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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION

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May 1985

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My deepest love and appreciation to Paul Frazier, for his patience, understanding and whose loving encouragement made this dream possible.

In Loving Appreciation to My Parents

"Home is where one starts from"

-T. S. Eliot

"That is why he is called a poet. And his responsibility, which is also his joy and his strength and his life, is to defeat all labels and complicate all battles by insisting on the human riddle, to bear witness as long as breath is in him to that mighty, unnameable, transfiguring force which live in the soul of man, and to aspire to do his work so well that when the breath has left him the people--all people! -- who search in the rubble for a sign or a witness will be able to find him there."

-James Baldwin

"The history of the living world can be summarized as the elaboration of the ever-perfect eyes within a cosmos in which there is always something more to be seen."

Teilhard de Chardin

THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION

The purpose of this thesis was to explore, through the source of mythology and its imagery, the process of the creative imagination. In all due respect, there exists millenniums of world mythology and imagery which would be impractical for my purposes, as a painter, to attempt to research thoroughly. I do remain in complete awe and deeply appreciate the vast resources which exist in this area. My purpose, however, was to use this vast collection of material as a source of information for my own creativity and thought processes.

For me it was the direct impact of primitive art as communication that led to the research of the creative imagination. This direct impact of the imagery intertwined with the mythology conveyed the visual beginnings of mankind's interpretations of thoughts, beliefs, fears, and purposes for existence. It seemed reasonable that if we are to comprehend the internal motivational factors and drives as contemporary artists, it would be practical to view the extreme beginnings of creativity which emerged in prehistory.

What is evident is the clarity of power and dynamic energy which one experiences in primitive art. Centuries later contemporary society is still experiencing the power of its impact. It is only through our imagination that we can estimate what influence this imagery contributed to the human psyche when

it was initially created. There is this awareness not only of the effects that such images could serve in prehistoric culture, but also the marvelous capacity of the human mind which created these visual feasts.

The primitive mind was not so diverted, but whose very presence and existence was centered around mere survival. These fears were what drove their pure instinctive and intuitive nature to create a world of magic. Their world was composed of a conscious awareness of a universe full of uncertainty and mystery.

A mythology evolved which fulfilled man's basic desire to comprehend and control the natural phenomena of his physical world. It is not necessarily the individual mythology which was of total importance in this research, but the basic source which pushed this mythology into the forefront of human consciousness. For the primitives this primary source seemed to lie in their fears. Here their depiction of the magic of the hunt, for example, served their consciousness as a power or control over their environment. So the primitive shaman, through rituals and bold paintings on confined cave walls, captured and controlled their fears through physical realities. The substance of fear seemed to lie in the unconscious, and took shape in the consciousness as mythical or dreamlike imagery. "It served to establish a connection between the two realities which split man in two, the physical reality which his body perceived and the immaterial reality in which his soul resided."¹ The visible world filled the emptiness of the unknown completing the union between the two. So the creative imagination given form through

human consciousness established not only a magic but a religion, "an instinctive choice, accepted with all one's being and it was compounded more of faith than reasoning."² What the primitive mind had orchestrated was a melange of expressive elements. The visual imagery was merely one component. What it had created was a microcosm of creation through myths, ceremonies, and rituals. According to contemporary standards, the primitives had developed an uncommon capacity to perceive and recognize invisible presences or premonitions. Perhaps some of these perceptive abilities were the results of the self-induced states of hallucinations caused by the physical limitation to withstand the intense, brutal and exhaustive disciplines of the rituals.

Again, it was not the perceptions which intrigued, but the forms of expression which gave life to these dreamlike images of hallucinatory figures. It was the simple elegance which primitive art displayed. The raw beauty of form, gesture, and humanity behind the creation of such objects renewed our interest and inspired our own creative resources. These art forms were not an individual endeavor. Instead, they were individual elements or symbols participating in the arrangement of a rhythmic whole. In most ceremonial or ritual activities, they incorporated the use of frenetic dances to draw on eternal energies and strengths needed for survival. These also served as symbols of the cosmic rhythm of the universe. This process mobilized and joined entire groups or families symbolizing a manageable comprehension of mankind's place in the created world. It was a culmination of developing technical expertise which helped in mastering the

materials. The importance of the perfected form as symbol, which was essential to elicit the correct response to meet the cultural reinforcement for continued social conduct.

My objective was not to paint like a primitive, but to extract the essence of excitement, commitment, and belief in the obvious. The obvious was the internal resource which had motivated creative man for millenniums. Each individual had to cultivate this internal resource. When viewing the paintings of the cave-temples, one can see the magnification of power which was rendered through the mastering of technical skills, to emphasize the drama visually portrayed. It was this ability to heighten one's senses through visual symbol and communication which enticed me toward primitive art. There was a vitality, directness, and simplicity in approach which attracted the eye to the essence of the form. This bare, essential and raw beauty which was present in primitive art evoked my interest.

The current thesis work developed out of an intense interest in symbolism. It was through a lengthy involvement and study of symbolism, which led me to expand beyond the immediate concrete object to the idea of symbol through time. This research stopped at primitive art and mythology. At this point, the focus of attention was on the mythical figures and the dynamic art which interpreted them. "Myths are sets of symbols. They are the oldest and most fundamental expression of the experience of ultimate reality."³ So the study was not just that of symbol but sets of symbols. The myths, ceremonies, and rituals which embody the proliferation of the myth through symbols gave conscious connection to the invisible. The images served a

vital function but were only a small part of the ceremonies. In reality the images were then combined with all the arts creating a figurative dramatization. Each of the elements participated within the framework or structure of a rhythmic whole. The individual image carried no real significance but was merely potentially expressive. Only in context with the entire ceremony of dance, image, disguise, and musical instrument did the symbol convey its true potentials of force and impact. The symbol acted as a vehicle. It served to shock and "to shake viewers out of habitual ways of seeing and thinking, to prepare them for the acceptance of further strangeness."⁴

With this in mind, it was with a new perspective that I looked at primitive art and the mythologies which were so interrelated. In so doing, I was not committing myself to a world of symbols, but to images which conveyed a bold and dynamic impact on the viewer. The challenge was in translating the information of my research and images into the realm of the twentieth century without imitating or fashioning my art directly from primitive art. I was searching in the realm of direct and spontaneous interaction between my thoughts and the paints with which I express those thoughts. The only premise was that I wanted no constraints or parameters to bind the creative process which took place.

Originally, it was the simplicity of primitive art which inspired the use of minimal line and color. After reviewing my previous work and breaking the visual components of the symbols down to the basic elements, I realized that the compositions were

basically composed of lyrical or poetical arrangements of line and color areas. All the emotions which emanated from these works were nothing more than harmonies of abstract bits of information placed on the canvas. Since the compositions appeared very lyrical, the symbols began to be read like tiny poems being strung along the studio walls. Here I began to relate more to their abstract qualities. The image of semi-realistic appearance was brought together out of context and then into being through another medium. They began to play or toy with the senses as parodies, metaphors, or simply to delight the emotions. The questions which aroused my curiosity were two-fold: were these paintings being read merely as literal translations of symbols or was it the elemental components of color combinations and line variations which stimulated the emotional connections to the image? I realized that my symbols and objects were not necessarily meaningful to others; therefore, "knowing that the interpretation of dreams, myths, and acts is always to some degree an individual matter. No matter what point of departure one uses, symbols inevitably have both a shared and an individual component. No two people ever use the same word in exactly the same way, and the more abstract the symbol, the greater the likelihood of a sizeable individual component."⁵ It was at this point that I became involved in the entire creative process.

In what manner did the images appear or evolve? After the initial idea had formulated, what was the procedure which made these ideas take shape? Here began the observation of the method which would contribute to bringing that concept into reality. This became the imaginative alteration of images as a journey

through creativity. It also became a journey through the expansion of thought and emotional commitment. The comprehension that the most important tool for any artist was the artist himself and that "through constant practice is faith in his ability to produce miracles when they are needed."⁶ The level of realization changed, making evident the self-imposed limitations of remaining enthralled with the semi-abstracted symbols of reality. I was limiting my growth as an artist and an individual if I only pursued the symbols as a means of communication. It was necessary not only to comprehend the importance of the symbol as communication, but to the other possibilities which the symbol itself was directing me as an artist.

It was at this point that I mentally had moved beyond the physical form of the symbol and could not continue to pursue the symbols of my past work. The transformative process began by leaving the objects or manmade forms for the more organic shapes. It was the lyrical and rhythmic qualities of organic patterns which had evoked the freedom of line and gesture. The first appearance of this freedom of expression was evident in the drawings. They were extremely calligraphic, primitive, or basic, but they displayed the spontaneity of gestural line and color. They were quick, simple, and impulsive serving as excellent sources to explore and search form through line and color.

Another intriguing element to consider was the magical use of space which permeated each composition. The symbolic forms were not merely representations of reality, but pieces of reality

which constantly moved about as positive and negative space. This ethereal or dreamlike quality gave the impression of ambiguous spaces. Here the objects and figures actually began to dissolve into the space. It created a rhythmic sense where form became space only to reenact as line into form. The movement of space through the active use of color created the importance of the line; thus, the line defining objects, figures, or the suggestion of form was the connecting link between total abstraction and the concrete forms of our physical reality. There existed this continuum of basic elements interweaving and interpenetrating each other. It became a matter of substance transforming into light and light into space.

Once arriving at that conclusion, other concepts began to flower. It was not the subject which mattered, but the inspiration which emanated from the suggestion or essence of the form. The work which had been vacillating between solid and vaporous began to transform. The paintings became a transition of concrete physical elements of reality into the simplification of space and light. Painting became a delight in the experience which evaded reality and moved into the realm of playful imagination. This drew from a vocabulary of visually tangible objects and playfully reconstructed their essence. Perhaps realizing that this essence or life force of the form was best interpreted as energy. This form as energy, pulsating, vibrant, and vital, functioning uninhibitedly. Therefore, the life of the form could not be created or destroyed but merely allowed to change form or transform. This transformation became more meaningful to my development. The search became unrestricted and

the objective was to break through old perceptions; so, thought patterns, emotions, and perceptions began to change.

I began a new approach to my work which evolved through a reinterpretation of what was important to me as an artist and my need for communication. Needless to say, the work changed. The object as symbol began to serve only as a reference point which evoked the thoughts to move beyond the limited perspective allowed to the eyes. Being a painter who loves the opportunity to delight the senses with color, I relied heavily on my ability to visualize both the form and color. In fact, I reached a point where the memory took over to avoid the errors the eyes would make. The mind intuitively knew what the form should be, while the eyes sometimes got in the way of what was there. The mental process of translating the ideas became manifested through the art. This magic of the internal conscious formulation of thoughts and ideas released through the external properties as the materials and media transformed the imagination into the visible.

Painting is a magical and lengthy process and even with the most diligent effort there are many failures and occasionally high moments of insight and inspiration. The entire process is as a ritual in which the artist constantly interacts with the medium which he chooses. It points to the basic and elemental substance of the artist centering with the basic properties of the medium of expression. It is a ceremony in which the artist prepares in totality. The mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects must be engaged to reach some plateau of

coherence in the imagery. The act of drawing or initiating the surface of the paper or canvas can become quite ceremonial. The color or texture of the surface can dictate the possible contour of the line or establish the character and mood of the initializing process. At times it can be extremely spontaneous and other times it can be more meditative and carefully approached. There is this realization that, when drawing, once the line is introduced it cannot be removed. There is a permanence which exists. Unlike painting which can go through many stages of development, the drawing tends to stand on its own from the initial moment of conception. Drawing is spontaneous and direct. It carries all of the energy and force in the immediate. Characteristic of a complete ritual, it is the instrument of the spontaneous creative act. The line carries the rhythm and determines the mood, being charged with energy it becomes the expressive element encompassing the concept of dance and music. If successful it is a rhythmic whole. "The dance is the incarnation of eternal energy. Every dance is a pantomime of metamorphosis, which seeks to change the dancer into a god, a demon or some other chosen form of existence."⁷

The lines can be explained in a number of ways, but the most basic of those explanations would be to say they represent the artist. They are representative of myself, moving though stationary, synonymous with my signature as my connection to reality, my life's energy. They stand as an index to my inner nature announcing either the freedom and nobility or the meanness and limitations of that nature. They can be interpreted as any or all, but there is one thing in which I am certain, they are

expressive.

In the paintings I wilfully moved into a nonfigurative expression of line, form, and color. It was the symbol reconstructed in a purely abstract manner giving freedom to work with the concept of space and time independent of objects or environments. Now the ambiguous projections of figure/ground finally broke apart. The symbols disintegrated into the space with which they continuously struggled, and the line became form. As the painting process continued the line as form could be seen to also be struggling with the illusion of space which engulfed it. "Space, and space again, is the infinite deity which surrounds us and in which we are ourselves contained."⁸ At times the lines appeared to be floating on the surface suspended in space. At other times the line appeared to be slicing through or piercing the space. The process continued to evolve as the line did not remain pure, but dissolved into the space or fragmented into splashes of color. The microcosm/macrocosm concept of space created through color, struggled, undulated, and rhythmically moved defining the uncertainty of whether the line was contained within the space or if the line as form was allowed to exist in space, therefore, in time. The work which had transpired might be described as relating more totally to space. "Japanese 'ji-ji-mu-ge' thing and thing: no division: no separation between things. The analogy suggested is of a net of gems, the universe as a great spread-out net with at every joint a gem, and each gem not only reflecting all the others but itself reflected in all."⁹

Although the paintings have approached a minimal nature,

there exists under the immediate surface a substantial amount of activity. This effect was achieved through a layering or glazing process of innumerable colors. Once there was a sufficient number of layers built up, a final color was applied to the surface in a semi-opaque, translucent layer producing an interesting illusion of depth. Here the color became the major emphasis and the properties which were adherent to the medium were displayed. They approached the senses as extremely atmospheric and suggested that they extend beyond the frame. It was a process not only as an expressive medium where the imaginative thought and emotive states were revealed, but also in the search and exploration of perfecting technique of the medium. In these paintings, the color appeared to have served in a multiple capacity as sensation, expression, symbol, and also as structure upon which the entire composition was built.

One of the responses on initially viewing one of the thesis paintings was that it appeared extremely sensuous, but at the same time disturbingly violent. Later reflecting on what was said about a nonintentional creative result, I reviewed a number of different rituals and myths and the answer seemed quite apparent. Primitive art which perpetuated the myths was a spontaneous creative act. We have no direct knowledge of how long the gestation period was which created their forms; yet, their rituals were extremely sensuous and violent. In primitive cultures the Earth was portrayed in various forms as the Mother of all and was venerated as such. From time immemorial, the rituals and ceremonies of all cultures in one way or another animated her movements in rhythmic ecstasies or in violent

assaults. It seemed only natural then that our art should not be exempt from that same flow or rhythm of nature when the same internal drives surfaced in the consciousness as the creative imagination. "Underlying these individual characteristics, a common world-language of form was apparent in them all; through the working of instinctive sculptural sensibility, the same shapes and form relationships were used to express similiar ideas at widely different places and periods in history.¹⁰

Although I have just verbally interpreted what had transpired visually in the thesis paintings, there are other important aspects of the creative imagination on which we must reflect. It is the nonverbal experience which allows the imagination to take over. I am referring to such action or movement which supplies the artist with a vast amount of information. While they stimulate and elevate the imagination, there is an internal response which flashes and releases the creative reactions. There seems to exist an internal mechanism or creative self which lives independent of our control. This creative or separate self which contains the information that we consciously seek, thrusts us into realms in which we appear unprepared.

There is a cyclic event which takes place in the creative process. It is a constant state of internal struggle, a metamorphosis which drives us relentlessly. On many occasions it is necessary to either ignore or refuse to submit to these constant internal eruptions and fluctuations of emotive forces. Nevertheless, they do not go away in spite of the negation or

acknowledgement. The desire of our innermost thoughts and being struggles to find expression and finally surfaces. At times, there are dormant states or periods of rest when the conscious is unaware of the inner turmoil, but that is rare. The act of being creative can be analogous to the consumptive properties of fire. It seems to be an individual self which controls our decisions. It is an internal flame that engulfs the spirit, driving the physical body beyond all limitations. Once touched by the energy of these flames, we begin an incredible journey. This thrust transcends beyond the physical realm into various dimensions of time and space. Here we lose ourselves searching for the source of expression that drives us so. It becomes obsessive, this searching in the abyss of the burning flames. There are no easy results from this process, for as we search for expression, we begin to find our images. It pushes, prods, and antagonizes until the images within are released. Now the process of conveying these images becomes just as engulfing. The force behind these images compels us on towards completion. Just as we reach one plateau, we find we are driven towards another. The cycle continues the developmental process enabling the merger of form and concept. Here the reality of the physical takes place as the concept begins to materialize.

"This work of art is not merely transmitted or derived... that it is like a plant which is not a mere product of the soil; but a living creative process centered in itself, the essence of which has nothing to do with the character of the soil; that, in short, the work of art must be regarded a creative formation, freely making use of every precondition."11

It is to some degree a releasing valve which clears the mind

of excessive imagery and makes possible a more selective search of form and expression. This internal flux drives the artist in search of the perfected form just as in primitive societies in which the importance of the perfected form was essential. The criteria may have changed, but the necessity to search and overcome is still basic to all human functions. It is only through continuous immersion and saturation in the creative process that this perfection of form reveals itself. In this context the artist appears as an instrument or medium through which the creative process reaches fruition as the imagination is freed from our subconscious mind.

It is an individual drama which unfolds with each new transitional period. Here we find fulfillment and excitement in the visible form of the concept. The reality of our desire for expression is finally released. Yet, the struggle for expression is a human endeavor, from which we cannot escape.

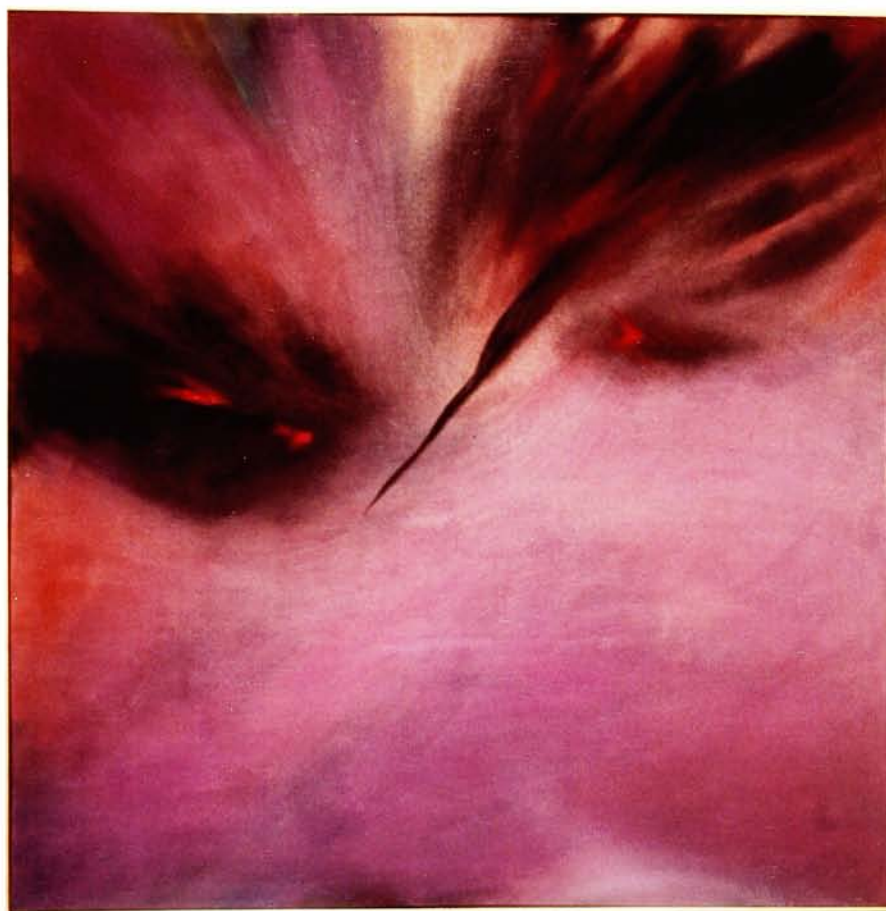


FIGURE 1.

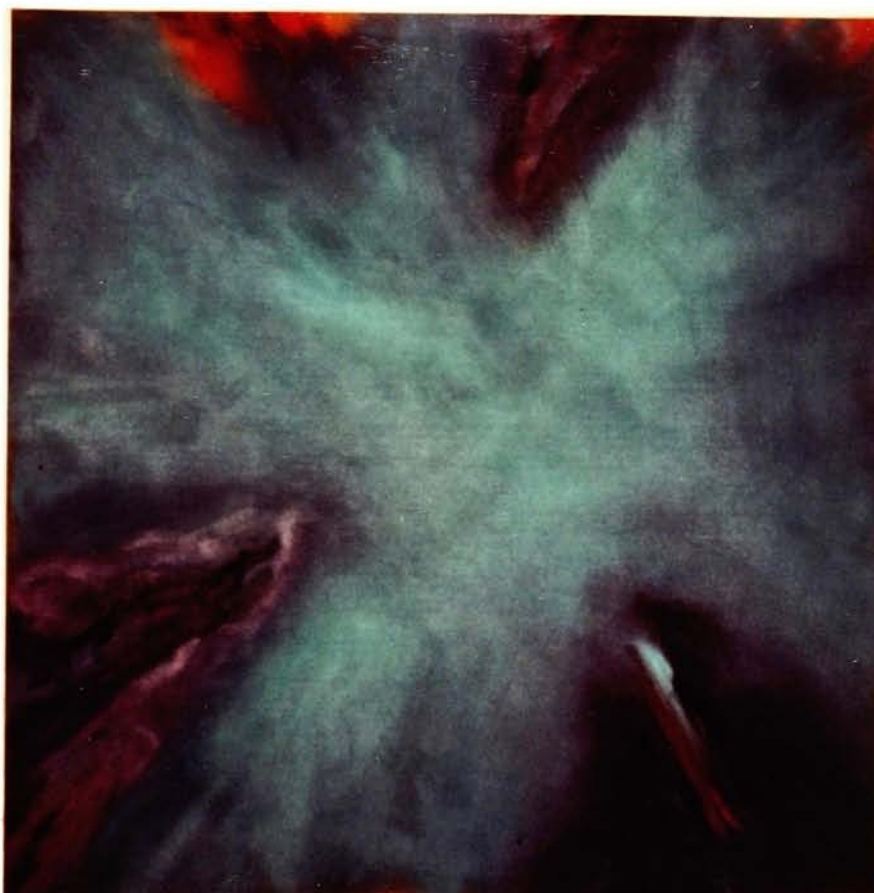


FIGURE 2.



FIGURE 3.



FIGURE 4.



FIGURE 5.

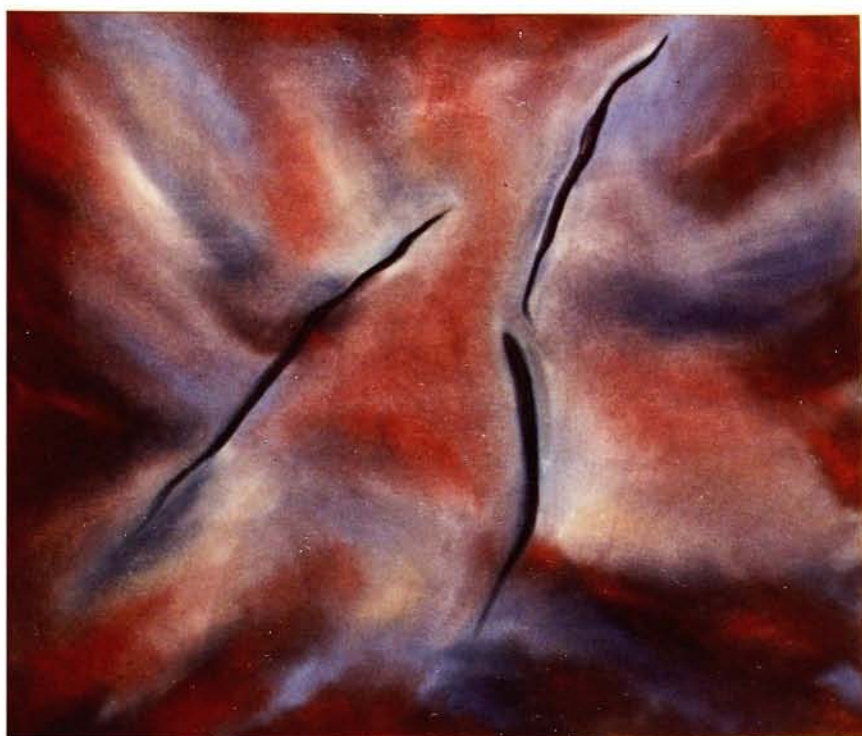


FIGURE 6.

Footnotes

- 1 Huyghe, Rene, gen. ed., Larousse Encyclopedia of Prehistoric and Ancient Art (New York: Prometheus Press, 1962), p. 76.
- 2 Pierre Grimal, ed., Larousse World Mythology (Paris: Hamlyn Publishing Group Limited, 1969; reprint ed., Secaucus, New Jersey: Chartwell Books, Inc., 1976), p. 13.
- 3 Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, ed., Art, Creativity, & the Sacred (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1984), p. 222.
- 4 John E. Pfeiffer, The Creative Explosion (New York: Harper-Row, 1982), p. 175.
- 5 Edward T. Hall, Beyond Culture (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1976), p. 10.
- 6 Graham Collier, Art and the Creative Consciousness (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), p. 40.
- 7 J. E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, Trans, Jack Sage, (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1962), p. 73.
- 8 Robert L. Herbert, ed., Modern Artists On Art (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1964), p. 132.
- 9 Joseph Campbell, Myths to Live By (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1972), p. 144.
- 10 Robert L. Herbert, ed., Modern Artists On Art (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1964), p. 148.
- 11 Herbert Read, The Forms of Things Unknown (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), p. 73.

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