



Ewing Gallery of Art & Architecture

Art

1995

Frank Tolar Retrospective (Exhibition Catalogue)

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Elizabeth Chase Tolar

John Rosenthal

Horace Farlowe

Timothy O. Hicks

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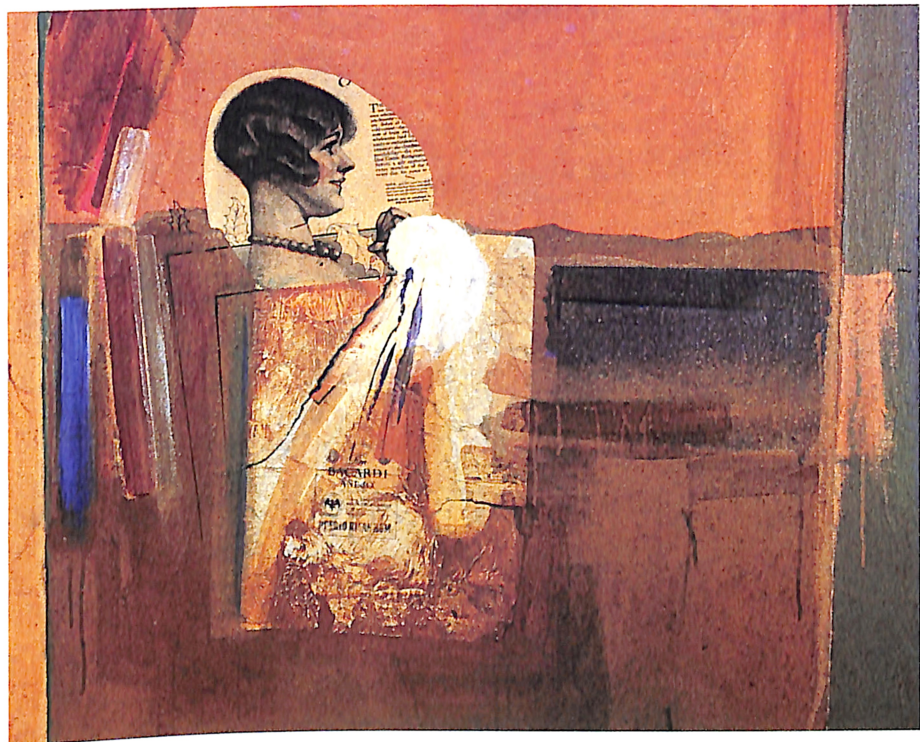
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F R A N K T O L A R



R E T R O S P E C T I V E

FRONT COVER

Moonlight Means Nothing to Mary

Mixed Media 38 x 46 1/2, 1965

Collection of Elizabeth Chase Tolar

The Ewing Gallery wishes to acknowledge the following individuals who have generously loaned work for this exhibition:

William Barth

Anne Church

Horace Farlowe

David Fox

LeRoy Holmes

Dr. Robert Kriegsman

Sarah Lewis

Dr. Hardy Liston

James Lord

Tama Nicholson

Dept. of Art, North Carolina Agricultural and

Technical State University/Greensboro

Visual Arts Center, North Carolina State

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Joseph Strother

Elizabeth Chase Tolar

Lydia Tolar

Maria Walker

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Mrs. James Phipps Chase

Mrs. Andrew D. Holt

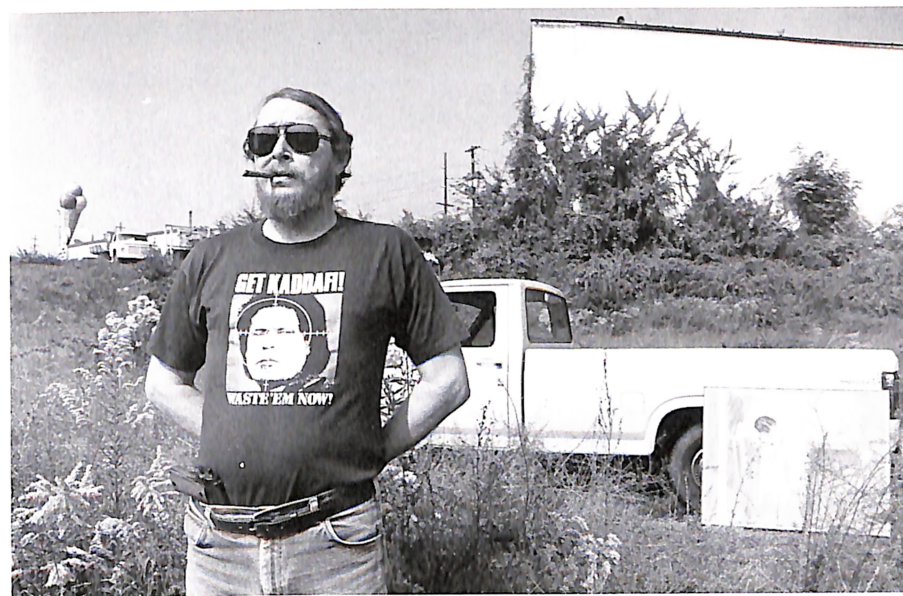
Mr. and Mrs. J. Pat Gore

Elizabeth Chase Tolar

Martha Chase Scott

The East Tennessee Foundation

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PHOTOGRAPH OF FRANK TOLAR © 1986 JOHN ROSENTHAL

FRANK TOLAR RETROSPECTIVE

August 4 – September 3, 1995
Ewing Gallery of Art and Architecture
The University of Tennessee
Knoxville, Tennessee

Sam Yates, Director
Cindy Spangler, Registrar
Jerry Brown, Preparator

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Born in 1940, Frank Tolar was a talented and accomplished Southeastern artist. The Ewing Gallery is pleased to have organized this retrospective of his creative works. In 1958, the young Tolar entered North Carolina State University in Raleigh to study Industrial Design. As the curriculum included numerous classes in art, his interest in painting and sculpture intensified and he decided to pursue a career in the Fine Arts. As North Carolina State did not offer a Fine Arts degree, he transferred to Atlantic Christian College, Wilson, North Carolina, to study with the artist Russell Arnold. With Arnold's encouragement, Tolar enrolled in the graduate program at East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina, where he received a Master of Arts degree in 1964.

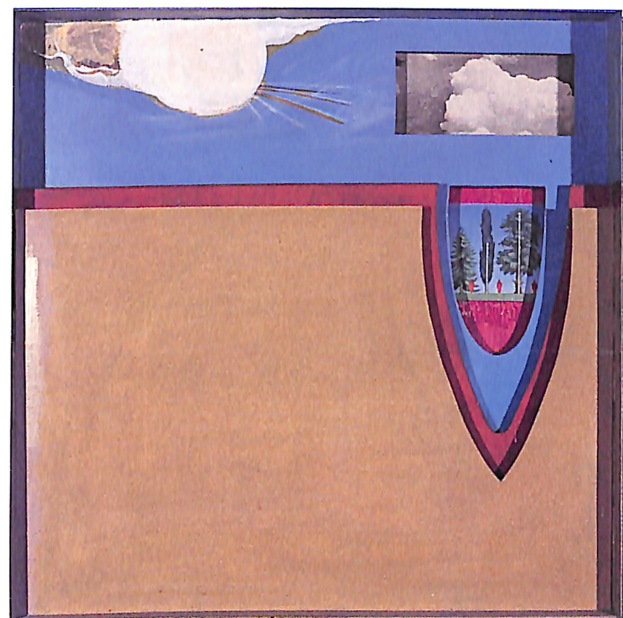
Afterwards Tolar became an inspiring teacher at various institutions including the Art Department, North Carolina A&T University, Greensboro, 1964-1970; the School of Architecture, The University of Tennessee-Knoxville, 1971-1972; and the School of Architecture, The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 1972-1974.

After a business venture, "Matrix", on the Carolina coast, Tolar returned to Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1978 where he established a successful wood-working and design shop, "Wood Works", and continued to make art. He died in 1989

shortly before his 50th birthday. His art had been included in numerous solo and group exhibitions throughout the Southeast and received distinguished reviews and awards.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the contributions of many individuals, foremost that of his wife Elizabeth Chase Tolar who, in the following introduction, gives unique understanding and insight to the complexities of Tolar and his work. Also acknowledged for their reflections on Tolar are Horace Farlowe, who was a fellow classmate and life-long friend; John Rosenthal, whose friendship began in the mid-1960s; and to Dr. Timothy Hicks who was a student of Tolar's at NC A&T University. Also recognized are the family and friends of Frank Tolar who have either loaned works for the exhibition or given financial assistance. We are also thankful to Mary Revenig and Lansing King for the design of this catalog, the Ewing Gallery staff and students in Museology III for their efforts in the success of this Retrospective.

— Sam Yates, Director
Ewing Gallery of Art and Architecture



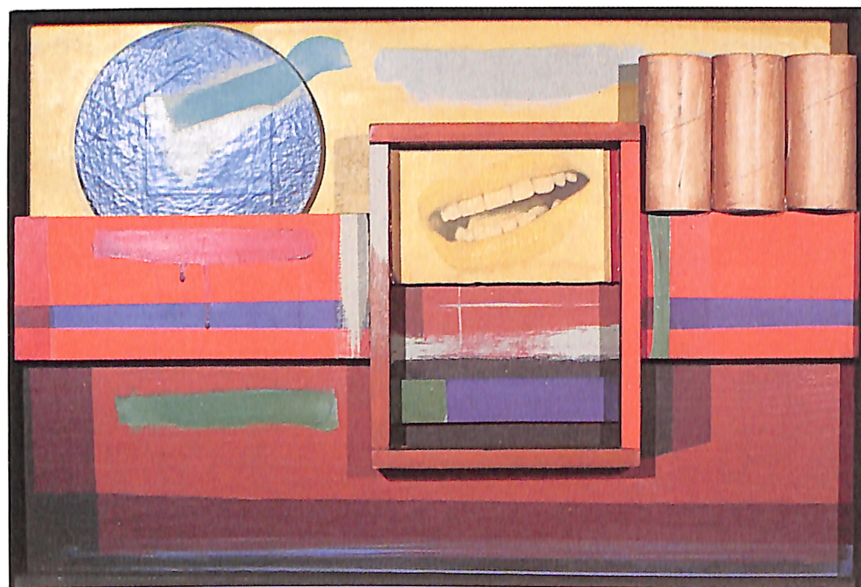
Cycle #3:
Psychophotosynthesis
Mixed media assemblage,
1966
29-1/2 x 29-1/2 x 5 inches
Collection of Lydia Tolar

INTRODUCTION

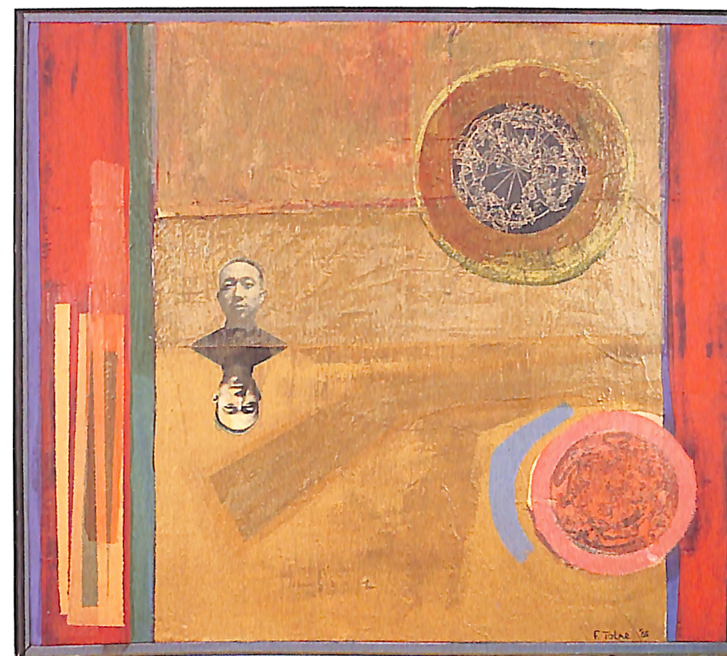
When looking at Frank Tolar's work, think of a visual pun to the fourth order, or dimension. He had an analytic mind. He saw the physical world as one of absolute limits, or boundaries. He was fascinated by the edges, the lines where material reality ends and space begins. He wanted to push these boundaries in color, in material, to reach another territory beyond this reality.

He was intrigued by the horizon, the line on the highway, the juncture of water and sky. He saw it as the direction beyond the

visual. He saw systems within systems—radio waves, light waves, water waves—all in motion within the orbit of earth (weather patterns, wave patterns) around the sun to galaxy. He loved the ocean as a course of life and movement, and painted it in the stillness of timelessness. One series illustrates the metaphor—the tear as a drop of water which runs to the ocean and evaporates and comes again as rain; the bird's flight over thousands of miles and the movement of the fish without maps or navigation and time maps as our minds know them. There is



Untitled
wood assemblage
Collection of LeRoy Holmes



The Spectres
Oil/collage on canvas, 1965
38 x 46 inches
Collection of Sarah Lewis

a series of radio waves, sounds across space. He was an electronics specialist in the Air Force; he made sound systems and televisions from kits as a hobby. He enjoyed putting things together, proceeding in a logical way. The boxes show the combination of the color, form and subjects that interested him; all intentional and orderly, clear and precise; contained and controlled.

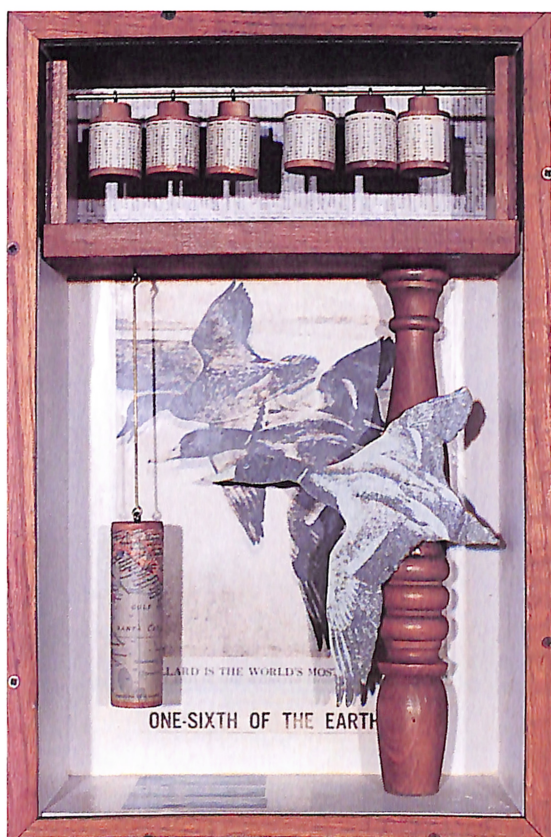
Visual themes—the ocean, galaxies, sound and light waves are used to show the way the artist sees and perceives the

universe in detail. Flight—movement in time—time as a highway line of sight—flight and propulsion shapes. The eye as a circle, the circle as galactic form—sun, moons, seeing as the artist sees. With his eyes, he takes the impression to the brain where it is analyzed and recognized as image, recorded in memory, processed as thought, and reproduced as art. He was moved by *Life* magazine as it recorded time—World War II, submarines, battle ships at sea, victims of Hiroshima—eagles of war and patriotism. His self is found in the morning glory, a vision

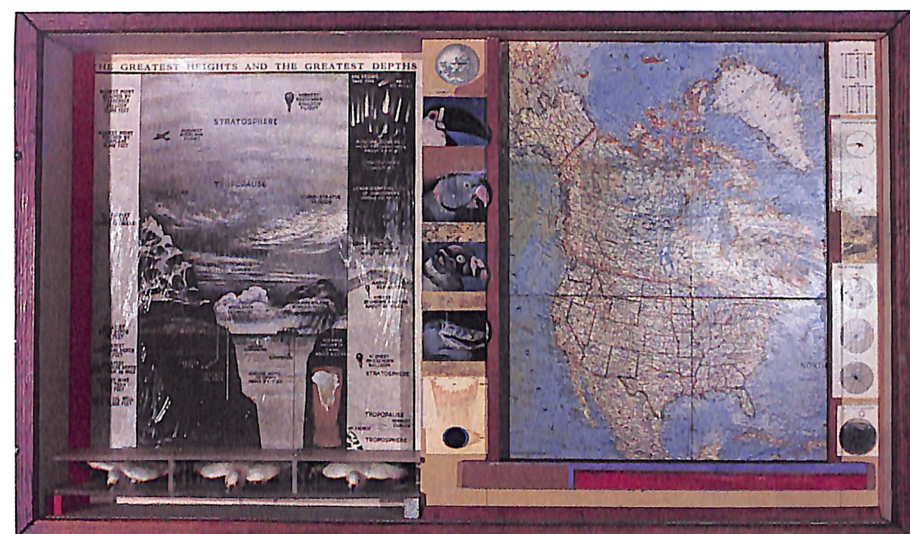
washing over the artist, working with and in awe of the world around.

The evolution of his work moved from sculpture to paintings, to the boxes, to woodwork (where he made rooms move and change). He pushed the materials to show form and movement. He experimented with wood grains as art and designed and built the cases, music stands, libraries, kitchens, rocking horses. He had begun woodworking when he was eleven.

He was precise about control of material, color and texture. One piece kicks up his heels and laughs with the happy spirit Frank had when he felt good and was making people laugh. Another is contained and precise, auto finish polished and defined in tension. The Hiram Walker drink being served is Frank being funny. The Bauhaus training is finding universal principles of design, a universal art language. Within it the artist found a way of original expression which suggests the particular person behind the work. There is a push and pull between



The Mallard Is The World's Most Important Duck
 Mixed media assemblage, 1965
 19 x 12-1/2 x 5 inches
 Collection of Tama Nicholson



It Is Said Of The Old Pilot That The Birds Along His Route Call Him Hal. This Is Because Hal Is Part Bird And Also That He Will Not Eat Eggs, Preferring Grits With His Coffee
 Mixed media assemblage, 1966
 26 x 43-1/2 x 6 inches
 Collection of Horace Farlowe

expression and adherence to design and color principles. Craftsmanship was his belief—and honesty in materials in the Bauhaus tradition. He was influenced by Rothko, Joseph Cornell, Rene Magritte—and his teacher Russell Arnold. He was a musician with an ear for music as keen and natural as his eye for color. He understood modes and tonalities scientifically. He could play the piano—any tune—the guitar—the 50s songs—and had a beautiful voice. He was born with no muscles in his eye lids to open and close them easily so his parents took

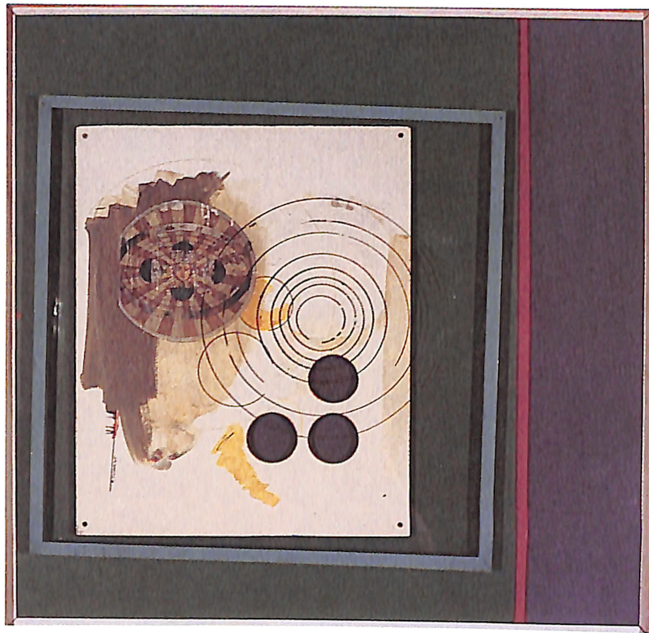
him to Duke where he had numerous operations to hold his eyelids up, and open. Consequently, he was very sensitive to light. He could not close it out. It was as if he were awake all the time.

At one time, he was teaching art, running a gallery, doing his painting at night. He began at the university in engineering physics. After the Air Force, he studied industrial design at State, then moved into Art. His IQ was Mensas level.

In the paintings, he used color to show tension and movement trying to capture space in time, lines of the horizon—of the tobacco fields on a hot day—the Atlantic Ocean and the fields he grew up with in the North Carolina Country where his father was a landowner, country store keeper, and salesman for Roster fertilizer—whose logo is found in some of the paintings. The boll weevil is there, too. Colors expressed his patriotism, his anger, and his redheaded choice of paint, his sensitivity to contrast and depth bouncing color off color; scientifically

measured to Oswald's color theory. He believed in science and God's systematic universe with its permeating rays of energy. The expression shows a creation from the tension of chaos. A final painting is of the beloved inlet, the path to the Gulf Stream where he went to catch the big blue marlin and where his ashes were returned to the spot where it was taken.

— Elizabeth Chase Tolar



System IV
 Mixed media assemblage, 1965
 27 x 27-1/2 x 2 inches
 Collection of *The Visual Arts Center*
 North Carolina State University
 Harrelson Fund Purchase

REMEMBERING FRANK

Back in the late 1960's Frank and I would drive down to Wrightsville Beach where he kept a little motorboat at his in-laws' place off the inland waterway. Early in the morning we'd go out to set up crab-pots and then head for the inlet in case the blues were running. At the time, Frank was one of North Carolina's most promising artists. He made little wooden

boxes, which he called "fantasy boxes," and he put all kinds of things in them. Those were nice days. The red tide hadn't shown up yet so you could eat all the shellfish you caught, and if you didn't catch anything you could sit at the raw bar and drink beer and eat oysters and still have some money in your pocket when you got through. And Frank was



Vision By The Sea X
 Mixed media assemblage, 1970
 48 x 48 x 6 inches
 Collection of
 Dr. Robert Kriegsman

the best of companions. A funny, curious, droopy-eyed man who found something luminous in the very air which blew off the ocean—one of those odd Southern souls, half-artist, half-redneck, who seemed to give up his inner divisions the closer he got to the sea. At least most of the time. Sometimes Frank would spoil things by drinking too much. You'd be sitting with him at the bar and he'd be talking about something like Jackson Pollack's paintings and the next thing you'd

know he was scowling at some bubba down the bar and saying, "What are you looking at?"

In the late '70's Frank moved to Knoxville though he returned to Wrightsville Beach each spring for the Marlin Tournament. One year he won second-place when he landed a 200-pound marlin—"it was like holding onto a goddamn freight train" he told me on the phone—and he brought it home to Knoxville where he hung it up



The Dangerous Horizon
 Mixed media assemblage, 1981
 32 x 23 x 5 inches
 Collection of William Barth

next to the fantasy boxes which he'd stopped making. By this time he'd given up his peculiar artistic vision for the more practical enterprise of making kitchen cabinets and bookshelves for the local gentry.

I'd still drive up through the Blue Ridge Mountains to see him three or four times a year, and he'd close down his shop and we'd jump in his pick-up and drive around the countryside, singing old Mose Allison songs and looking for graveyards. And at night we'd usually go down to

Pero's, Frank's bar on Kingston Pike, where he would swap stories with anybody—real estate agents, ex-soldiers, retired professors, nurses—who had a story of their own. I guess Frank had exchanged the solitude of art-making for the louder democracy of the bar-room. Though I wish he hadn't. He might have lived longer drinking white wine at art galleries than he did drinking scotch and smoking cigars, even in the best taverns.

Frank was an honest man, which is to say, he was sometimes selfish and

discourteous. It also means that he never gossiped. Since he was willing to offend people to their face, he didn't have to do it vicariously. Perhaps he should have been more positive, or, as we say nowadays, more caring, instead of believing that his fellow man was simply too stupid to be depressed. At any rate, Frank acted as if freedom begins with the word NO, and he believed that even though the world may end with a whimper, we humans can end a lot sooner, with a smile on our faces and "have a nice day" on the tip of our tongues.

I never paid him much attention when he'd go off on a tirade about "bleeding hearts" or the futility of making art in a world full of phonies. Since he could laugh at himself, too, I never thought I had to. Anyway, though he was brilliant, he didn't think very well. Logic wasn't a tool that took him where he wanted to be, or solved problems he wanted solving. He was—permit me to coin a word—an ecstasist. He didn't want meaning—he wanted the electrical charge of the thing itself. That was enough. Words and categories came later, like dogs sniffing under the table, after the feast was over. Still, I wish he had put more faith in words. They are, after all, a kind of solace after the intuitive moment, with all its quick glory, is past.

He died a few months short of his 50th birthday. On a hot day he'd just unloaded

a truck full of Honduras mahogany and he sat down and died. At his request, his ashes were scattered over the ocean, at the exact coordinates where he landed his marlin.

Now that he's gone, I say bless him for his anger, bless him for his vividness, and bless him for the complication of beauty he brought into the world he so unwillingly loved.

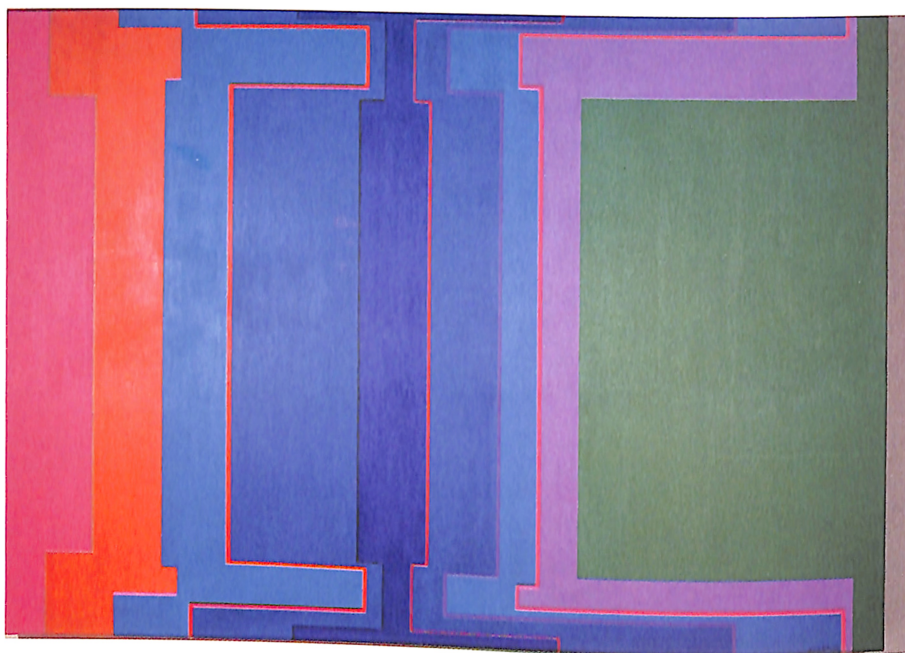
— John Rosenthal

John Rosenthal is a writer and occasional commentator on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*. He is also a photographer who has exhibited throughout the Southeast.

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 The most difficult, intelligent and sincere man I ever met was Frank Tolar, and he became my friend.

To meet Frank was an experience. After the meeting you either liked him or disliked him. One way or the other, you would always remember Frank Tolar.

We met in 1961 when we were both husbands, fathers and students in search of ourselves and a purpose in life. Art became that purpose. At this time, abstract expressionism was supreme and it was this wave of art that we were caught up in.



M-26-72

Oil on linen, 1972
58-1/2 x 82 inches
Collection of Anne Church

In 1965, Frank won the Harrelson Award in the North Carolina Annual Exhibition at the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, North Carolina. He won with a painting-collage-assemblage called "System IV." This recognition by the museum was important to Frank and the results were a number of superb "boxes" done in 1966.

Unfortunately, the late 1960's were times of personal hardship for Frank, myself and our families.

October 24, 1965. Frank Tolar is very unhappy with his work. He says things such as "the life the artist believes in does not exist and is a lot of hogwash."

February 5, 1966. Frank has something going for him in his boxes or constructions. I'm very pleased he has finally found a direction.

September 20, 1966. Talked with Frank today. He broke down Sunday night. He went all to pieces and broke some jars of paint which resulted in a very bad cut on his hand.

November 27, 1967. In a letter from Frank..."I've done little work art wise but have been doing a lot of experimenting with moving colored lights and bright colored yarns—also with cast polyester resin. The whole idea being that an optical color cancels out a pigment type color and leaves in its place a strange sort of visual sensation. I don't think I'll ever be famous for it but that is my personal thing to do what I can do for the sake of discovering what's happening, baby, and that is all that seems to count to me art wise.

Frank walked away from teaching on the university level. He became a crew member of a deep sea fishing boat and later a master cabinet maker. He never truly returned to the construction of "boxes" with full energy, but he did find happiness in Knoxville, Tennessee.

— Horace Farlowe

Associate Professor of Art
The University of Georgia/Athens

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Frank Tolar was an extraordinarily sensitive teacher especially where recognizing student talent was concerned. I remember well a specific critique he made of an acrylic painting that I was working on. He explained that my struggle and frustration to reach a point of resolve was an act of the pure artist in me.

Frank was really wrapped-up in his work and the sixties revolution, so much so that sometimes his teaching digressed to these subjects. Otherwise, he was my hero and mentor. He was insightful, funny, sarcastic, dedicated, serious, witty, knowledgeable, and very temperamental. He was an excellent draftsman and craftsman; he believed in himself and his art and he pushed his students to have the same kind of faith.

Most of all, I always felt that Frank was on the same frequency with his students. Rarely did he distance himself even when he was painting or drafting some new ideas. He viewed teaching as romantically as he did his work and the movies. I remember going to see "Blow-Up" (a 1966 movie production about a photographer who discovers the image of a dead body in a photograph taken in a park) because his re-creation and interpretation of the events in the movie were so vivid and aesthetically revealing.

I don't know if these few reflections on Frank say anything important. I do know that he was not perfect and he didn't try to be—nonetheless, he had a profound effect on all of us and we love him for that.

— Timothy O. Hicks

Chair and Associate Professor of Art
North Carolina Agricultural
and Technical State University
Greensboro, North Carolina



Music Stand

Walnut, c. 1986

58 x 28 x 23 inches

Collection of Elizabeth Chase Tolar