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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

In Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MYTHOLOGICAL EXPLORATIONS

by

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Date: June 1, 2002

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Thesis Proposal for the Master of Fine Arts Degree
School of Art
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

Title: Mythological Explorations

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Date: September 21, 2001

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The purpose of this thesis is to explore the personal mythological journey. Mythic tales exist to describe and give meaning to the human experience. In the process of self discovery, images arise from the unconscious, and are probed to reveal the underlying meaning. This inner dialogue will be revealed using abstract painting as the metaphoric language of the odyssey. Referring to the writings of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, the imagery will be examined relative to universal, as well as personal mythology. The work will be symbolic of the mystic journey, expressing visually that which is beyond words.

INTRODUCTION

It is possible to examine the development of emerging themes in a series of abstract paintings within a psychological, or mythological, context. The work may be viewed as the documentation of a mystical quest, or search for meaning. Joseph Campbell describes this search as the hero's journey, be it on a personal, or epic scale. (Campbell and Moyers, 1991, 206.)

For the artist, abstract painting becomes a symbolic language of the journey. The paintings describe the landscape of the unconscious, and the dialogue of the creative process guides the exploration. Ultimately, the evolution and growth of the work becomes a metaphor for that of the creator.

Chapter 1

The Personal Mythology

The *Power of Myth* documents a conversation between Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers on the importance of mythology in the individual experience of modern life.

When asked to describe the hero's adventure, Campbell responds:

Well, there are two types of deed. One is the physical deed, in which the hero performs a courageous act in battle or saves a life. The other kind is the spiritual deed, in which the hero learns to experience the supernormal range of human spiritual life and then comes back with a message.

The usual hero adventure begins with someone from whom something has been taken, or who feels there's something lacking in the normal experiences available or permitted to the members of his society. This person then takes off on a series of adventures beyond the ordinary, either to recover what has been lost or to discover some life-giving elixir. It's usually a cycle, a going and a returning...

...This, I believe, is the great Western truth: that each of us is a completely unique creature and that, if we are ever to give any gift to the world, it will have to come out of our own experience and fulfillment of our own potentialities, not someone else's...

...It's important to live life with the experience, and therefore the knowledge, of its mystery and of your own mystery. This gives life a new radiance, a new harmony, a new splendor. Thinking in mythological terms helps to put you in accord with the inevitables of this vale of tears. You learn to recognize the positive values in what appear to be the negative moments and aspects of your life. The big question is whether you are going to be able to say a hearty yes to your adventure. (Campbell and Moyers, 1991, 158, 186, 206)

The challenge in answering the call lies in the willingness to venture into the unknown. Risking the comfort of a secure, albeit somewhat unfulfilling, existence, for the possibility of reaching one's true potential is a particularly significant issue for the artist.

This is especially the case in our society, where the arts are often viewed as a supplemental, rather than an integral, part of the human existence, and, as such, are

often not supported. To argue that art is essential in the expression, and understanding, of humanity is often to stand with the minority. To be an individual called to a life in the arts requires a high level of commitment and focus.

Campbell's description of the journey resonates with me on a personal level, as it is representative of the stages I went through in recognizing myself as an artist. Although I was interested in creative pursuits as a young person, I chose a different type of career, losing touch with my creative self in the process. The discomfort of performing well in life, yet not living life fully, was the impetus to begin the journey. However, answering the call did not mean an immediate decision to become an artist. First, came a period of soul searching to uncover the creative self beneath the surface. The lesson here, I believe, is what Campbell refers to in stating that we must fulfill our own potential before we can give any gift to the world. It is essential to lead a genuine life, to seek fulfillment not only for the personal satisfaction, but to have anything of value to offer the world. Considering this, the call to the artist's life seems a valid way to make a meaningful contribution.

It is important to note that answering the call is not the end of the soul searching. Looking inward to give meaning to the experiences along the way is the key to moving beyond the ordinary. This introspective analysis of the challenges, triumphs, and plateaus along the way begins the development of a personal mythology. The cycle continues with the inner exploration enriching the experience of life. The expression of the journey through painting should reflect the depth and richness of the experience.

When the hero's adventure is described in terms of shamanism, the hero returns with special powers, or healing abilities. In *The Power of Myth*, Campbell assigns the

role of shaman to artists:

Moyers: Who interprets the divinity inherent in nature for us today? Who are our shamans? Who interprets unseen things for us?

Campbell: It is the function of the artist to do this. The artist is the one who communicates myth for today. But he has to be an artist who understands mythology and humanity and isn't simply a sociologist with a program for you. (Campbell and Moyers, 1991, 122)

This view is reiterated by Audrey Flack, in *Art and Fear*.

Myths are presentations from the collective unconscious of psychological and spiritual truths. For Jung, myths have meaning for everyone because they represent "archetypes" –that is, patterns of life that are universally valid.

Artists revive old myths and generate new ones. Because their primary sources are spiritual, nonmaterial, they can have clearer vision. By the use of myths, artists put society in touch with universal basic questions and feelings we all have about life. (Flack, 1986, 99)

Chapter 2

Landscape of the Unconscious

The life work of psychologist Dr. Carl Jung was an exploration of the unconscious. Jung believed that a higher level of self understanding could be attained by being in touch with unconscious influences. In *Man and his Symbols*, Jung and his colleagues present their theories of the meaning of various types of symbols and imagery stemming from the unconscious. Aniela Jaffe discusses the role of the unconscious in modern painting:

A different expression of the hidden unconscious spirit can be found in one of the most notable of the younger “abstract” painters. Jackson Pollock, the American who was killed in a car accident when he was 44. His work has had a great influence on the younger artists of our time. In *My Painting*, he revealed that he painted in a kind of trance: “When I am in my painting I am not aware of what I am doing. It is only after a sort of ‘get acquainted’ period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well.”

Pollock’s pictures, which were painted practically unconsciously, are charged with boundless emotional vehemence. In their lack of structure, they are almost chaotic, a glowing lava stream of colors, lines, planes, and points. They may be regarded as a parallel to what the alchemists called the *massa confusa*, the *prima materia*, or chaos — all ways of defining the precious prime matter of the alchemical process, the starting point of the quest for the essence of being. Pollock’s pictures represent the nothing that is everything — that is, the unconscious itself. They seem to live in a time before the emergence of consciousness and being, or to be fantastic landscapes of a time after the extinction of consciousness and being. (Jaffe, 1968, 308)

The painting process is similarly described by Audrey Flack:

It almost doesn’t matter what you paint. It is what takes place during the act of painting that matters.

It doesn’t matter what style or technique you use. It is the artistic result and personal development that count.

The act of painting is a spiritual covenant between the maker and the higher powers. The intent of the artist flows through the work of art, no matter what the technique or style. (Flack, 1986, 10)

According to art historian David Anfam, Jung's theories influenced the Abstract Expressionist movement in America:

First Freud and subsequently Jung proposed that myth articulated the deepest levels of experience and so voiced a universal language. By the late 1930s each had gained sufficient currency in America (like Joyce and Eliot) not to have to be studied minutely (as it is sometimes claimed Pollock did during the War) but instead absorbed broadly and intuitively. 'Psychology' to the Abstract Expressionist eye represented a cornucopia of visionary and poetic images with an existential edge, especially since Jung claimed that myth issued from the same depths as art. This inner hinterland, the so-called 'collective unconscious', was supposedly common to all human beings, whether primitive or 'civilized'. Hence the 'archaic' look about the pictures of Rothko, Gottlieb, Pollock and Stamos was meant to cut through to inner truths. Moreover, the collective unconscious could only be known via mediators or 'archetypes': primal figures, symbols and the groupings associated with them that populate dreams and myths which resembled signs pointing towards things hidden and complex. These striking models of consciousness fired their imaginations. (Anfam, 1999, 81)

As the source of imagery shifted from the external to the internal, a freedom in use of materials and technique developed. The stylistic range extended from Pollock's energetic drip paintings to the meditative color field paintings of Rothko. The unique and evolving inner world of the painter was objectified in the paintings. If universal mythological themes are experienced at the individual level, and the experience is externalized in the form of abstract painting, it can be said that these works transcend their own place in history. Responsiveness to unique expression of common themes extends across time. From this perspective, the continued exploration of abstract painting as a visual language can be understood.

In *Abstract Art*, Michael Seuphor describes the importance of experiencing the

journey rather than reaching the destination:

In every other period of art history, the idea itself – the what – had been primary. Today the idea matters less than the way it is arrived at; the how has become more important than the what. And so we are face to face again with infinite variations upon the theme. It is no longer a matter of possessing the truth, but of approaching it cautiously, of heading for it unhurriedly, knowing that the road is long, knowing that the road has no end, that following the road is the end in itself. Art is not a certain sum of knowledge, technical or otherwise; it is a reality in process of becoming, which reveals itself to us and yet eludes us at every step. It is this search – now patient, now headlong, but steady and impassioned – that is the common denominator of the various forms of the art of today. In pursuing his own theme every artist builds up his personal sum of knowledge, technical and otherwise, to serve as his own language, his own manner of saying – inimitably – what everyone knows, what everyone tends to forget after seeing it so often in the same tawdry garb, after hearing it repeated so often in the same tone of voice. (Seuphor, 1961, 289)

Non objective art has an immediacy which cuts to the center, the place of feeling beyond verbal description. When a work of art strikes a chord in the viewer, there is a sense of recognition, or connection. The artist is able to stir the universal, basic feelings described by Flack. Accordingly, Seuphor echoes Campbell in attributing this ability of the artist to the undertaking of his own quest for meaning.

Chapter 3

The Inner Journey

For me, the creative process is the passage to the inner landscape. The journey is one of plunging the depths of the psyche, excavating layers of surface debris to reach the center. The challenge of the quest is to connect with that center, not only at a personal level, but also at the level of archetypal human identity. By exploring the individual experience and response, and developing a personal mythology around that, a greater understanding of the universal human experience unfolds. The act of painting, and the resulting work, facilitates and describes the journey. Reaching the destination, or figuring out the answers, is less important than fully experiencing the journey and raising the questions.

The practice of painting opens a channel to the unconscious. As with yoga, meditation, or any spiritual practice, a heightened state of awareness is reached by quieting the mind, clearing the superficial, and focusing at a deeper level. I generally begin working in an intuitive manner, without conscious intent as to imagery, starting with a series of automatic drawings which may be developed into resolved pieces, or may serve simply as explorations along the way. I consider this stream of consciousness approach to be a sort of visual meditation, a gateway to a deeper source of creativity. Fully immersing myself in the process opens my responsiveness to the rhythms and movements of the inner landscape. The process is a metaphor for what Campbell describes as fully experiencing life, rather than conducting an analysis of the meaning from a position of detachment.

Like many artists, I am drawn to nature for inspiration and meaning. The free flowing creativity I begin working with is balanced by taking a step back to consider what has come forward. The psychological shift from the unconscious to the conscious is analogous to movements in the natural world from wild chaos to solid stability. I think of the landscape of the Southwest where the surface layer was once torn apart by violent forces, then resettled into the majestic rockiness of the Badlands. There is a deeper core which both generates the volatility, and provides a solid foundation. This cycle is repeated throughout nature, as in the human drama.

Considering what has emerged from the unconscious, I think about my response in the context of the hero's quest. What can be discovered through this work about my experiences, reactions, and beliefs? What makes my heart sing, or my soul weep? Who am I, and how do the pieces fit together? This questioning leads to an excavation of layers, a sorting through the remains in search of something of value, or meaning. So, while the flow from the unconscious is important as raw material, a revelation or resolution doesn't magically appear. It is the work of the conscious mind to form this material into something meaningful, or resolved, as in the work of art.

The two modes of thought, and working process, shift in precedence at different points in time, and in different pieces. This parallels the natural and human cycles of periods of storminess or uncertainty, alternating with periods of calm. Some of my work is done in short, energetic bursts, resolving in emergence as if developed in a dream state, and waiting to be set free. At other times the dialogue between unconscious and conscious is integral to a slower, thoughtful process. In this mode, I find myself recycling discarded pieces into the new, and transforming pieces over and over again.

This feels more like a type of psycho-archaeological dig, a process of considering what is revealed, selecting how much to disclose, or conceal, as layers are removed or replaced. Choices are also to be made about which thoughts to explore, or revisit later. Working in this more weighty psychological manner generally involves a corresponding physicality to the work.

In general, describing the process in terms of the hero's journey, and making connections to inner and outer worlds, has to do with using my creativity to guide the quest, to ask the questions necessary to find my place in the universe, and within my own psyche. The resulting work is both a visual documentation, mapping the journey, and an expression of the emotion, or meaning. The development of an artistic voice is comparable to that of a personal mythology. It is a dynamic approach to a meaningful existence, involving constant transformation.

Chapter 4

Reflections on the Work

The thesis work is a reflection of my own mythological adventure, or journey, at least that of the past year. The work evolved intuitively through the interaction of unconscious forces, and conscious thought, as described in the preceding chapter.

The exploration of materials and techniques became an important part of the process. Sometimes, what at first appeared to be technical problems became opportunities for experimentation, or pathways to new areas for growth. Generally, this involved moving from less durable materials to stronger supports, heavier layering with paint and collage, and using a wider variety of tools.

The earliest works consisted of water based media and pastel on paper. Various resists were used to create textural effects. The style is gestural and fluid, stemming from an interest in the calligraphic mark. At the time, I was attracted to the spontaneous mark making of Franz Kline, Cy Twombly, and Sam Francis. I became increasingly interested in the abstract expressionists, and noted the exploration of some of these artists of Eastern thought and calligraphy. I also studied Zen paintings by Japanese monks. The untitled, framed work in the thesis exhibition is from this phase, which signifies crossing the blurred line distinguishing drawing from painting. In describing my own work, the transition is the shift in emphasis from mark making and transparent layers, to heavier, opaque applications of paint, often manipulating the surface texture. As the shift occurred, I studied the work of Pollock, Krasner, and Joan Mitchell.

At this point, I began to work in a more painterly manner, using acrylics. The brushwork retained the chaotic energy of the earlier paintings, but the paintings became increasingly layered. The process involved painting over the base application, building layers which were sometimes removed by wiping away wet layers, leaving a filmy residue. An additive and subtractive process ensued, whereby the subtractive process became more physical, as I scraped and scratched the surface. It is not uncommon for me to completely rework the entire surface, changing a painting several times before a final version is complete. Inevitably, my increasing involvement with the subtractive process resulted in an unplanned, and undesirable, tear through the center of the painting. Out of necessity, I experimented with collage, which enabled me to further manipulate the surface.

As stated earlier, a recurring theme is the enduring stability beneath chaos. This cycle occurs throughout the natural world, and is part of the human experience on both a physical, and psychological level. This is the feeling conveyed by the earlier works on paper. In *Visual Thinking*, Rudolph Arnheim addresses this cycle of permanence and change:

The labors of vision create the view of a world in which persistence and change act as eternal antagonists. Changes are perceived as mere accidentals of underlying persistent identity; but perception also reveals constancy as the shortsighted look of change. Wendelband, in his introduction to a discussion of Greek thought, says: "The observation that the things of experience change into each other spurred the earliest philosophical considerations." Visual perception supplied philosophers looking for permanence with evidence of the *arche*, the world substance beneath the variability of material things, "which suffers these changes and is the origin from which all particular things spring and into which they retransform themselves." Perception likewise offered visible proof that all things are in a flux of constant modification. Neither of these views could have arisen if sense were not intelligent enough to extricate the lasting from the

changing and to perceive the immobile as a phase of mobility. (Arnheim,1997,53)

Although working from the same theme, a transition occurred in the works on paper, as the surface and edges were torn, then layered with paint and collaged fragments of other paintings. *Breaking Ground* and *Rough Edges* came out of this experimentation. Rather than capturing a moment of chaos, the work began to mirror the entire process. As the paint and collaged layers became heavier, and the surface marring more physical, the need for more stable supports led to the use of canvas and board.

The larger paintings on board are reminiscent of the archaeological dig. The recycling of older works on paper into these paintings appeals to me as it connects to the process of evolution. The physical tearing away of layers is most evident in *Strata*, and is continued in *Riverbed* and *Echo*, in a more subdued manner. The use of tools such as scrapers and knives almost entirely replaced the brush at this point. There is a variation in the series from the dramatic physicality of *Crevasse*, to the quiet restfulness of *Willowdream*. With the larger paintings, the working process became slower and more thoughtful. While still an intuitive process, there is an intent in these pieces that is absent in the earlier work. It became important to maintain a certain spontaneity, while balancing this measured process with the earlier gestural immediacy.

Once the series of large paintings was complete, a sense of lightness, almost playfulness came through in a series of small pieces called *Marbles*. Brushwork and color replaces the scraping and gouging of the heavier paintings. The use of collage is still present, with Japanese papers and thin layers of wood adhered to the surface. The

effect is one of textural highlights, rather than built up constructions. This series signals a new direction to be explored.

As I consider moving forward, what seems most important to take from this work is the willingness to stay open to the adventure and the learning that comes with it. In terms of mythology and the natural cycle of change, Patricia Daly states it well:

Myth also epitomizes movement as it flows with illusion and change. Myth is always becoming. It is never static.

...Create or discover your own myths. (Daly, 2001, 89)

With every answer to the call, there is a collective benefit as the unique gifts of each individual are realized. If the role of the artist is to interpret a changing world through the creation of myths, then the shared reward of the adventure is the strengthening of the basic human connection.

Chapter 5

Body of Work

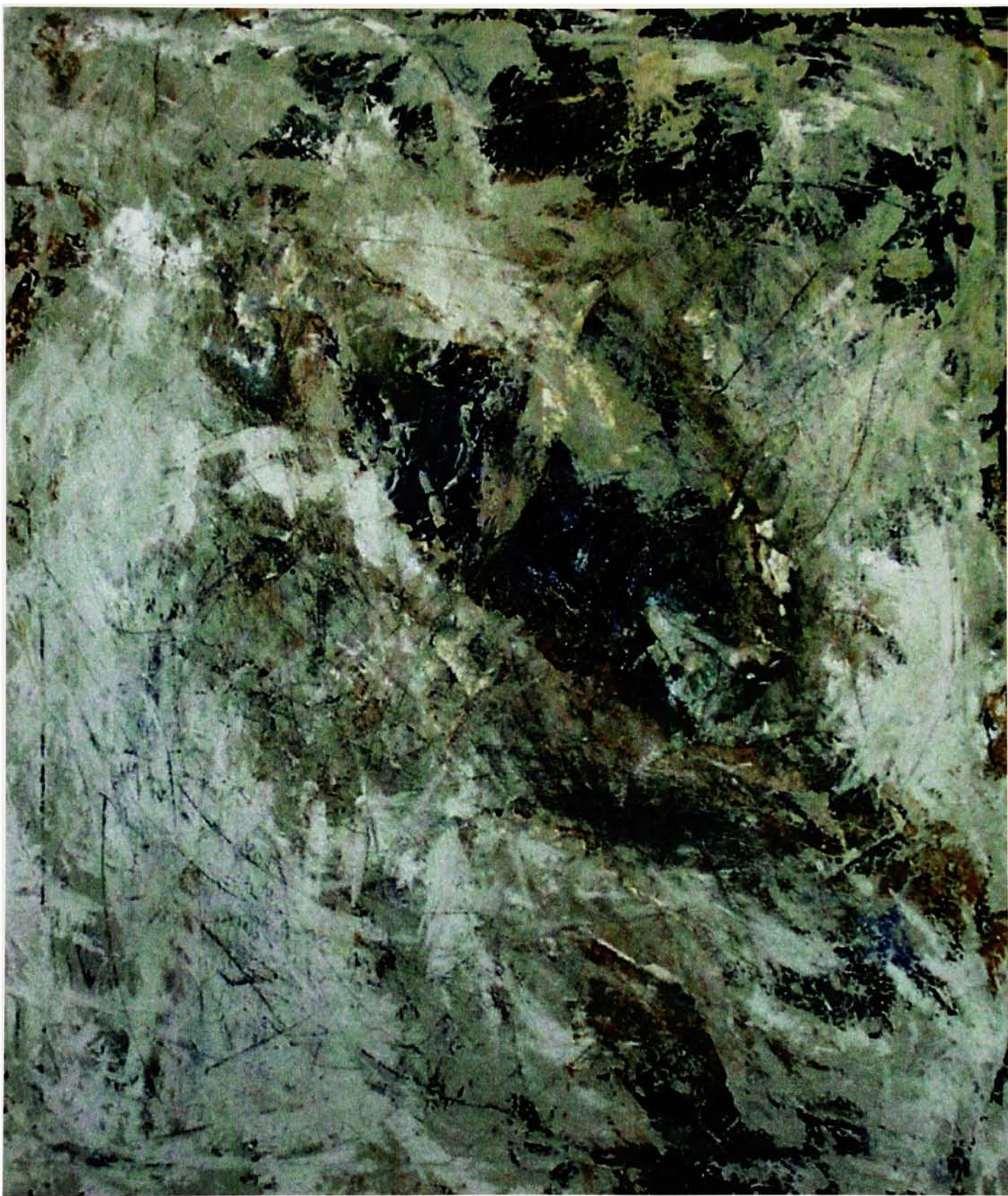
| | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------|
| Diptych | | 18 |
| | Acrylic on paper | 40" x 48" |
| Surface Break | | 19 |
| | Acrylic on paper | 30" x 44" |
| Rough Edge | | 20 |
| | Acrylic on paper | 50" x 36" |
| Untitled - Yellow Painting | | 21 |
| | Acrylic on canvas | 30" x 36" |
| Untitled - Blue Painting | | 22 |
| | Acrylic on canvas | 30" x 36" |
| Strata | | 23 |
| | Acrylic, collage on board | 40" x 48" |
| Riverbed | | 24 |
| | Acrylic, collage on board | 40" x 48" |
| Echo | | 25 |
| | Acrylic, collage on board | 40" x 48" |
| Crevasse | | 26 |
| | Acrylic, collage on board | 40" x 48" |
| Willowdream | | 27 |
| | Acrylic, collage on board | 40" x 48" |
| Marble | | 28 |
| | Acrylic, collage on board | 22" x 22" |
| Thesis Exhibition - View 1 | | 29 |
| Thesis Exhibition - View 2 | | 30 |
| Thesis Exhibition - View 3 | | 31 |
| Thesis Exhibition - View 4 | | 32 |

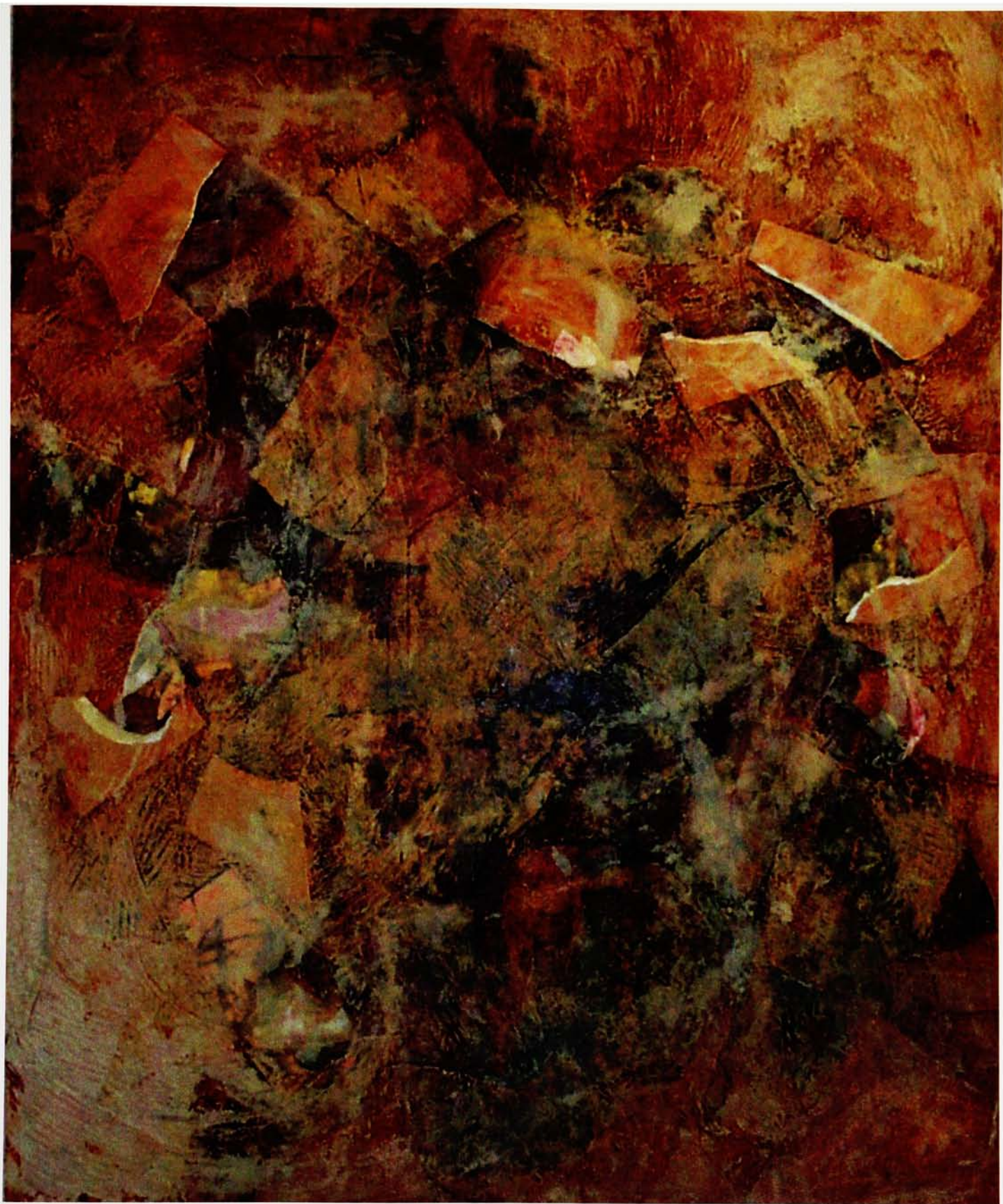


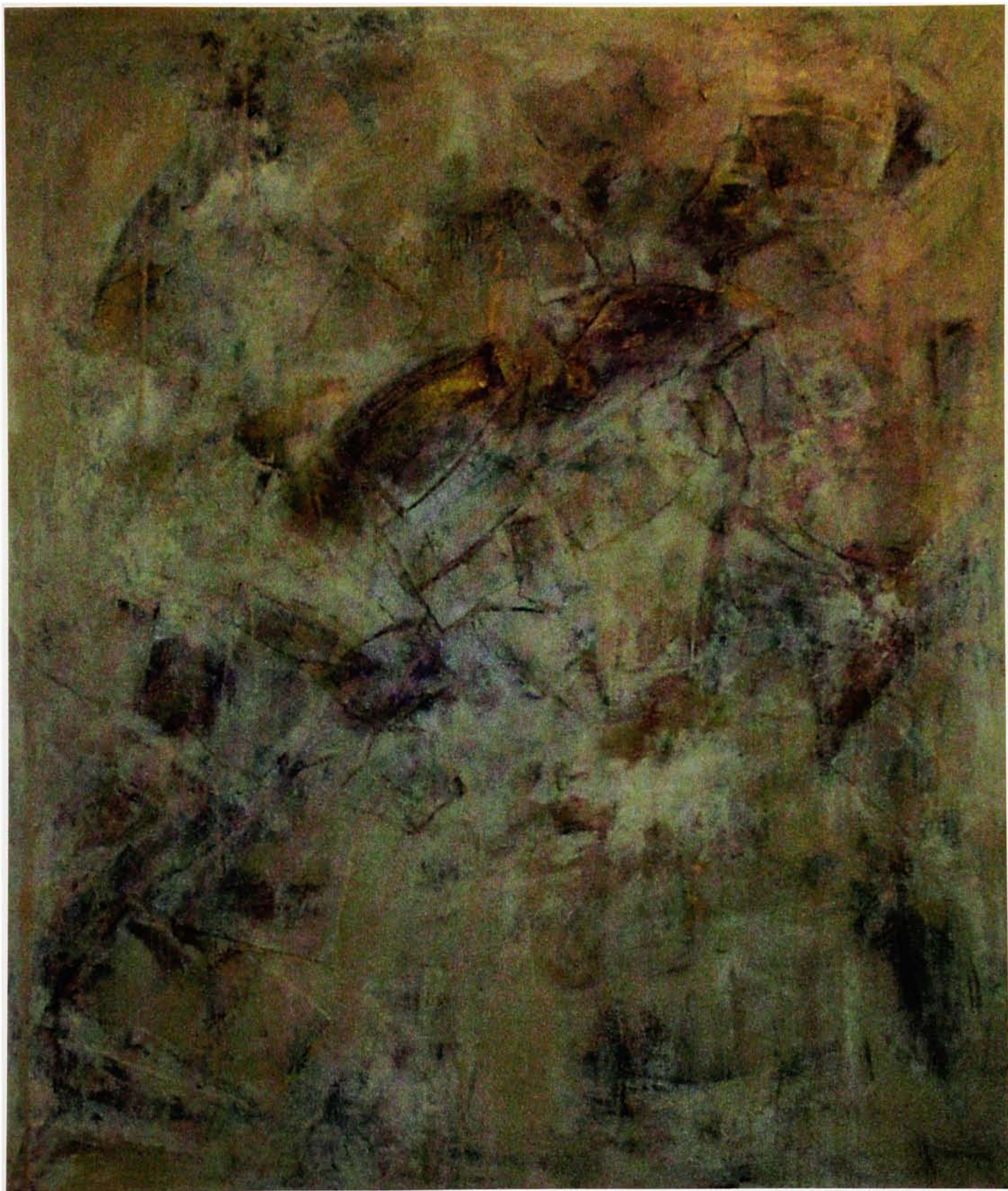






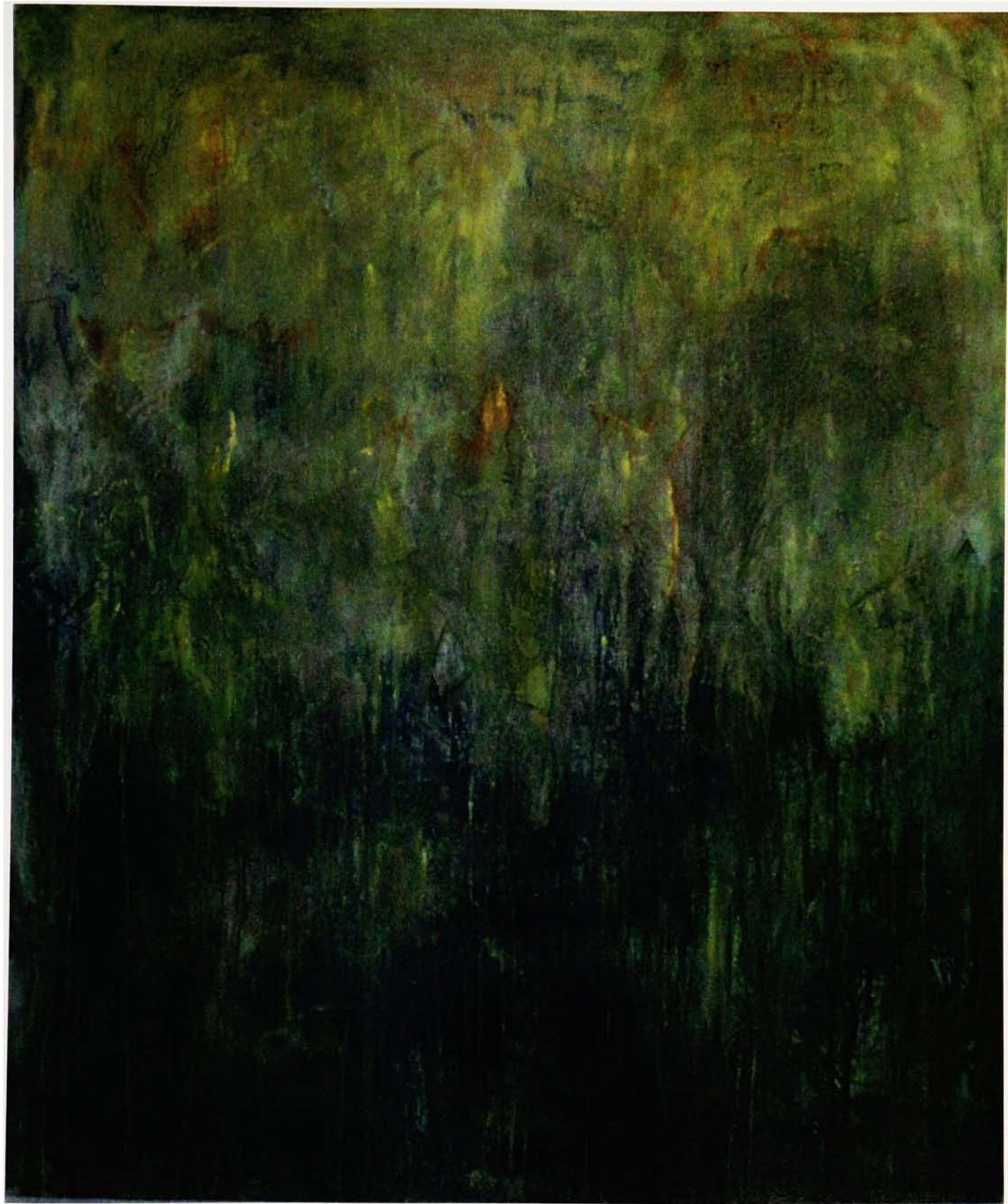


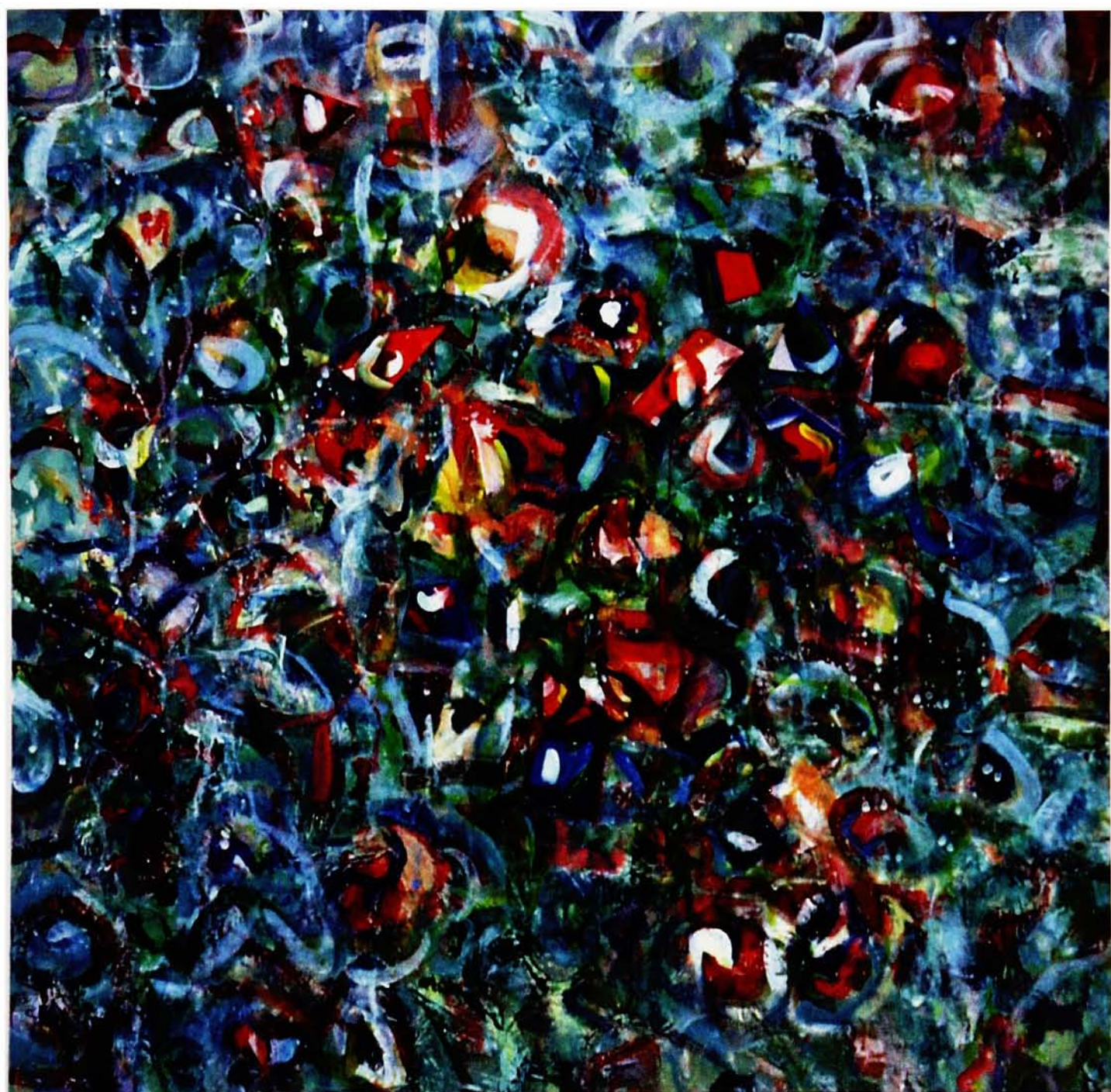






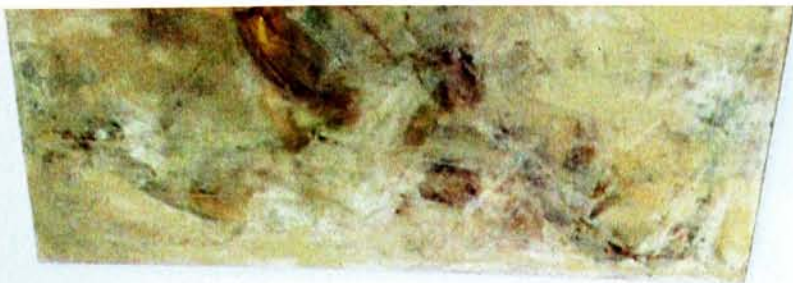


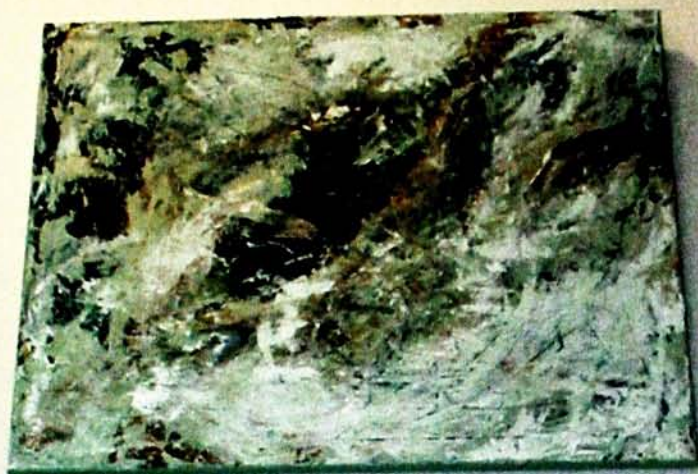












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