

It would be impossible to exaggerate the importance to Stevens of the Weller-Rattner connection. Thanks to their collaboration, it was "Nature Oriented Abstract Expressionism" not "Abstract Expressionism" he would henceforth profess to follow.<sup>7</sup> "Nature oriented" not only has to do with an objective physical condition upon which his imagery would always depend, whether closely or distantly, but the phrase also connotes a particular kind of human relationship which in Stevens' terminology translates roughly into "duty." The artist has the double obligation to put himself into a relationship with nature and also to make the experience of this relationship convincing to the observer. In this regard he was to write, "I now consider the duty of an art instructor to be not only that of an information center, but even more



to the point, that of an inspiring agent. Beyond this idea of duty, lies the important factor of my own existence, for in my desire to work with thinking individuals, 'duty' becomes an integral part of 'advantage'."8 This resolve, which went into his

every turn. For his part, Weller regarded Stevens as a "great natural talent," but added that he was "a sensitive person who sometimes covers up a basic seriousness with a manner which seems slightly flippant."10



**Figure 5.** Graduate painters, The University of Illinois, Urbana, ca., 1954. Standing back row from left: Bill Colby, Robert Wilbert, Tom Fricano, Robert Taugner, Billy Jackson, John Hannah, and Bill Armstrong; Center: Stevens; Seated from left: Ken Burge and Al Miller

career placement portfolio, might also be read as a tribute to Rattner's effectiveness in inspiring him. As late as 1979, Stevens had occasion to renew this warm regard when, in an interview, he singled out Rattner from possibly hundreds of influences that had left their imprints on his oeuvre because of "his love and devotion to art that is almost religious fervor."9

Nevertheless, Stevens was careful to put distance between himself and his instructors. For example, Rattner's lingering obedience to the School of Paris would seem to put too much emphasis upon religious and biographical content. Symbolic imagery and verbose analysis guided Rattner at

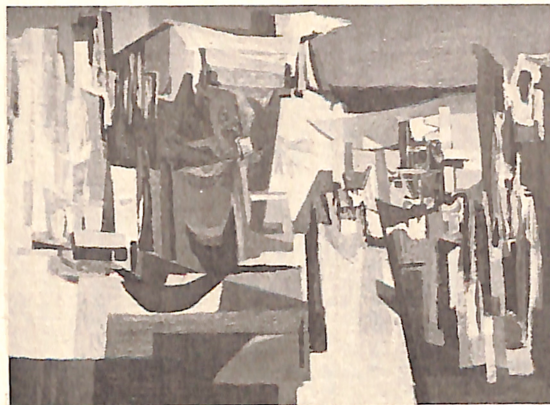
## Toward an Uncertain Future

Turning to the oils of the later 1950's, we find a rapid change of style, a kind of accelerated evolution characteristic of early maturity. The metamorphosis is most pronounced in a period of three years, from 1953, when he was beginning graduate school, to 1956, a year of changing situations following his graduation. "Sea Edge I" and "St. Louis I" are from 1953 and "Pinball," a rare figurative subject, dates from the following year (figs. 6, 7 and 8). "Waterfall" and "South Ridge II" were painted in 1956 (figs. 9 and 10).

The three earlier paintings, consistent with a popular trend emerging in the late 1940's, are



American sagas of the kind being revived from the 1930's. The title, "Sea Edge I," allows the viewer an indispensable clue to the discovery of typical regional motifs. In "St. Louis I," the artist hopes the spectator will not just think of an archetypal



**Figure 6.** *Sea Edge I* 1953, Oil on masonite, 36" x 48"

metropolis like those of Feininger's "City At the Edge of the World" series, but appreciate some of the actual landmarks of a place where Stevens spent time. The pinball player, madly attacking his machine, would make a ludicrous addition to a motif pretending to address some universal issue, but rather successfully sets the stage for an American drama based upon specific time, location, and social mores. But these views are hardly random geographic reports. They are "message" paintings, advancing subjects, as Stevens said, "with which I feel deeply involved." New England, the ancestral home for the Stevens and the Smiths, was a reassuring symbol replete with idyllic childhood memories. His regard for St. Louis, a town often visited and the location of his second one-man exhibition,<sup>11</sup> was strongly flavored by social concerns (Stevens took double minor degrees at Illinois in English and Social Science). St. Louis, he wrote in his M.F.A. thesis, was a golden

city rising up from the land as a giant, but it was also a place where man and nature seemed to have struck an ideal accord.<sup>12</sup>

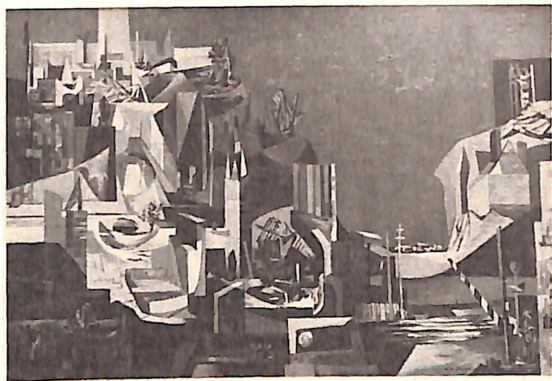
These are the presentments of an extremely confident and ambitious young man for whom the increasing chaos of great American cities in evidence today would have been incomprehensible. Such approbation took for granted Einstein's assertion that order always lay behind the chaos of appearance or the most limited fragment of experience, and that artist and scientist alike had the responsibility to make this order manifest.<sup>13</sup>

Stevens' updated version of the School of Paris well served his determination to formalize and unify limited experience. While "Pinball" has in it hints of Rattner's rugged, searching procedure, "St. Louis I" seems arrogant in its sense of perfection and in the accuracy of its quoted imagery. Never again would the artist so methodically choose from available formulas as here. Should we care to follow it, the entire history of Cubism, together with its supposed antecedents (the Fourteenth Century muralists, the Renaissance, Cézanne) unfolds before us; depicted material space and surface reality resume their well-rehearsed contest. Geometric forms of every imaginable shape are defined by the ruled edge or by line. In certain passages, the geometric interplay quickens and proliferates fugue-like into densely ordered junctures. Color is resonant. Acid yellows, bright reds, oranges, violets, and greens flash before more somber blues, greys, and browns. With a palette knife the artist has spread paint across the hard masonite surface as if it were plaster. Texture is created not by the support, which is smooth, but by the action of the knife and brushes alone. The opacity of paint now allows a gradual reversal of the old function of line. Line appears from beneath adjoining color areas



rather than on top of them. Color, to paraphrase Rattner, has become sound and line the void.

However, not even this significant reversal of concepts regarding artistic expression could quite prepare us for "Waterfall" or "South Ridge II."



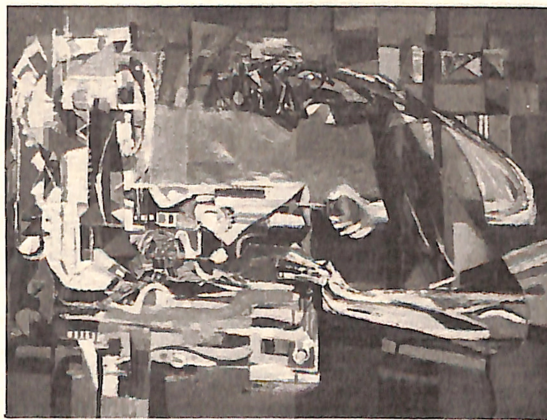
**Figure 7.** *St. Louis I* 1953, Oil on masonite, 4' x 6'

Even in his most savagely expressive moments, as in 1955 when he painted "Figures in Farmscape," Rattner pushed viscous layers of raw paint over one another as if he were in fact plowing Illinois fields himself. But even as seen in a black-and-white illustration, "Waterfall" is obviously an amazingly fluid work formed of broad, rapidly-painted brush strokes of relatively thin color. In order to fill almost four vertical feet of canvas, the artist had to employ forceful swings of his painting arm, thus physically joining compositional "movements" with muscular action. "South Ridge II" is more subdued, and its compositional poise more consistent with "St. Louis I." Nevertheless, the stroking gesture, a provisional nudging of paint against the textured canvas surface, has less to do with the earlier concern for efficiently covering an area. Color, stroke, and preconceived shape begin to compete against one another for the viewer's attention as a sparing use of line takes a more discretionary turn than before.

Mood is still integral with the chosen elements. Our glimpse of "South Ridge," with its cool palette and sedate arrangement, is overwhelmed by gentle melancholy. Only now, a particular quality of stroke—in the case of "South Ridge II," a soft touching, in "Waterfall" an explosive slash—began to replace fixed symbols in presenting the "message."

In 1956, then, there is a tilt away from the Midwestern branch of the School of Paris to the New York School, or at least the Willem de Kooning version of that school. It was the year "de Kooning" became a household word. At New York's Sidney Janis Gallery in the spring, De Kooning had exhibited "Easter Monday," the first of those gigantic urban landscapes that in the late 1950's replaced the grotesque "Woman" series. For a new generation, these canvases were somehow easier to accept; where before the master had a few disciples, he now had a national following.<sup>14</sup> As a part of that following, Stevens sensed that the precise personality of a De Kooning edge or angled curve had to do with measured scale and velocity of stroke. It is precisely this personality we detect in "South Ridge II."

What prompted this precipitous change in out-



**Figure 8.** *Pinball* 1954, Oil on masonite, 36" x 48"





**Figure 9.** *Waterfall* 1956, Oil on canvas, 44" × 28"

look could lead us into endless speculation. Suffice it to say his graduation in June of 1955 forced upon Stevens a professional identity that had to be met in some visible way. De Kooning's example offered not a style or performance within a fixed system—Rattner would always remain the grand performer—but an attitude of passionate inquiry. Cubism for De Kooning was a point of departure, not a goal. There was no need for the initiate to relinquish a basic faith in duty and nature in order to become a De Kooningite; be-

fore the repturous "Easter Monday," such Cedar Bar mantras as "boredom" and "anxiety" could easily be forgiven and forgotten. All one was being asked to do, in exchange, was to make a specific emotional state produced by circumstances more important than circumstances itself.

Another point concerning 1956 has to do with professional identity and economics. So far Stevens had been an extremely active exhibitor. In his first nine years as an artist, his work had been accepted into over fifty exhibitions, not only in the Midwest, but also in Boston, Philadelphia, Seattle, Oakland, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Brooklyn, El Paso, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C. There had been a moderate number of purchases and he had garnered five exhibition awards as well. But, obviously, due to the considerable cost of shipping and matters of convenience, he exhibited his oils only in shows relatively close to home. To big-city patrons Stevens was one of many promising printmakers then being turned out by college workshops. The workhorse of these early prints was "Structure Nine," a mixed intaglio no doubt produced in Lee Chesney's print class in about 1954 (fig. 11).<sup>15</sup> It is an ambitious work, revealing the mixture of control, flexibility, and eloquence that Chesney made essential to printmaking. The great variety of effects made possible through burnishing, soft ground, dry point, and aquatint methods has stimulated a spontaneity still rarely found in the oils. Yet, no matter how promising his command of technical possibilities, Stevens, with his teacher, must have been quite aware of the limited professional acceptance of the medium in America. Indeed, Chesney was quick to concede, "Painting remains the leading medium in Western Fine Arts."<sup>16</sup>



No, what Stevens could have most hoped for was a national reputation as a painter, a reputation that could be won only through contact with New York publicity and gallery affiliation. That is why his selection by the editors of *Art in America* magazine for inclusion in their "New Talent" issue of March, 1957 seemed like an especially good omen (among the thirty-one painters selected for featured articles and for inclusion in a traveling exhibition sponsored by the American Federation of Arts were Helen Frankenthaler and Ellsworth Kelly). The basis for selection, wrote John I. D.



**Figure 10.** *South Ridge II* 1956, Oil on canvas, 50' x 40'

Baur in the introduction, was that the participants, having discovered the means to express their own personal visions with vitality and diversity, could easily be distinguished from the large pool of merely promising "school-painters." Stevens' personal statement, appearing beside an illustration of "Waterfall," pointed to the crucial role of experience. "This experience may be the reaction to the mood of moist air, a strange rock formation, a mysterious flow of water, a certain quality of light . . . The purpose is to re-create and hold the transient emotions stemming from a participation in nature."<sup>17</sup>

## The Man on His Own

Most of the old Illinois gang had dispersed to far-flung locations. Only Don Robertson and William Jackson remained in Urbana, having taken teaching positions in the ever expanding studio program. Stevens' good friend Robert Taugner, a former high-seas adventurer-turned-painter, was in Knoxville, teaching at the University of Tennessee. In June of 1956, Stevens, himself, was concluding a somewhat unpleasant year as instructor at Ohio State University in Columbus. With few options, the thread of his career seemed to lead in Taugner's direction. In the summer he took a job as display artist for the Atomic Energy Museum in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, as he made ready to introduce his work to a regional clientele. Paintings, prints, and watercolors went out to New Orleans, Columbia, South Carolina, and to Knoxville, where in the spring or 1957, the print "Structure Nine" captured the purchase award in the Spring Jury Show sponsored by the Knoxville Art Center at the Audigier Gallery on the University of Tennessee campus. Through Taugner, Stevens was introduced to C. Kermit Ewing, head of the art division of the Department of Fine Arts. Consequently, in the fall of 1957, as Taugner prepared for an eventual trip to Spain, Stevens took over his position as instructor of painting.

Moving into a Knoxville apartment on 17th Street, the Stevens family now number four; a daughter, Holly (Mrs. Stephen Furne), having been born in Columbus, and Andrew, during their first year in Knoxville. In a few years they acquired the partially renovated log house off Woodson Drive that would serve the multiple purposes of living space, studio, record and book library, and informal gallery. The official campus studio was an upstairs space in a derelict store-office complex once located at 838 Temple Avenue.



Settling could never mean blending. No matter how congenial these improvised settings or seductive the tropical density of East Tennessee hills, there loomed for Stevens the danger of losing the required edge of self-assertion. Therefore, it was an extremely fortuitous moment when in 1958 his mother purchased a 200 year old farm just beyond the toll bridge on Deer Isle, Maine that would serve as a summer retreat. That this heirloom came without the amenities of plumbing, telephone, or television in no way diminished its effectiveness in providing Stevens with a sense of self-renewal. Here, within reach of Penobscot Bay, were the great shifting skies, turbulent seas, the rock-bound headlands, cluttered fishing shacks and black walls of pine that were the focus of John Marin's Stonington period. Each summer, Stevens would produce between forty and sixty watercolors on Deer Isle, and it was to be this seasonal harvest, much of it based on outdoor painting, that helped define the direction of his Knoxville work.

Meanwhile, on the University of Tennessee campus, where "Hello Walk," bobby socks and Kennedy euphoria were in season, Stevens converted 838 Temple Avenue into a transplanted roost of the "Internationally Unknowns." An adventurous non-conformity enlivened studio life. There were late hours and from the studio issued unending strains of classical music. As former students of that period recall, instruction involved little philosophizing or psychoanalysis. The point to be made was simple. Representational painting reflected a lack of conviction, an unwillingness on the part of the student to commit his or her emotional resources to a pictorial idea. Contemporary art magazines gave some ideas as to how New York artists were making their own particular commitments in this direction. The teacher would

test presumptions through a familiar "needling" technique, misunderstood by those students who presumed painting to be the business of picture-making; devoutly received by those disciples who felt their work had become labored and contrived. He regarded all before him with compassion—he presumed all were potentially artists. At the same time, as office memos attest, Stevens relentlessly dismissed the backsliders: "He should consider himself in a probationary period and devote himself more seriously to his painting if he wishes to remain in the program," or, "I believe it is questionable if she is developed enough as a painter to qualify for an M.F.A."

Administrative protocol he preferred to see from distinct points of view. On one hand, Stevens single-handedly piloted the painting and print programs through formative stages; he engineered the foundations of the graduate painting division, assisted in organizing half-a-dozen art organizations including the Knoxville Watercolor Society and Deer Isle Art Association, and tirelessly contributed time, money, and art to exhibitions throughout the country. Nevertheless, he remained as disdainful of institutional priorities as he did of all modes of habit he considered conventional.

It was in protest against confinement that Stevens seems to have adopted the death-defying mannerisms of some of his literary heroes: for example, the dry humor and cynical, facetious, tone of Gulliver in Joyce Cary's *The Horse's Mouth*, or the wise-cracking taunts of James Page in John Gardner's *October Light*. Photographs reveal a physical transformation that accords with a sense of increased alienation. In the early 1960's Stevens might have been mistaken for a skin-headed drill sergeant or even a trim yachtsman. After mid-decade he had begun to acquire the





**Figure 11.** *Structure Nine* ca. 1954, Mixed intaglio  
(dimensions unknown)

flowing white mane of the returned Rip Van Winkle. It was the image of rumpled sage that would serve as so necessary a center-piece for art department functions throughout the 1970's. Even after twenty years spent in East Tennessee, Stevens' nasal blend of Long Island and "Down East" accents, together with the recalcitrance popularly associated with the New England character, remained as strong as ever. When brought to bear on thorny issues of governance, "Holly's" special blend of speech and attitude gave faculty meetings the air of protracted town forums.

This sense of displacement intensified Stevens' acquisitive nature. Wray Stevens recalls, "We would go into New York for the day, park at Jamaica Plains, and go to the Museum of Modern

Art. We would come back piled down with books and records." His reading formed an orthodox blend of literature, history, and philosophy. Among art titles are many of the catalogs published by the Museum of Modern Art in the last thirty years. Judging from his library, Stevens also had unusual interest in the paintings of Turner and in the sculpture of Michelangelo and Picasso. On one foray to Woodstock, New York, Stevens allowed himself the purchase of a work by an artist of national reputation. Raoul Hague's golden-brown wood-carving "Bearsville Butternut," of 1964, thereafter adorned the Stevens' livingroom.

Stevens' life-long involvement with music deserves its own special mention. His record collection, ranging from medieval chants to Bach, Berlioz, and Gershwin would number into the thousands. He coached colleagues on vital works and enthusiastically tested performances newly brought to his attention. Beyond the Old Masters of symphony and opera, his taste extended well into the contemporary era. Gustav Mahler was high on the list of moderns, but increasingly, Stevens gravitated to contemporary classical composers like Carl Orff, George Crumb, George Rochberg, and Vincent Persichetti, who variously extended the experimental idioms of Schoenberg, Bartok, Hindemith, Debussy and Stravinsky.<sup>18</sup> If there was a gap in his reception of musical forms, it lay with jazz and folk categories, genres he, nevertheless, struggled to appreciate. In Knoxville, the local public radio station was his chief means of keeping up with new developments in the contemporary classics and the station's programming he watched with proprietary concern. When, for example, the station decided to delete a program it considered to have little following, Stevens protested vehemently. To the program director he wrote:



*It would be much more sound to adopt a philosophy of broadcasting that embraces an attitude of leadership and progressive thinking than one that seems to exist only to maintain the level of appreciation. I don't look forward to "folk festival" or your jazz programs . . . I do know many enjoy these programs (I can try to learn from them too) so I would not be so selfish as to ask for their removal. I would suggest, however, that you continue to introduce us to all the available contemporary "classical" music and make WUOT a leader rather than a follower.<sup>19</sup>*

Music was an obvious catalyst for his creative work, providing mood, allowing concentration, perhaps in some measure suggesting a harmonic context for decisions regarding composition, color, and stroke. Though he had little to say concerning any specific relationship that might exist, Stevens would have been the last to argue with Leonardo, Gauguin, Kandinsky, Rattner, and Marin on the direct associations these artists saw between the media. Yet for Stevens, music was also clearly an important escape from painting. The act of painting was secretive; the closed door, like a frame, established a barrier against all forms of intrusion. Actual moments of decision and exhilaration could only become public at a future time, as matters of record, properly framed and titled. Music, on the other hand, instantly called forth the intense excitement engendered by a public performance in time and space. It was this unique kind of experience he had cultivated in high school but found increasingly detrimental to his painting.

Thus, "total theatre" seemed as integral to music as confinement and seclusion were to the process of painting. Furthermore, as a connoisseur of music, the painter harbored no prejudice against

programmatic writing or flagrantly symbolic themes, elements the self-respecting abstract artist, of course, could only consider "impurities." Quite to the contrary, such compositions as Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*, Crumb's *Makro-cosmos* or Orff's *Carmina burana* could only affirm the social and philosophical orientation of his education and ultimate concern.

### **The Inquisitor**

The paintings Stevens produced between 1958 and 1980 form themselves into two rather well-defined groups, the first "period" extending through 1964. In these earlier oils and watercolors there are also transitions to be noted, in fact, quite significant moves that set the stage for future developments. Yet, each work painted within this time period has been generated from an enthusiastically inquisitive working attitude that after 1965 awaited conversion into a quite different kind of reasoning. In his wonderment, Stevens reminds us of David Casper Friedrich's thunder-struck travelers standing before an endless valley. Indeed, to express his state of mind, the artist borrowed some general terms from the Oriental philosophers. Witness his statement of 1960.

*When engrossed [in a] visual union with our physical world, we are indeed led to feel much more than mere contact. We are often wonderfully aware that we are actually a meaningful part of that which we view and that it in turn is an integral part of us. This moment, of 'becoming' is magnificent, no matter how brief, for we are strongly assured that our lives are immeasurably enriched even though this enrichment is intangible.<sup>20</sup>*

The first examples, like "Night Furnace," of 1959 (Plate 1), are presented as panoramas, their fore-planes brimming from side to side with a multitude of shapes that thrust and counterthrust. With



compositions such as "Eagle Grove" and "August," both of 1960 (Plates 2 and 3), the vertical format has been introduced in an apparent effort to free the artist from the intimidating authority of the horizon. However, the vertical landscape can prove to be equally intimidating. Thus, perhaps to further limit compositional options and neutralize the fiction of space, Stevens begins employing the vertical-square format for the 1963 paintings "Rock Vines" and "Expansion" (Plate 5, fig. 13) and totally square dimensions for the architectural exposition, "The Bridge," of 1964 (Plate 6). In these last, central motifs have been separated from the borders of the paintings by broad avenues of color.

In matters of technique and emotional force, this same body of work also illustrates a general trend away from a wild melee of painterly initiatives to a more conforming persuasion found in the square paintings. The frothy, almost brutish, "Night Furnace," its hellish red blasting a murky heath, is a late descendent of Hieronymous Bosch's conflagrations and Turner's sea disasters. More directly, the painting relates to the last oils of John Marin, particularly those muddy sea and tensely-angular cityscapes that first saw light in the late artist's memorial exhibition in 1955. But when the novelty of his own split life as Deer Isle and Knoxville painter began to fade, Stevens found ample time to revisit de Kooning and test anew the devices of Philip Guston, Joan Mitchell, John Hultberg, Gorky, Paul Berlin, Jack Tworkov and at least a dozen others. In "Eagle Grove," a replay of "Waterfall" of 1956, the artist seems to repent the ill-humor of "Night Furnace." Tense expectancy gives way to a Baroque apotheosis for which nothing less than a full, vivid, palette was required. Many passages in this idyl are painted wet into wet, providing those unplanned effects that prove to be as

much a surprise to the artist as they are to his audience. We meet precisely this kind of exploration everywhere, but no more effectively handled than in the upper left range of "August." In a dense thicket of Tworkov-like streaks, yellow, ochres, browns, blacks, whites and blues partially decompose into gray shadows as they collide. Otherwise, the emotional resources of "August" find unusual concentration in the prominent orange "A" that speeds through its sunburnt field (a reversal, incidentally, of the "V" in the de Kooning masterpiece, "Suburb in Havana").

Until about 1963, Stevens took for granted the special characteristics of the support. "Movements" glide, spill or gush over the canvas, covering its woven surface, or, where canvas is revealed, as in scraped or thinly-painted areas, its inherent texture is largely incidental to the artist's intended effect. This benign neglect of the canvas surface is understandable when we realize that until 1955 Stevens had painted principally on masonite which is as neutral a surface as one could find. With "Rock Vines" and "Expansion," however, the artist seems much more anxious to reconcile medium and support. "Rock Vines" is a subdued pastoral for which no improvisational outbursts were required; its opalescence and fragile lineation seem at first glance to have been produced by a staining procedure. But, if anything, Stevens has reduced the amount of vehicle he would normally use and, taking advantage of an increased viscosity, literally hangs the pigment onto the thread beneath it. Physically, this procedure inhibits the freedom of brushed movement. Likewise, in a physiological sense, the movement of the viewer's eye is impeded as it "touches" the granular passages. Looking to the sandy texture of its tawny field and to the almost breathless scumbling of white that elsewhere partially covers the ghosts of former images, we become sensitive to a new kind of brushwork in "Rock Vines." It amounts to a short, easy, "pushing into" rather than



a "laying on." But this maneuver in no way precluded action. We discover a memorable surge in "Expansion" at a point where light yellows and ochres burst through a confining black ledge (Figure 13a). The impact of this explosion is magnified for the viewer because the forceful strokes, coarsened by the granular surface, have obviously encountered considerable friction. Yet despite this, the triumphant gesture rounds the edge of the maze with astonishing grace, then vanishes into the sky.



Stevens painting in the mountains, ca., 1963

Watercolor inspired in Stevens a recognition of the support somewhat earlier than did oil painting. The stock-in-trade of the medium, of course, had been rough rag paper which immediately tended to force the artist into a defensive position. Marin liked this because, as it were, he enjoyed fighting back and equally enjoyed having the material record of the battle made part of the view itself. "Untitled" (Plate 4), a watercolor heightened with *gauche*, was painted by Stevens at a moment when his sentimental regard for

Marin had strengthened into discipleship. Complete with framing curtains, cryptic nature symbols, and a deep Marin viridian,<sup>21</sup> our little souvenir effectively summarizes both the sensitivity and the wisecracking cheek of Stevens' patron saint. The resistance of paper to stroke simply forced more resolve and economy. At the same time, the brilliant passages of open paper invited a few random splashes of the lighter tints. But it was the stripes (Stevens playfully referred to them as his "yipes"), set against the most heavily textured paper he could find, that formed the working basis of the Maine scenes. These marks, like words in a final draft of a historic document, were the results of a judicial process of review. In 1965, he explained, "I may take all morning to put only a few marks on paper. But all the while I'm studying and deciding just what it is I want the picture to be. When I have this clear in my mind I can take the work inside to finish."<sup>22</sup>

Shortly after his arrival in Knoxville, Stevens cast his lot with an active exhibition group centered around Ewing and the Department of Fine Arts. Besides Ewing and Stevens, there was Richard Clarke and Philip Nichols, also studio instructors, and Carl Sublett, art director for the Charles S. Cane advertising agency. By 1963 when Joanna Higgs and Robert Birdwell joined the ranks, the group became known as "The Knoxville Seven." Not only had "The Knoxville Seven" taken on an international engagement (in 1963 its work traveled to Formosa), it also took on what it considered to be unhealthy chauvinism at home. After *Look* Magazine and the National Municipal League selected Knoxville as their annual choice for "All American" city, the seven went on the attack, using what the outraged local press defined as "Pop Art" as their weapon. At the Dogwood Arts Festival exhibition in April of 1963, Stevens unveiled an assemblage comprised of boards, a turpentine can, and an umbrella which he called "All American City."



His "Cultural Seat of the South" was an old chair seat and back mounted on a pedestal. "Rearrangement of Black and Gold: Do-It-Yourself Therapy Kit, No. 2" featured among junk items attached to a board one piece that was moveable. "This one," said Stevens, "is for the person who thinks he knows more about art than the artist."<sup>23</sup>

Though he had not done badly in his few encounters with the New York art press, some of the vehemence of his attack might have been prompted by a lukewarm notice concerning his one-man exhibition at Contemporary Arts, Incorporated, New York, 1960. Even though Richard Hayes, an editorial assistant for *Art News*, gave Stevens full credit for his "intense commitment to the spatial delineation of forms," he otherwise found the abstract seascapes hostile, "perhaps monotonous" and concluded that the artist worried his colors excessively.<sup>24</sup> Simultaneously, *Arts Magazine* gave forth a more supportive review of the show.

*The important thing that remains—and that places Stevens in the easel-painting tradition, is the essential structuring according to figure and ground. There is always a central, abstract, form—like an exploded portrait or a widely demolished still life. But what we have is a picture of violence rather than a manifestation of it, for Stevens' attack upon the canvas is not violent. Neither is it lacking in energy or animation, for there is a great deal of both . . . Occasionally the picture of violence has a faint air of horror. "North Island I" is notable for the way the energy of the central explosion is carried to the four corners without confusing the relation of figure and ground."*<sup>25</sup>

But despite the respectable showing in his last brief attack upon the citadel of taste, Stevens obviously sided with many of his contemporaries who objected

to the tremendous power wielded by erring mortals calling themselves New York critics. Even more intolerable were the abusive presumptions of small town arbiters of culture.

Stevens' association with one Knoxville artist, Carl Sublett, proved particularly fruitful. Originally from Kentucky, Sublett covered the Italian campaign as a combat artist in World War II. Later employed as a newspaper cartoonist in Bristol, Tennessee, he came to Knoxville in 1955, joining the Art Department faculty finally in 1966. Sublett was a most enthusiastic receptor of contemporary painting trends and, parenthetically, acutely aware of his isolated position as a Southern abstract painter. The two artists met after Sublett had seen Stevens' work in the Spring exhibition at the Audigier Gallery in 1957. Says Sublett, "I knew I had to meet this guy."

Thus began an almost ideal collaboration between like minds that reached its greatest intensity between 1957 and about 1966. What made this partnership even closer than it might otherwise have been was the fact that Carl and Helen Sublett maintained a summer cottage at Port Clyde, Maine, located only forty sea miles from the Stevens place on Deer Isle. Hitting the road on weekends, Stevens and Sublett became fellow explorers, sketching quarries, auto graveyards and ridges, trading enthusiastic "thumbs-up" signs from behind their easels, conferring on the contents of the latest art magazines. With the other Knoxville regulars they drove to regional exhibitions, their cars loaded down with paintings. Sublett recalls one such trip to Nashville when, on a moonlit stretch of highway, the drivers of the caravan impulsively turned off their lights. The junkies extended in the summers in Maine; there were walking tours to Bar Harbor, nights in sleeping bags on Monhegan Island. On Long Island in



the late 1950's Stevens and Sublett were entertained by the famous art patron Walter Chrysler after having sold him paintings.<sup>26</sup>

The outdoor sketching produced a variety of working themes, some quite literal (fig. 12). One idea would trigger another, then an unplanned cycle would evolve. Titles for works made out-of-doors, or for works dependent upon an initial inspiration conceived in an outdoor setting, were suggested by the names of locations that happened to be near likely motifs. Beyond their practical service of cataloging works, chosen titles, as Sublett recalls, also "had a certain aura about them." "Split," "shift" and "ridge" allude, for example, to a basic natural relationship or intersection that has been created by extraordinary pressure and movement. And usually it was the crisp edge of a fault line, the blast point of an excavation or the jagged crust of a fractured boulder that provided a starting point for a relational theme. Naturally, there are paintings both artists produced in those years that indicate much common ground; influences went both ways. But in retrospect Sublett and Stevens differed on the question of how much emphasis one should give to the edge or a point of intersection. Sublett would tend to place decisions about linear relationships second to an overall concern for establishing a dominant color field.

### **The Fabricant**

In 1964 Stevens made a bridge and the river beneath it subjects for an oil set in a square format (Plate 6). The looming shape of the structure, seen perhaps in early light, must have made a strong impression on the artist for he chooses to represent it almost entirely as an evocative interplay of rapidly-brushed strokes, and selects for its coloring a brash combination of spectrum red, blue-violet and opalescent white. Here and there

one senses special moments of excitement when a black line takes a devious turn or a sweep of thick white vigorously intrudes into wet color. "The Bridge" represents yet another instance of the kind of spiritual integration between artist and subject that was still possible for Stevens before mid-decade.

Only two years later came "Windows III" (Plates 7 and 7a). Here surfaces are evenly and thinly painted. A measured geometric perfection dominates form. Edges have been ruled and a prominent circle has been inscribed with the aid of a compass. Though color retains the allure of nature, the viewer has little chance of imaginatively stepping through the ordered plane of the canvas into breathable space beyond. In this painting ambiguities are founded on calculated illusory devices such as perspectival paradox and vanishing planes. Improvisation—the occasional glimmer of a peach-colored undertone, the appearance of "ghost" images, a few areas of uneven brushing—seems less the result of sudden insight than a well-planned strategy. The central motif is the compassed circle which magnifies synthesized elements of still life: three diversely-arranged boxes appear to jump forward from the picture.

The impersonalized interior-still life subjects that comprise Stevens' "Window" series represent a timely response to the "hard edge" movement which was then riding the crest of a national rebellion against various modes of expression. It was this very series, in fact, which helped to inaugurate the Mid-South's participation in the movement. In April of 1966 Stevens' "Window II" won the \$1,000 purchase award in the first Annual Central South Competition at Nashville's Parthenon. Juror Diane Waldman, then assistant director of the Guggenheim Museum of Art, based her judgement of the



"basic concept or idea" of the painting, as well as "its position within an over-all context."<sup>27</sup>

But this gratifying confirmation that concept was now "in" only partly explains Stevens' abrupt change of form and technique. The reaction against New York Abstract Expressionism, with its supposed neglect of materials and reasonably sound techniques, also produced an intense re-evaluation of available pigments, binders and supports, as well as a new questioning of studio craft. In 1964 or 1965 Stevens obtained a copy of Lawrence N. Jensen's *Synthetic Painting Media* (1964) in which acrylic polymer paint, because of its versatility, fast-drying potential and durability, was christened the medium of the future. Following technicians Ralph Mayer and Maurice Grosser, Jensen assumed that traditional artists' materials were central to the history of style. A change in medium or binder would instantly result in a change in attitude concerning form and expression. Acrylic paint, however, possessed protean characteristics and would thus be an ideal agent for an unheralded democratization and progressive advance in painting.

Whether or not he accepted Jensen's historic thesis, it is clear that Stevens drew a connection between his use of acrylics and the conceptual approach to painting he now embraced. The neat efficiency that characterizes "Windows III," for example, is well served by the advantageous staining potential of acrylics. Depending upon the amount of water or thinner employed for various passages, thin layers of paint range from full saturation to delicate transparencies bearing the subtlety of watercolor. Stevens' preference for the "thinning" rather than the "thickening" potential of the medium meant that the acrylics were to enjoy a much closer relationship with his watercolors than was earlier possible between the oils

and watercolors. Following the general trend toward broad forms and horizontal formats, the watercolors assumed their own level of hard-edged staining, even though the paper texture continued to add its "tooth" to the resulting washes (Plate 8). After 1970 the painter exchanged watercolor paper for the smooth, non-absorbent, surface of illustration board. As he did so, Stevens began using rags or dry-brush to lift out wet pigment from selected areas in order to enhance an edginess and increase luminosity. Once an area had been sponged, the residue was left to rest in diluted pools of color. Reversing his earlier practice, this reductive approach helps to augment the authority of surface; gentle tone-poems like "Needle Isle" (Plate 9) take on a harsh metallic sheen and later abstractions such as "Wall Shift III" (Plate 13) display a slick, enamel-like, consistency.

Stevens' adoption of synthetic materials was met by a markedly altered working routine. As we have seen, still lifes and interiors began replacing quarries and ridges as subject matter. After 1976 nature titles give way entirely to initials and serial numbers. Outdoor sketching and painting was to be reserved only for Maine summers. Night painting became more frequent than ever. When, in the late 1960's, he elected to transfer his classes from day to evening sessions, he began losing contact with Sublett. The older artist's place as Stevens' confidant was increasingly assumed by Whitney Leland, a former pupil who received appointment to the Art Department faculty. As if to symbolize his growing unconcern for maintaining a direct contact with nature, Stevens, in 1972, constructed next to his house a tall, windowless shed that would henceforth serve as his studio. Filled with tools and supplies, this space more resembled a laboratory than the traditional artist's haunt.



In 1974, as he prepared for a one-man exhibition of his watercolors at the Philadelphia Art Alliance, the artist declared his painting to be “an attempt to build a real world of my own that communicates the joyous and mysterious power of nature.”<sup>28</sup> There was no mention of his wanting to become one with nature itself. No matter. The life of an individual who prefers to fabricate experience as opposed to that of an adventurous seeker has within its reach intimations of immortality. What the artist “makes” merely becomes a substitute for that all-consuming passion which in our time has sent so many inquisitors to early graves. The older Stevens’ inclination to live vicariously through the representation of resolved formal types and established routines set the stage for a “real” art that would transcend circumstances of time and place. The “Windows” series framed for him the furthest perimeters of concept. He would try to work his way back slowly to the mystery and joy of nature without forfeiting the hard-won reality of structure and surface.

One way he allowed mystery back into his later works was through a random play of shapes and colors that suggest the dramatization of some inner compulsion. In “Devil’s Hopyard” (Plate XII), Stevens engineers a design that seems curiously devoid of any coherent formal relationships. Despite the demonstrative coloring and deliberate formal patterning of its several oddly-cropped characters, the painting might well be illustrating one of those moments of reverie or dream when all conscious thought and strategic purpose have been suspended. Long ago Kandinsky and the Surrealists demonstrated the proposition that it was during periods of disrupted consciousness that psychological “truths” could be given free play and it is clearly the more formally-minded Kandinsky of the middle period

as well as Joan Miro who laid the groundwork for this redemptive painting.



Figure 12. *Smoky Mountain* 1965, Watercolor, 15" × 20"

However, it was in some of his later watercolors that Stevens was able to follow through most effectively on his psychological explorations. “Air Wall,” of 1975 and “Summer ’80 (i)” (Plates 14 and 23) are examples in which automatism—the random dripping of paint and improvisational markings— alludes to passing inner impulses. Yet the references are not to exceptional instances of apotheosis, rather to something more consistent with the ongoing pulse of existence itself. It is perhaps ironic to speak of these spontaneously painted watercolors as having a certain detached air about them. Nevertheless, what most separates them from the expressive works of an earlier day is their muted delicacy and elegance, their reductive tonings as well as their uncompromising references to surface. Not only can they be read as “walls of air,” but as three-dimensional projections as well, since we often have the feeling that these episodes glide across transparent filaments hung in advance of the supports.

Cautiously evaluating new styles, Stevens assumes an increasingly critical approach to paint-



ing in the decade of the 1970's. This heightened concern for judgemental authority certainly had something to do with his being a senior teacher, his constant awareness that others were looking over his shoulder for clues as to what standards might be applied during times of unprecedented change. Whatever his reasons, the methodical drawing and discarding of various doctrines took on the aspects of a stimulating game, but a game that received justification in Stevens' determination to draw the line, to "take a stand." Psychological fantasy could not entirely consume him since it stood only as one of many possibilities for making painting real and independent.

For example, in 1973 when he introduced the "Island" series, Stevens was painting single image works consisting of strident diagonal prisms, giant triangles or chevrons all set in hard-edge formats. These are programmatic works, but programmatic in a different sense than were the illustrative views of earlier times. Replacing subjects that mattered or relationships that determined a pattern of development within a single work, are giant emblems representing self-evident systems which may be best encountered and understood by the viewer in a single instant. In terms of the "Post-Painterly Abstraction" movement, especially as it was amplified through the polemics of Frank Stella, the single image design argued for the nominal independence of the painted object. The painting's visual qualities served metaphysics rather than an incidental emotional state and it is difficult to believe Stevens felt entirely at home while working in this mode. "Island Series II-2," an oil painted in about 1973 is just one example where we see the artist refusing to cast off all the moorings to nature. The imminence of subject is not only confirmed by the title but also by colors that unmistakably relate to sunny coastal scen-

ery and by a trembling facture that responds to the glitter and profusion of atmosphere. In a few years his oeuvre had been cleansed. "North East," of 1976 is less an orphan than a prodigal offspring of the minimal canvases. Only the ruled horizon, broadly painted diagonals and pointed spurs remind us of the severity of absolute organization, otherwise a synchromy and textural richness allude to a landscape of shifting light, and breath-taking space (It would remind us of the landscapes of the late 1950's, but for the unusual breadth of single color areas and the persistence of the diagonal element within the composition). However, Stevens was about to draw a new card. Fittingly, the blue and yellow palette of "Northeast" suggests the crisp New England air which inspired it. On the other hand, there is a distinct California accent to be noted in its open, color-field, tendencies and to account for this new reference in Stevens' work we must briefly allude to Richard Diebenkorn. California assumes the same status in American Art as the Mediterranean region for much longer has occupied in the annals of European painting. This fact was confirmed in 1967 when Diebenkorn began the "Ocean Park" series which is comprised of a distinct group of abstract landscapes stimulated by the cluttered coastal environment of Santa Monica. Much has been written of Diebenkorn's debt in this instance to the early Matisse, the Matisse of luxurious Morocco.<sup>29</sup> Like the Moroccan paintings, the progeny of "Ocean Park" blend seductive fields of color—a token of Oriental splendor—with the lucid linear construction that is so consistent with latent medieval and Protestant instincts. "Northeast" could not pass for a contemporary Diebenkorn: its Turneresque drifts of atmosphere go unbounded and the high horizon consigns it to the domain of the conventional panorama. But



willingly or not, Stevens' retreat from the "single image" had brought him to the very portal of Ocean Park.

Diebenkorn's ties with Urbana and stardom as the California figurative painter of the 1960's had so far failed to impress Stevens. But we detect an obvious sense of relief on his part when in 1977 he decided to give "Ocean Park" a trial run. Among the acrylics, examples include "K-77-16," "Ten-79-1," "Ten-79-4," and "Ten-79-11," which the artist's impersonal code informs us were made in Knoxville in 1977 and 1979 (Plates 16, 18, 19, 20). Also belonging with this group are watercolors of the "D.I." and so-called "Summer" series which were produced in Maine during the same years. The canvases are imprinted with thin lines of shifting intensity and color that suggest those pre-emptive marks a carpenter applies to the measured plank. Like freshly-applied ceramic glazes, sparsely brushed layers of blended colors are pushed to the edges of the zones. The boundary lines are subject to frequent invasion from the color areas and it is almost as if in reaction to this vulnerability that the artist sometimes seems to doggedly retrace a line, allowing this adjustment to closely parallel the original edge. Thus, the organizing grid seems definite without being absolute.

In Stevens' works, as in Diebenkorn's, there is an implied intimacy between the painting, the physical nature of its support and the architectural space that surrounds it, in this case, the salt-box profile of his Knoxville studio and the sturdy timbered house on Deer Isle. At corners and along edges of the canvas, crossing grids call attention to the invisible but very "real" stretcher bars, while interior passages break into angular intersections. These angles, like gables or pathways abruptly turned into space, lend a dynamics and

ambiguity to the compositions, the "push-pull" between surface and space. As we have seen, the angle is also a favored *lietmotif*, Stevens' highly regarded symbol for illustrating moral consequence that has seldom strayed from an architectural concept. Dazzling effects of space and light are handled more sensitively as the series advances. In the first of our four examples, the artist utilizes brilliant contrasts that somewhat neutralize the ambiance of space. However, the later three works reveal preciously balanced tonal and textural variations that allow the viewer a chance for more serene reflections. The second painting portrays the "bleue heure" of gentle melancholy; the third, the happy chords of morning sun; the final painting permits us to reflect upon the random interchange of synthesized surfaces of which we are always conscious in our daily commerce. To the nuance of color, Stevens' controlled technique of scraping, scumbling, erasing, and soft over painting adds the allure of indeterminacy.

These stately works would seem to propose a return to the formal theme of his earliest paintings. Structure controls the inconstant elements of space and light. Reason commands faith. Or, almost. For now that a warm California breeze was drifting across the nation, the old proposition could not be so relentlessly declared. Returning once again to "Ten-79-11," we realize how fragile the boundaries have become and how often the tenuous thread gives way to the force of color. Might it be ventured that a new alliance was in the offing between the figure and ground, between control and release, between decision and abeyance? Nonetheless, we are assured that, for Stevens, the observable pursuit of this dialogue stood well above the assumed merits of originality. Allen Weller spoke for Stevens when in his *Joys and Sorrows of Recent American Art*, he



wrote the following passage.

*The artist is not always the one who knows most about the meaning of his work. More and more frequently the contemporary artist seems to be an instrument, a medium, a device for the transmission of forms and forces outside of himself, rather than the architect of self-established and self-selected themes.*<sup>30</sup>

In April of 1967, Stevens suffered a near fatal cardiac arrest. Another milder attack followed in 1976. Despite his delicate health, life continued with little noticeable change. He savored as before pleasant seasonal rituals: the spring tennis match with Philip Nichols, the pumpkin-carve with Dale Cleaver each October. As he left for Maine in June 1980, he looked forward to a full summer of work; three parcels of composition board had been packed. In mid-summer the children made their scheduled visits. He began Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* and had leafed through the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's new Philip Guston catalog sent by his sister. On August 23, the day "Holly" Stevens died, a new recording of Dmitry Shostakovich's *Fifth Symphony* was being broadcast. While listening to this, he lay down to look at a new watercolor brought in the day before.

## NOTES

1. Recommendations, Walter H. Stevens file, Office of Teacher Placement, The University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana. Copies of Stevens papers, Knoxville, Tennessee.
2. Candidate's personal statement, Stevens file.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Besides Stevens, the sixteen were: Bill Armstrong, Nicholas Bridge, Ken Burge, Bill Colby, Dave Cietemann, Thomas Fricano, John Hannah, Robert Hodgell, Bill Jackson, Janice Koenig, Virginia Meyers, Al Miller, Don Robertson, Robert Taugner and Robert Wilbert.
5. Don Robertson to Walter Stevens, November 28, 1960, in Stevens papers.
6. Quoted in Allen Leepa, *The Challenge of Modern Art*. (New York: Beechhurst Press, 1949), p. 197.
7. *Who's Who in American Art*, (New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1980) p. 719.
8. Candidate's personal statement, Stevens file.
9. Interview with David D. Duncan, Knoxville, Tennessee, 1979.
10. Recommendation, Stevens file.
11. Petit Pigalle Gallery, August and September, 1952.
12. Walter Hollis Stevens, "St. Louis III," (Thesis: The University of Illinois, 1955), p. 2.
13. Allen S. Weller, "Appearance and Reality" in The University of Illinois, *Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture* (Urbana, 1955), p. 21.
14. Thomas B. Hess, *Willem de Kooning* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1968), p. 102.
15. "Structure Nine" was first exhibited at Third National Print Show, The University of Southern California, Los Angeles, in May of 1954. Walter H. Stevens, Exhibition Record, typed manuscript.
16. Lee Chesney, "Printmaking Today," *College Art Journal* 19 (Winter 1959-60): 165.
17. "Walter H. Stevens," *Art In America* 45 (March 1957): 32.



18. These composers are mentioned in correspondence exchanged between the artist and Walter Reinsel from 1973 to 1977.
19. Draft of letter from Walter H. Stevens to Glenn Houser, June 12, 1978, Stevens papers.
20. "Walter H. Stevens," *Knoxville Artists* (Art Department, University of Tennessee: Knoxville, 1960) n.p.
21. A typed resume of Marin's palette was attached to Stevens' copy of McKinley Helm's *John Marin*. It includes: spectrum red, light red, rose madder, cadmium yellow, Aureolin yellow, yellow ochre, viridian, oxide of chromium, cobalt, ultramarine and Cerulian blue, Lamp black and Payne's Gray.
22. Pat Fields, "Watercolor Exhibition Features Landscapes," *Knoxville Journal*, September 1, 1965.
23. Unidentified newspaper clipping, Stevens papers.
24. Richard Hayes, "Walter H. Stevens," *Art News* 51 (March 1960): 62.
25. George Dennison, "Walter H. Stevens," *Arts Magazine* 34 (March 1960): 66.
26. From Stevens Chrysler purchased a 1955 oil entitled "Sea-Edge III."
27. "Walter Stevens Wins in Art Competition," *Nashville Tennessean*, May 1, 1966.
28. "Tennessee Professor to Show Watercolors," *Art Alliance Bulletin* 52 (April 1974): 7.
29. Robert T. Buck, Jr., "The Ocean Park Paintings," in Albright-Knox Art Gallery, *Richard Diebenkorn* (Buffalo, 1980), pp. 42-48.
30. Allen S. Weller, *The Joys and Sorrows of Recent American Art* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1968), p. 11.



**Figure 13.** *Expansion* 1963, Oil on canvas, 50' x 40'





**Figure 13a.** *Expansion*, 1963, oil. 50 × 40, detail.





**Plate 1**, *Night Furnace*, 1959, oil. 36 × 50.





**Plate 2, *Eagle Grove*, 1960, oil. 50 × 40.**





**Plate 3**, *August*, 1960, oil. 50 × 40.





**Plate 4,** *Untitled*, 1962, watercolor. 17½ × 22½.





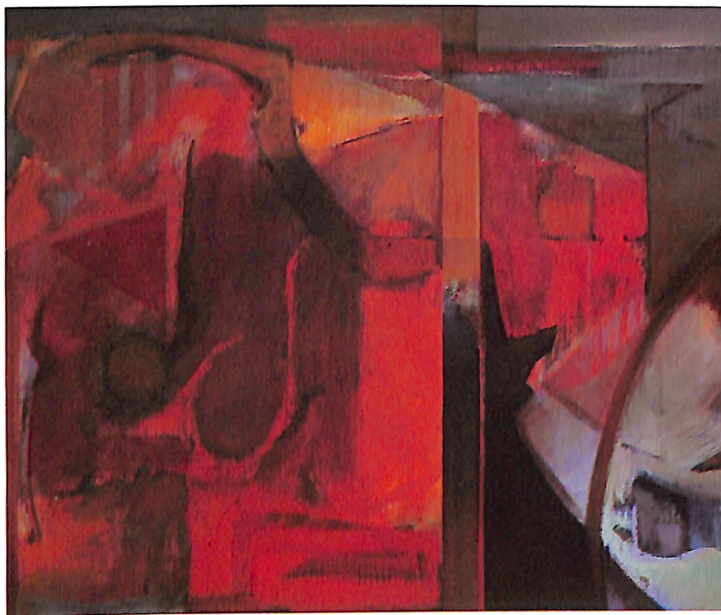
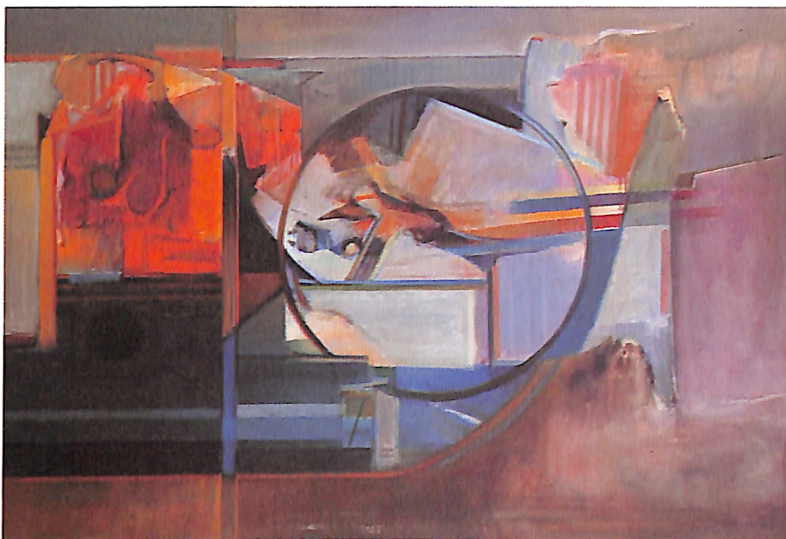
**Plate 5, *Rock Vines*, 1963, oil. 50 × 40.**





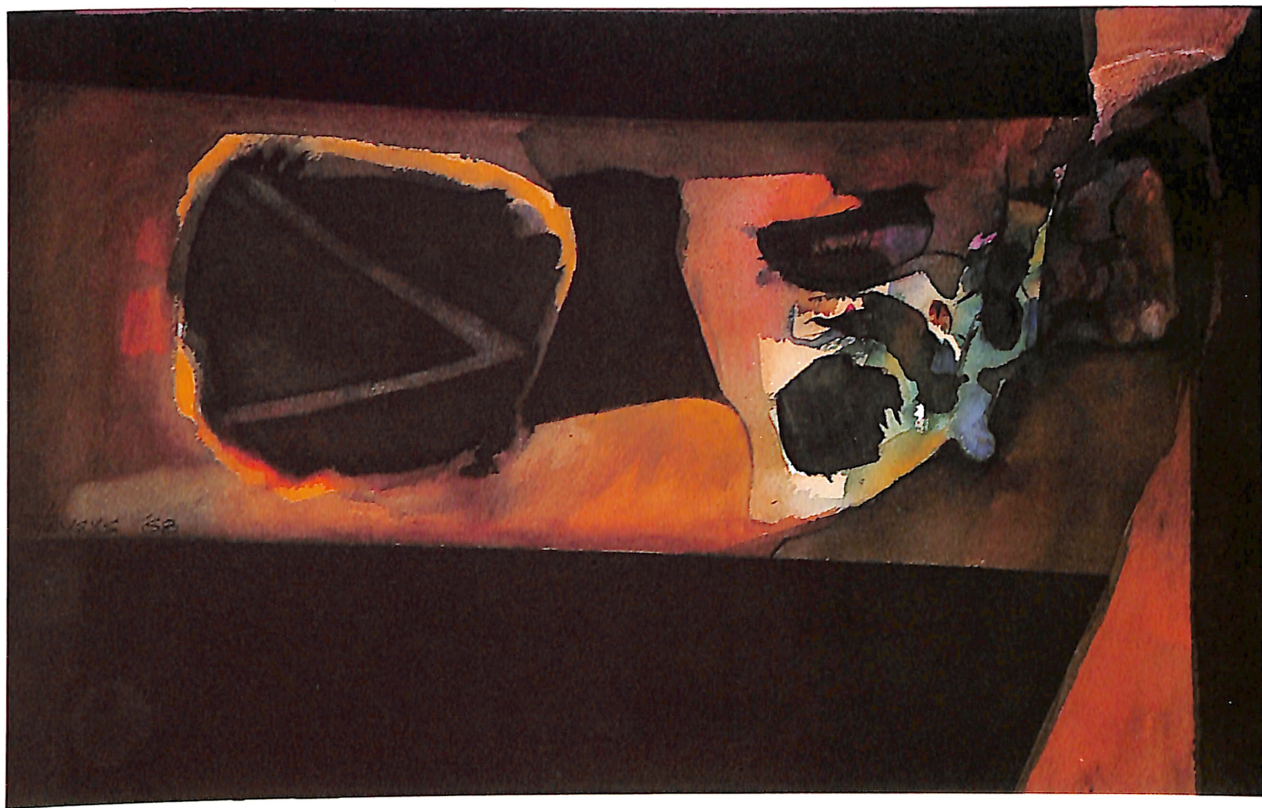
**Plate 6,** *The Bridge*, 1964, oil. 48 × 48.





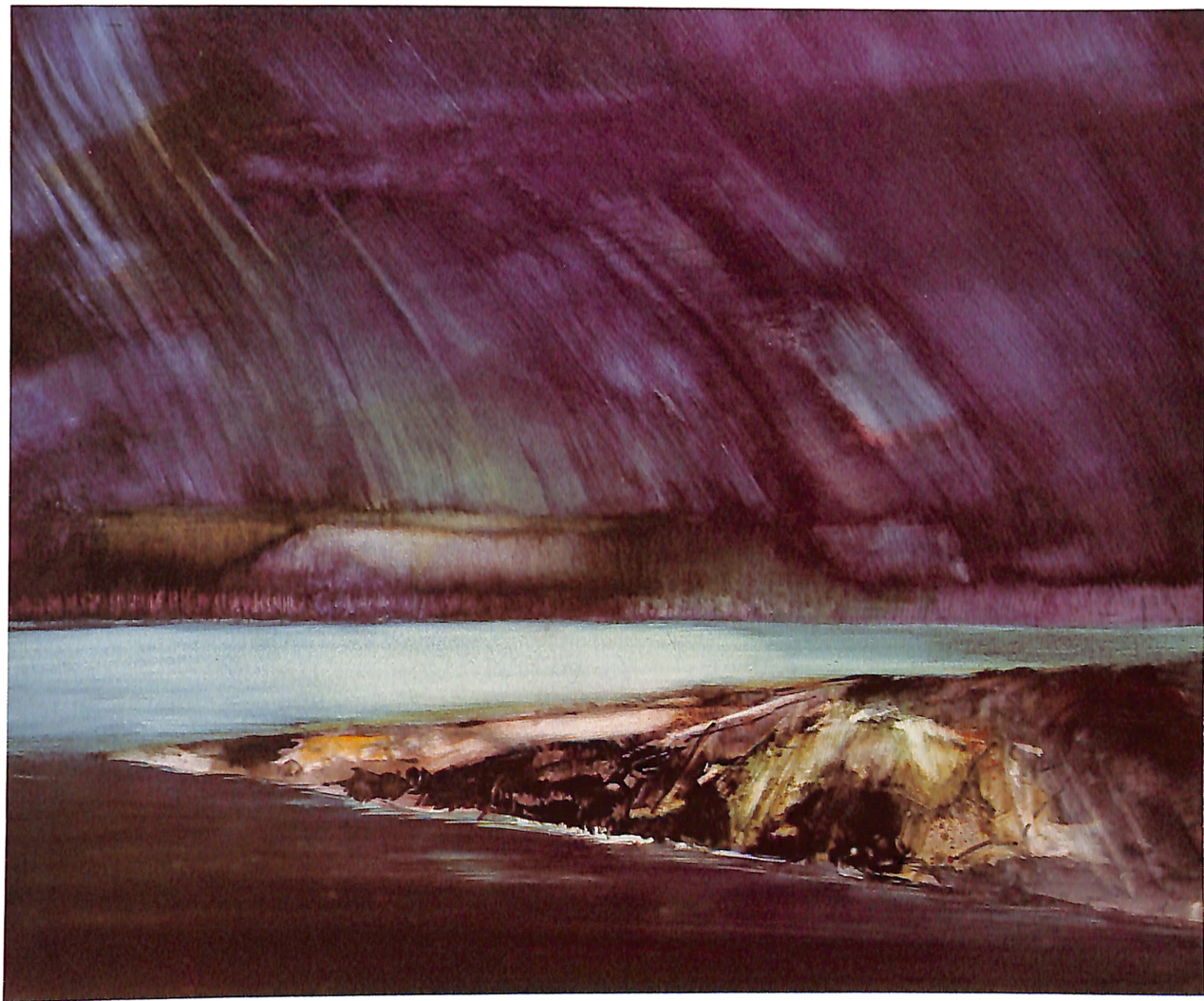
**Plate 7**, (top) *Windows III*, 1966, acrylic. 45 × 65. **Plate 7a**, (bottom), detail.





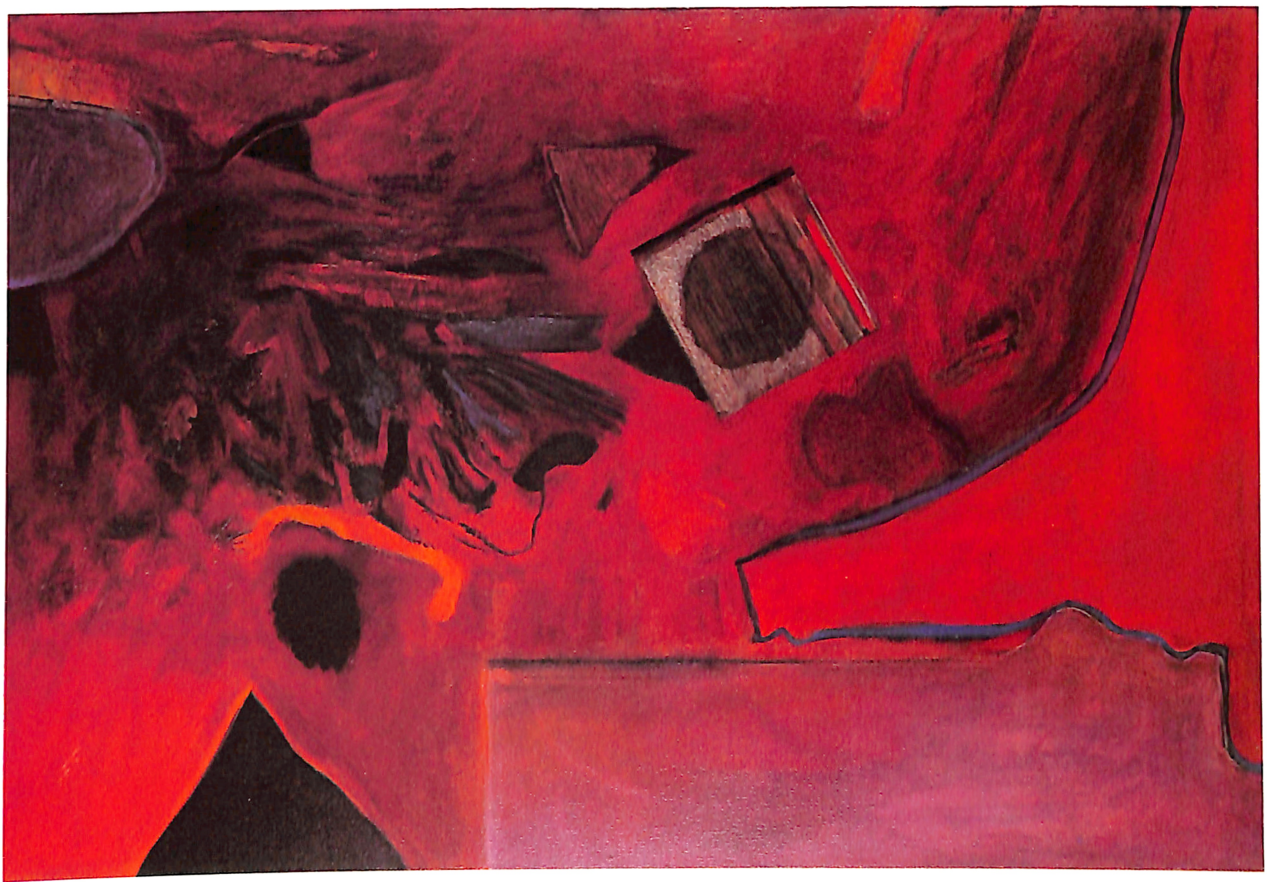
**Plate 8,** *Ridge Strip*, 1968, watercolor. 14 × 21.





**Plate 9,** *Needle Isle*, (date unknown), 26 x 31.





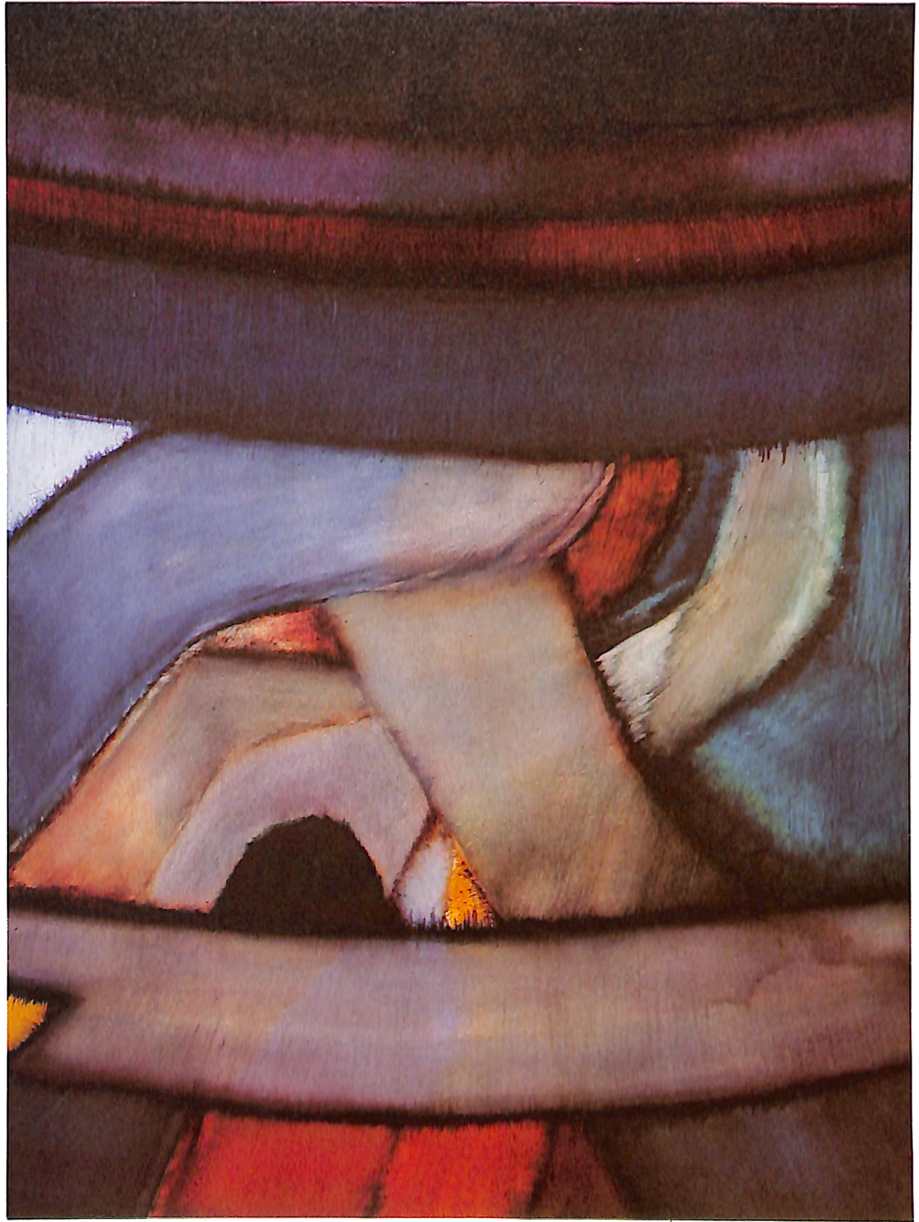
**Plate 10,** *Devil's Hopyard*, 1970, acrylic. 45 × 65.





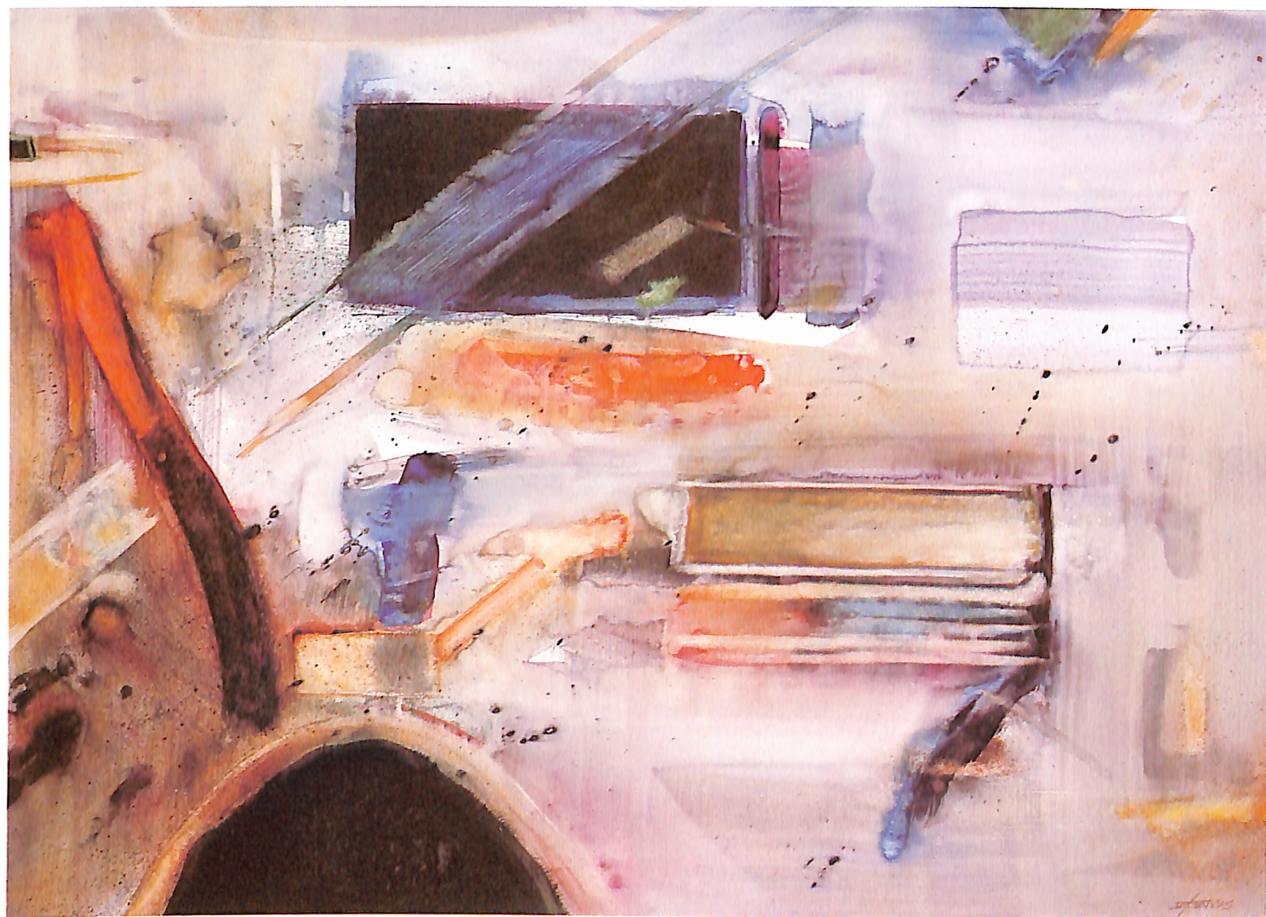
**Plate 11,** *Block Totem*, circa 1972, watercolor. 32 × 28.





**Plate 12**, *Island Series 7*, 1973, watercolor. 40 × 30.





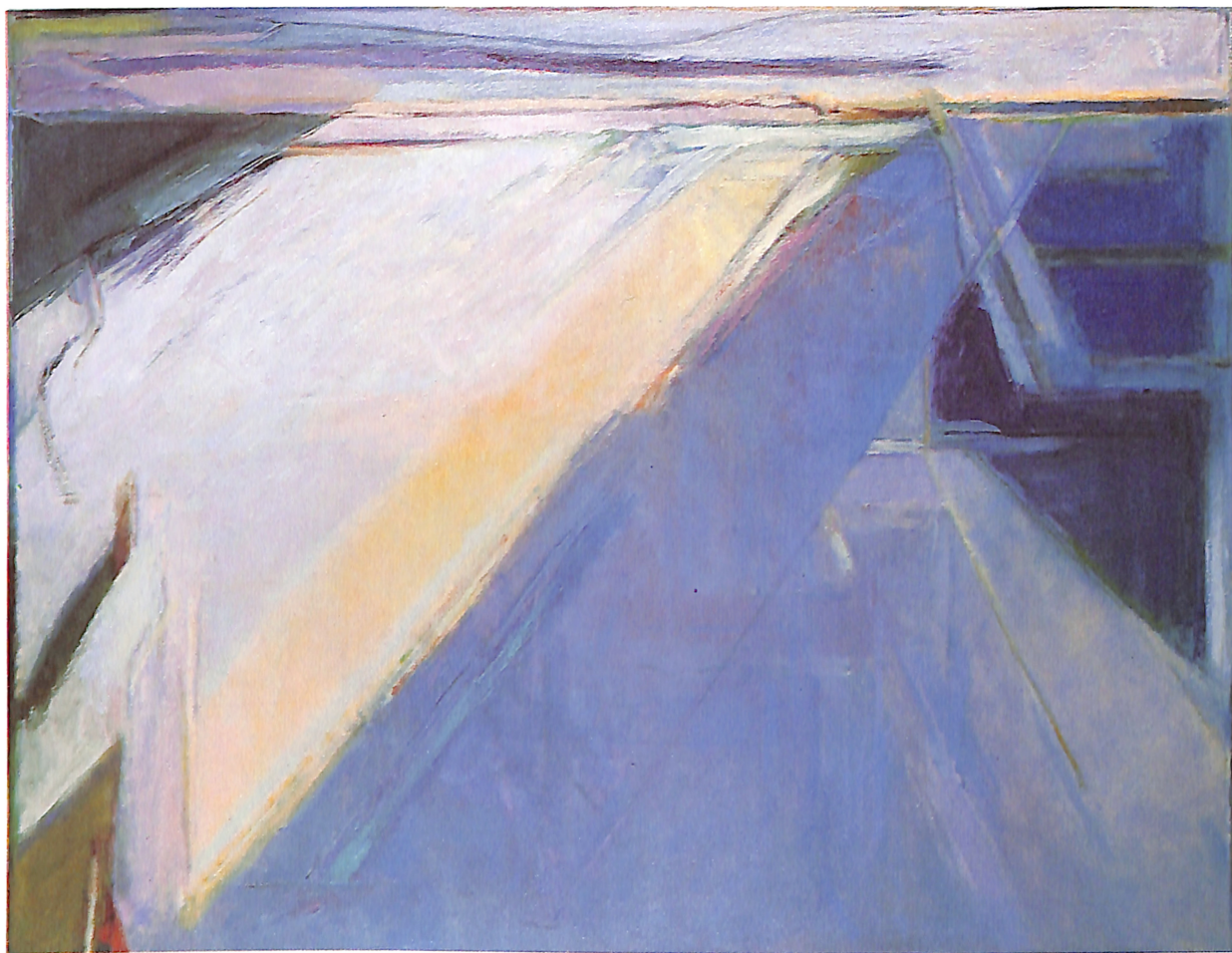
**Plate 13,** *Wall Shift III*, 1975, watercolor. 30 × 40.





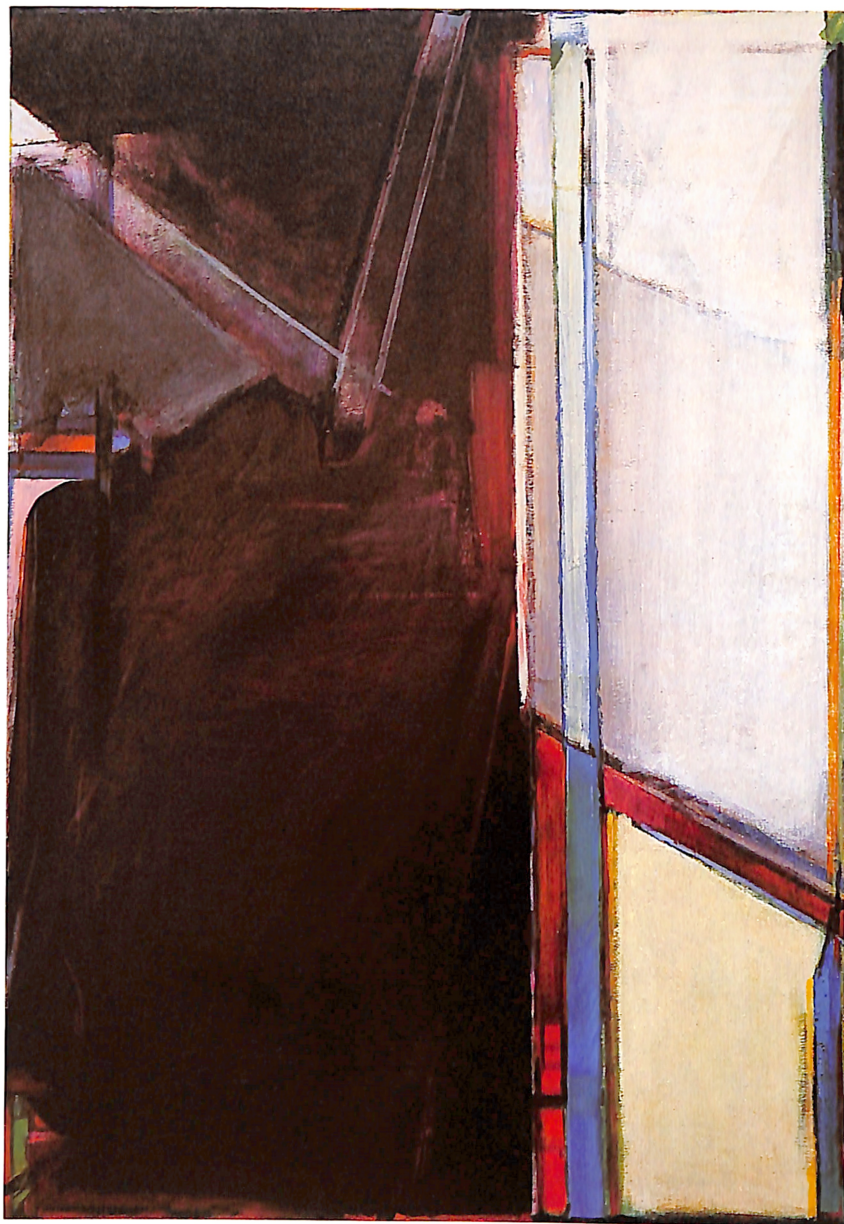
**Plate 14**, *Air Wall*, 1975, watercolor. 30 × 40.





**Plate 15, *North East*, 1976, oil. 42 × 54.**





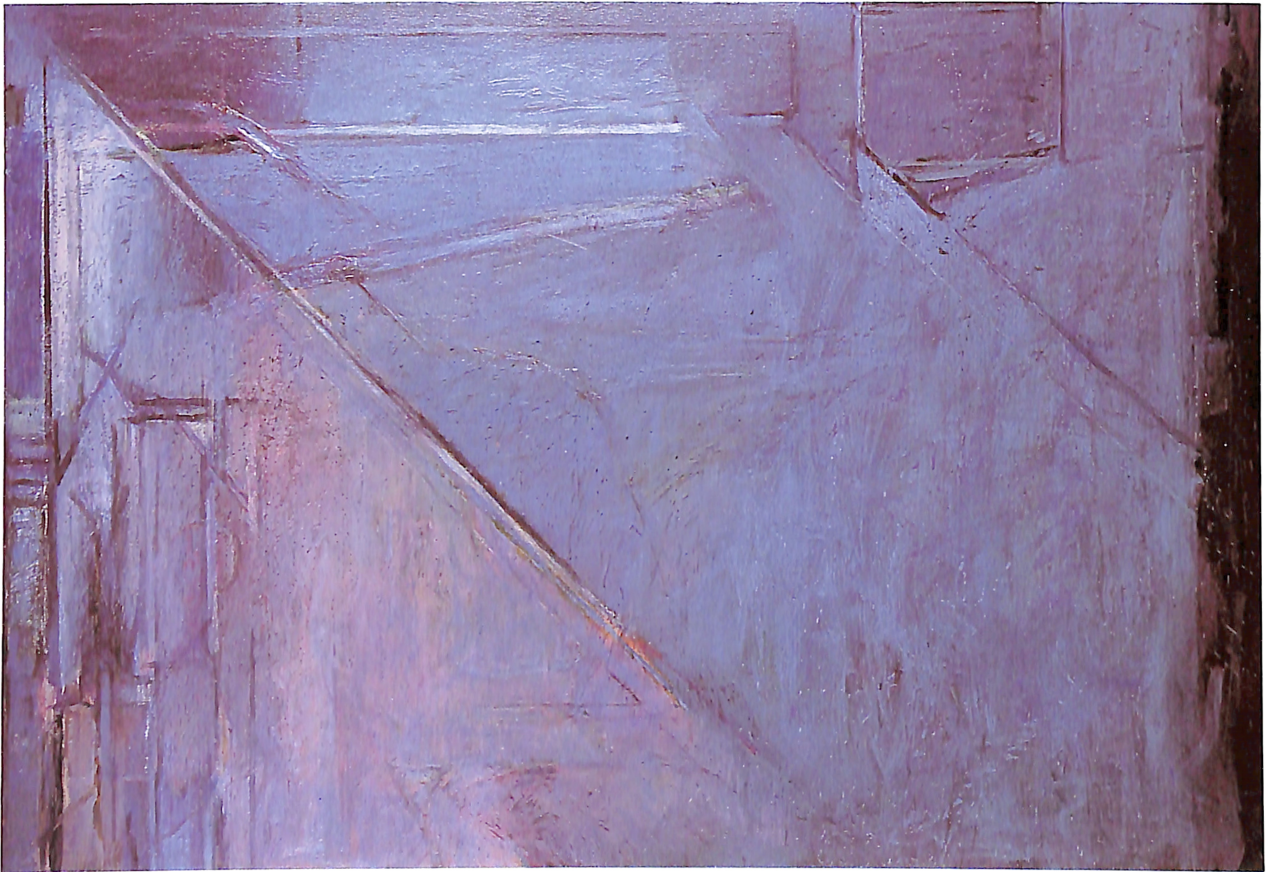
**Plate 16,** *K-77-16*, 1977, acrylic. 65 × 45.





**Plate 17,** *Entrance*, 1977, watercolor. 40 × 30.





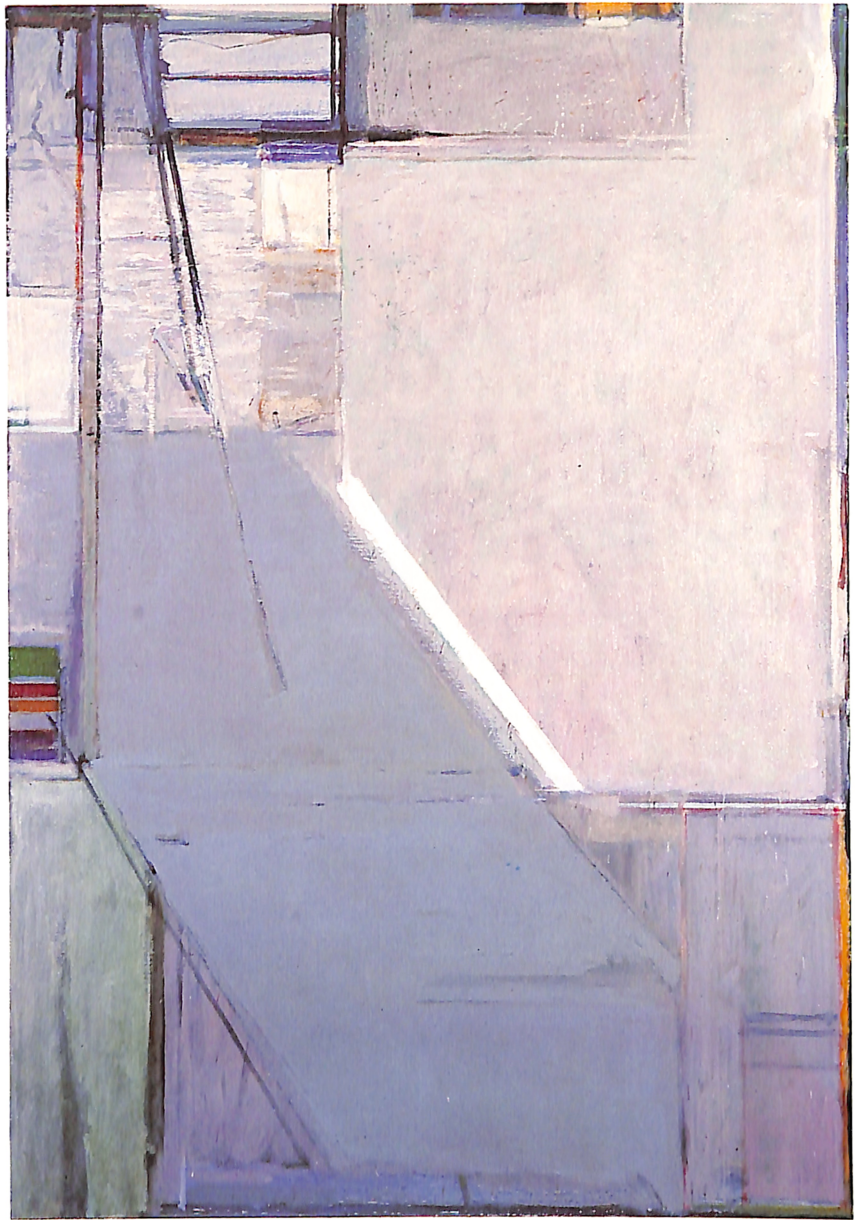
**Plate 18,** *Ten 79-1*, 1979, acrylic. 45 × 65.





**Plate 19,** *Ten 79-4*, 1979, acrylic. 63 × 45.





**Plate 20**, *Ten 79-11*, 1979, acrylic. 65 × 45.





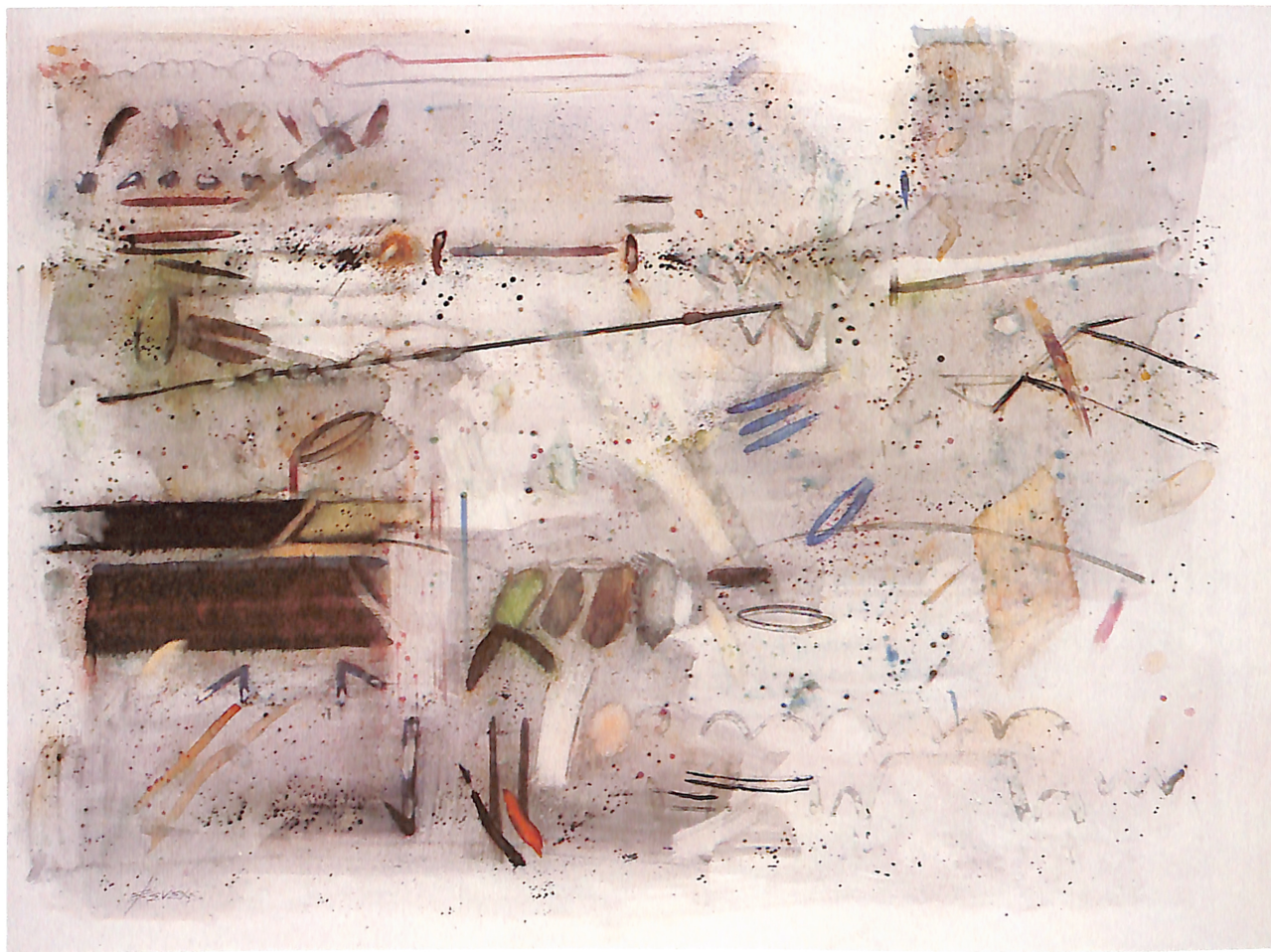
**Plate 21**, *K-79-7*, 1979, acrylic. 72 × 60.





**Plate 22,** *Summer '80 (c)*, 1980, watercolor. 40 × 30.





**Plate 23,** *Summer '80 (i)*, 1980, watercolor. 40 × 30.



# The Exhibition

## Watercolors on Paper

1. *Bristle Ridge*, 1961  
19' x 24" Polymer
- 2. *Untitled*, 1962  
17½" x 22½"
3. *Untitled*, 1964  
19' x 24"
4. *Night Marble*, 1964  
28½" x 20¾" Polymer
5. *Acadia*, 1966  
18' x 24"
- 6. *Ridge Strip*, 1968  
14" x 21"
7. *Untitled*, (Date Unknown)  
18¾" x 23¾"
8. *Seat Beat*, 1970  
20¾" x 29¾"
- 9. *Needle Isle*, Date Unknown  
26' x 31"
10. *Window Wall*, 1972  
32' x 28"
- 11. *Block Totem*, circa 1972  
32' x 28"
12. *Island Series II-20*, circa 197  
40' x 30"
- 13. *Island Series 7*, 1973  
40' x 30"
- 14. *Wall Shift III*, 1975  
30' x 40"
- 15. *Air Wall*, 1975  
30' x 40"
16. *Flux 6*, circa 1976  
30' x 40"
17. *Tidal III*, 1976  
18' x 24"
18. *D.I. 77-14*, 1977  
40' x 30"
- 19. *Entrance*, 1977  
40' x 30"
20. *D.I. 78-12*, 1978  
40' x 30"
21. *D.I. 78-40*, 1978  
40' x 30"
22. *D.I. 79-4*, 1979  
40' x 30"
23. *D.I. 79-5*, 1979  
40' x 30"
24. *D.I. 79-12*, 1979  
40' x 30"

25. *Ten-80-23*, 1980  
40' x 30"
26. *Summer '80 (a)*, 1980  
40' x 30"
27. *Summer '80 (b)*, 1980  
40' x 30"
- 28. *Summer '80 (c)*, 1980  
40' x 30"
29. *Summer '80 (d)*, 1980  
40' x 30"
30. *Summer '80 (e)*, 1980  
40' x 30"
31. *Summer '80 (f)*, 1980  
40' x 30"
32. *Summer '80 (g)*, 1980  
40' x 30"
33. *Summer '80 (h)*, 1980  
40' x 30"
- 34. *Summer '80 (i)*, 1980  
40" x 30"
35. *Summer '80 (j)*, 1980  
40' x 30"
36. *Summer '80 (k)*, 1980  
40' x 30"
37. *Summer, '80 (l)*, 1980  
40' x 30"
38. *Summer, '80 (m)*, 1980  
40' x 30"

## Paintings on Canvas

- 1. *South Ridge II*, 1956  
50' x 40", oil
2. *Hot Day in the Smokies*, 1958  
50" x 40", oil
3. *Sub Zero*, 1959  
24" x 36", Lacquer and oil
- 4. *Night Furnace*, 1959  
36" x 50", oil
- 5. *Eagle Grove*, 1960  
50' x 40", oil
- 6. *August*, 1960  
50' x 40", oil
7. *Granite Falls*, 1961  
48' x 40", oil
8. *Indian Gap*, 1961  
50' x 36", oil

9. *Knocker II*, 1962  
40' x 40", oil
- 10. *Rock Vines*, 1963  
50' x 44", oil
- 11. *Expansion*, 1963  
50' x 44", oil
- 12. *The Bridge*, 1964  
48' x 48", oil
- 13. *Windows III*, 1966  
45' x 65", acrylic
14. *Sky Shift*, 1969  
45' x 65", acrylic
- 15. *Devil's Hopyard*, 1970  
45' x 65", acrylic
16. *Island Series III-2*, circa 1973  
68' x 68", oil
17. *Jump Split*, circa 1974  
48' x 48", oil
- 18. *North East*, 1976  
42' x 54", oil
19. *K-77-12*, 1977  
45' x 65", acrylic
- 20. *K-77-16*, 1977  
65' x 45", acrylic
- 21. *Ten 79-1*, 1979  
45' x 65", acrylic
22. *Ten 79-2*, 1979  
50' x 45", acrylic
- 23. *Ten 79-4*, 1979  
63' x 45", acrylic
24. *Ten 79-6*, 1979  
50' x 45", acrylic
25. *Ten 79-8*, 1979  
45¼" x 60", acrylic
26. *Ten 79-10*, 1979  
45' x 60", acrylic
- 27. *Ten 79-11*, 1979  
65' x 45", acrylic
- 28. *K-79-7*, 1979  
72' x 60", acrylic

Dimensions: Height precedes width.

## • Illustrated



Walter Hollis Stevens was an inspiring teacher and distinguished member of the Art Department Faculty at the University of Tennessee from 1957 until his death in 1980. Holly, as he was known by his friends, was foremost an artist of great integrity and dedication. His paintings were displayed in numerous exhibitions throughout the country and are included in various private, corporate, and public collections. The respect and esteem in which Stevens' work was held by his colleagues and the Knoxville community led to the organization of this memorial exhibition.

Holly Stevens was a most prolific artist. Because of his productivity, there were many excellent paintings from the various stages of his life which were stored in his home and studio. It was, therefore, decided that this exhibition be chosen from his estate. Dr. Fred Moffatt agreed to research and write the catalog's text and an advisory committee of faculty close to Stevens and his work was formed to assist in the selection of the exhibition.

I would like to thank Whitney Leland, Dennis Peacock, Phil Nichols, and Carl Sublett for their time and patience in serving on this committee. Whitney Leland is especially acknowledged for his advice and assistance in virtually every aspect of this exhibition's development.

A special thank you to Dr. Fred Moffatt for his authorship of the accompanying text and to William Kennedy for his design and layout of this catalog and of the exhibition poster. Acknowledged also in the support given this exhibition by Dr. Donald Kurka, Head of the Art Department, and by the College of Liberal Arts, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Gratitude is extended to Holly's longtime friend and supporter, Mr. Tom Rechenbach for his generous contribution to this exhibition and catalog publication, and to the Dulin Gallery of Art for their early commitment to this exhibition, and to all sponsoring institutions for hosting the Stevens' exhibition.

Sincere appreciation is given to Mrs. Wray Stevens for providing extensive information to Dr. Moffatt, for graciously opening her home numerous times to the selection committee, and for the loan of her late husband's work.

Needless to say, the realization of an exhibition of this scope requires the involvement and cooperation of many people who are unnamed above. I thank all of these individuals whose assistance was generously given and invaluable to the exhibition's progress.

This exhibition is a tribute to Walter Hollis Stevens, a tribute to his achievements as an artist, a teacher, a colleague, and to his contribution to the development of the visual arts in Tennessee and the entire Southeast.

Sam Yates, Director  
Art & Architecture Gallery  
University of Tennessee, Knoxville