



Advancing Warm Front, 1993

Oil on canvas

64 x 60 inches

All works by Richard Hennessy

Carter Ratcliff: Let's start where you do, in the studio, at the moment when you make the first mark on a blank canvas.

Richard Hennessy: Well, that's a moment fraught with a sense of the momentous. A plunge into the unknown. Because, no matter how long you have painted, no matter how much experience you have accumulated, you can never completely predict what the mark you make with your brush will look like. You make the mark and then you have to react to it. And your reaction may not be immediate. It may take a while—for me, at any rate, because I never start with a plan for how to proceed. Plans make it all too easy. They relieve you of the need to pay attention to what you're doing. Just following the plan through to the end isn't challenging. A painting acquires interest by becoming a record of the interaction of mind, matter, and physical activity. Choosing. Preferring. Judging. Making.

CR: And, eventually, the painting is done. But what about preparatory sketches? Notes toward an overall composition? I'm reminded of how-to-paint books, with their advice on blocking out the main elements of the composition and so on.

RH: Well, the 'main elements' emerge from the process, as does the subject—the poetic content. They can't be rushed into existence before you've picked up your tools and mixed your colors. I compose as I paint, from within color. From within stroke. The oil medium makes this possible, though there is, of course, an enormous prejudice in favor of drawing coming first and painting later. That's about fresco. Because of the nature of that medium, a fresco painter had to work everything out in advance. But not all great painters did that. That is why there are so few Titian drawings, and almost none whose attribution isn't controversial. There are, perhaps, two drawings by Velazquez. That may be merely an accident of survival. But both these painters worked directly on the canvas. In the wet. Monet, whom I rank with Titian as one of the greatest technicians of all time, is very much to the point. People have recently tried to make a case for the unknown Monet—Monet the draftsman. Yet his drawings are not artistically interesting. His compositions were not planned in advance, on paper. They emerged from the process of painting. The color-space which resulted is one of the most august and original achievements in all of painting.

CR: What about Michelangelo's drawings, and the Florentine idea of art those drawings do so much to sustain—*disegno* and all that? Surely those drawings are great in their way, even though Michelangelo may not have

prized them as much as we do. He thought of himself as a sculptor, and I think it's arguable that his drawings are not all that pictorial. Or if that is a silly thing to say, isn't it nonetheless true that his drawings are not about pictorial space? They look to me like notations of form, and often the forms just float on the page. They're the drawings of a sculptor who painted under protest. Maybe he would have liked to refuse the Sistine Chapel commission, but how could he? Ultimately, though, he was right about himself. He was a sculptor. And an architect.

RH: A very great architect. As for the drawings, they're about mass and compressed energy. They're the greatest drawings about mass that have ever been done. You really believe in the solidity of those figures—and every grain of notation counts toward that effect. I recently gave a talk at the New York Studio School, which led me, at one point, to put a Mondrian and Rothko up on the screen. Then I followed up with Michelangelo's *God, creating the sun and the moon*. Both arms are extended, the fingers pointing intensely. And his gaze is intense. With his left hand, he is creating the moon. With his right, he is creating the sun and pointing right at it. Talk about eye-hand coordination—a completely unified body-mind. One substance, with the power to create a universe. For centuries, Christian Europe had been oppressed by the image of a man with both his hands nailed down. Fortunately, determined efforts to nail down the mind as well proved unavailing. With the advent of the Renaissance, the body returns in all its glory. With Michelangelo, we get the world's most famous image of touching—the creation of Adam on the Sistine ceiling.

CR: I wonder about Michelangelo's religiosity. Of course, he was religious—a Catholic in the manner of his time and place. But his idea of art was Neoplatonic. Pagan. His David is Hercules. So I suppose there is no way of knowing just how much piety we should see in his images of the Scriptural god.

RH: Michelangelo's *God* is the same as humanity's—an imagined ideal agent, an ideal doer. No doubt an idealized self-image. Or so it seems to me, as a painter. But I am getting into risky territory here. It has to do with pride and what we all love about painting—the spectacle of a world emerging from the painter's hand and mind, from one's body and one's mind simultaneously. To paint is to unify one's being. So there may be an element of self-portraiture in Michelangelo's images of a god that is all of a piece. Of course, the ancient Greeks talked of a sound mind in a sound body, and yet there is also the Christian view that man is created in god's image. And the body was never thrown away. It was going to be resurrected. That's the thrill of painting, to assert this exalted idea of the body, though there are moralizers who would think that's over reaching. Isn't that the perfect word: overreaching? Because reaching is what you do with your arms. That



acceptance of—or insistence on—the earthly body is owed to humanism, which gives us a set of very exalted ideas about what we are.

Paradisal Parlance New, 2003
Oil on board
24 x 36 inches

CR: Ideas that are of no use whatsoever unless you're concerned with who we are. Many of today's art-lovers turn to art as if it were a hot-air balloon, a way of lofting oneself far above oneself. Far above life as everyone else knows it. The other day you were talking about a show of early Cubist work you saw in a gallery on 57th Street—paintings and collages, with their bits and pieces of readymade imagery. No doubt these were shocking when they first appeared: scraps of ordinary life in the exalted realm of art. I suppose the idea, in part, was to flaunt the ordinary at the expense of the exalted. Which is all well and good, and yet one of the effects of collage was to suggest a new and improved way of putting a painting together.

RH: Juxtaposition versus composition.

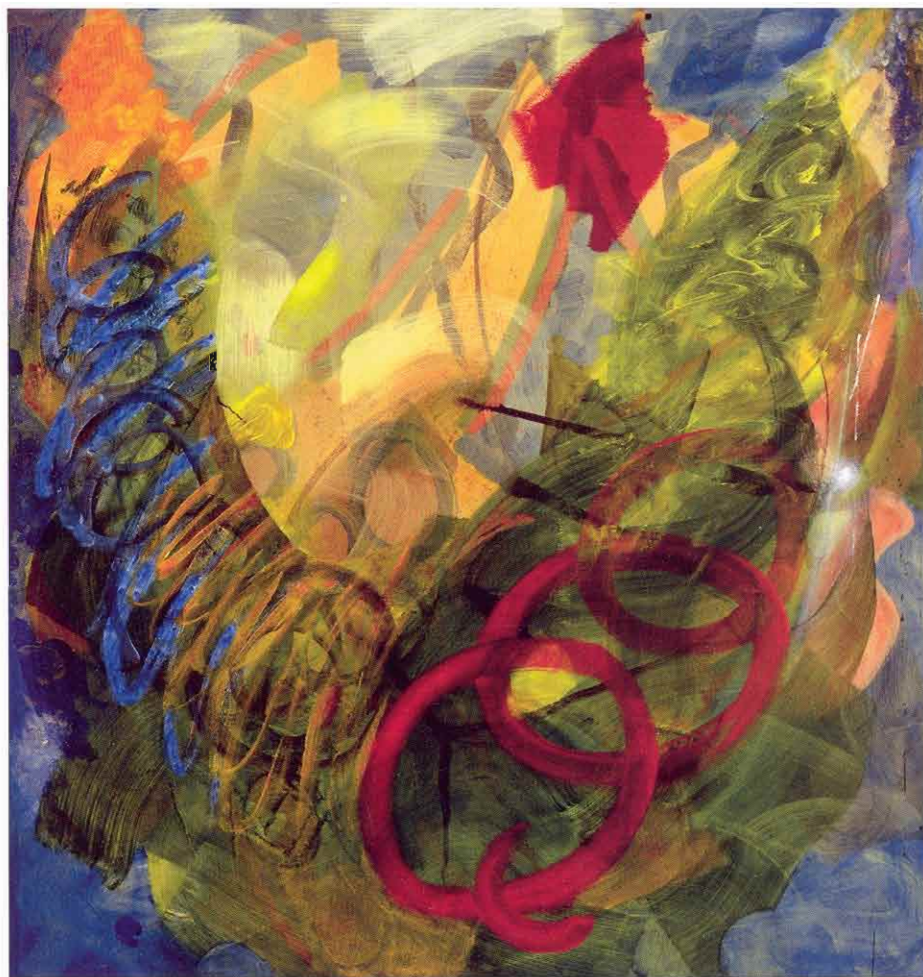
CR: Exactly, and it looks to me as if this turned into one of the 20th century's standard routines. How to make a picture. But not in ten easy lessons, because no lessons are required.

RH: True. It's easy just to make arrangements, to place one image next to another until you've filled up the surface. Collage can be an evasion of composition, which is the core issue. And, as familiar as collage has become, for some it still has the look of a challenge to tradition. A faded look, to put it

mildly. Nonetheless, I don't want to deny the greatness of the very first collages or of Analytic Cubism in general, its dematerialization of mass; separating the contour, the edge, from the mass, then atomizing it. Mass becomes this glowing, spectral, atomic vision of itself. Extraordinary. Then Mondrian came along and tidied it up.

CR: And once he had done that—once he had shown the way beyond the clutter of Cubism, all the messy ambiguities—he launched the grand project of repeating himself for the next two decades. Not quite fair, of course, but there does seem to be something fanatic about carrying on as if one's style were *the* style. The only one that humanity would ever need.

RH: What we have to remember is that not so very long after he and Braque invented collage, Picasso was painting neoclassical works, those ponderous figures that look as if they're made of stone. Having dematerialized mass, he now proceeds to paint bodies as heavy as anything that has appeared in the history of art. For Picasso, there are no permanent resting spots. You arrive at a certain place and then you go on. I believe that all things human



*A Surface on which
to Dwell, 1984*
Oil on canvas
47 x 44 inches

are provisional. Nothing is permanent. But the people who saw in Cubism the key to pictorial structure had a conversion experience. Flat, squared-away form became the be-all and end-all, and I think that began the process of the emptying out of painting, with wilder and wilder claims of moral righteousness. I admire Mondrian enormously, up to a certain point, but I think his painting shows us the prettiest face that fanaticism managed to put on in the 20th century. With his mature style, he equates rectitude with rectangularity. The less going on, the greater the claims. But when does rigor become rigor mortis? When does MoMA become an acronym for Mummies of Modern Art?

CR: Are you thinking of the utopian schemes that were funded, so to speak, by the metaphysical certainties of Mondrian and other painters of de Stijl? Not to mention the artists of the Bauhaus and Constructivism?

RH: Yes. These were artists who had all the answers. They were going to teach everyone how to live. Answers have only a temporary usefulness. The search is the interesting thing. Whenever an artist pursues an ultimate solution, I become suspicious. The origins of Mondrian's fanaticism can be seen in a painting from 1912, called *Evolution*. It's figurative, thus an embarrassment for people who promote Mondrian's later work. There are three panels, with a nude woman in each. The one on the right bears a Star of David on each of her shoulders. The one on the left, while not allegorized, I assume to represent Christianity. The one in the center seems to stand for the new religion Mondrian was always looking for, and only her eyes are open—staring bug-eyed. All three of them hold their arms pressed to their sides. But it's more than that, almost as if their arms were growing into their bodies. Exactly the opposite of evolution. What does this tell you? After all, arms are what we need to paint. The denial of the body built into this kind of abstraction.

CR: Paintings have to be painted, as a practical matter, but you're arguing that painting of this kind implies a bodily image. The flesh devolving to some early stage of embryonic development, while the spirit—or the mind—leaps to a higher level. A higher level and a very narrow one, where the mind can conceive of painting only as a blueprint for utopia.

RH: But this denial of the body can be seen in the work of abstract painters who were anything but utopian. There is an early Rothko, from 1941 or '42, called *Crucifix*, that shows arms and legs in piled-up boxes, looking like a Louise Nevelson. On top is a head. Or three heads: profiles, left and right, and in the center full-face. One thinks of Christ and the two thieves, crucified. I was stunned the first time I saw that painting, like a body blow. I suddenly realized that the boxes we see stacked in the abstract Rothkos are like those limb-packed boxes. His later paintings are headless, armless, legless trunks. So that appears to be the price of

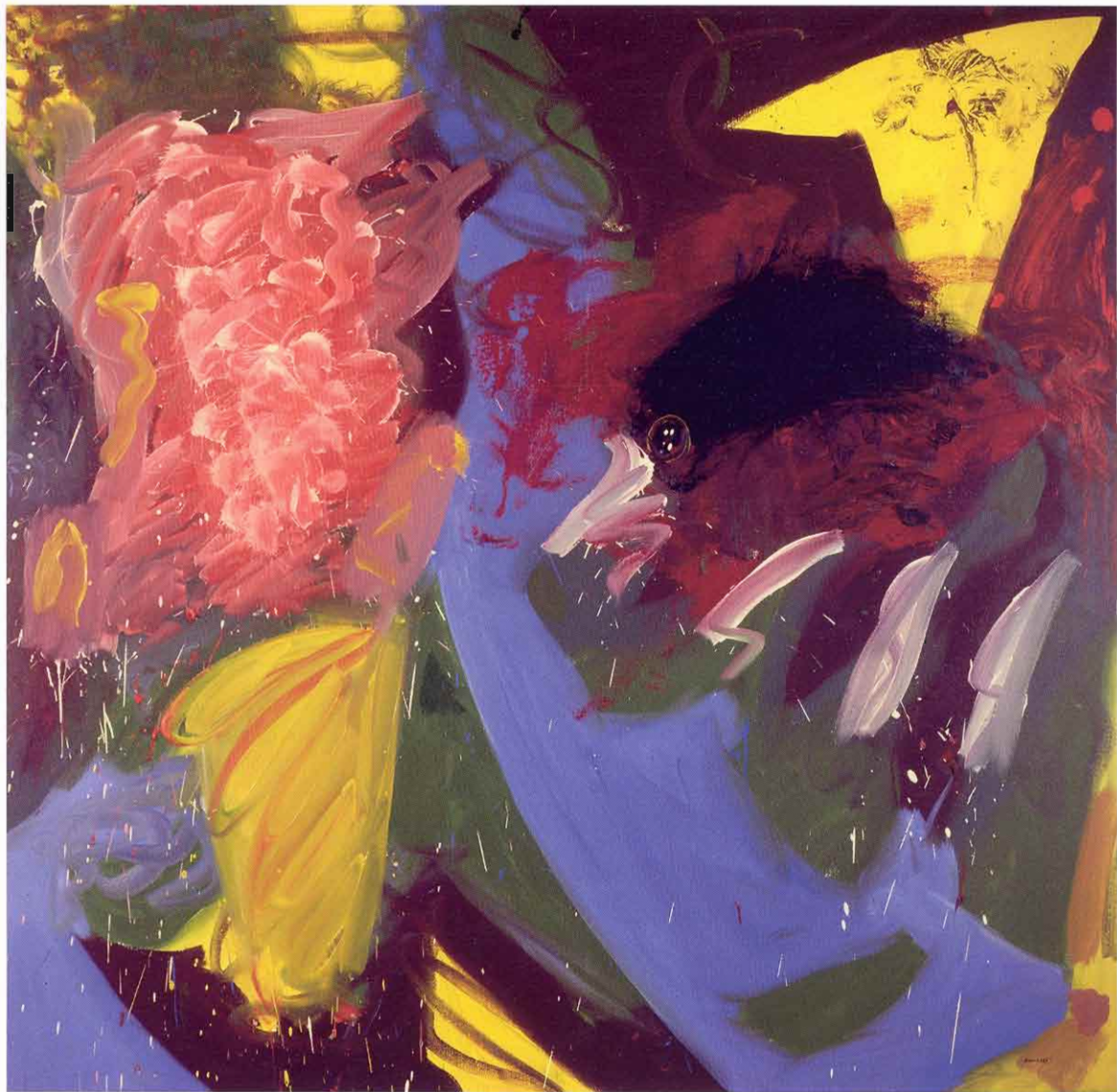
admission to this kind of abstraction. Your arms. Your legs. Your head.

CR: What's left of the body is a ruin, like an antique statue with its extremities missing. Of course, there is a romance of the ruin—think of Northern Europeans wandering around the Mediterranean in the 18th century. The Grand Tour, upon which one did not set out without a supply of stock responses to things that had fallen into disrepair. Or been subjected to vandalism. The Acropolis owes much of its decrepitude to the explosion of a 17th-century ammunition dump. That's how the Turks were using it in those days. No one blames them, really. It's almost as if they are to be credited with aesthetic refinement, as unconscious as it may have been. With so much of the past in ruins and the modern spirit so given to doubts about itself, ruins become a sign of integrity. Of authenticity, to use a modern word that goes some way toward justifying the modern spirit's self-doubts. Think of those sculptures of Rodin's that present just a fragment of the body. The irony of the part with the presence of the whole. But not all ironies work. Maybe those fragmented bodies of Rodin's ought to be seen not as grandly monumental but as sadly mutilated.

RH: I find it harder and harder, the older I get, to look at broken sculptures.

CR: In certain circumstances, though, an ancient trunk can have a kind of grandeur. There's one near the Piazza Navona, in Rome—Pasquino, to give this figure its nickname. It inspired a new literary form, the Pasquinade, a protest in severely condensed form or, anyway, concise enough to be printed on a handbill and pasted on the wall near this statue. Political protest, professions of moral outrage, and so on. The outraged were the oppressed, and they may have felt an affinity for Pasquino's ruined form. As if their powerlessness felt to them like armlessness and leglessness. This was in 16th century Italy, a time and a place where the freedoms we call modern had become imaginable. It occurred to the oppressed that oppression might not be inevitable. They might, if things improved, act for their own benefit, like people with a full complement of limbs. This is what proponents of art theory and other, *soi-disant* radicals dislike about the modern era. It opened up a space where people could reimagine themselves, to their own advantage. Theory, which has all the answers, prefers us not to be capable of imagination, not to be whole, not to be free. In theory and for theory, the ideal body is a trunk, incapable of action and all the better if it lacks a head, so that thinking is, by default, the exclusive preserve of those who manage to get themselves certified as thinkers. Like Mondrian and Rothko and other reductive painters, the art theorists ascend by leaving parts of themselves behind.

RH: Are Mondrian and Rothko unconsciously attempting to make a bargain with fate? You renounce something to get something. In the Old Testament, it is said: if thy left hand offend thee, lop it off. If thy right eye



Drunk to me only with thine eyes, 1980

Oil on canvas

65 x 66 inches



Leaping Laocoön, 1985
Oil on canvas
60 x 66 inches

offend thee, pluck it out. I think this is a very sinister instance of what ambition will do to realize itself.

CR: Sinister but alluring to just about everyone, in certain moods. The glamor of renunciation. The prettiest face of fanaticism, as you call it, implying that these spiritualized abstractionists make common cause—if only at a discreet distance—with the totalitarian impulses of the 20th century. Or is that your implication?

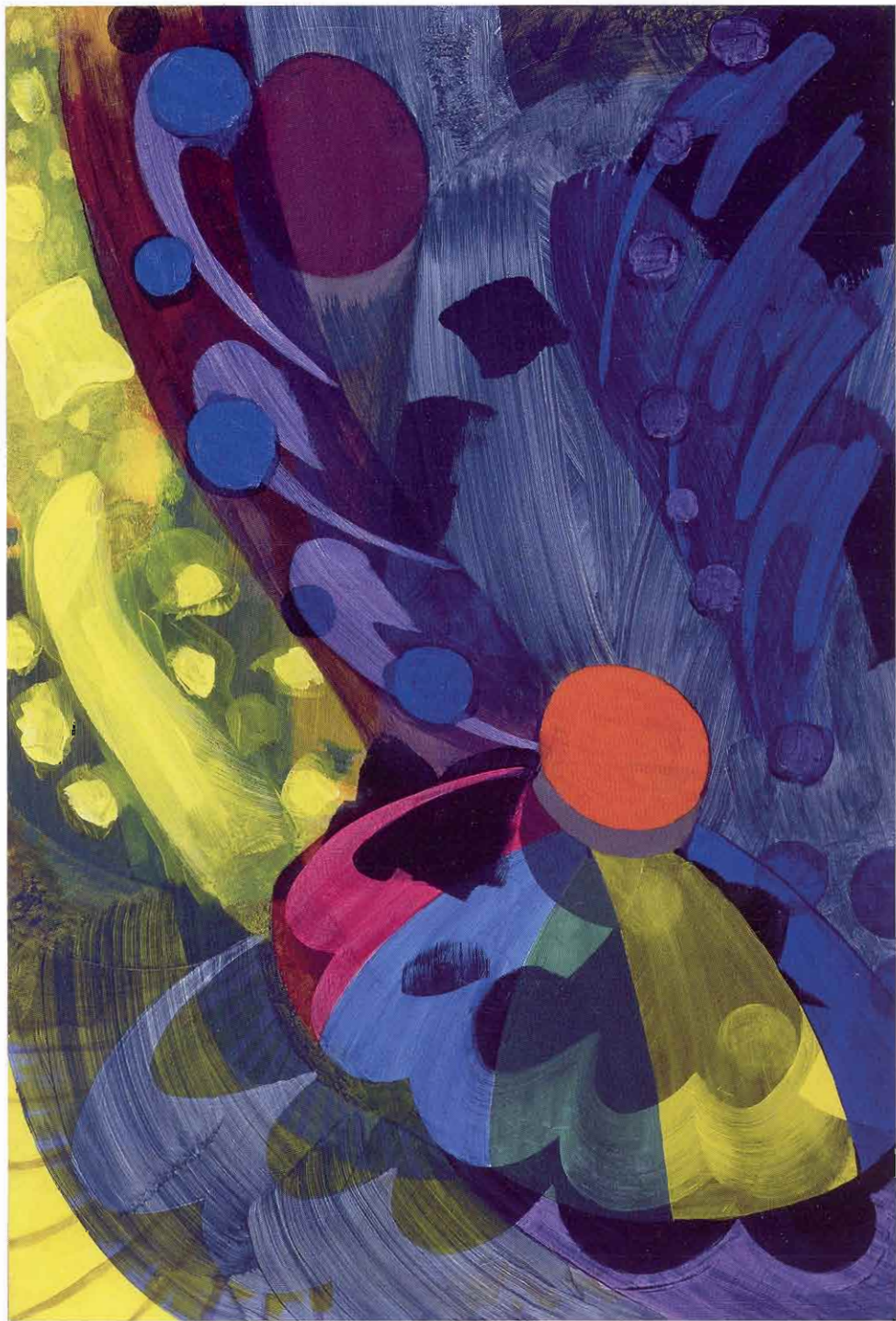
RH: Absolutely.

CR: So Mondrian and the fascists alike register an objection to the down-to-earth, contingent, secular world launched by the Renaissance and expanded by the Enlightenment. A world where everyone has a right not only to arms and legs but also to a head. A right not only to act for oneself but to decide on one's own reasons for acting. I'm aware of the fishy, laissez-faire implications of putting it that way, and there is much to add on the subject of society. Civil society, that is to say. But that way lie dense thickets of dreary commentary. So, to stay in the company of painters and others who invent spaces of the imagination, let's just say, for present purposes, that



civil society is represented by those civilized viewers who know what to make of brushwork and pictorial composition. The self's representative is the painter, whose informed brush invents, without benefit of theory, the space where, in imagination, we can realize our best ideas of ourselves. That may well be the point of painting. Not that I want to neglect the immediate pleasures of particular canvases. Still, it does seem to me that what has sustained the enterprise of painting over the centuries is its power to assert the image of a self. An ideal self, an impossible self, an ironic self—whatever. But, in any case, “It is all self,” as Zenobia says in *The Blithedale Romance*. “Nothing but self, self, self!” Hawthorne’s heroine is allowing herself to be exasperated by an American version of Wordsworth’s “egotistical sublime.” Her outburst tells us what we already know, by the time we get to that point in the story: Hawthorne was alive to dangers of the self-exalted self. You mentioned pride. There is also, in modern times, the risk of falling into an abyss of solipsism. And that’s just for starters. But what is the alternative to these risks? To theorize the self out of existence? This is what the proponents of art theory would like to do, and so they say that painting has long been beside the point. Because they

Untitled, 1972
Oil on canvas
25 x 28 inches



Her Gracious Sway (Nancy Graves 1940-1995), 1996

Oil on board
36 x 24 inches

understand as well as anyone that painting does much to animate our ideas of ourselves. If, therefore, we are to transcend the self, if we are to hit the heights of supra-personal truth, we must get rid of this inconvenient medium. Good luck. Painting is still with us. As is the body, except in theory, which has thrown the body away, leaving only the mind, a brain in a bottle, and eventually you get conceptual art.

RH: And when they finally discarded the body, the mental life that emerges is pitifully impoverished.

CR: A terrible irony.

RH: A crushing irony. To negate invention, to negate imagination, to negate curiosity. Religiosity is lurking behind all this. A homeless religiosity that can't be orthodox precisely because it has no home. But it is rigidly orthodox in spirit, and therefore it is against curiosity. Orthodoxy always is. Its proponents say: why are you so curious? We already know everything we need to know. We've got the answers. If it's a matter of reductive art, of impoverished art, the artist may not claim to have the answer for everybody. But he will claim that he has the answer for himself, demonstrating this by endless repetition.

CR: This repetition produces what is called, in these latter days, a brand. The image becomes a logo, a device for marketing itself, and here's the delusion: that the attention paid to this work is a sign of its aesthetic power, when, in fact, it shows only the power of the brand. Marketing success is understood as a triumph of art. This is a game of three-card monte. Even if it has only two cards. In any case, it is extraordinarily dishonest.

RH: It's anti-intellectual. And, having impoverished the mind by depriving it of the body, it then shifts the argument. They start talking about spirituality. I think this spiritualized anti-intellectuality is anti-joy. Because the satisfaction of curiosity is, after all, a natural phenomenon. Healthy animals display enormous amounts of curiosity. Nature is kind. It rewards you when you satisfy your curiosity. The dopamine flows. But not for the religionists. They condemn curiosity and they condemn the pursuit of knowledge.

CR: Because they already know.

RH: They already know. They've got the answers.

CR: To get back to you in the studio, launching a painting without preparatory drawings. Is it curiosity that drives you? Drives you to see how it will turn out? What can be done?

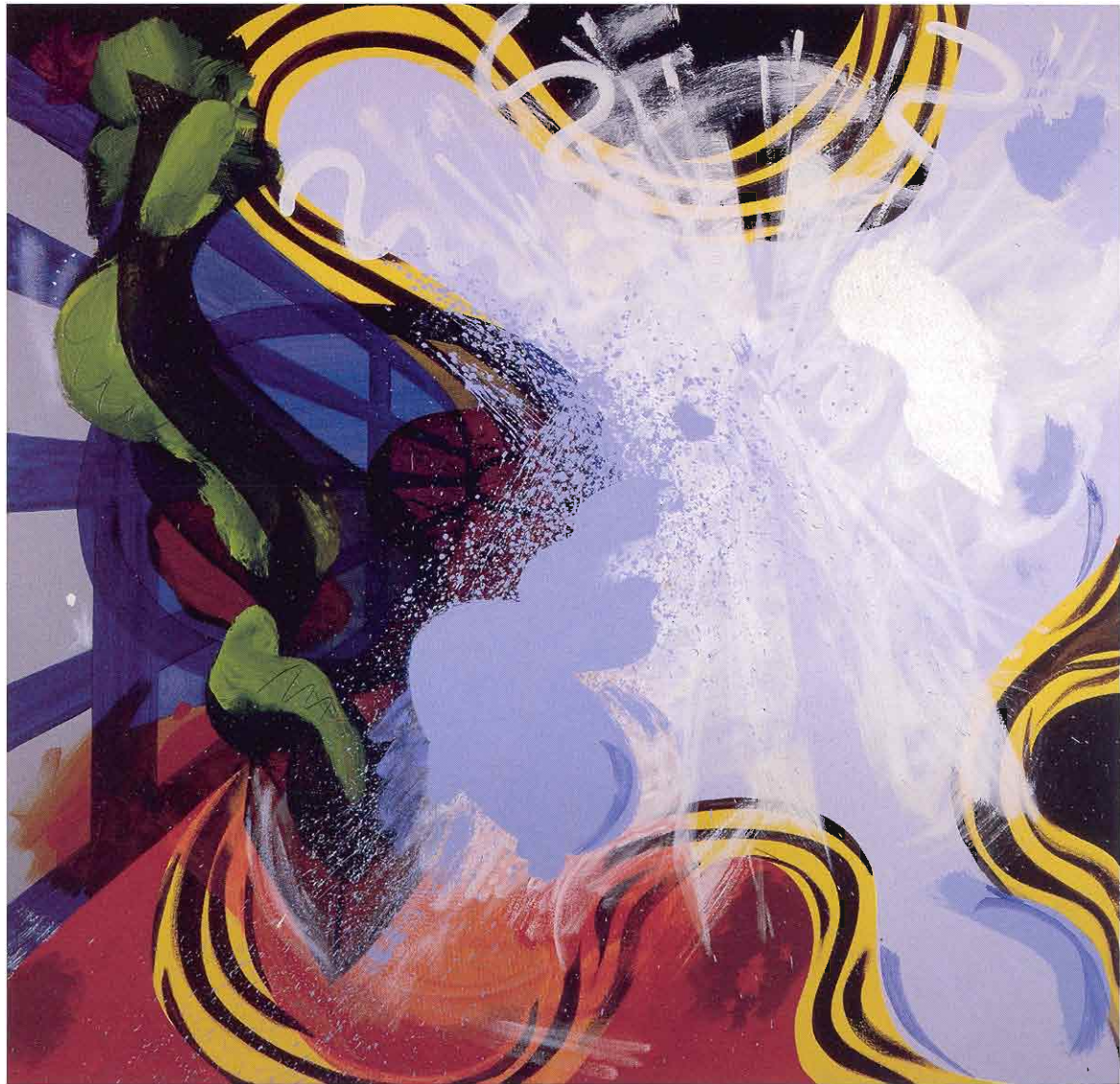
RH: Yes. That is the joy of it. Nothing is a more effective killjoy than a precise plan. I leave a huge role for impulse—impulse and dealing with its consequences. We have vast stores of knowledge, of perception, which I want to access. Words won't do it. The reasons for satisfying an impulse only become

clear after doing so, when faced with the physical consequences, so much richer than could have possibly been imagined, and so truly 'precise' with the 'precision' of achieved fact. Impulse and reflection follow one another until somewhere along the way, after much doubt, patience, and sheer tenacity, the subject hoves into view and I can see my way. At that point, you can come up with all the words and reasons in the world, by way of explanation. But there wouldn't be anything to explain if you hadn't acted first, without guarantees. This is how you learn. But there is no learning if you begin with a precise plan and just carry it out. Nor is the self unified, much less strengthened. If one part of you is ordering the other part to follow the plan, you have divided yourself into a boss who dictates and a servant who meekly obeys. That kind of artist tends to be popular with the taskmasters of our society, the sort of patrons for whom the ideal artist resembles a docile employee. Somebody who shows up at nine in the morning and doesn't ask for much. Does the job. Goes home at five.

CR: An amazing image. It points to the way art has been put into a box. A box built by the market, where art can flourish only as a specialized profession. To be an artist is to follow a career path not all that different, in principle, from the one followed by an accountant or a software engineer who helps a company to keep humming along. But I don't think even the most professionalized artists see themselves as obedient. They've gone to art school and maybe heard something about Michelangelo giving the Pope a hard time. Or about avant-gardists defying the academy. They see themselves as rebels. As resistant to the dominant hegemony, as the dog-eared lingo has it.

RH: Of course, genuine art is always done in defiance.

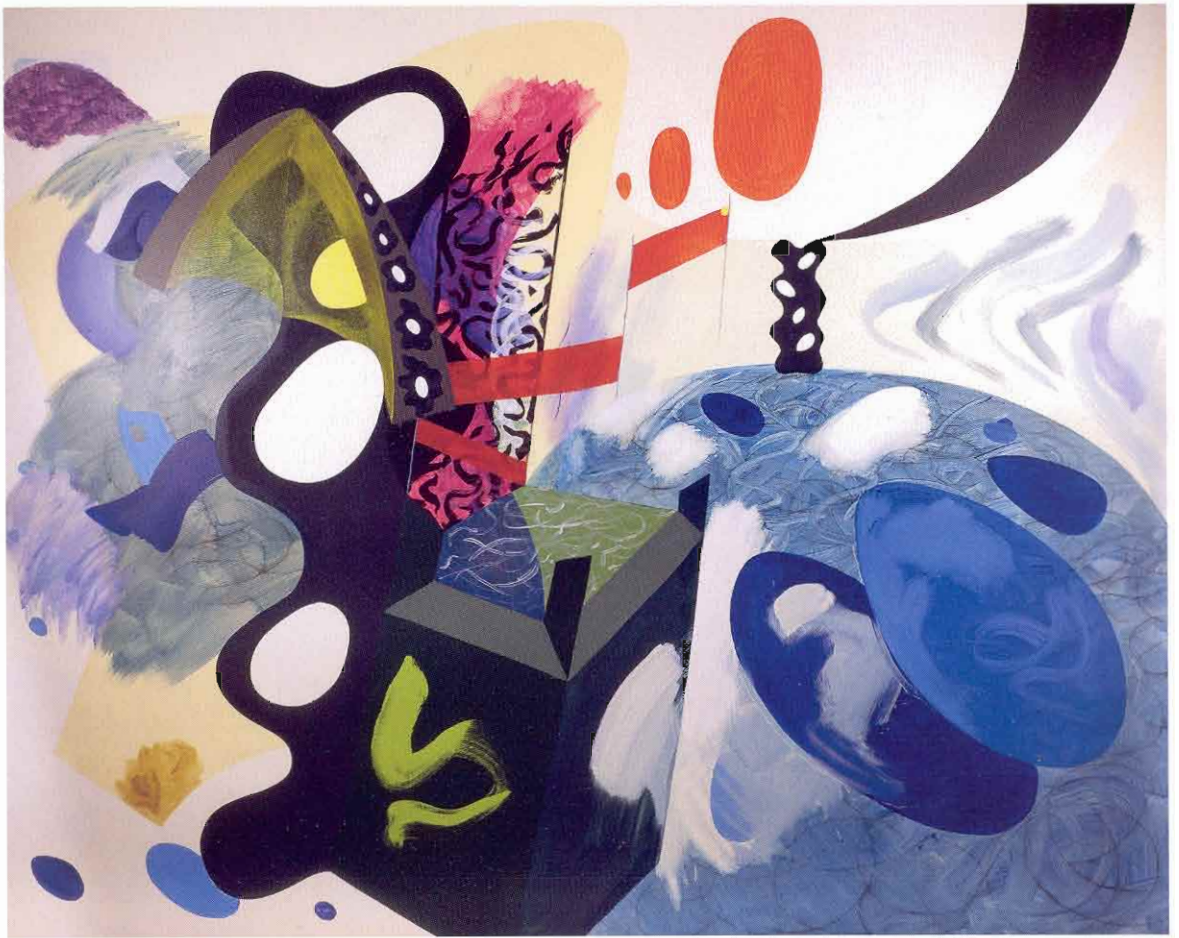
CR: In our time, genuine art tends not to be militant. All the banners with the strange devices of the avant-garde have long since been rolled up and retired from the field. Genuine artists don't make a fuss about rebellion or originality. Nonetheless, they are rebellious and original because they are willing, as you've said, to proceed without a plan. They stir up contingencies and follow them wherever they lead. So far, so good, until run-of-the-mill, professionalized art gets into the picture. By affixing the art-label to obedient, theorized stuff, the art world grants it the virtues of defiant art. Grants it every virtue that art has ever displayed in any historical period. Never mind that these virtues often make a bad fit with one another. How can you claim the rebelliousness of mid-nineteenth-century avant-gardism for work that you also praise for a spiritual presence nothing less than medieval? But a rave hardly seems to have gotten off the ground until the critic has picked one term of praise from menu A and another from menu B. If a work is not too messy, it can be applauded as not only medieval but also Apollonian, an edgy, up-to-the-moment echo of all that we have inherited from the art of classical Athens. Again, it's a shell game. Further



Bifocal Bender, 1989

Oil on canvas

46 x 47 inches



Tokyo Bay 1853, 1990
Oil on canvas
96 x 120 inches

sleight-of-hand. I'm not sure how conscious these maneuvers are, especially when performed by artists. One goes to art school and finds out what can be done in the wake of Bruce Nauman. Attention is paid, and suddenly one is part of art history. Just like William Blake or Michelangelo. But artists like that are nothing of the kind. They are reincarnations of the academic artists who made careers of scrambling up the institutional ladder in 19th century France. There are ranks and awards, or reasonable facsimiles thereof. In those days, it was run by the state. Now it's run by the market, and the equivalent of a gold medal is a retrospective exhibition acknowledging a well-established brand.

RH: *Mutatis mutandi*, art is in exactly the same spot it was over a hundred years ago. The new ingredient is art history. Art historians have entered the scene to reassure everyone that it is impossible to make any mistakes, because they are here now to see that we don't. It's a new kind of legitimization and valorization. What it leaves out of the mix is that in the late 19th century the audience had to choose among many novelties. We think of academic art as always having been old hat, but it too was new. It looked like nothing that had ever come before. This is not properly understood. To the crowds at the Salon, Manet's work looked like the art of earlier ages done poorly. He looked like a ham-fisted amateur. Here were the academicians—all these easy, beautiful novelties—and here was Manet doing something appalling but deeply new. Revisiting the past, reinventing it, giving painting a future. This is misunderstood because art historians are so busy tearing down the canon. They are making respectable again the academic art of the 19th century because, of course, it fits in with the academic art of the 20th century, which they champion.

CR: All of which is not art but illustration. Or documentary imagery. These distinctions are clearer in our time than they were in the 19th century because illustrational, documentary inclinations have become remarkably frank. Or simply shameless, now that there is so much photography on view in the galleries. Distracted by imagery that requires little more than an identification of subject matter, much of the audience can't read pictorial composition. They don't get brushwork. You were talking about the painted mark, how it can never be entirely foreseen. True artists confront themselves with the unexpected. Viewers are under a similar obligation—to respond to the image in all its contingency and, so to speak, invent what they see. Many can't do that. Rendered obedient by their respect for theory, for authority, they wait to be told how to respond. But some viewers are not like that. Or so I believe.

RH: I'm living proof that there are such people because they're the ones who pay my bills. Because they buy my work. People come to my studio and say, oh, my god, we've been traipsing around Chelsea for years and we could never find anything we liked. This is it. So it can happen. But my art doesn't

lend itself to art worldliness, because it's too personal.

CR: It's not brandable. A response to a brand is a conditioned reflex. The response to art like yours is not even the opposite of that. It's a different order of experience. There's no sales pitch for art like yours.

RH: For a lot of contemporary art, you need only one sales pitch for an entire oeuvre. But if each work is unique, they have to be dealt with one by one. After my talk at the Studio School, in response to a questioner, I said that if I had one goal when I was starting out, it was to make a body of work that couldn't be summed up in words, that would resist words.

CR: Poems, too, should resist words. At any rate, my intention is always to write poems that leave language in the dust. This may seem ungrateful or just nonsensical, in light of the obvious point that poems are made of words. Of language. Why, a sensible person might ask, should there be language that resists language? Because language unresisted reduces us to obedience. If we're not in charge of language, doing with it what we please, it is in charge of us. So we have a responsibility to do irresponsible things with words, and we have many choices. We can tell jokes or silly stories, spout gibberish or non sequiturs. Or compose poems. Poetry is the kind of writing that guides us into imaginary places, as into a dark wood or along a grand but dubious boulevard to an even more dubious metropolis. These are make-believe destinations, where all meaning is up for grabs. Not that I'm against plain speaking. We couldn't manage without it, though many manage well enough without poetry. But no culture has done so. Every culture prizes poetry, having first seen the difference between fictive language and the kind that refers to things in a practical, more or less verifiable way. In one of our earlier conversations, you mentioned a parallel distinction in the realm of the visual. I mean the distinction between painting and photography. Between pictorial space and the space of documentary images. As you said, everyone loves photojournalism. Old issues of *Life* magazine will never lose their fascination. But nonfiction, visual or verbal, can never do what a work of the imagination does, which is to create a thoroughgoing crisis of meaning—one of those desperate and invigorating situations that invite us to come fully alive to ourselves.

RH: Yes. And fully alive to others, to their best and deepest selves. Know the consolation of dialogue, of mutuality. Feel our shared humanity. And our freedom.