

Frank Bowling

The most exciting and perhaps the most important art works being made in this last quarter of the 20th century are paintings: paintings which convey the universal structure and feelings therein almost entirely in terms of color. To assume, as some do, or even to assert, as has been asserted recently, that painting has always been involved with color, is to miss the point that paint color has little to do with color outside painting, such as color in nature. With the advent of the Impressionists, but especially with the advent of Cézanne as a major figure, painting began to drift purposefully into a phase of criticism, a phase of contraction and isolation. Looking back on those times represents the kind of terror which most people who can do it—who can paint and paint well—can't handle. But, while painting continues to develop—to quote John Elderfield—"too frequently it is assumed that the causes that prosper at any given moment are the only ones from which further progress will come." There is a resistance to the idea of revision. Revisions are necessary. However, painting remains clearly the most important movement in the direction of a first-order activity since the 17th century Dutch Schools. There is a real difference between what Breitner, say, produced through the ideas of the Dutch Schools and what Van Gogh did with impressionist ideas. Van Gogh, like Cézanne and the Impressionists, believed that the correct way to proceed had to be detailed analysis through the various kinds of marks one can make with paint color on canvas to realize, to stabilize, one's sensations through impressions. Whereas, the 17th century Dutch via an artist like Elshimer, the German, who so influenced Rembrandt through Renaissance ideas, believed very general powers of analysis; that is, generalizations about pictorial facts controlled by limitations, the limitation of the picture as framed, or picturing constituted understanding, or a real grasp of that which is seen. But since pictures must register or read, in order to convey the sensations that paint color demands of the eye and hence the emotions, the elements had to be separated.

Ever since Young, in a most casual aside, declared in 1807 at a lecture given at the Royal Society that "... it is almost impossible to conceive of each sensitive point of the retina . . . contain(ing) an

infinite number of particles, each capable of vibrating in perfect unison with every possible undulation, it becomes necessary to suppose the number limited, for instance, to the three principal colors red, yellow and blue . . ." The theory, if not the actuality of limitation by rote, has stuck. There is no evidence that Young made any experiments to support this trichromatic theory of color vision. In fact, no important work seems to have been done for fifty years or so until Clerk-Maxwell made his brilliant analysis. Clerk-Maxwell actually chose red, green and blue as a color triangle to demonstrate that every color can be matched by suitable mixtures of fixed primaries irrespective of which color was taken as primary, providing when mixed, in whatever proportion, they form white. This extension of thought, for better or worse, is with us as fact. However, one thing is certain; the eye is able to discern boundaries. To use pure color in lambent intensity—to articulate pure paint color toward maximum emotional intensity, in its different combinations, harmonies

registered by looking at color are articulated.

Of the artists who seem, most positively, to have taken the position firmly in hand, evidenced by the marks they have made, one must of necessity pass on from Hans Hoffman, Matisse, Mondrian, Barnett Newman, Clifford Still, etc. and circumvent the Ken Noland, Jules Olitski position which is untenable. Color in painting promises new life. One of the most heartening things about Ken Noland's work, of course, is this promise. After a number of years there remains this stubborn promise, frail and wilder besides the point with every exhibition, emphasized, underlined even, with every distinguished picture. This work is stamped with paint color promise, hinting, but only, at this deep-rooted and everfresh vigour, even so. But at the heart of all this there lies a most terrible trap. The unity of Noland's painted surface possesses a spirit that taints its serenity; it relaxes, stabilizes itself as the eye wanders from juncture to juncture; it's a moment edging toward pain-

REVISIONS

Color and Recent Painting

etc., and not to use them to define objects—is quite simply a different business from aping nature color. A real problem this is; this business of making a dash or splash, a spot, a square, a rectangle of paint; pushed, dragged, flung or brushed to define concept after all become object. As Marcia Tucker implies in the opening lines of a rather rich catalogue essay for the exhibition, *Structure Of Color*, "Color affects the eye and heart, physically and metaphorically, more directly than any other single element in painting," paint color is not just simply different from nature color, it also does different things to the head and body. Through the act of seeing, which it shares with that out there (nature), light in light is a distinction locked in permanent decoration which yields a special kind of pleasure which, at the best moments, edits greed. *"That pure white (color as total canvas) crossed by violent harmonies which are transcended tenderly into lilac, rose ibis, Veronese green, angelic blue—incorporal colors, vistas which give us that inexplicable sensation of freshness lavished by this choreography of fiery embers" is, in effect, totally beside the point when it comes to the moment that the feelings

ful disappointment, even discomfort (if it's one shot and fleeting, it's not there) in works like *Aries Solo*, *Spring Sensation*, *Blues Intentions*; tall, skinny, elegant pictures, quite the opposite of "masses of limpid conflagrations . . ." but they do drive one to the abyss. *Spring Sensation* demonstrates that dilution of solution bleeds to create new situations, dynamic situations perhaps, but not polemical. This yellow, nudging, nudging, green; line by line (like a page, like a scroll) is separated tall but not strong. Edgewise, is it blue? When it stops is it a firm picture of painted yellow?

Beyond this aforementioned trap, of course, is the loss of many stout young talents working with color in painting. This is a threat. Of the number we have seen this season, the positive growth of Gary Hudson stands out. Hudson's work seen this season at the Reese Palley Gallery tries on something which is a very marked quality in Cézanne. Hudson betrays Cézannesque ambitions with the use of volume as the keystone in a search for living color through spatial organization. It is not just the build up of the taped-in firmly placed rectangles off the mottled and seemingly less controlled

*Georges Duthuit



surface ground that gives rise to this near muscular low relief quality, but a matter of open relationships within that which is recognizable as objects. The illogical proportions of the internal and positively painted rectangles, in color and size, sitting cheek by jowl alongside and in front of the blobs and skims of mixtures of green paint, serve, at the same time, to define where a picture like *Wall Green* starts and stops. In a work like *Wall Green*, the point about all those dotted rectangles squashed, concertinaed within this tiny painting compared with the others, (60"x72") is that it is all about revision. The quotes, and there are many, only go together to sew firmly the fabric of what we are doing which is making traditional painting. Not the last art works ever made, but the first paintings in a traditional mode; pictures about paint, through paint color. *Wall Green* delivers more than a work like *Red Siding* which, it could be argued, gets the edge in attractiveness, because it takes on more. *Upside Brown* thins out, for all the Ad Reinhardt quotes are anything but subtle. In a picture this size the strip of yellow on the right and the paler, longer one on the left fail to hold the image together. If the eye picks up and registers color the residue must be around in the head somewhere. The point though is to criticize and revise.

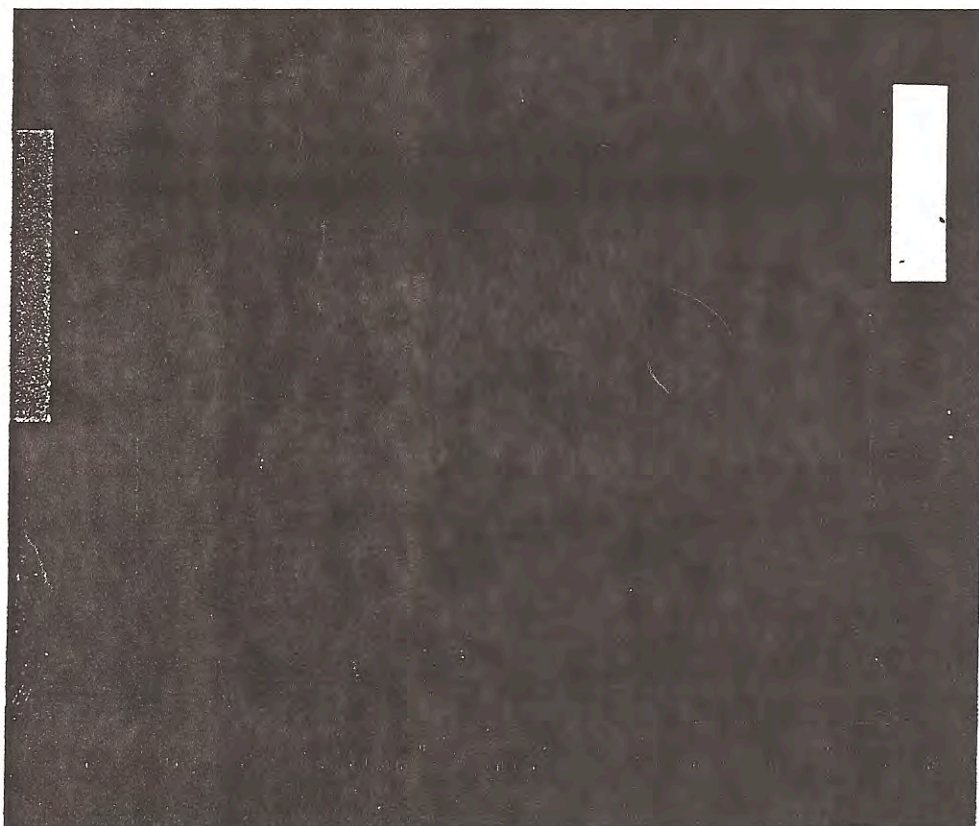
Revision, it has been said, nevertheless, is opposed to the tradition of the new. The academic alternative, which the new has become, is not relational in the sense that the agitation one feels from a recognition of toe jam or down home cooking is not the same as seeing a smart

great coat shrouding toe jam in a New York subway or eating greens in a place on 2nd Avenue in the upper 80's. What happens on the one hand is a spasm of identification which takes one over omnipotently, claims one in the same way which says "there but for the grace of God go I," and on the other, a sense of culinary pride. This restoration through excitement takes place in paint color, a recognition lucidly giving within conventional means. But the difference is—the interaction of paint color holds one in thrall guilt free.

A certain pervasive concern with paint possibilities, as opposed to design inven-

tiveness, or a drive toward architectonic planar discoveries, is abroad (widespread) and it would be impossible to name but a few. The point though is not necessarily to name names but to elucidate characteristics. My random subjectively arbitrary selection only goes to demonstrate the enormity of the capacity of paint to engage, demonstrate and distribute major weights like imagination, articulation, understanding and delivery. If Hudson uses certain skimpy planimetric devices to "pull the push," it (the work) does not deny that the whole business is really like gambling—what you toss is what you've got. It's a system, but it's a question of what number you like. One follows the (it) that's paint with everything that's paint.

John Torreano's earlier work, vigorous and colorful, confused me because it seemed to want to accommodate so much (there were dots, gashes, bleeds, swages and overlap; all hectic color—blue, red—you name it, it was there) at a time when the situation those canvases implied was all bailing out, scooping out, emptying. For instance the picture he had in David Bourdon's *Erased Structures* show at the School of Visual Art, I found difficult to see. It was difficult to tell where the picture began and ended. The most recent works, however, possess a tension which must be the result of pulling all that exuberant love of paint color tighter in an effort to make a coherent painted image. By attempting to anchor the spaces created by those forms



Above: Jack Whitten, *Colored Hornet*, 76" x 104".
Courtesy Allan Stone Gallery.

Right: Gary Hudson, *Wall Green*, 60" x 72".
Courtesy Reese Palley Gallery.

he's so fond of (the dots etc.) to the gaps left behind and in between the forms and which implied no touch, Torreano seems headed for a period of making near one color pictures. Of the four recent works I've seen, a blue picture some six feet by five has the kind of grace only color paint can achieve. I suspect this blue was arrived at by a challenge to the color itself, as if, following the concept blue arrived carrying an urgency to be dealt with; this blue has red in it and green. Where the picture begins and ends is defined by simple accidents of the process used. Having been on the floor for a while, a certain upright looking, face to face, eye to color, becomes necessary. Midway down the right perpendicular extreme edge of the painting, a spot of sharp red pulls the eye back into the picture. There's nowhere to go except the wall, which is not interesting, for the blue is engaging one. The red is so sudden it can't be anything but accident. Hauling a hard, timber-backed squeegee full of paint (perhaps blue, perhaps green) toward the edge of a being worked surface, the thing bumps on the stretcher bar and a bit of the color underneath peeps out. The problem now is deciding one to one whether to paint this bit out or whether to push it over the edge. It stays because it looks right. There is ever such a splendid anti-cropping justification here which is unimaginable without a deliberate decision to step off one of the present picture making crutches. These are difficult pictures containing shapes that appear like foot marks and hand prints; broad through lines, lines reminiscent of the earlier works, but it's the near satisfactory realisations of color which command presence.

Eleven years ago, whilst I was still a student, Richard Smith gave me the names of several N. Y. painters to visit among whom were Frank Stella, Ray Parker and Edward Avedesian. I don't know whether they knew each other for I never visited any of those people. I tended to wait for the work. The more I saw of Avedesian's work the more I figured this one for an iconoclast—like it was more debunking non-figurative expressionism than criticizing, rerouting, revising. I've changed my mind. The evidence betrayed by the surfaces of Avedesian's most recent pictures indicates the sensibility of a real gambler. Much as one could quarrel with the editorial process, perhaps in this particular part of the business it's every man for himself and, as has been pointed out, it's a matter of taste, not the devil takes the hindmost. A picture begins and ends with a concept. You can kiss the dice goodbye but you're hoping it's not going

to lie, for within this deliberate risk which all the more enterprising painters are aware of, the physical campaigns following, nay leading the armies of now old represented objects, objects like those following from lines, circles, squares, rectangles; shape and contour unlimited, in Avedesian's work is absolutely dispersed, set free within an intensity, a life force of qualifying relationships. These are the pictures of a dandy. *Radio Love*, a picture seven feet high by eight feet wide is decked out like an exotic carpet. The bottom of the picture consists of flecks, spatters and stains directly into the weave of the cotton duck in more or less straight lines which move all the way across the width of the picture's constantly changing color, now blue, now red, now green. Moving from left to right the positive rivulets and bleeds that make up the lines change, almost dead centre, from three into five because the spatters which cover the ground color, deep umber, a greyish green, become more dense. The color mixed with medium glares back and the open rectangle sitting above this area, though loosely painted, is sharply defined. The red/green contrast, which would make up the third and fourth lines reading left to right on the bottom of the picture is echoed in the top left two smaller rectangles contained in a third of jagged, unevenly distributed and handled acrylic white paint. The picture reads as a set of spatters, blobs and wayward streaks contained in loosely drawn and randomly proportioned rectangles: contained more by size of whim than any recognizable measuring device and sitting on these elegantly colored and wobbly lines, which somehow stay straight. They stay straight because of the firm perimetrical edge of the supports. The picture is a fun picture. The variety of surface and color seems uncomplicated. However, I have no doubt that what appears as throw-away swank is calculated risk behind a very sharp sense of design, if not of measuring, and a strong rationale about and response to color which in the best work is neither lush nor self indulgent because tempered by discipline; the kind that's very rare with a certain hit and miss color painting which leans heavily on cropping to bring the image off. Avedesian is perpetually taking-a-line-for-a-walk.

The flood up against that art-deco street-lamp bleeds into a pool of rich color paint. It's not nature you see; it's just that this manufactured object was standing there after all. It wasn't as if it were a tree, it was just decorative alloy, manufactured and painted green. If it is the case that in the human eye

there are two kinds of photoreceptor cells—rods and cones—and that the rods are responsible for scotopic or twilight vision, that flood up against the art-deco street-lamp, which isn't lit because it is being replaced by a more modern one further up the street, does not bleed into a pool of rich color, for the flood is being received on a rod because the only light source is the moonlight which is achro-

but these are long tapers, fingers of evenly stained color physically put together, stretched and physically placed—architecturally organized. If Peter Bradley, whose exhibition at the Emerich Gallery in June I'm eagerly awaiting, is right, color and field is the issue, not velocity in a field which mathematically means—frequencies multiplied by speed in space radiate concentrically outward. "Hold it!" In terms of available knowledge Johnson's new flat, openly rectangular pictures are his most successful. A recent window picture that isn't built turns geometry and hard edges through violet back to blue black into a coherent statement of paint color image.

Don Lewallen's work is altogether a

paint, which could be a number of mixtures, is electrified by a wobbly line, once white, darting toward the top left hand of the image. The table leg on the bottom left of the work, touches but doesn't reach the edge: and then the two shapes in all that grey at the top on the right; are they images, oval after images of the peaches, or are they 'slipper-type' shapes? While color is a more public front, the outward dramatization of the internal mark making conflicts or, as John Tancock would have it, ones "esoteric ponderings . . .", is more sturdily realized when color subjected through that circle or square tyranny uses up the organic and geometric to force open mark making meaning upon, between and within the limits of the surface spread. Of Lewallen's work, *Sierra*—a square work 6' x 6', *Byzantium*, *Horizon*, *Opel* and *Culver City*, *Culver City*, in terms of rectilinear proportion and paint articulation, comes off best.

Talking about my own work is really like pulling strong healthy teeth and I am reminded of Diderot who has been described as ". . . one of those unfortunates who trail round exhibitions and then endeavour to embroider on their emotions . . . (who) tried to get as quickly as possible off the subject" but who, in getting off the subject, could wax over the loss of an old dressing-gown thus: "My old dressing-gown went with the other rags round it. A straw chair, a wooden table, a Bergamo tapestry, a plank of pinewood, which supported a few books, a few smoky prints without borders nailed at each corner to the tapestry. Between these prints a few plaster casts were hung which formed with my dressing-gown an indigence full of harmony."

Two hundred years later I can't afford the luxury of getting off the subject but I'm attracted by the idea of "an indigence full of harmony." In my case, it might be my old pyjamas and a few travel-torn Rembrandt prints but I wonder whether it is Rembrandt or the tear which is important and to whom? What best accommodates paint and frees it toward all its potential life is cloth and cloth does tear. Paint accommodates, articulates and freezes that concept. In painting tearing or mapping, as acts, do not act out those concepts; as painting does not act out walking, rushing or brushing (all that happens at the movies or in the theatre) which is perhaps the misconception behind all those arguments about the action and the stroke. What paint does is realize or form up and deliver through clear, undisputed paint articulation. One can force paint to do all kinds of things, or try, but in the end the color says; the color looks. What we

Linear velocity which sometimes gets muddled up with paint possibilities through illusion, optical illusion, after image and all that stuff, is one dimensional. It is fleeting; now you see it, now you don't kind of idea. It has no shape until one pins it down. Velocity in plane, which is polarized light, creates two dimensional space. Two younger artists, Mark Alsop and Roger Kizik, are trying to revise and straighten out the muddle. Alsop has worked technically with paint color. He has been working very closely



John Torreano, *Untitled* (1970), 7½' x 11'. Reese Palley, New York.

with the people who invented liquitex modular colors, which perhaps explains the difference between these two. My response to Kizik's work is very physical. Some I like, some I don't, but what I know forces a rationale to Alsop. Alsop for some time worked at sculpture and does some of the most super embossings. The problem is that I accept paint as organic matter, pliable and beautiful. What one looks at has substance and moves one. Alsop's work is not grey, it's not rich. The kind of long, skinny, precise lines of color on a ground misses. The vinture of positive/negative is a hassle. What occurs is cancellation. Michael Johnson, whose last exhibition was at the Max Hutchinson Gallery, proposes a more viable solution; velocity in a field or a three dimensional space. No! Not sculpture. I mean, isn't it true that anyone can chop wood even in the dark and that if you bump into things you can hurt yourself? Johnson talks about planks

different kettle of fish. As the person that whispers to the person that shouts, one has to listen carefully to get their meaning. If Monet is about paint, Cézanne is about articulate paint. The counter action; the chance one takes pushing, brushing paint within preconceived boundaries is subject, surely, to personal will wrapped around by precedent. As against grinding one's teeth in voluntary opposition to a foreign language, paint engages one in its flow, in its natural flow. Lewallen works with what amounts to square grids in rectilinear formats. The plane strut of these pictures, though in color, is plane tints of varying tones of color like a swift mix change. For instance, is it possible that what Cézanne couldn't do in that picture of peaches in a dish on a white tablecloth, presently at the Guggenheim Museum, was surrender his middleclassness to the flow of paint. Between 1879-82 this picture was being cajoled into life. All that super grey



Left: Don Lewallen, *Culver City*, 84" x 84". Courtesy O.K. Harris.

Below: Frank Bowling, *Fani Ciotti*, 111" x 216". Collection Lucienne De Wulf.

death—may be a completely private affair and not meant to be conveyed within the context of working most positively, even, at a first-order activity. One's cognitive powers, one's ability to articulate the longing if not the power to steer a neat course (having recognized love, hate, tragedy) remain locked in the idea which is this color paint. If titles were meant to convey another path to the picture they obviously don't do a very good job, for none of the story matters in the light that titling is legitimized by convenience. It was very convenient for me to solicit Pat Simms' assistance over the telephone, when trying to straighten out a problem which arose over Don Lewallen's picture, by simply saying *Culver City*. Edward Avedisian's *Radio Love* and *Into the Misty*, though roughly the same size, stay in the mind as two quite different images. As *Untitled I* and *Untitled II* they would be more elusive. Though this is all true, it remains difficult to tell why a certain part of painting stays inaccessible even to the people most directly involved. The secret could be that because paint continues to be so open, so accessible and direct, the volition existing for the communication of so singular an idea remains suspect. The immediate pleasurable response to a successfully painted picture forces most people to bristle and not because they don't know where it's actually coming from.

have in the end is not gesture or walking, but the concept. The concept is there. It may be true that I think the greatest tension, hence the maximum emotional force through looking, can be attained by inserting an organic within a geometric shape and that supporting devices to achieve my avowed intention consist of approachable ideas like spread, bleed, gathering in pools; ideas which liquid,

hard and soft can accommodate which only add to the face—what you see is what you see. What it is about is paint; that's how it carries, that's its structure, that's what it's made of.

Painters have a way of making pictures with paint. It is often impossible to tell whether they practice what they preach. Proselytizing about certain constants—good, evil, love, hate, revenge,

