



2005

Three Paths to Abstraction (Exhibition Catalogue)

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Three Paths to

Abstraction

Pinkney Herbert
Whitney Leland
Carol Mode



11.18.2005—12.16.2005
Ewing Gallery of Art and Architecture
The University of Tennessee
Knoxville, Tennessee

02.09.2006—03.16.2006
Vanderbilt University
Fine Arts Gallery
Nashville, Tennessee

06.24.2006—09.09.2006
Art Museum
University of Memphis
Memphis, Tennessee



Three Paths to

Abstraction

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Three Paths to Abstraction:
Pinkney Herbert
Whitney Leland
Carol Mode

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Pinkney Herbert is represented by David Lusk Gallery, Memphis, Tennessee.

Carol Mode is represented by Sandler Hudson Gallery, Atlanta, Georgia.

Exhibition Curators:
Leslie Luebbbers, Joseph S. Mella, and Sam Yates

Contributors to the Catalogue:
Leslie Luebbbers, Joseph S. Mella, and Sam Yates

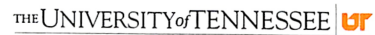
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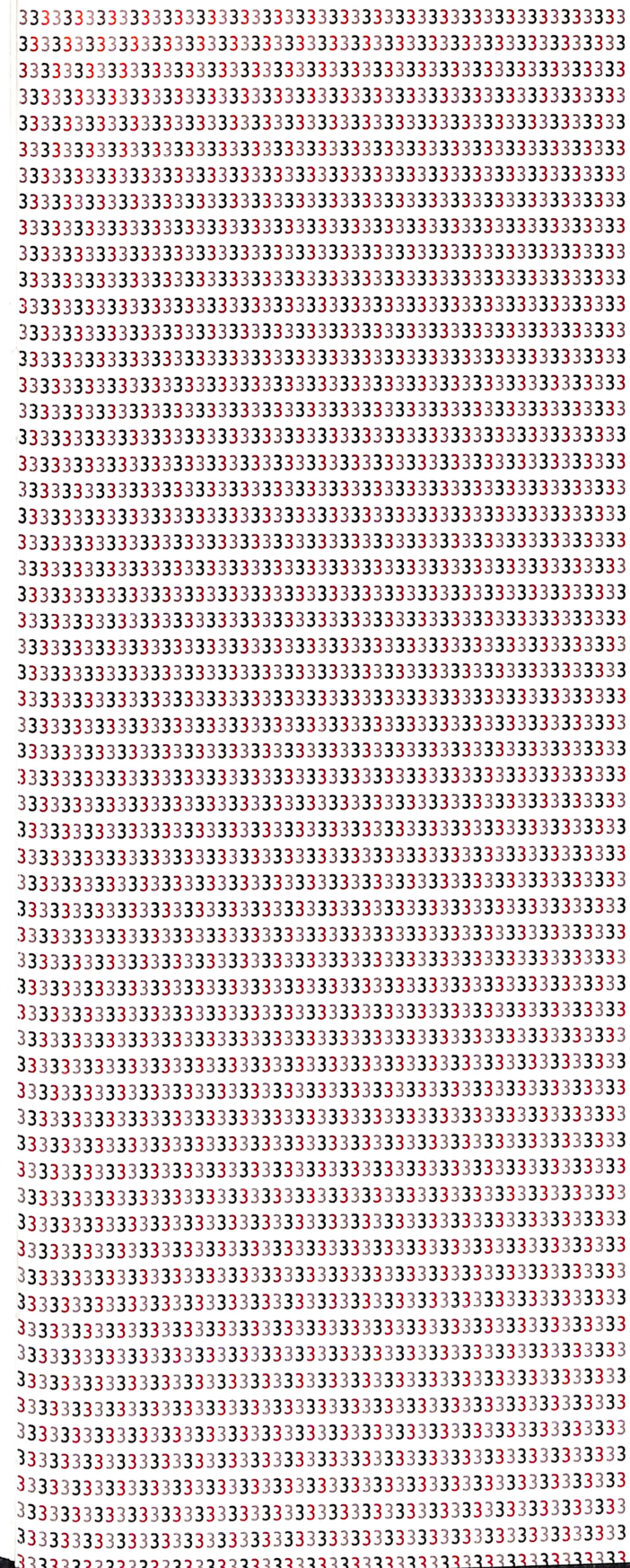
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Whitney Leland, *2005 IV*, 2005. Acrylic on canvas, 80 inches x 50 inches



Three Paths to Abstraction

In his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912), Wassily Kandinsky argued that color, along with other formal elements, such as line and shape, is a language that communicates to all—a language that is comparable to sounds and their evocative capacity. Though Kandinsky's argument was radical by early twentieth-century standards, the survival of Abstraction as a viable mode of visual communication continues to affirm its profundity and universality.

With its roots in Cubism and Expressionism, Abstraction, throughout the twentieth century, has spawned many evolutionary sub-movements, each with its unique and, often, sophisticated theory of art-making. For example, post-World War II movements include: Abstract Expressionism, Op Art, Geometric Abstraction, Color Field, Post-Painterly Abstraction, Pop Art, Minimalism, New Imagery, and others. Many artists working today, however, defy any category as they select, adapt, and utilize techniques and attitudes from many of Abstraction's earlier movements and combine them into something fresh and personal.

As the centennial anniversary of Abstraction approaches, the celebration—and exhibition—of this mode of expression is relevant and meaningful to both the general public and to the university community. The University of Tennessee's Ewing Gallery of Art and Architecture has organized this appropriately titled exhibition—*Three Paths to Abstraction*—to applaud the achievements of three Tennessee artists who have demonstrated a life-long commitment to Abstraction—Pinkney Herbert (Memphis), Whitney Leland (Knoxville), and Carol Mode (Nashville).

This exhibition will present a number of recently-produced paintings by each artist, providing the gallery visitor with insight into the artists' individualized approaches—approaches

that have evolved through years of personal exploration and production.

Drawing from his own memories and referencing world events, Pinkney Herbert investigates both the destructive and transformative qualities of fire with bold, expressive lines and intense, evocative colors. Utilizing a fluid, gestural approach, Whitney Leland creates spatial arrangements of brightly-colored, overlapping forms that simultaneously elicit a sense of chaos and order. Exploring the properties of space in nature, Carol Mode layers seemingly familiar shapes and forms, creating planes—or topographies—that reference a specific time and place in her life.

The paintings of these Tennessee artists exemplify the diversity, energy, optimism, exhilaration, and meditative properties that encompass and define Abstraction today.

Acknowledgments

Three Paths to Abstraction could not have come to fruition without the contributions of many individuals. Joseph S. Mella, Director of the Vanderbilt University Fine Arts Gallery, and Dr. Leslie Luebbers, Director of the Art Museum of the University of Memphis, are acknowledged for their insightful essays on the paintings and for their selection of works for exhibition by Carol Mode and Pinkney Herbert respectively. Gratitude is extended to Adam H. Alfrey and Cindy Spangler of the Ewing Gallery for their efforts in the organization of this exhibition. Adam H. Alfrey also worked diligently and dutifully in the design of this catalogue, and I highly commend him for his outstanding effort. And, most importantly, I would like to thank the artists for their generosity in loaning their most recent work for inclusion in this exhibition.

Sam Yates

Pinkney Herbert, *Firefall*, 2004, Oil on canvas, 67 inches x 52 inches



Pinkney Herbert

In his 1936 catalogue for the first major exhibition of abstract art in America, Alfred Barr, founder of New York's Museum of Modern Art, divided Abstraction into two streams: the first, "intellectual, structural, architectonic, geometrical, rectilinear and classical;" the second, "intuitional or emotional [...]; organic or biomorphic; curvilinear [...], decorative [...], and romantic [...]" in its exaltation of the mystical, the spontaneous and the irrational.¹ Pinkney Herbert's work would seem to belong entirely to the latter group, and in most respects it does.

The selection of Herbert's paintings for this exhibition includes recent work based on the elemental themes of fire and water with their inherent reserves of emotional power. While the essences of the other two classic elements, earth and air, are primarily nurturing and supportive, the nature of fire and water is ambiguous and paradoxical. *Firefall*, reproduced on the facing page, is not the spark that humanized a species of apes and allowed moms to produce apple pies. This is the mesmerizing, irresistible, enveloping, devouring beast that roars across landscapes and desolates mountains and cities; it is natural, beautiful, and dangerous unless tamed and contained. *Waterfall II* [page 8] is equally primal, and its thunderous surge expresses an equal power to fascinate and destroy, though this painting allows a little air, a little breath, a little opportunity for life.

Claustrophobic in their intensity and magisterial in their power, these paintings are simpler in composition than much of Herbert's work, which typically derives structural integrity from the artist's innate graphic sensibility. *Not Black and White* [page 9], with its complete absence of reference, illustrates this capacity. Despite the title, the painting is mostly black and white, but the pigments, like a combination of fire and water, are equal partners or equal antagonists in the articulation of space, in the expression of gestures large and small, and in the revelation

of the painter's process of addition and subtraction, marking and marking over and marking out.

In contrast to the organizing principle of black and white that is often the basis for Herbert's most successful work, the soaring and descending arches of Herbert's fire and water series provide an armature, "an intellectual, structural" ground. In this respect, the binary distinctions Barr described are less than fully operational as an approach to Herbert's new work which, despite the full fury of its eloquence, provides enough stability, enough safe haven to allow the viewer to contemplate the ambiguous nature of the elements.

Leslie Luebbers

1.) Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), p. 19.

Pinkney Herbert, *Waterfall II*, 2005, Oil on canvas, 67 inches x 52-1/4 inches



Pinkney Herbert, *Not Black and White*, 2005, Oil on canvas, 67 inches x 52 inches



Whitney Leland, *2003 XII*, 2003, Acrylic on canvas, 80 inches x 50 inches



Whitney Leland

Exquisitely composed balancing acts of chaos and order, the recent large scale paintings of Whitney Leland are the culmination of over 30 years of work investigating the abstract relationship between figure and ground, as well as control and chance. The paintings are composed of complex, overlapping, and interwoven colored forms that hover against an intense white ground and summon a presence that is both authoritative and introspective. The artist has stated, "I want my paintings to present an experience of something that is meditative and slow to reveal itself. I also place importance on options and do not wish for them to be read in a singular fashion."

Influenced by Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting of the mid-twentieth century, Leland makes decisions while working directly on the canvas, allowing ideas to evolve out of the painting process rather than from preliminary drawings or studies. "The rapport between the process and the ideas throughout the development of the paintings is absolutely crucial," explained Leland.

Leland purposefully tries to keep external references from entering his paintings, wishing the sole informant of the current painting to be that of the previous. Just as certain traits and characteristics are passed from one generation to the next through the transfer of DNA, each of Leland's paintings evolves from its antecedent—that is, the remaining mixtures of colors and acrylic medium of one painting, along with its formal response to compression and movement, become the locus of the next.

Like any master of a particular medium who has devoted many years to his craft, Leland has developed a procedure that is not only technically precise but also personally driven. Considering it as an integral part of his creative procedure—and not just the preparation of a surface—Leland applies up to ten coats of a thinned mixture of gesso and acrylic medium

to a stretched canvas until it "mimics the weave of the canvas and has a reality." Next, Leland paints large, slow gestural shapes in colors derived from the previous painting, providing the foundation that will support additional layers of paint (either translucent or opaque) that, in turn, create numerous and varied overlapping and intersecting forms. Leland's vibrant palette of painted glazes often take more than 12 hours to dry, at which time the true color of the painted layers is revealed. In all stages of its development, from the ground through the applications of various colored shapes, the painting is executed while horizontal to the floor; only when its surface is dry can it be stood up for analysis.

Leland's large acrylics are a challenge to him, as he says, "like trying to walk a tightrope." The metaphor of trying to walk a tightrope seems appropriate in connection with Leland's *oeuvre*, for it evokes the idea of having forward movement while under extreme limitations. Leland's limitations or boundaries—his consistency of size, his insistence on a vertical orientation, and his dependence on a system of intertwined forms that rely on the previous painting—focus his creative exploration, his evolution. It is an evolution that is nuanced, one that builds like a conversation that is dependent on the previous statement.

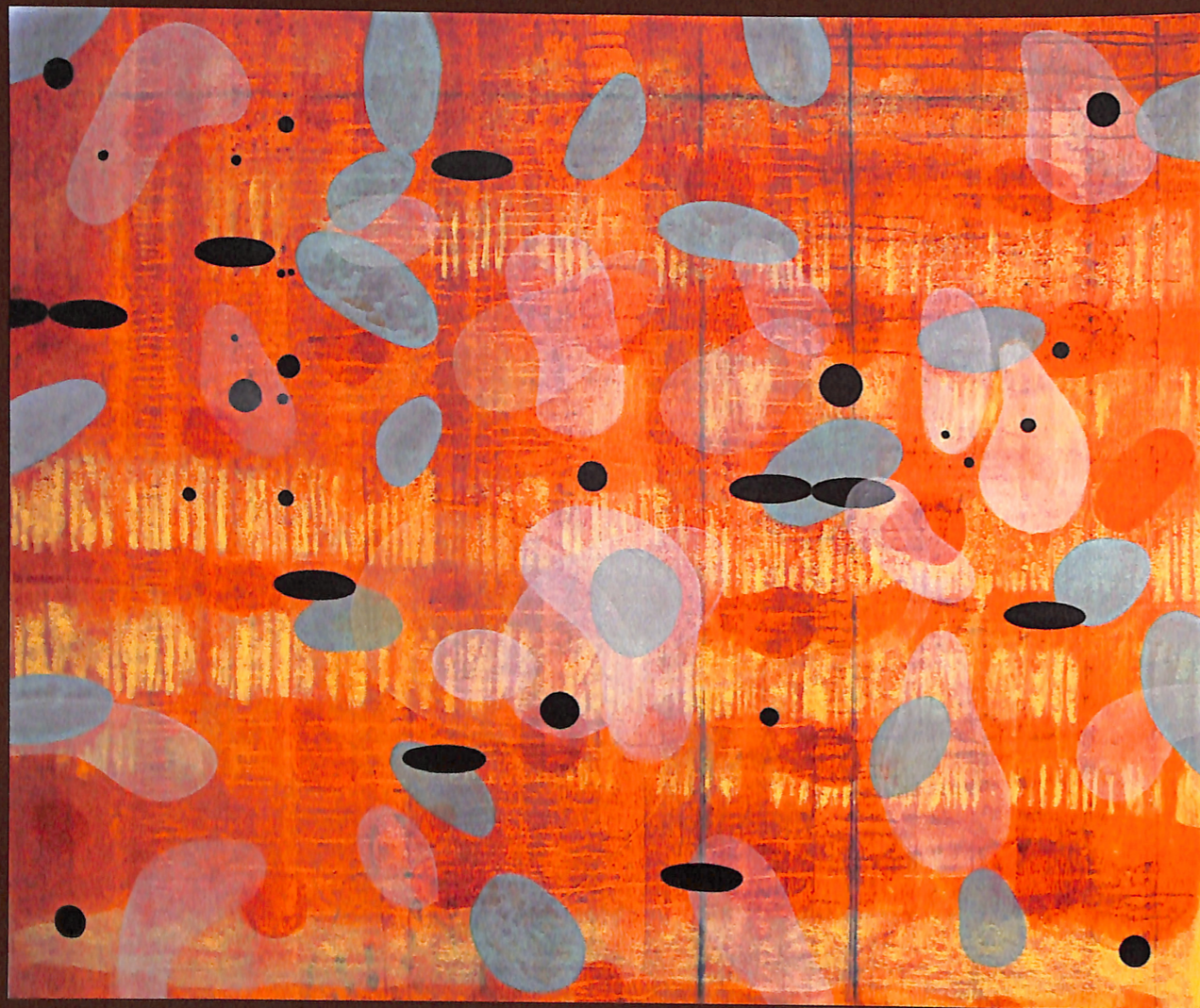
Sam Yates

Whitney Leland, *2005 IX*, 2005, Acrylic on canvas, 80 inches x 50 inches



Whitney Leland, *2005 XI*, 2005, Acrylic on canvas, 80 inches x 50 inches





Carol Mode

For over 30 years, Carol Mode has worked to develop a personal form of abstraction that is universal in its expression and reactive in its means of responding to whom she is as an artist and, moreover, as a human being. Seldom drawn to non-objective painting, or painting that exists purely as an exercise of form and color, Mode has always looked to nature, abstracting it to her own unique ends.

It would be incorrect to say that form, and especially color, are not important to Mode, for both support the idea or concept that drives each of her paintings. Regarding the latter, Wassily Kandinsky, in his essay "The Effects of Color" (1911), wrote of two primary ways we experience color. The first is as a purely physical effect—that is how the "[...] eye itself is enchanted by the beauty and other qualities of color."¹ He continues his discussion by pointing to color's ability to impact the viewer on a psychological level. For Kandinsky and, I would argue, Mode, "[...] the effect of colors is deeper and intensely moving. [...] They produce a correspondent spiritual vibration, and it is only as a step towards this spiritual vibration that the physical impression is of importance."²

Mode has always used color to great advantage—never as a purely "physical effect," but one that arrests the viewer in a profoundly visceral way. This is not color as a form of decoration. This *is* color in the hand of an artist that clearly understands how color can induce a transcendent experience. One needs to look no further than to her astounding painting *Araby*, found within this exhibition and reproduced on the facing page, to realize this remarkable effect.

In a recent statement, Mode tells us that she is "[...] a painter whose work is connected to specific times and places. [...] I constantly reference natural objects, earth and sky formations, weaving all the elements together as abstract topographies."³ Recently, Mode's

work reflects influences that include astronomy, weather, and the often-unseen worlds found beneath the ocean, and to water itself. Significantly, Mode's response to "time and place" has increasingly played a central role in how she creates her paintings.

These works, like a number of others in recent years, reference a rare progressive eye condition that impacts how she views the relationship between physical objects. "When looking at something obliquely, Mode sees planes and veils of atmosphere, interrupted by 'floaters,' small dark spots that move around in the field of vision. Although frightening in their implications, these symptoms have become a part of her artistic vocabulary. [...] Mode's intriguing iconography functions as a valuable marker for this moment in life."⁴

What is remarkable is that within this condition, Mode is producing the best work in her career. These are paintings that are at once luminous and tactile; liquid and solid; light and dark; and in the end, the kind of painting that Kandinsky revered, painting that creates within us a "spiritual vibration," and, for this viewer, heart-stopping beauty amid the chaos of contemporary life.

Joseph S. Mella

1.) Chapter 5, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (Munich: R. Piper, 1912), p. 37. English translation by Francis Golffing, Michael Harrison, and Ferdinand Ostertag from *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1947), p. 43.

2.) *Ibid.*, p. 37.

3.) Mode, Carol, artist statement, <http://www.sandlerhudson.com/mode.html>.

4.) Scala, Mark, "The Fragile Species," *The Fragile Species: New Art Nashville* (Nashville, Tennessee: The Frist Center for the Visual Arts, 2005), p. 4.

Carol Mode, *Wave*, 2005, Acrylic on wood panel, 15 inches x 15 inches



Carol Mode, *Stream*, 2005, Acrylic on wood panel, 15-7/8 inches x 15-7/8 inches



Resumes

Pinkney Herbert

Education:

MFA, University of Memphis, 1982
BA, Rhodes College, 1977

Recent Solo Exhibitions:

- 2005 Freed-Hardeman University
Henderson, Tennessee
- 2004 David Lusk Gallery
Memphis, Tennessee
- 2002 Cedar Crest College
Allentown, Pennsylvania

Recent Group Exhibitions:

- 2004 *Suitcase Series*
The Lab
New York, New York
- 2003 *Art of Tennessee*
Frist Center for Visual Art
Nashville, Tennessee
- 2002 *Current Memphis: Memphis Current*
SHoRes and NP40
Amsterdam, Netherlands
- True Colors: Meditations on the
American Spirit*
Meridian International Center,
Washington, DC (touring)
- A Century of Progress: Twentieth
Century Painting in Tennessee*
Cheekwood Museum of Art
Nashville, Tennessee

Selected Collections:

Memphis Brooks Museum of Art
Memphis, Tennessee

New York University
New York, New York

Tennessee State Museum
Nashville, Tennessee

Whitney Leland

Professor of Art, The University of Tennessee

Education:

MFA, University of Tennessee, 1970
BFA, Memphis College of Art, 1968

Selected Collections:

Huntsville Museum of Art
Huntsville, Alabama

Tennessee State Museum
Nashville, Tennessee

Arkansas Art Center
Little Rock, Arkansas

Tennessee Valley Authority
Sequoyah Nuclear Plant

Hospital Corporation of America
Nashville, Tennessee

Third National Bank
Nashville, Tennessee

Chattahoochee Valley Art Museum
LaGrange, Georgia

Chase Manhattan Bank
New York, New York

Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta
Miami Branch, Miami, Florida

Knoxville Museum of Art
Knoxville, Tennessee

IBM
Tampa, Florida

National Museum of American Art
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC

Hunter Museum of Art
Chattanooga, Tennessee

Springfield Art Museum
Springfield, Missouri

Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts
Montgomery, Alabama

Carol Mode

Education:

BFA, Washington University, 1965

Recent Solo Exhibitions:

- 2005 *Pulse*
Trahern Gallery, Austin Peay University
Clarksville, Tennessee
- 2004 Water Tower Museum
Louisville, Kentucky
- 2001 *Floater*
Sandler Hudson Gallery
Atlanta, Georgia
- 2000 *Reverberations*
St. Andrews Sewanee Gallery
Sewanee, Tennessee

Recent Group Exhibitions:

- 2005 *The Fragile Species: New Art Nashville*
Frist Center for Visual Art
Nashville, Tennessee
- 2003 *Fugitive in Memphis: Eleven
Nashville Artists*
Delta Axis and Marshall Arts
Memphis, Tennessee
- 2002 *A Century of Progress: Twentieth
Century Painting in Tennessee*
Cheekwood Museum of Art
Nashville, Tennessee
- 2001 *Brooks Perspectives*
Memphis Brooks Museum of Art
Memphis, Tennessee

Selected Collections:

Tennessee State Museum
Nashville, Tennessee

Filmhouse
Nashville, Tennessee

Owensboro Museum of Fine Art
Owensboro, Kentucky

Pinkney Herbert, *Expulsion*, 2005,
Oil on canvas, 67 inches x 52 inches



Contributors to the Catalogue

Leslie Luebbers

Leslie Luebbers is Director of the Art Museum of the University of Memphis (AMUM) and Co-director of the university's program for the Interdisciplinary Graduate Certificate in Museum Studies. She earned her BA from Wellesley College and an MA and PhD from New York University's Institute of Fine Arts.

Joseph S. Mella

With 20 years of experience working in art museums, Joseph S. Mella manages, curates, and oversees the operations of the Vanderbilt University Fine Arts Gallery and its collections. Prior to arriving at Vanderbilt in 1992, Mella served as Curator of Exhibitions and Collections at the Rockford Art Museum, Rockford, Illinois, and in a similar capacity at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas, Beaumont. He holds an MA in Modern Art History, Theory, and Criticism from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he also completed a Certificate in Art Collection Care and Maintenance. Mella received a BFA in Printmaking from the University of Iowa, Iowa City.

Sam Yates

Sam Yates is Director and Curator of The University of Tennessee's Ewing Gallery of Art and Architecture and The University of Tennessee Downtown Gallery. Throughout his professional career, he has originated numerous acclaimed exhibitions that have been displayed at major universities and museums across the United States. Yates has also been recognized for his achievements as an exhibit design consultant for regional historical museums. He received a BS from East Carolina University and an MFA from the University of North Carolina, Greensboro.

Ewing Gallery of Art and Architecture The University of Tennessee

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Cindy Spangler, Collections Manager
Adam H. Alfrey, Exhibitions Coordinator
Lila Planavsky, Graduate Assistant

Vanderbilt University Fine Arts Gallery

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William A. Martin, Assistant Art Curator

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Katy Miller
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Mackenzie Thomas

Art Museum University of Memphis

Leslie Luebbers, Director
Lisa Abitz, Assistant Director/Registrar
Anita Huggins, Administrative Secretary
Bryan Blankenship, Museum Assistant
Angela Taylor, Museum Assistant
Emilie Chiozza, Security Assistant

Carol Mode, *E-mergence*, 2005, Acrylic on canvas, 65 inches x 72 inches

