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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

An Exploration in Weaving and Painting

by

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May 21, 1982

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To Donald John
for his love and support.

STATEMENT

When I was a small child my room was always arranged so that I could sit on my bed and stare out of the window. I would spend wonderful hours daydreaming through my window. I watched my neighbors and their houses, observed the changing landscape, and the passing seasons. The window would only let you see so far. It blocked out or framed a specific view, and this view was always changing with the passage of time. I was always wondering what happened beyond the view: where did the people go, what was behind the house, what was going on?

Some windows are just for wondering through--to gaze into the future or think about the past. They are for gathering thoughts like flowers. They are moments in time, memories, insights, lies. They reveal truths and angers, love and hate. Some of us seek to capture these bits and pieces of thoughts, but they can never be as real as when we initially experienced them. Ultimately, windows are a frame from which to view the passage of time.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis has been divided into four parts. Each part concerns itself with a subject that has been important to me and has influenced the direction of my work over the past two years. These sections contain thoughts or fragments of things that have influenced me rather than historical or technical information. For me these topics, Windows, Painter, Small, Paper, have been most influential.

"Old paint on canvas, as it ages, sometimes becomes transparent. When that happens it is possible, in some pictures, to see the original lines: a tree will show through a woman's dress, a child makes way for a dog, a large boat is no longer on an open sea. That is called pentimento because the painter 'repented,' changed his mind. Perhaps it would be as well to say that the old conception, replaced by a later choice, is a way of seeing and then seeing again." ¹

Lillian Hellman

WINDOWS

"Walls themselves because of glass will become windows and windows as we used to know them as holes in walls will be seen no more. Ceilings will often become as window-walls, too. The textile may soon be used as a beautiful overhead for space, the textile an attribute of genuine architecture instead of decoration by way of hangings and upholstery. The usual camouflage of the old order."²

Frank Lloyd Wright

Throughout my graduate work the theme of windows has constantly reoccurred. My personal perception of windows has meant more to me and influenced me more than any body of painting or weaving I have seen. The qualities of light and compositional make-up of windows are important to me, but I also consciously relate elements of memory and or fragments of thoughts with windows. This may not be apparent when viewing my work, but it is those thoughts of past experiences that have inspired me to use windows throughout my work.

Windows are a framing device. They surround the scene that you view and the light that comes in, and they create a composition by limiting or blocking out certain elements from your field of vision. There is for me always a yearning to know more, to know what you cannot see, what was there before, or what will be there later--windows pose questions. You receive a great deal of visual information, though limited, when you look out of a window, but you only

remember parts of it. Perhaps you remember the way the light came through the blinds yesterday, or the colour of the sky. Perhaps there was a house across the street that is no longer there, you remember the house but not the details. It is these fragments I deal with in my work--memories of colour, but not all the colours, parts of the composition, but not the details, the feeling of light, but only part of that feeling. There is so much we forget. We may remember different things later, but what we see at present, we will only remember in part.

I find the composition of windows very pleasing; I use it exclusively in my work. My pieces may concern themselves with just one window, with its panes and mullions, or with rows of windows. I like solid brick walls that have been punctured by rectangular holes--holes that let you see out and also let the light in. I have arranged some of my work in groups of this manner to simulate this architectural relationship.

The windows I peer through these days do not have curtains, rather they are dressed in bamboo blinds. My loom is situated between two such windows. When I sit down to weave I can watch the light play upon the bamboo surfaces. Sometimes the light falls so strongly on the blinds that I cannot see out, what I do see is the rectangular pattern of the window reflected onto the blind. Other times I stand very close to the window and the view becomes diffused due to the bamboo. The glass, which has become rippled and distorted with age also filters and changes the quality

of light coming through my window.

All these things, though not specifically any one, have influenced my work. There are parts of all these elements painted into each piece. But most recently these windows covered with bamboo blinds seems to surface in my thinking and in my work. My thesis work does not represent any specific time or progression of events. The pieces are a summation of all these things.

PAINTER

I have always considered myself a weaver, but most recently I find myself a weaver that also paints. I enjoy looking at paintings a great deal; the works of Rothko, Stamos, Avery, Bonnard, Vuillard, Diebenkorn, Hoffmann, and Hockney, are a few of the many painters I most enjoy. Each painter includes elements in his work that I find very interesting. When I look at paintings by these artists the first thing I notice is how the artist used colour, what combination he used and how the colour vibrates on the canvas. The next thing is the style or technique of brush work that was used. Thirdly, I look at the composition, and then how these three elements relate to each other. It is these relationships of colour, technique and composition that inspired me to try my hand at painting.

Although I have experienced several different painting mediums in undergraduate school, I did not feel accomplished in any particular area. Painting in graduate school gave me the opportunity to concentrate in just water-based media. It was not just the works of the above artists that inspired me to paint but also the act of painting itself. I find it both relaxing and invigorating. As a weaver there is a certain sense of satisfaction obtained by throwing the shuttle back and forth and watching a piece of fabric appear before your eyes. For me there is this same joy in painting.

I love the simple act of applying paint to paper, mixing colours, watching the movement of the brush, and combining pigment with fiber. There is something curious about the way the colour flows, the simplicity of a single brush stroke--one against another--the economy of line. For me there is no comparing the quality of these elements with those of dyes. These painterly qualities are what I wanted to achieve in my weaving. The more I experimented with paint, the more I wanted to use it in my weavings. So I became a weaver that paints.

As fate would have it my painting developed much faster than my weaving. I could do eight or ten paintings a week, have a crit, and do eight or ten more. Meanwhile, I was only producing one fiber piece every two weeks or so. The learning process was slow, and what I was gaining in my paintings did not seem to reflect in my weavings. It was frustrating because I did not consider myself a real painter at the time.

One day I made the mistake of showing my paintings to my textile professor. She said quite bluntly, "Why are you in textiles, you are a painter." To say the least, I realized that I was never going to simulate the qualities of paint on paper in my weaving without actually using the painted paper in my work. These qualities of light, colour and translucency that I sought to obtain with paint caused me to unite the processes of weaving and painting.

Using the theme of windows in my work, the combination of weaving and painting seemed to work together perfectly

to obtain the qualities I wanted. Windows seem to possess an innate grid composition, they also have coverings of curtains or blinds and visually they are meant to be seen through. All of these elements I could achieve in weaving. I created a piece of cloth that was loosely woven so that light could pass through it. By cutting each painting into strips and weaving them into the cloth I allowed the light to pass through the painting. With this relationship of light, weaving, and painting, together in one piece the effect was much the same as if light were passing through my window. What I can do with this relationship is endless.

PAPER

"Neither paper nor textiles, they are paintings and drawings made of fiber...The papers are best seen held in midair, with light pouring through them, like stained-glass windows. They can be viewed in many ways."³

Douglass Morse Howell

I was never interested in the use of handmade paper in my work until recently. The use of paper offered many new directions for me to go in. Paper is, after all, just another form of fiber. I needed to find a material which was suitable--it had to be strong, lightweight, receive water-based media nicely, and it had to function as an integral part of a woven surface. Since my work deals to some degree with translucent light, I needed a material that could possess the translucent qualities I desired.

I experimented with many types of paper available to me from around the area. I had varying success with each type. Eventually I found that rice papers had many qualities of light and texture that I enjoy, but would not stand up to the rigorous painting I put it through. I also enjoyed tracing vellum which has a wonderful reflective quality but does not hold the paint--I even tried monoprinting on this vellum to gain the qualities I wanted, but found the process laborious and preferred to paint directly.

It was because of these demands that I decided to make

my own handmade paper. Papermaking is a wonderful relaxing process. I experimented with several pulps--wood, cotton, linen, straw, cattails, abaca, hand dyed pulp, and so forth. Each resulting paper has its own different beautiful qualities. It is easy to get carried away and just make a lot of paper. I continued to experiment, varying the thicknesses, layering, adding other objects, painting with the pulp. This was a rather roundabout way of finding a suitable material, but also very necessary. I found that the qualities of straw paper met my needs quite well. It was strong and lightweight. I could also make it as thin or as uneven as I wished, in doing so I could change the degree of translucency. After awhile I started to create windows in the paper by laying in loosely woven fabric and removing the pulp from that area. The addition of cloth to the paper created a needed transition from the painted paper which would then be cut up and woven to the weaving itself.

Finding and learning to make handmade paper has been a truly inspiring element in my thesis work. It has been the final integrating process in my work thus far. It is here that I plan to continue experimenting.

SMALL

I first came to really enjoy small works of art after seeing a show of small French paintings. These paintings were very delightful. I was drawn into the work and forced to look closely at it. I would then start to examine the incredible relationship between the brushwork and the colour. The simplicity, quality, and economy of line, combined to create what seemed like an effortless description of gesture. I would peer into these small paintings by Bonnard, Vuillard, and other French painters "in which spontaneity is unbridled and where the painter seems to have abandoned himself exclusively to his own pleasure."⁴

It is this sense of line and colour relationship that keeps drawing me to work small. There is a sort of intimate surprise as the viewer examines the work and starts to understand how it is put together. I enjoy going up to a piece and seeing a nice bit of colour next to a particular shape, knowing if it were not there the painting would not work.

The reason why small works appeal to me is because they are very intimate, personal, and inviting. They compel you to approach them and to carefully examine their every detail. Although they can be seen in one glance, their scale forces the viewer to come closer and experience every mark and indication of surface texture.

My work is generally small, or at least I start out by working on a small scale. I try to apply all those same elements that I have appreciated in small French paintings to my own work. I want to tempt people to view my work at a very close distance. Some of my finished pieces are not small, but rather start out with a small painting or number of paintings which are cut into strips and reassembled with space and weaving in between the strips. This process makes a small painting appear much larger. The subtlety of the painted surfaces when combined with the detail and play of light in the open weave recreates for me many of these qualities that I find appealing.

CONCLUSION

Although I have come to the end of this period in my life, my work continues just as my thoughts and opinions concerning my work continues. My development as an artist is of course, an ongoing process. All the work that has come before, no matter what period of life I was in has affected the work I am about to do.

I do not know if I will stop looking out of windows or whether I will always use paper in weavings, or weaving in my paintings. I do know that I have a need to do another piece, to re-examine the possibilities, rearrange the composition, to add something new, disregard other elements, to take the piece just one additional step further. For me there is always something that can be done. There will be different windows, and new things to see. As Lillian Hellman writes, the way of seeing things will fade and become transparent--"the old conception, replaced by a later choice is a way of seeing and then seeing again."⁵

FOOTNOTES

¹Lillian Hellman, "Pentimento," Three (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), p. 309.

²Frank Lloyd Wright, The Natural House (New York: Horizon Press, 1954), pp. 53-54.

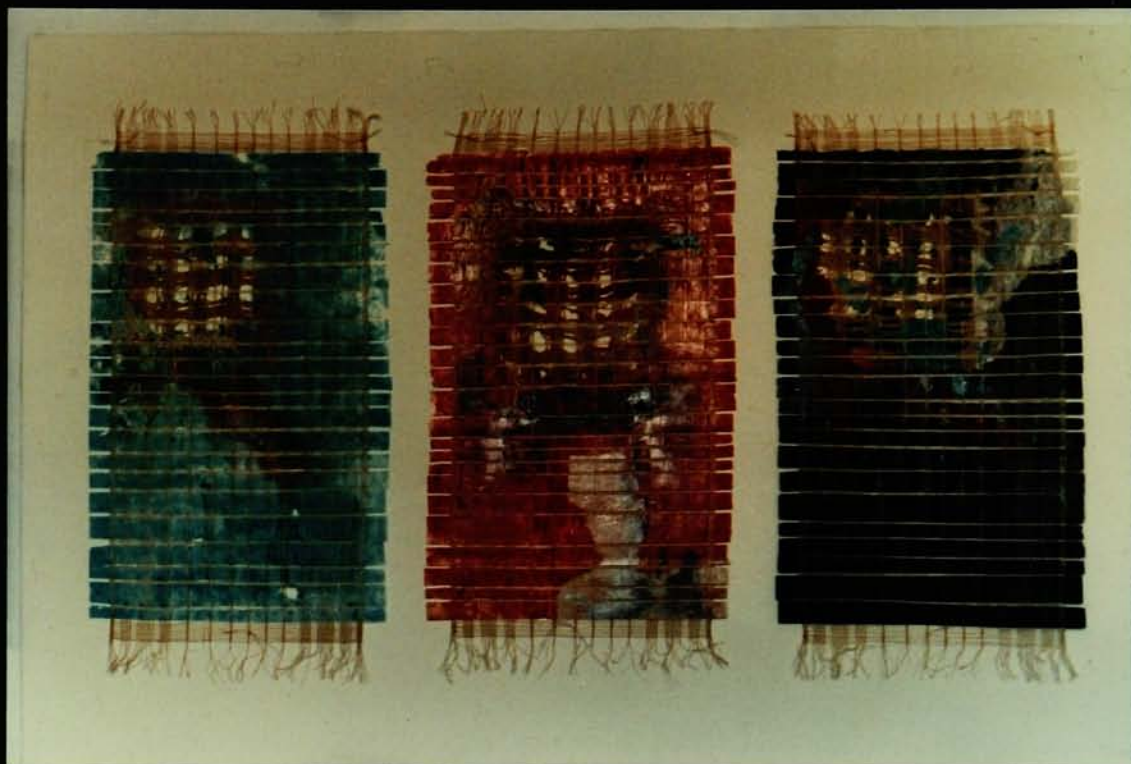
³John Rewald, "Introduction," Small French Paintings From the Bequest of Ailsa Mellon Bruce (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1978), pp. xi.

⁴John Brozostoski, "Douglass Morse Howell: Scholarship, Skill, Vision" American Craft, (Feb.-March 1981), p. 5.

⁵Hellman, p. 309.

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— Plate #1 "Fenestration Series #1"—



- Plate #2 "Fenestration Series #2" -

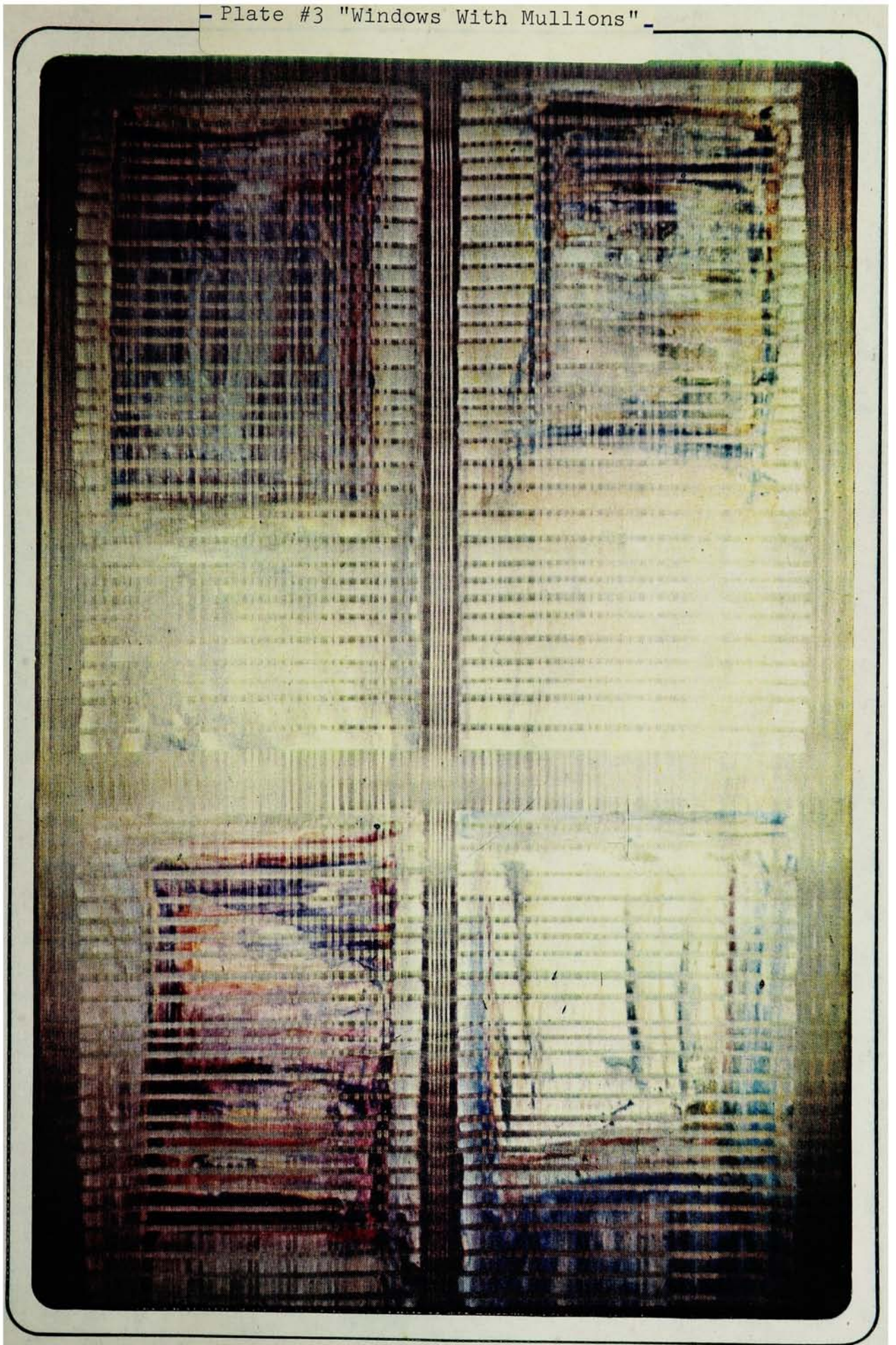


Plate #4 "Triptych"

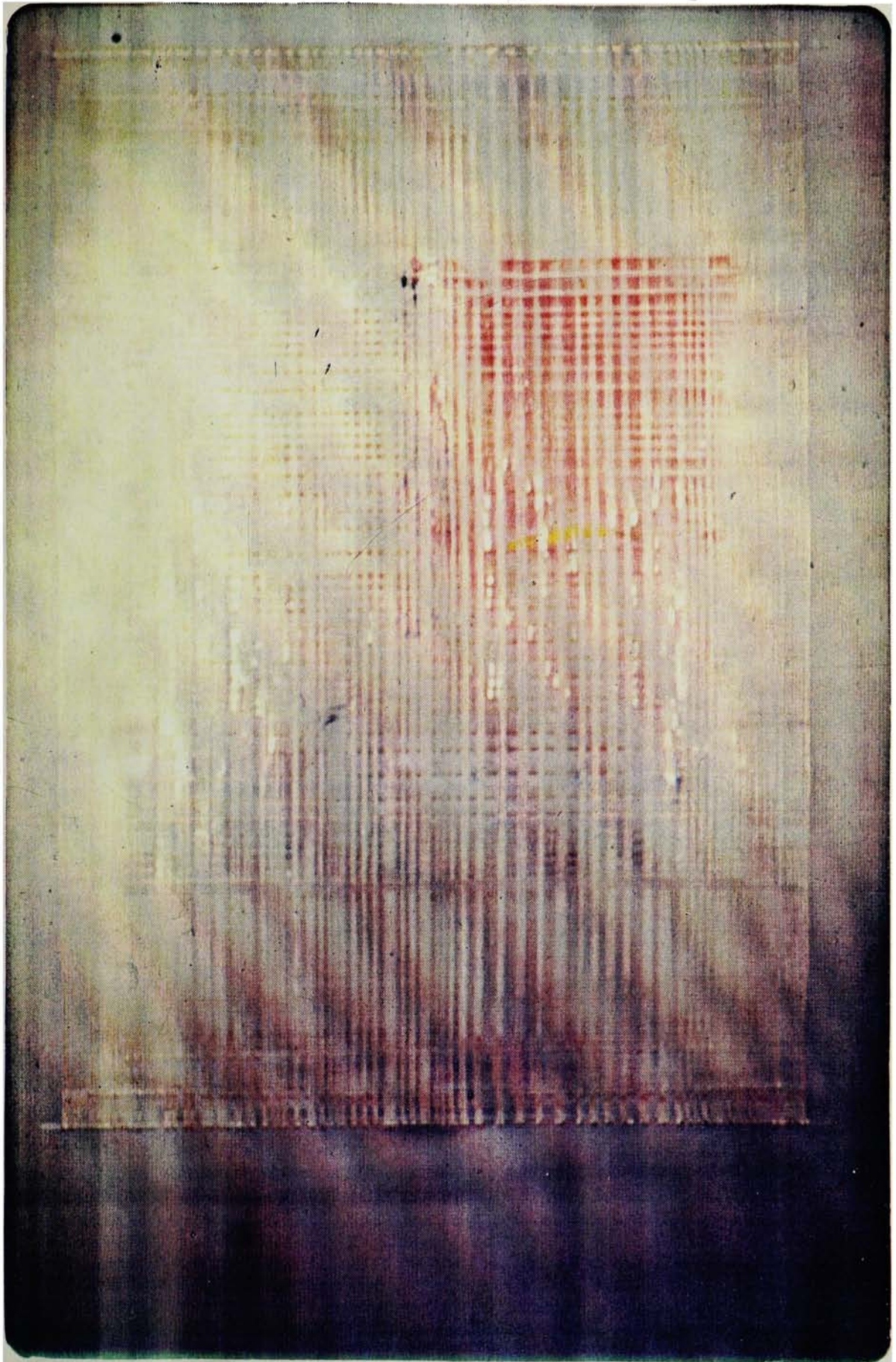


Plate #5 "Fenestrated Scrolls"



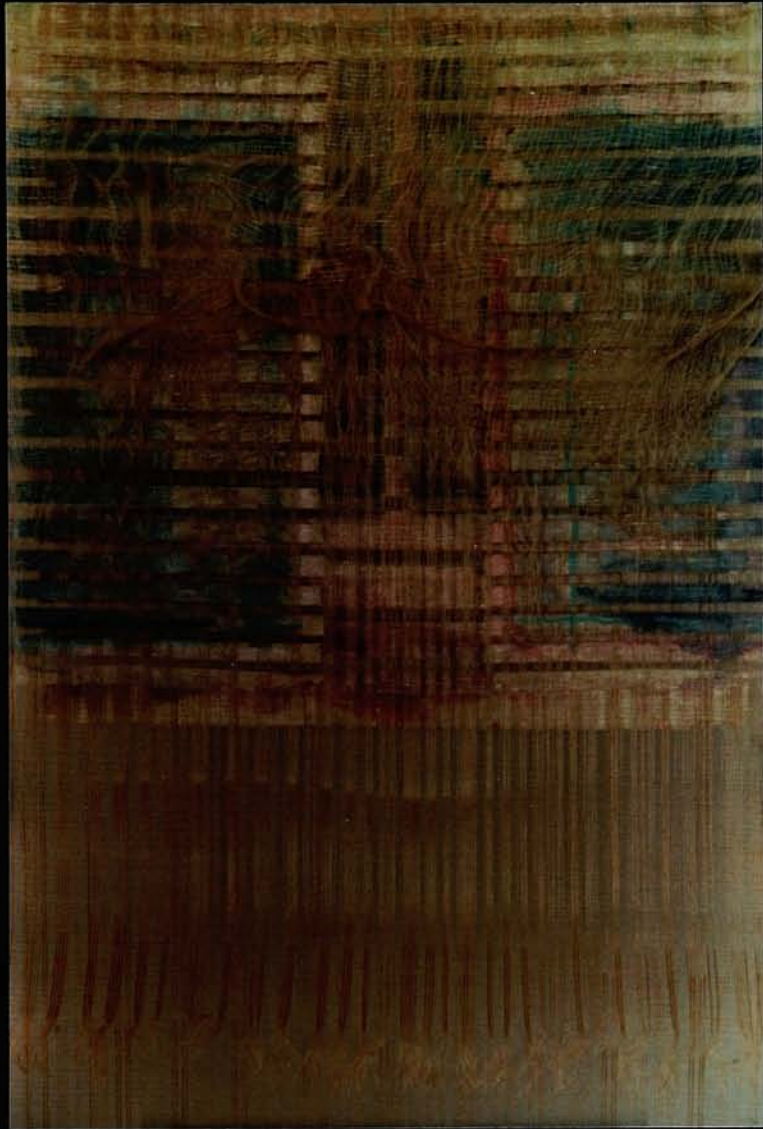


Plate #6 "Curtain"

