



2010

Filament: The Work of Bill FitzGibbons and Creighton Michael (Exhibition Catalogue)

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filament

The work of Bill FitzGibbons and Creighton Michael



filament

Ewing Gallery of Art and Architecture
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

September 16 - October 31, 2010

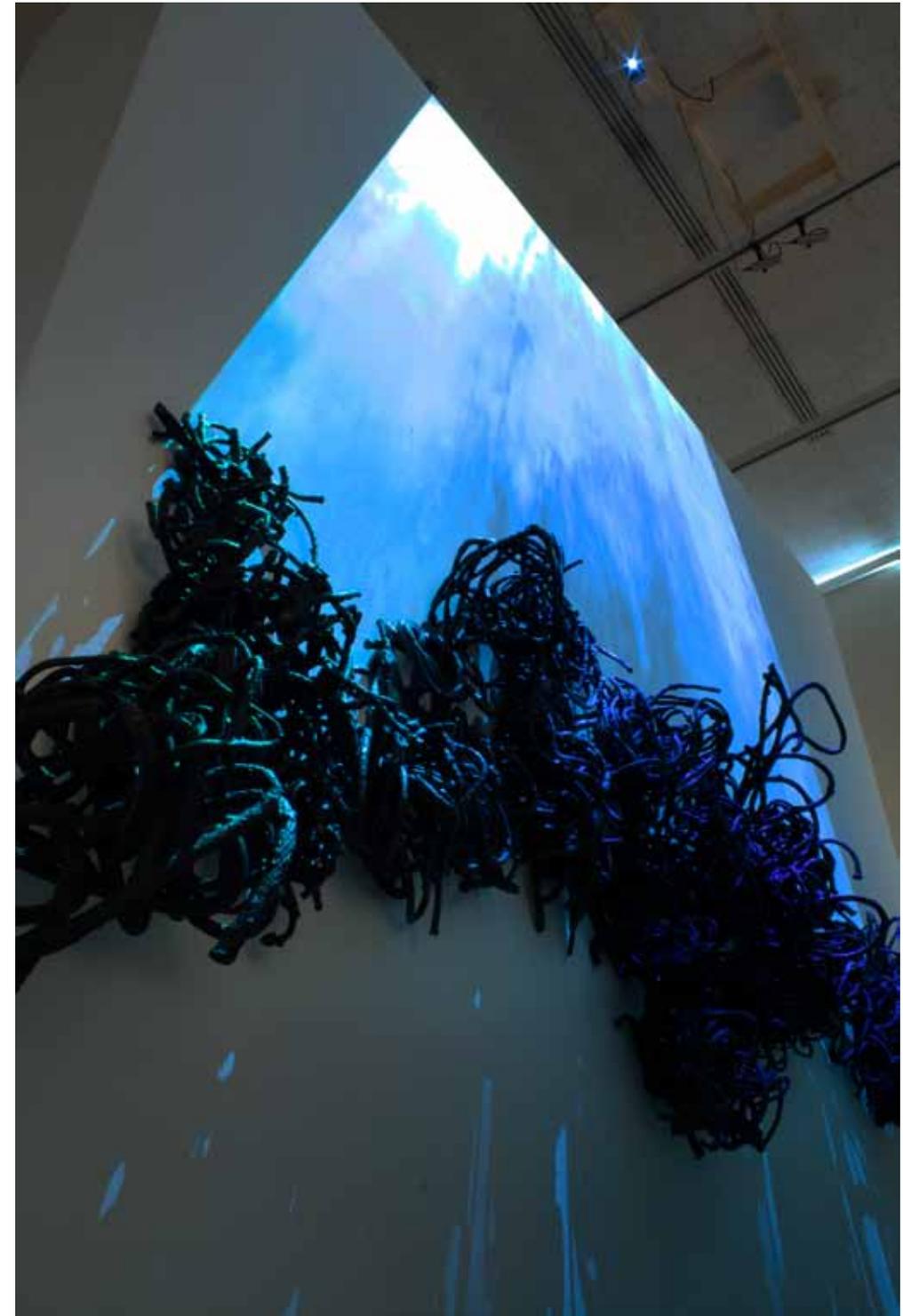
From the Director

Since coming to UT thirty years ago, I have often been asked by my colleagues if I had ever met UT alumnus Creighton Michael, '71, or if I was familiar with his work. Although I had seen exhibition announcements and online information about him, I was not able to meet the artist until the summer of 2009 – a meeting strongly recommended by our mutual friend and former UT visiting artist Pinkney Herbert. While driving from his home in New York to visit his father in Nashville, Michael visited our campus for the first time since 1971. During our discussions about the possibility of exhibiting his work at one of our galleries, at the Ewing Gallery on campus or at our smaller Downtown Gallery on Gay Street, Michael suggested that I consider a two-person exhibition with him and his longtime friend and fellow UT alumnus Bill FitzGibbons, '72. The proposal was to divide the Ewing Gallery into three separate spaces; one for Michael, one for FitzGibbons, and one for a unique joint collaboration. Though having never met FitzGibbons, I was familiar with his public art projects, and I quickly agreed to exhibit the work of these two outstanding alumni. Appropriately titled, *Filament* became part of our 2010/2011 Ewing Gallery exhibition schedule. Michael's and FitzGibbons' shared intent for *Filament* is to create an environment in which the viewer physically encounters the tangible nature and sensual pleasure of drawing. Their collaborative piece employs, as the primary light source, a collaged video of both artists captured in various marking activities.

Since their graduations from UT in the early seventies, Michael and FitzGibbons have had successful careers as artists and have remained close friends. They have

Opposite: Bill FitzGibbons/Creighton Michael, detail of *Filament*, collaborative video installation with sound, dimensions variable, 2010.

Image courtesy of the Ewing Gallery.



extensive national and international exhibition records and are included in many public and private collections. The artists have collaborated professionally in site-specific installations, including the critically acclaimed 2006 New York City installation *EELight*.

An exhibition project of this significance could not have been achieved without the input and support of numerous individuals. The Knoxville Museum of Art, by coordinating a public sculpture project with FitzGibbons during this same time period, has helped make this artist's installation at both Knoxville venues financially viable. The museum's staff: David Butler, Director; Stephen Wicks, Curator; and Clark Gillespie, Assistant Curator, are recognized for their enthusiastic support. Brian Jobe, UT alumnus, '04, and former assistant to FitzGibbons at Blue Star, San Antonio, TX, was also instrumental in working with the KMA to bring this project to Knoxville.

I would like to acknowledge the School of Art's VASDCO committee for bringing the artists to campus, Steve Catlett, Associate Vice Chancellor for Alumni Affairs, and Patrick Wade, Director of Alumni Programs, for their support of the exhibition catalogue. Dr. Dorothy Habel, Director of the School of Art, is recognized for her steadfast endorsement of the project, as is Jason Brown, sculptor and School of Art faculty member, who wrote the catalog essay. Ewing Gallery staff members Benjamin Wooten and Sarah McFalls have both worked diligently to insure the success of this exhibition. Wooten is also acknowledged for his extensive efforts in the design of the exhibition catalog.

introduction by **Sam Yates, Director**
Ewing Gallery of Art and Architecture
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Opposite: Bill FitzGibbons/Creighton Michael,
installation view of *Filament*, collaborative video
installation with sound, 10 x 10 x 4 feet, 2010.

Image courtesy of the Ewing Gallery.



BILL FITZGIBBONS

Abbreviated Biography

Bill FitzGibbons received a BFA in sculpture and art history from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and an MFA in sculpture and multi-media from Washington University in St. Louis.

FitzGibbons has received over thirty public art commissions, spanning a distinguished career as an international sculptor and public artist. His work has appeared in venues such as The Lab Gallery, New York City, New York, and the San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio, Texas. Recent commissions include site-specific light installations in Reykjavic, Iceland, and Seattle, Washington.

FitzGibbons was named as the first curator at Laumeier Sculpture Park in St. Louis, Missouri, and has since served terms as the Director of Sculpture at the Visual Art Center in Anchorage, Alaska, and as the Department Head of Sculpture at the San Antonio Art Institute. Among his honors, FitzGibbons was selected for a Fulbright Scholarship to the Hungarian Art Academy in Budapest, Hungary, and a USIA artist fellowship in Helsinki, Finland.

FitzGibbons is the Executive Director of the Blue Star Contemporary Art Center, San Antonio, TX, and serves on the board of directors of the International Sculpture Center.

Opposite: Bill FitzGibbons, *Ouroboros*, oxy-acetylene torch drawing on birch veneered plywood, 24 x 24 inches, 2010.



Artist's Statement

The *Fire Drawing* series is a direct result of *Filament*, the collaborative project between Creighton Michael and myself. The drawing process that I chose for the video component of *Filament* was an oxy-acetylene torch used to burn the surface of primed birch board. The choice of fire as a drawing medium was made not only for its characteristics of light, but also in reference to my earlier pyrotechnic sculpture performances from the early nineties. Various sources and uses of light as a sculptural medium have been an ongoing aspect of my sculptural vocabulary.

The resulting *Fire Drawings* in this exhibition primarily have an aggressive vortex approach to their manifestation. These circuitous compositions contain evidence of their creation with the wisps of smoke imbedded onto the surface, often rising off of the picture plane. The steel sculpture, *Wormhole*, was inspired by these drawings. The composition of the drawings suggests possible cosmological ideas through exploring flat space with fire as a medium. The resulting *Wormhole* sculpture pierces the flat plane with a tunnel or passageway transcending to other spatial realities beyond the observer's line of sight.

Bill FitzGibbons, 2010

Opposite: Bill FitzGibbons, *Emerging*, oxy-acetylene torch drawing on birch veneered plywood, 48 x 48 inches, 2010.





Top left: Bill FitzGibbons, *Crossroads*, oxy-acetylene torch drawing on birch veneered plywood, 48 x 48 inches, 2010.

Top right: Bill FitzGibbons, *Loki*, oxy-acetylene torch drawing on birch veneered plywood, 24 x 24 inches, 2010.

Opposite: Bill FitzGibbons, *Crab Nebula*, oxy-acetylene torch drawing on birch veneered plywood, 48 x 48 inches, 2010.

“There is no way to make a drawing –

there is only drawing.”

Richard Serra, 1977

Walking into the *Filament* installation, visitors are simultaneously confronted with a series of complex visual images and the repetitive and layered sounds of manual labor. There are forces of movement, light and shadow, flickering through a narrow passage. This sensory environment immediately establishes an active relationship between the artists' working process and the audience – fracturing the passive experience of viewing an artwork quietly detached from its maker. A video projection of hands moving through space while transforming raw materials challenges visitors to participate in the experience of drawing in multiple dimensions.

Creighton Michael and Bill FitzGibbons unravel the two-dimensional activity of linear mark making, reinterpreting the practice of drawing. They embrace the fluid nature of connecting time, space, and object through material elements. Their collaborative work embodies the action-oriented spirit of all the varied meanings of the verb ‘to draw’, suggesting a force of dragging and manipulating matter to make art. Within their current gallery installation, solids, liquids, and gases are drawn into tension. Line and light are intertwined in the collaborative project that is *Filament*.

Opposite: Bill FitzGibbons/Creighton Michael, video still from *Filament*, collaborative video installation with sound, 2010.





Opposite: Creighton Michael, installation view of *MOTIF* paintings, dimensions variable, 2010.

Image courtesy of the Ewing Gallery.

Filament represents an exploration of the materiality of line and fiber. As the video progressively becomes more abstract through layers and distortion, the graphite-coated rope on the walls and floor is exposed as an unambiguous manifestation of drawing. Michael and FitzGibbons entangle their audience in an endless feedback loop of pulling and pushing. *Filament* is an orchestrated extension of a fantastical movement of pencil on paper projected into a multi-dimensional reality.

Considering the work of artist Creighton Michael, the act of drawing is essential from start to finish, front to back, and even inside out. His paintings in this exhibit are no exception, and in fact may be best understood by examining the layers to reveal the underpinnings from which they originate.

At first glance, the *MOTIF* series is a suite of colorful and energetic paintings full of abstract cellular shapes and structures. Looking closer, the paint is not one continuous surface, but an accumulated dimensional construction built on layers of sequential paintings and carefully crafted screens. Michael paints on plastic and meticulously peels away pieces of pigment, which he then saves for future compositions. In his original collection and inventory of unique forms, there are no duplicates. The repetition of gesture and movement within the frame creates a proliferation of myriad shapes. Although Michael's studio work is laborious, a playful spirit of intuitive spontaneity

drives his artistic process. Michael's paintings have a scale and presence that is macroscopic in their conceptual vision. His projects parallel the patterns and structures in nature, with an aesthetic order that is systematic and synthetic in the composition and design.

Michael's paintings are meditative and energizing, wild yet disciplined. These works are just a fraction of the impressive number of related pieces in Michael's archive. On ongoing study of human perception in regard to color, light, and optics, *MOTIF* is the manifestation of years of research and creative experiments.

As a sculptor, Bill FitzGibbons has a keen sense of the interplay of light and shadow on structure and form. In this installation and series of new works, he has established a remarkable contrast between the heavy mass of steel and the ethereal lightness of carbon residue. While these seemingly opposite forces hover in the gallery, FitzGibbons has found a way to unite them through the natural elements of gas, heat, and the process of making sculpture.

In metalworking, 'drawing' refers to the process of shaping sheet metal into complex, three-dimensional forms with metal dies. While such fabrication methods clearly couldn't have been applied on this scale, the form itself stands alone as a testament to industrial ingenuity. Entitled *Wormhole*, the massive sculptural object of a 30-inch diameter curved pipe penetrating one-inch thick steel plate is at

Opposite: Bill FitzGibbons, *Wormhole*, raw steel, 120 x 60 x 84 inches, 2010.

Image courtesy of the Ewing Gallery.



once monumental and a beautiful model for larger forces at work in the physical world. FitzGibbons refers to this circular space and void as a vortex of energy and ideas.

Returning to the linear concept of drawing, FitzGibbons has used a common welding instrument to make circular marks on square wood panels. The result is an elegant series of fire drawings that appear to float on the walls. As a complementary link between these experiments and the sculpture that dominates the floor, FitzGibbons includes a video loop of the process of making the drawings with an oxy-acetylene gas torch. Ironically, this fleeting image is projected onto a second heavy steel plate positioned as a screen that reflects both image and object.

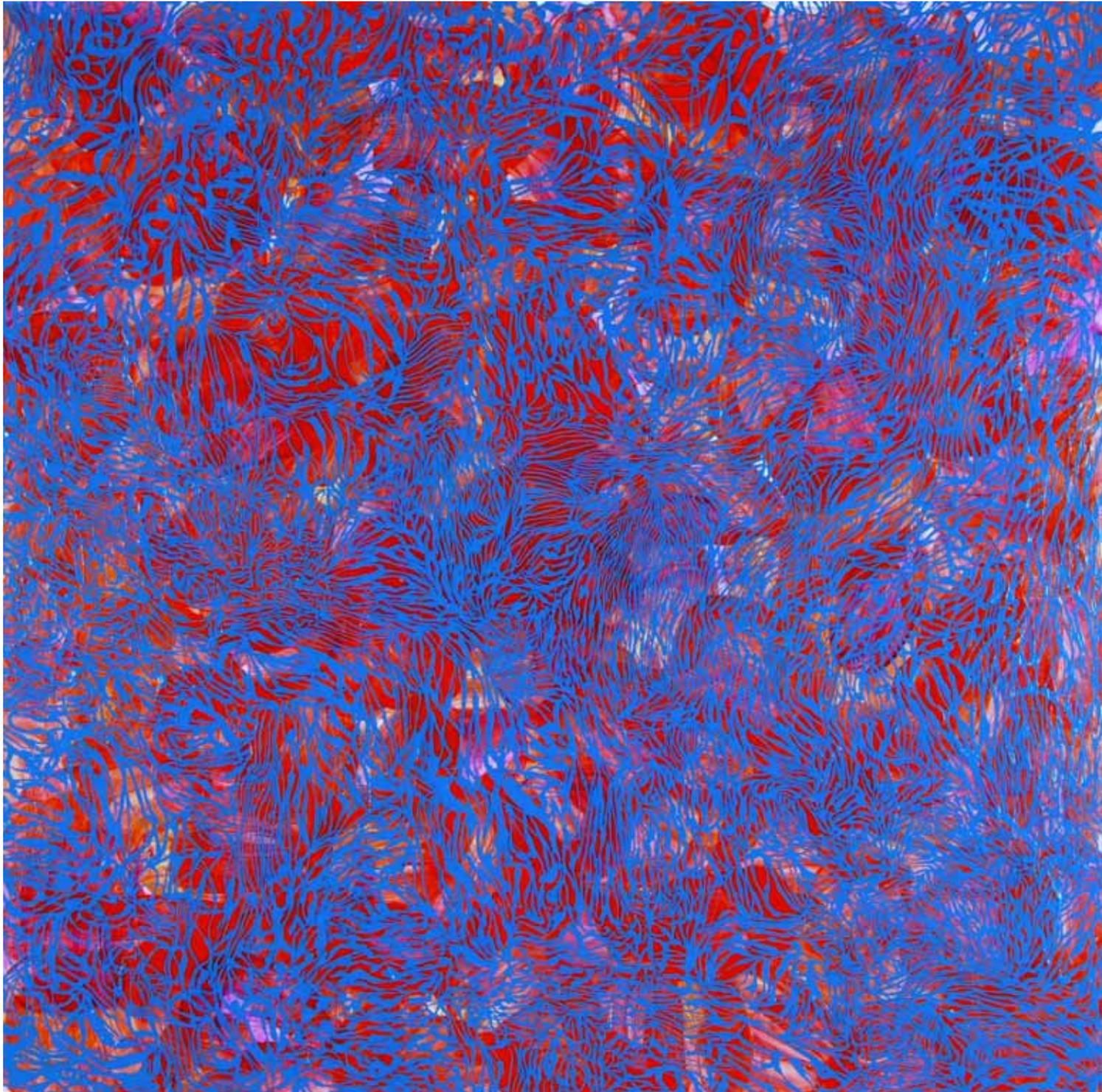
At its best, the process of working in the studio and making art is one of discovery, invention, and renewal. FitzGibbons demonstrates his commitment to both material and labor, while embracing an open-ended outcome for the development of ideas in his creative practice. The cyclical aspects of his work are deceptively simple in appearance, but infinitely complex in their possibilities.

essay by **Jason Sheridan Brown**
Sculptor/Associate Professor of Art
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Opposite: Bill FitzGibbons, installation view of *Wormhole*, raw steel, 120 x 60 x 84 inches, 2010.

Image courtesy of the Ewing Gallery.





CREIGHTON MICHAEL

Opposite: Creighton Michael, *MOTIF 409*, oil on acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 inches, 2009.

Abbreviated Biography

Creighton Michael earned a BFA in studio art from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, an MA in art history from Vanderbilt University, and an MFA in painting and multimedia from Washington University in St. Louis.

Honored with a variety of awards, including a Pollack-Krasner Foundation grant and a New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship in sculpture, Michael's work is housed in prestigious collections, including the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Brooklyn Museum; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia; the Denver Art Museum; and the Mint Museums of Art, Charlotte, North Carolina.

Highlighting Michael's lengthy domestic exhibition record are solo shows at the High Museum of Art, the Queens Museum of Art at Bulova Corporate Center, and The Mint Museums. Internationally, his work has appeared in Copenhagen, Denmark; Montreal, Canada; and Reykjavík, Iceland.

Michael has served on the faculty at the Rhode Island School of Design, the Pennsylvania Academy of Art, and Princeton University. Currently, he is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Art at Hunter College in New York City.

Artist's Statement

My current painting series, *MOTIF*, explores drawing activity first as a deferred, then as a direct, marking system.

Each painting is a synthesis of these two separate marking styles, both based in action but separated by time and the perception of color. These two opposing forces achieve a perpetual spatial ambiguity, underscored by continually shifting patterns within the picture plane.

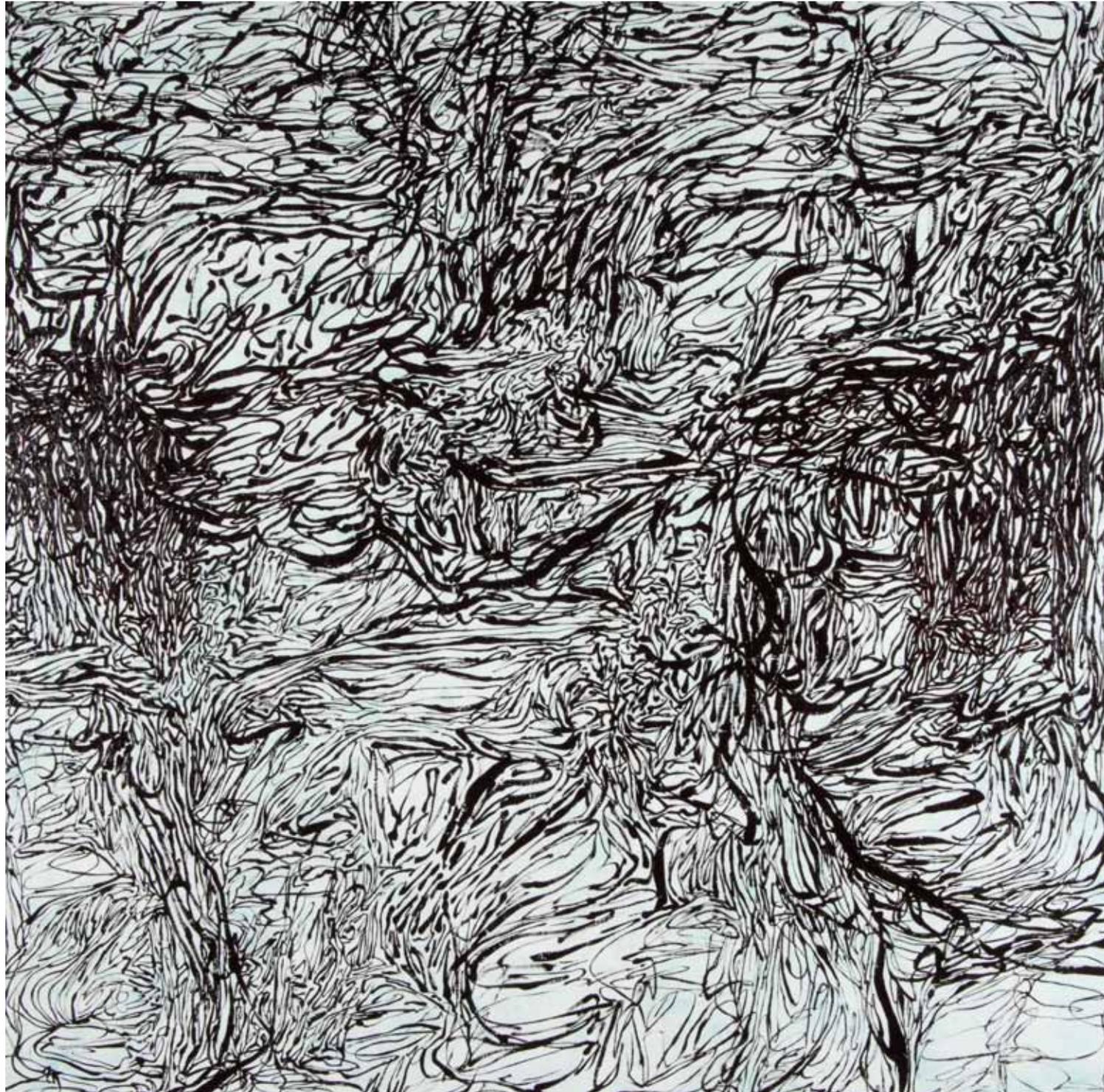
In the deferred marking system – a translucent layering of previously painted acrylic strokes – the color is prismatic, appearing as the result of light reflecting back through the transparent strata. The compilation of oil painted gestures floating on the surface creates a tonal calligraphic tapestry of pigment color, whose optical weight contributes to the visual tension in the painting.

The fluid script floating along the surface partially conceals, and episodically interrupts the rhythms of its underneath counterpart. This encourages the viewer to peer through the variable openings of the pigmented lattice in an effort to reconcile the conflict between the two marking systems.

Creighton Michael, 2010

Opposite: Creighton Michael, *MOTIF 1210*, oil on acrylic on canvas, 50 x 50 inches, 2010.





Top left: Creighton Michael, *MOTIF 710*, oil on acrylic on canvas, 50 x 50 inches, 2010.

Top right: Creighton Michael, *MOTIF 810*, oil on acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 inches, 2010.

Opposite: Creighton Michael, *MOTIF 1310*, oil on acrylic on canvas, 50 x 50 inches, 2010.



The Accomplished Alumni Program

Started in the fall of 2008, the Accomplished Alumni Program is designed to attract alumni of note back to campus to share their success stories with students, other alumni, and the UT community. Alumni who are honored through this program spend time on campus teaching students, sharing dialogue with faculty, and engaging with alumni and friends.

A variety of outstanding alumni have been featured in this program, including CEOs of major corporations, Olympians, authors, artists, musicians, U.S. Ambassadors, and civic leaders.

We are honored to recognize Bill FitzGibbons and Creighton Michael as Accomplished Alumni of The University of Tennessee. We are grateful to them for sharing their time and their remarkable talents with us during their campus visit.



Opposite top: Bill FitzGibbons, image courtesy of the Ewing Gallery



Opposite bottom: Creighton Michael, image courtesy of the artist

When Bill and I met, one January evening in 1969, little did we know our conversation that night would lead to a lifelong friendship and commitment to the visual arts. I had recently begun work on creating a humanities magazine, which would broaden the traditional boundaries of a literary publication. Bill liked the idea so much, he became a permanent part of the team and helped make the magazine, *Druid*, a reality.

Initiatives, such as publishing a magazine from scratch, were part of a “can do” attitude that permeated the University of Tennessee campus during our tenure in the late sixties. Our success in school was due in large part to professors such as Drs. Gail Compton and Lorraine Burghardt, who not only supported, but also encouraged, our ambitions. As art majors, Bill and I had no shortage of stimulating instructors that taught us the importance of both concept and craft in the making of art. Studying with such varied teaching artists – Carl Sublett, Dennis Peacock, Phil Nichols, Clark Stewart, and Whitney Leland – gave us a foundation that has proven its value over time.

However, the real brilliance of the BFA program we experienced was not limited to just studio activity, but included a mandatory three years of art history, giving us a virtual window into the world of art. It was Dale Cleaver who, along with Kermit Ewing, engineered such a positive fine arts program. Bill and myself, among many others, continue working today as true beneficiaries of their foresight.

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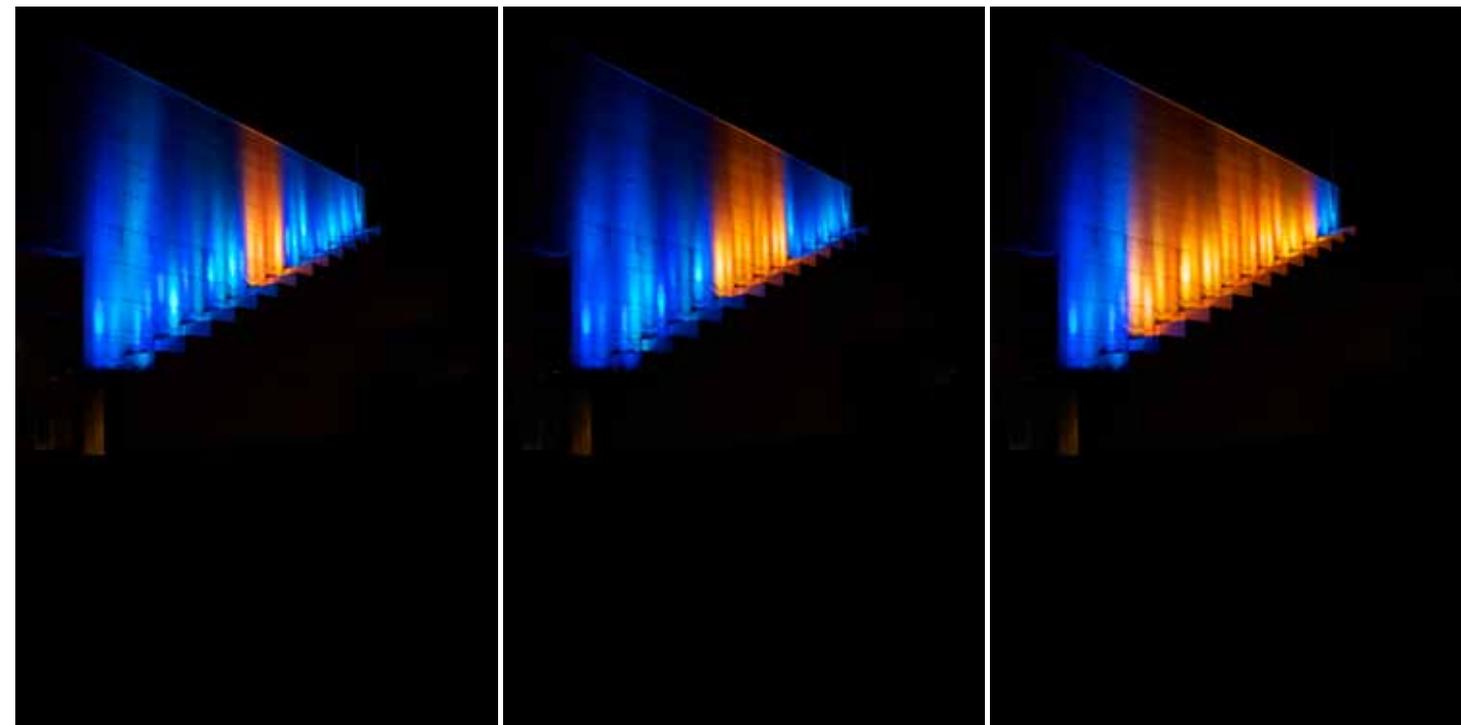
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Top left to right: Bill FitzGibbons, sequential views of *Knoxville Colorline*, Knoxville Museum of Art, computer programmed LED light system, 50 x 80 feet, 2010.

Images courtesy of the Ewing Gallery.

Inside front cover: Bill FitzGibbons, detail shot of *Knoxville Colorline*, Knoxville Museum of Art, computer programmed LED light system, 50 x 80 feet, 2010.

Image courtesy of the artist.

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*Open your eyes.
Open your mind.*