

CARL HOLTY

LEGACY
TO AMERICAN ABSTRACTION



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TAYLOR | GRAHAM

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Front cover:

1972

Color Theory #586

Oil on canvas on Masonite

12 x 9 inches (detail)

Its not uncommon that with age we begin to think about the idea of legacy.

As I think about the life and career of Carl Holty, I realized how few American artists were devoted to abstraction for as long a period of time. He began in the late 1920s with Hans Hofmann in Munich moving on to Paris and Cubism in the 1930s. He flirted with hard edge abstraction when he befriended Mondrian in 1940 and evolved with the evolution of abstraction through Color Field until his death in 1973.

This catalogue is a result of our great fortune to have two significant bodies work by this American Master. The catalogue is an opportunity to give a sweeping view of Holty's journey with abstraction through the decades. All artists who seriously devote themselves to this extent are part of the fabric of art history, it is just that very little of American abstraction happened without Holty as a significant and involved player, innovator, and teacher. This is where legacy comes in and we recognize his valuable contribution.

– Abby Taylor

“What then . . . are the possibilities left to the non-representative painter, what can he work with and what for since he has cut himself away from the world his detractors hold inalienable in art? Color, shape, movement, all these remain for him to deal with. He can make use of light as no artist before him could do and he can give expression to all impressions his senses perceive and register all moods his poetic soul dictates. He can explore not only the hues and tones of color but its very nature itself.

He can, in effect, create the equivalent of symphonies in color or compress all means into a deceptive simplicity that is more succinct than a Haiku poem.”

– Carl Holty

Hans Hofmann

Carl Holty was born in Germany to American parents and grew up in Milwaukee. He returned to Munich in 1928 to study with Hans Hofmann and credits the Master as the most important influence on his own work and spent his career thinking about, dissecting, and practicing Hofmann's teachings.

About Hofmann, Holty writes "No one had ever talked to me about conceptual drawing, about knowing what I'm looking at from the point of view of my tactile knowledge as well as my visual knowledge. Hofmann did. And the world opened up just like that."

Cubism

Around 1928 Holty's participation in French painting circles increased his interest in Cubism and specifically in the work of Juan Gris, however his friend Joan Miro was critical of this direction saying that it was "interesting and serious, but also over-problematic and over-conscientious."

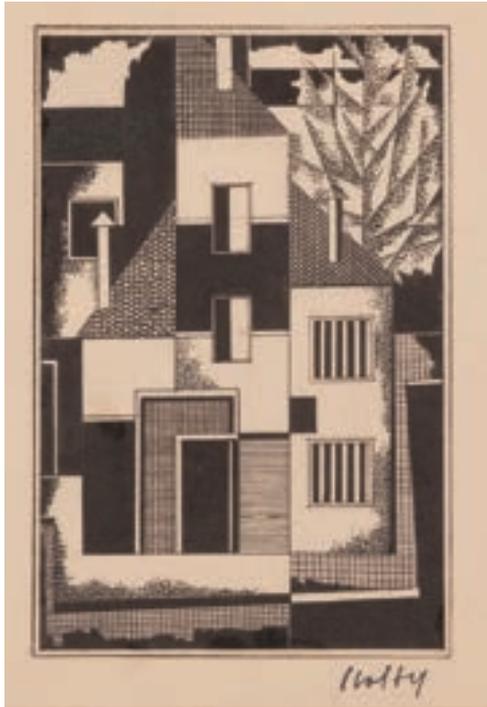
c. 1930s

Cubist Figure

Ink on paper

13 5/8 x 10 1/4 inches





1930

Paris House #1

Ink on paper

6 3/4 x 4 1/2 inches

Ink Drawings, Paris 1930

In 1930 Holty moved to Paris spending a great deal of time with Juan Gris. Holty recognized a pedantic quality to his work but this appealed to his own proclivity for simplicity and clarity.

1930

Paris Hotel

Ink on paper

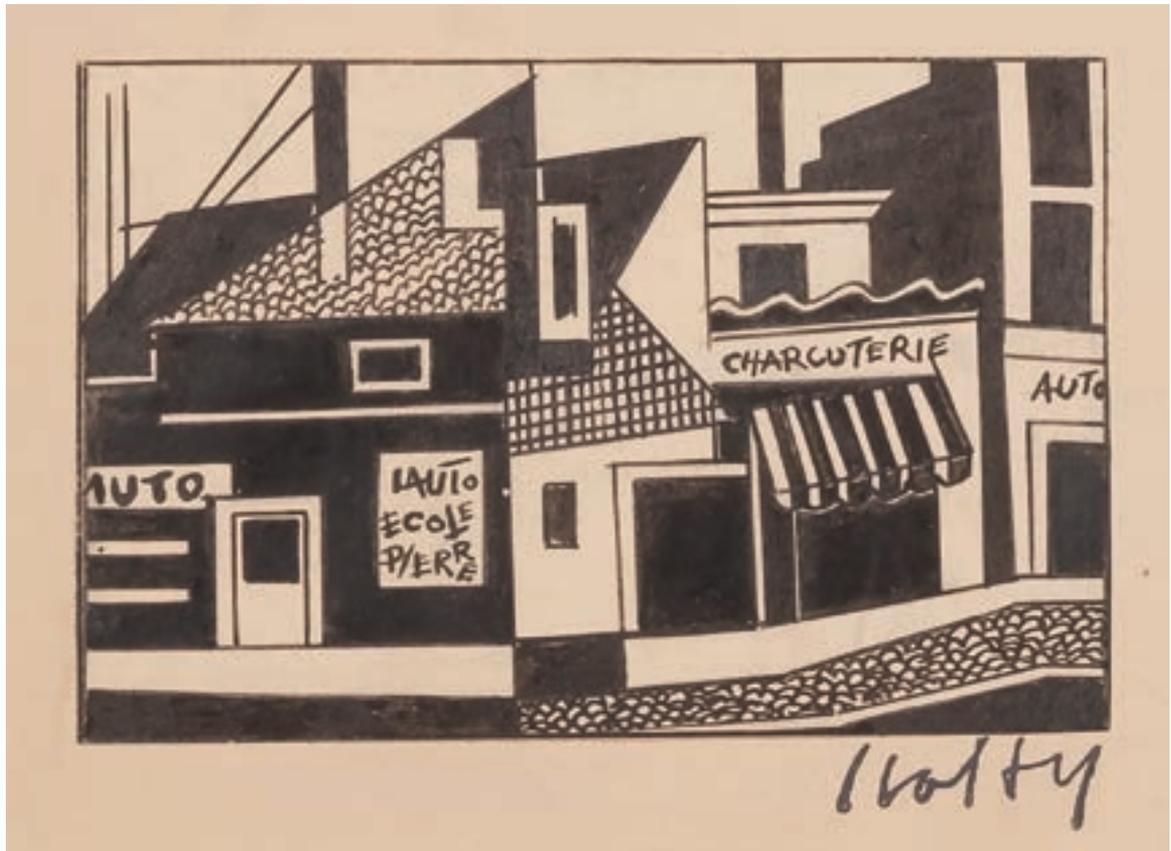
5 1/2 x 4 3/8 inches

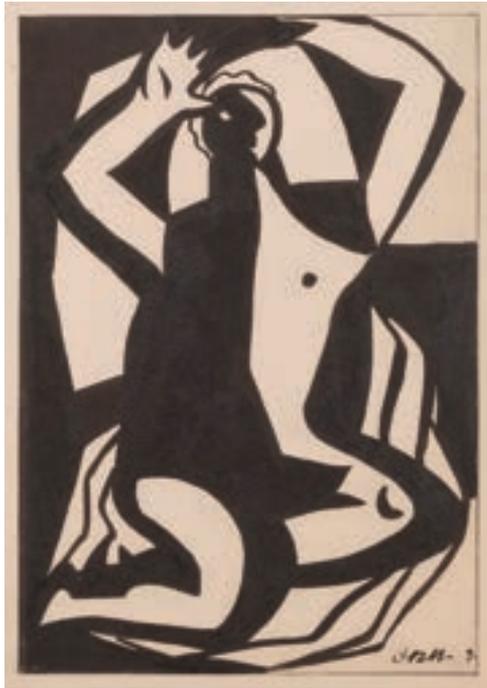
1930

Paris Charcuterie

Ink on paper

2 1/2 x 3 5/8 inches





1931

Dessins, Seated Woman

Ink on paper
8 1/4 x 5 3/4

Figure, Cubism

It is said that Holty only brought curves into his Cubism for figures and that he felt those should be at a minimum.

1931

Paris, Four Figures

Ink on paper
5 1/4 x 4 inches

160149





1933

Angels

Graphite on paper
15 x 10 inches

Abstraction-Création Group

In Paris in the early 1930s, the Abstraction-Création group's interest in Synthetic Cubism was a strong influence on Holty's work.

1933

Seated Figure I

Charcoal, pencil on paper
9 3/4 x 6 5/8 inches

1933

Seated Figure II

Charcoal, pencil on paper
9 1/4 x 5 3/8 inches





1933

Lady by the Sea XIV

Graphite on paper
9 7/8 x 12 1/2 inches

Lady by the Sea

In 1933 Holty drew an in-depth series of line drawings, nearly two dozen iterations, all variations on the figure of a "Lady by the Sea." Perhaps he had been influenced by Monet and was doing his own experiment with seeing how many different approaches he could take to the same subject.

1933

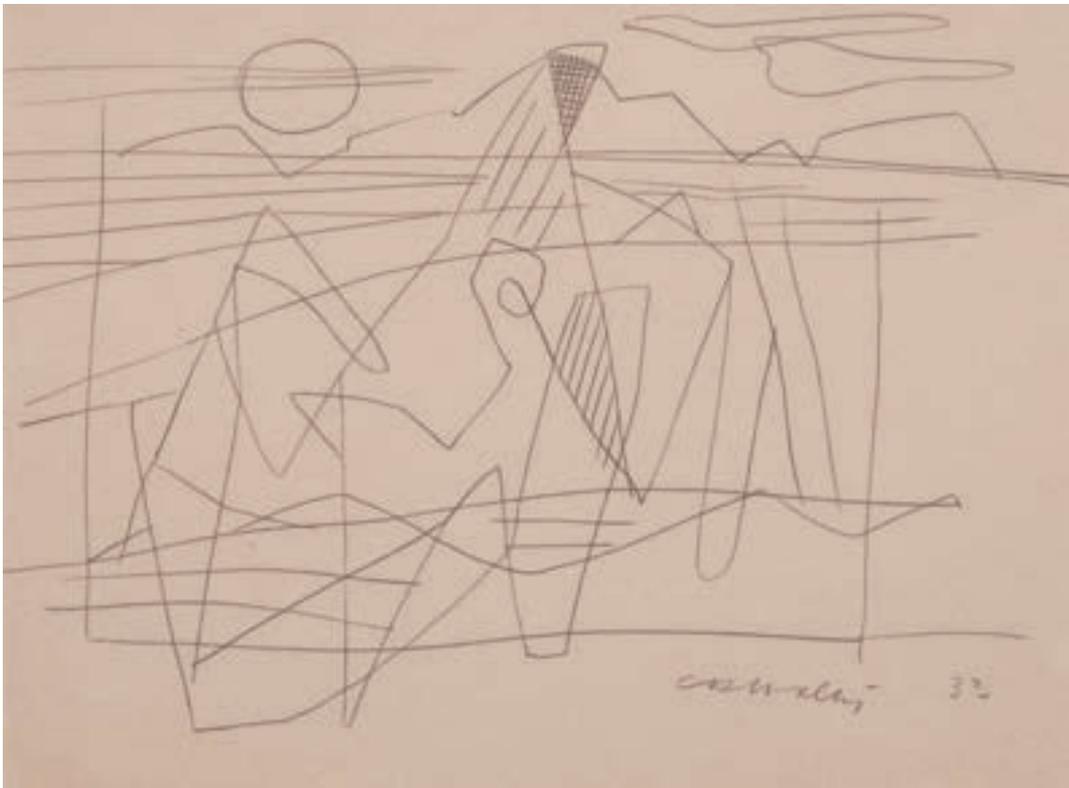
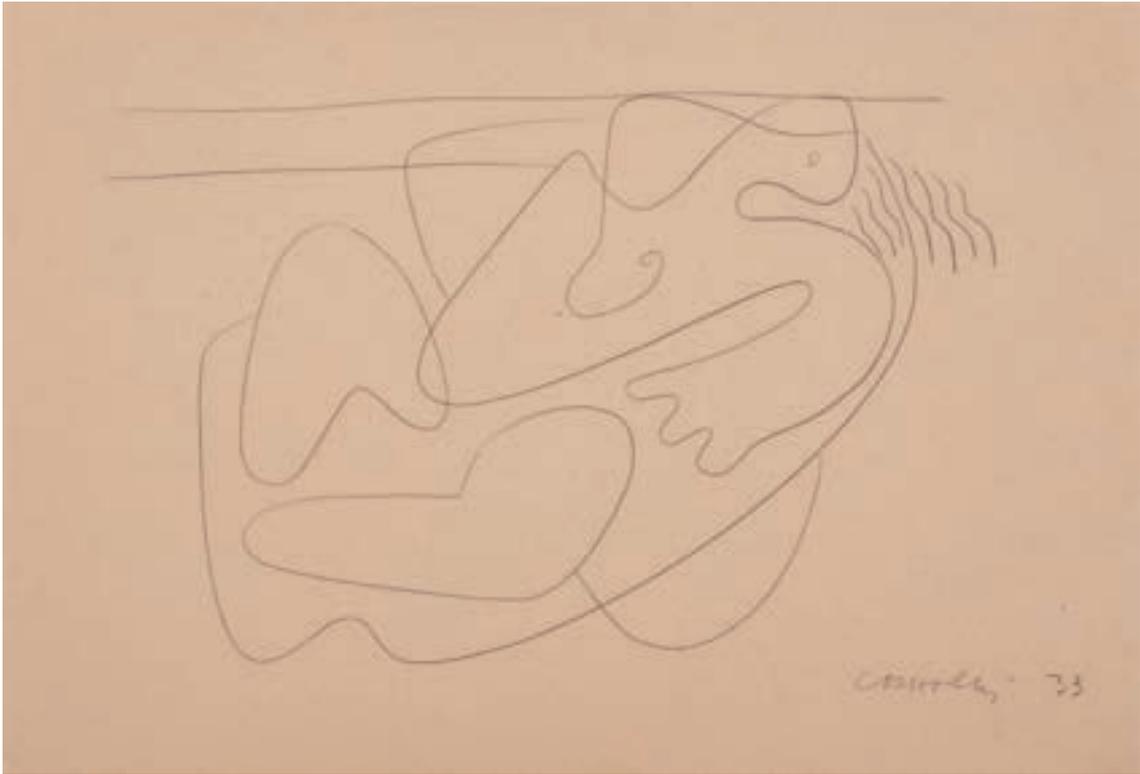
Lady by the Sea XVII

Graphite on paper
10 1/4 x 14 3/4 inches

1933

Lady by the Sea XIX

Graphite on paper
9 1/4 x 12 1/4 inches





1935

Forms

Sketchbook #4

Ink on paper

9 x 12 inches

Paris

From 1930 to 1935 Holty lived in Paris and exhibited with the Abstraction-Création Group, the only American member aside from Alexander Calder. The French artists included Theo Van Doesburg, Jean Helion, Albert Gleizes and Jean Arp.

In Paris, Holty found the idea of having few possessions appealing. He writes "Most of my clothes were on me, the other suit and the overcoat were in the bathroom... That, I admit, was the farthest I ever went toward the oath of poverty, but in this respect, a disdain for owning things, I certainly followed Edvard Munch's idea and example"

1935

Horses I

Sketchbook #4

Ink on paper

9 x 12 inches

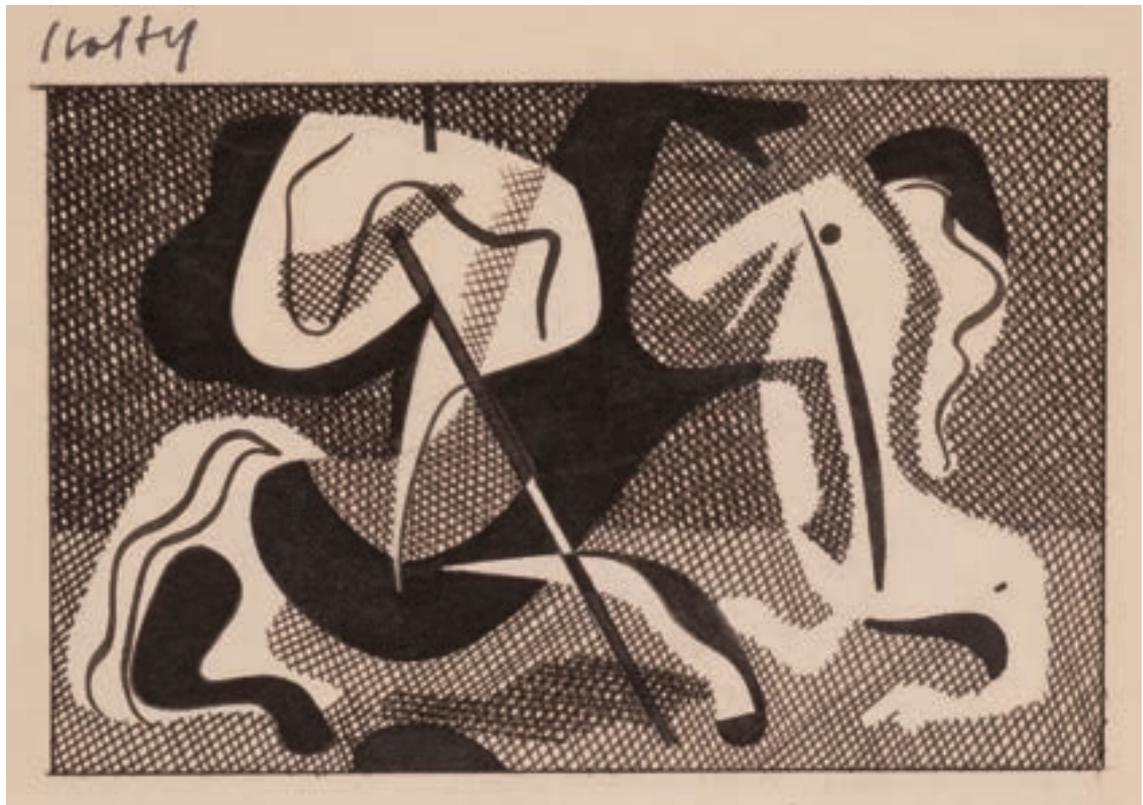
1935

Horses II

Sketchbook #4

Ink on paper

9 x 12 inches





circa 1935

Forms and Figures #2

Sketchbook #3

Graphite on paper

8 3/4 x 11 3/4 inches

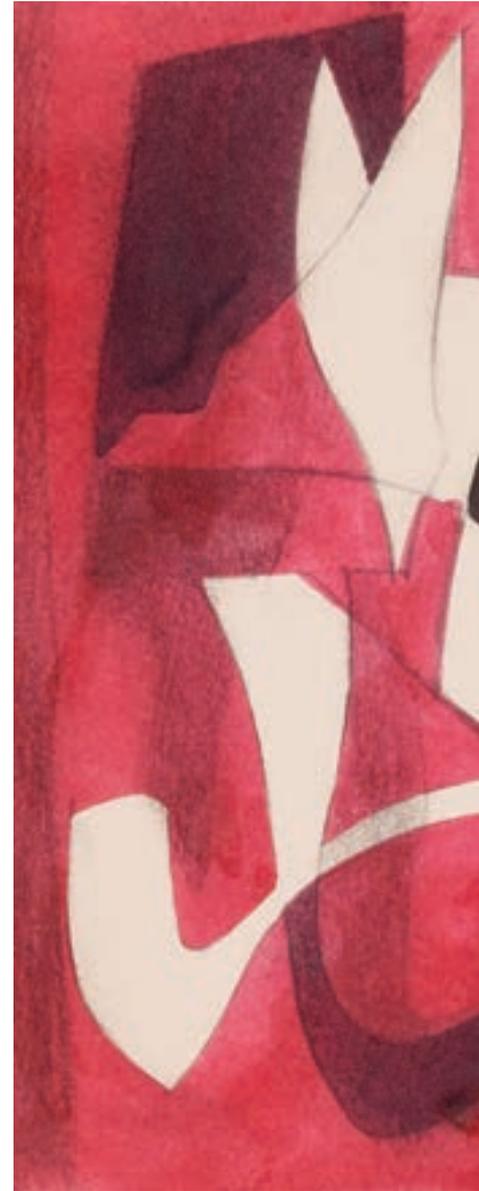
circa 1935

Reclining Woman

Sketchbook #3

Ink, watercolor, graphite on paper

8 3/4 x 11 3/4 inches







circa 1935

Line Drawing #3

Sketchbook #2

Graphite on paper

5 5/8 x 8 7/8 inches

Structural

Holty was interested in the formal aspects of Cubism and all of the related approaches to abstracting the form and for the next twenty years experimented with subtle variations.

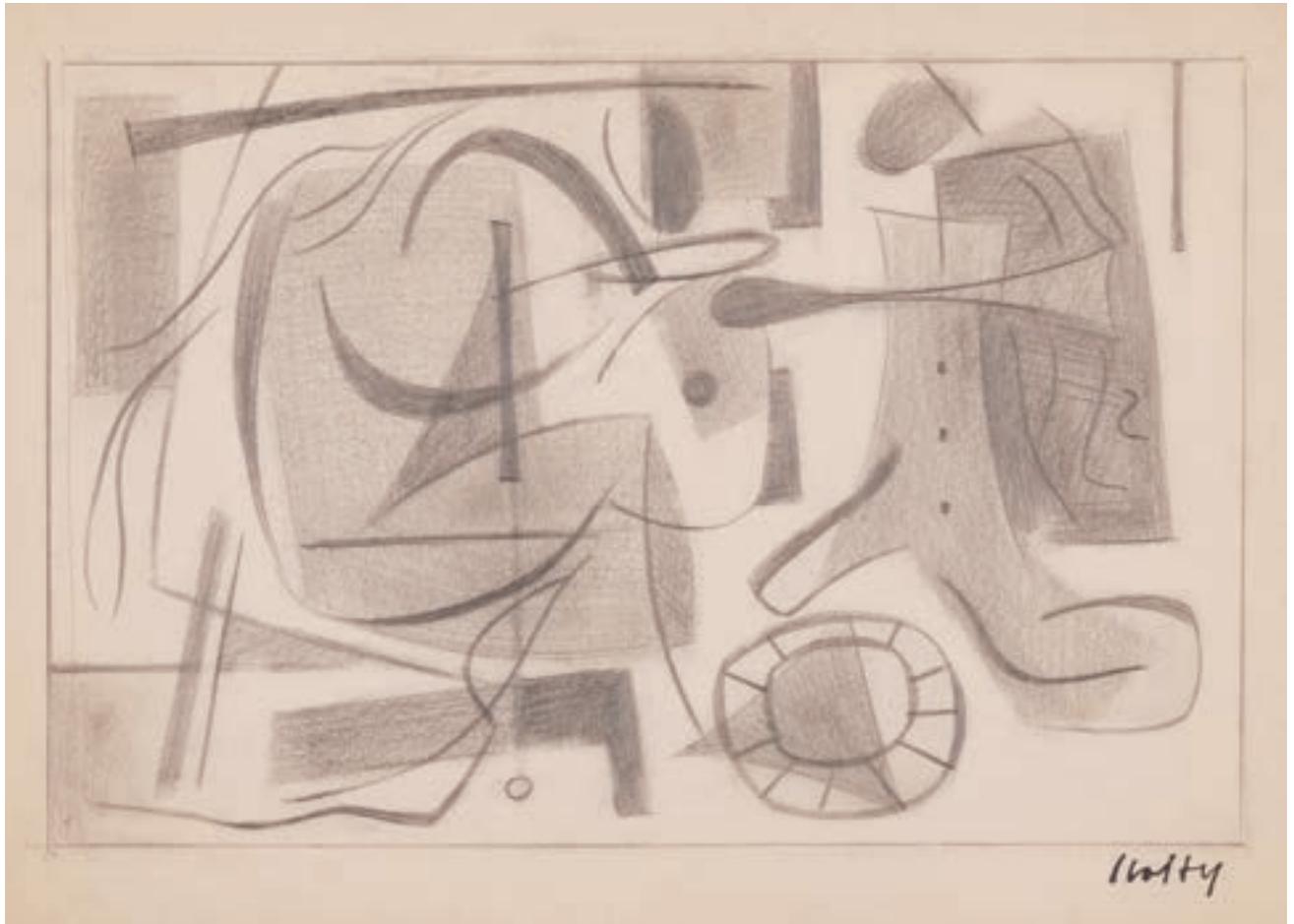
circa 1935

Forms and Figures #3

Sketchbook #3

Graphite on paper

8 3/4 x 11 3/4 inches





circa 1930s

Figure Composition #1

Gouache on paper
12 x 18 inches

George L.K. Morris

The American Abstract Artist group, a cooperative exhibiting society similar to that of the Abstraction-Création group in France, formed in New York in 1936. Created to promote and foster a greater understanding and appreciation of abstract art, its founding members included Carl Holty, Josef Albers, Ilya Bolotowsky, George L. K. Morris, Ibram Lassaw among others.

Of Holty's importance to the Abstract Artists Group, George L. K. Morris said "It soon became apparent that Holty provided just what the organization needed. Although complete as an artist, he was by nature pragmatic – he had no patience with nebulous comments."

1936

Nude III

Graphite on paper
7 1/8 x 5 1/2 inches

1936

Women at Table

Graphite on paper
5 1/4 x 7 1/2 inches



Piet Mondrian

In 1940 Holty formed a close friendship with Piet Mondrian who convinced him to move to a pure form of non-objective abstraction. Holty was seeking to free himself from problems he had with Cubism and underwent a sophisticated struggle and transformation emerging as a critic of the decorative direction of late Cubist works by Pablo Picasso, Fernand Léger and Stuart Davis.

1941

Interior

Oil on panel

59 1/2 x 22 1/2 inches

Exhibited: Milwaukee Art Center, WI., 1980-81





circa 1942

Ink Composition #4

Ink on paper
6 1/2 x 5 inches

Working Toward "Of War"

Of War, 1942, in the permanent collection of the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA., is a brilliant and important painting by Holty. Executed at the onset of WWII, Holty imbues the surface with angst and turmoil.

Ink Composition #4 and *Abstract Composition #5* were likely executed in preparation for this important canvas.

circa 1942

Abstract Composition #5

Watercolor, graphite on paper
7 3/4 x 5 3/4 inches





1940

Horse V

Graphite on paper
9 x 6 inches

Biomorphism

Beginning as early as 1936, Holty began to embrace amoeboid forms associated with Biomorphism, a movement largely identified with Joan Miro whose shapes are organic and float within the pictorial space.

circa 1945

Escapades #348

Gouache on paper
18 x 12 inches





circa 1942

Abstract Composition #3

Ink on paper

6 1/4 x 5 inches

In the 1940's Holty writes "We will struggle long before we arrive at a complete new imagery ... and our work will perhaps have a fanciful character for a long while, but its indistinctness will be like the shadows on the wall from Plato's fire. The images that cast the shadows cannot yet be discerned."

1945

Seated Figure

Watercolor, graphite on paper

11 3/4 x 9 inches





1950

Mosaic #1003

Gouache on board
16 x 22 inches

Mosaics

In 1948 Holty began a two-year residency at the University of Georgia secured by his friend Howard Thomas, himself a teacher at the University. Holty adopted a new style which came about when he overpainted certain canvases with white. He discovered "...left over spots assumed a significance they did not have in the original picture. Some glowed brilliantly, others became nothing much at all, rather colorless fragments of paint."

1948-49

Untitled

Oil on canvas
20 x 24 inches

Holty writes "The space as we conceive it today is the surface itself: - the maximum space - the whole surface ... A piece of white collar-board with a hole punched accidentally in it gives me as real a feeling of discomfort mentally as to see a man minus a hand ... Modern painting wants to be true and beautiful only as optical truth."





1949

Centaur #368

Watercolor on paper
12 x 9 inches

Centaur

In the 1950's a form of lyricism creeps into Holty's style pinned by foundations of cubism. A unifying element in Holty's work is that he never gave up entirely on certain themes and theories which interested him, adopting a way to innovate around them. Among his favorite subjects were Cavaliers, horses, centaurs and other mythological beings.

1949-51

Centaur #371

Watercolor on paper
12 x 9 inches

1951

Centaur with Bow and Arrow

Watercolor on paper
9 1/2 x 8 inches



Transitional Work

Holty's years teaching at Georgia University were productive. The body of work produced had a distinct look and often a freshness of palette.

circa 1950s

Federation

Oil on canvas
16 x 24 inches







circa 1950

Color Theory #1036

Lavender, Green, Blue, Orange, White

Oil on canvas on Masonite

12 x 9 inches

Small Canvases

Holty writes "I make countless sketches (9x12) and use them as models for the large canvases, not as compositions to be enlarged ... In recent years I have painted numerous series of them from scratch as studies for more ambitious work. Should anyone care to know why the largest dimension of the panels is 12" ... [this dimension] will establish the maximum size that can be taken in by the average eye without a shift of focus...they often appear to partake of monumentality when they seem to be large pictures seen through the reverse end of a telescope."

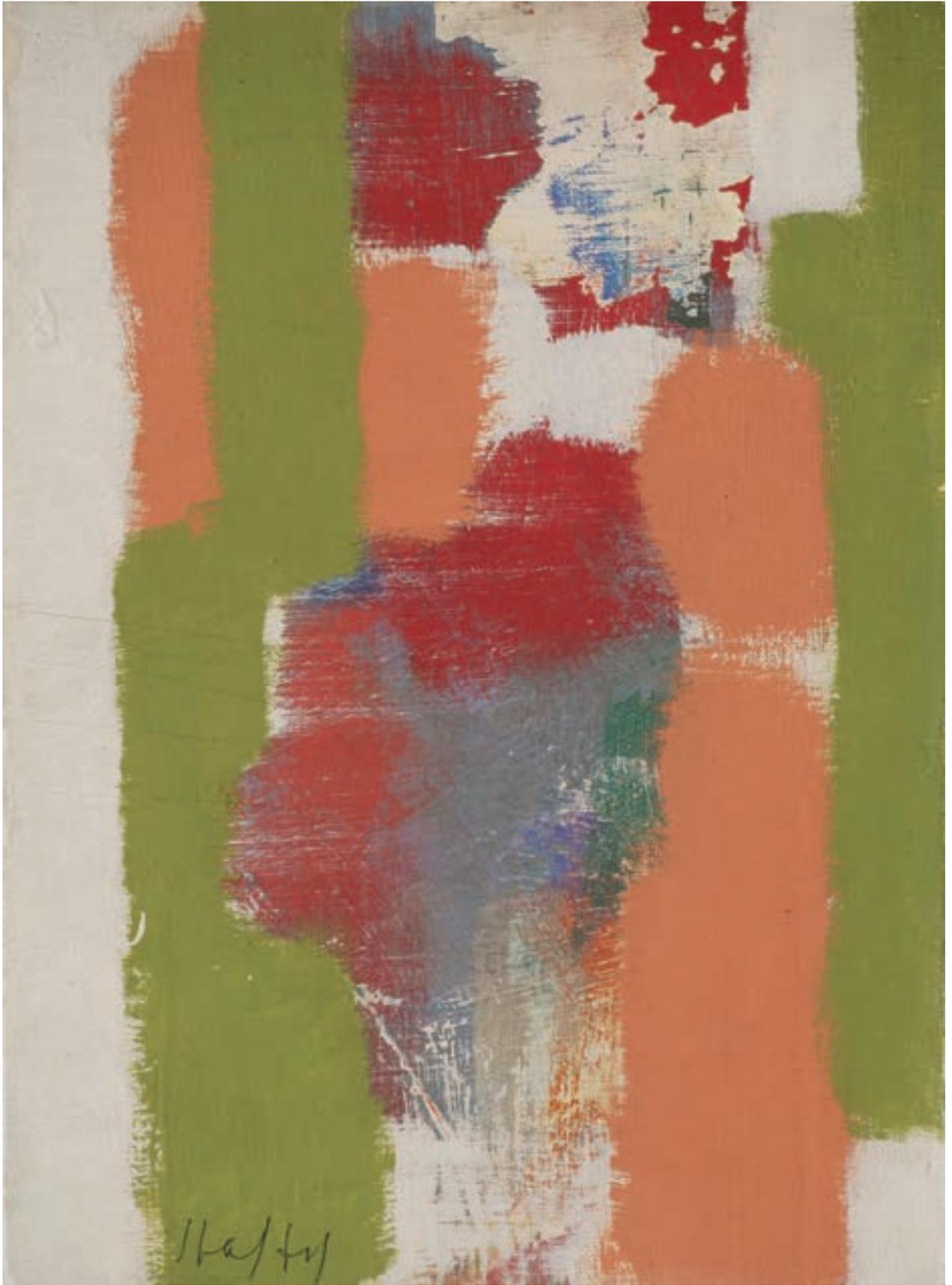
circa 1950

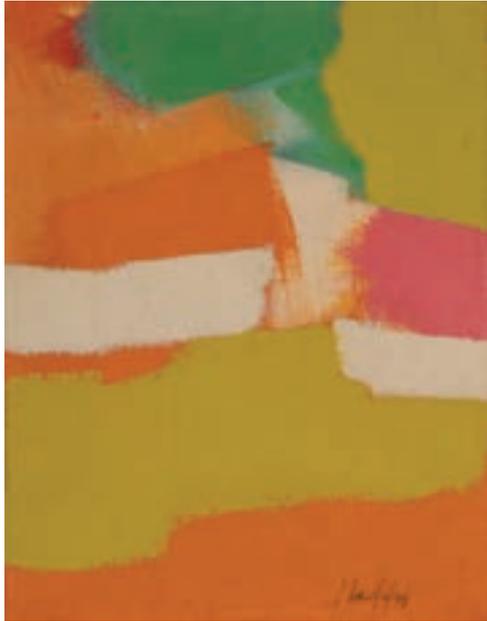
Color Theory #1031

White, Pink, Green, Red, Green, Blue

Oil on canvas on Masonite

12 x 8 1/2 inches





circa 1950

Color Theory #1037

Orange, Yellow, White, Pink, Green

Oil on canvas on Masonite

11 1/2 x 9 inches

circa 1950

Color Theory #1043

Yellow, Orange, White, Green

Oil on canvas on Masonite

12 x 9 inches





circa 1951

Study #372

Watercolor on paper
12 x 9 inches

1951

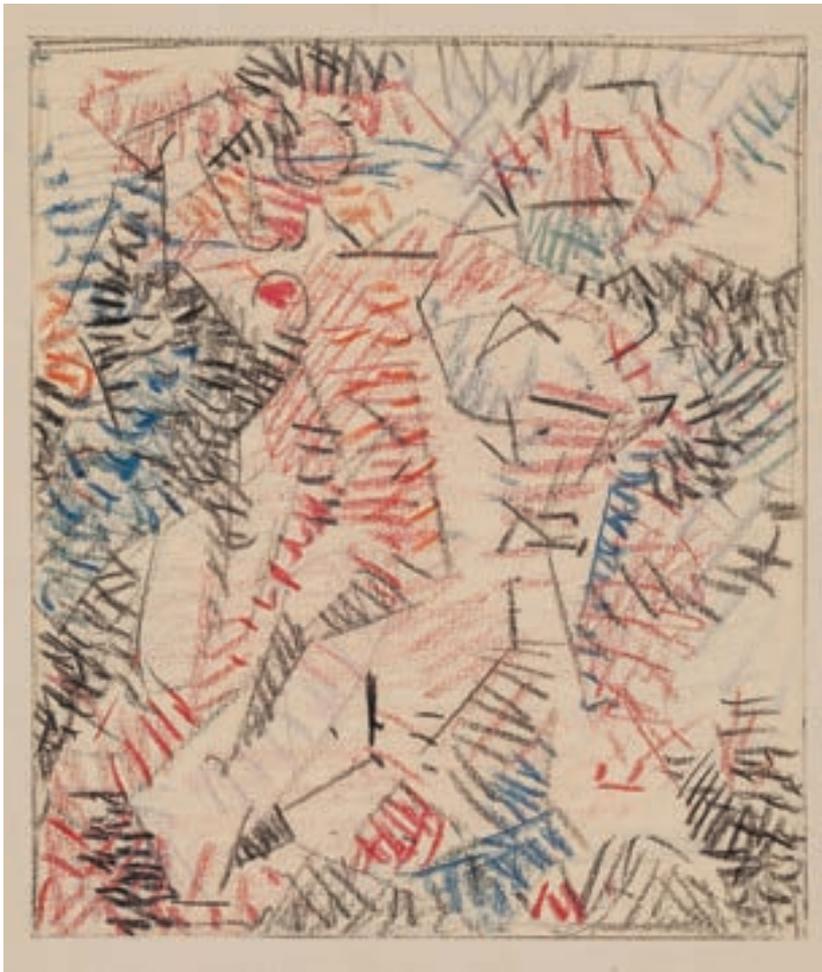
Saint Martin and the Beggar

Colored pencil on paper
10 3/4 x 8 1/4 inches

1951

Europa and the Bull

Pastel on paper
10 x 8 1/2 inches





circa 1950

Color Theory #1039

Blue, Green, White, Orange, Pink

Oil on canvas on Masonite

12 x 9 inches

1952

Study for Medieval Fresco

Oil on canvas

70 x 56 inches





1954

Untitled #162

Oil on canvas

30 x 36 inches

circa 1955

Ascending

Oil on canvas

52 x 38 inches





1955

Color Theory #546

Red, White, Blue, Green
Oil on canvas on Masonite
10 x 6 3/4 inches

1955

Color Theory #554

Red, White, Blues
Oil on canvas on Masonite
12 x 9 inches





Square on Top

Holty writes "I took about twenty-five of these and painted one rectangle of a color not present in them somewhere on top of what was there. I taped out this rectangle and filled it with a flat color and the results have been marvelous. Naturally that colored rectangle had to produce an immediate visual impact ... Unlike Mr. Hofmann's and Mr. Alber's rectangles this artificial void brings the surface to a new life but is definitely part of the painting."

1955

Color Theory, Green Square #469

Oil on canvas on Masonite
12 x 9 inches

circa 1955

Color Theory, Yellow Square #6

Oil on canvas on Masonite
12 1/4 x 9 1/4 inches



circa 1955

Color Theory, Red Square #10

Oil on canvas on Masonite
11 x 8 1/2 inches



1955

Color Theory #557

Red, Gray, Green, Blue
Oil on canvas on Masonite
12 x 9 inches

1957

Untitled #158

Oil on canvas
50 x 39 inches





circa 1958

Abstract

Gouache on paper
12 3/8 x 9 1/4 inches

1958

Color Theory #646

White, Yellow, Green, Blue, Red
Oil on canvas on Masonite
11 3/4 x 9 inches





1959

Color Theory #602

White, Green, Blue, Purple
Oil on canvas on Masonite
12 x 9 inches

1958

The King's Blue

Oil on canvas
52 x 36 inches





1959
Abstract
Oil on canvas
15 x 23 inches

Clement Greenberg

It was as though Holty's wrestling with imagery in art dissolved in the 1950's and he embraced the flatter aesthetic that art critic Clement Greenberg was championing. Carl Holty himself said "Every bit of background must be dissolved and brought into two-dimensional equilibrium with the forms and lines invented". The beauty of Holty's work at this time is also just their painterly beauty.

circa 1959

Untitled #1600

Oil on canvas
42 x 68 inches





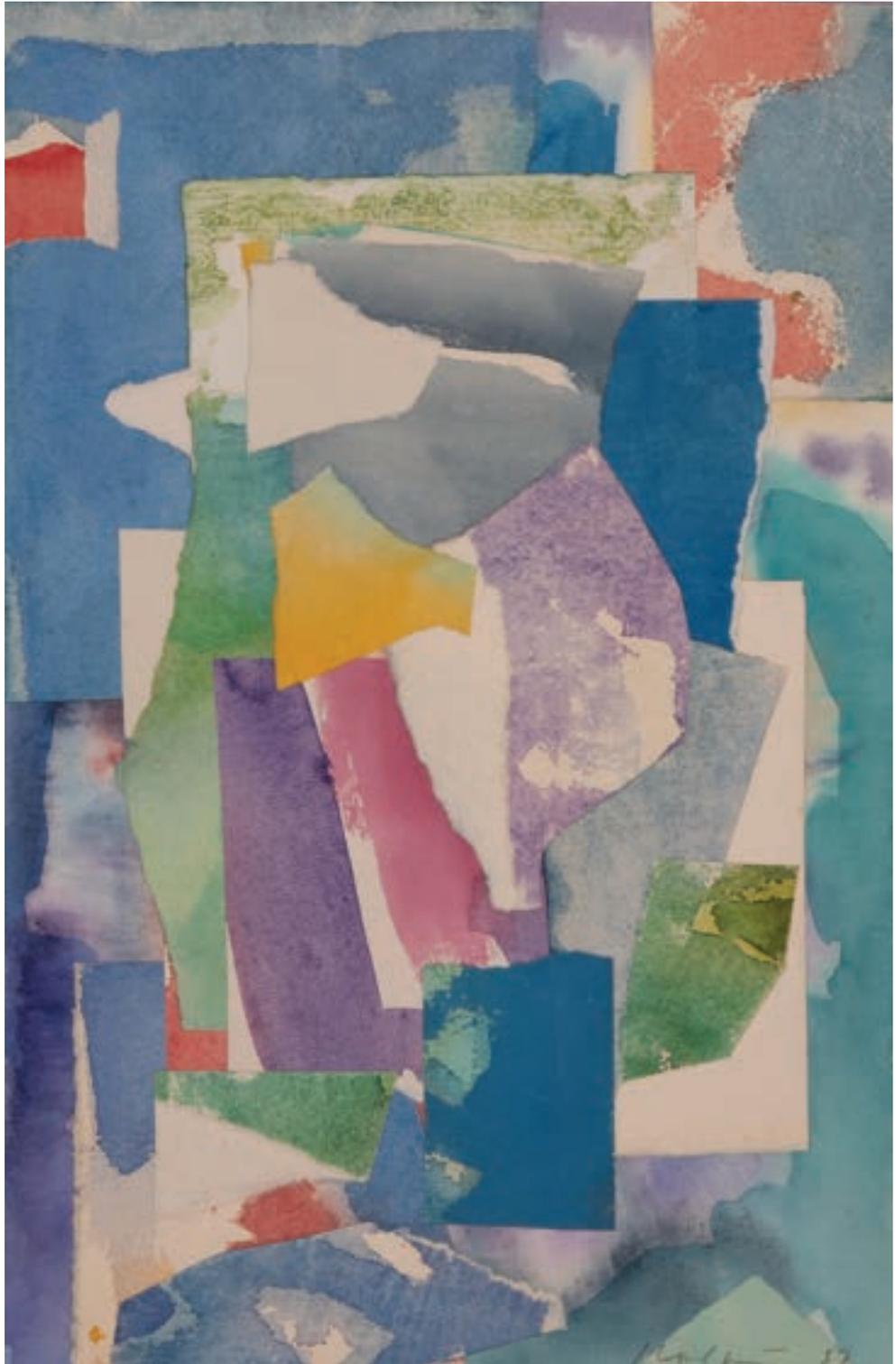
Romare Bearden

Carl Holty and Romare Bearden maintained a long and close relationship and, while their work is for the most part quite different, a clear influence can be seen on each other. With no figurative or literal content, Holty's torn paper and fragmented color constructions from the late 1950s predate Bearden's own ideas about space and composition in collage which he began to explore around 1964.

1957

Collage #394

Ink, gouache, collage on paper
14 x 9 inches





1959

Collage I

Watercolor, collage on paper
13 1/2 x 9 inches

1957

Collage #392

Ink, gouache, collage on paper
12 x 9 inches





1957

Collage #397

Ink, gouache, collage on paper
15 1/2 x 10 inches

circa 1957

Collage #395

Ink, gouache, collage on paper
14 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches



circa 1957

Color Staining #400

Watercolor on paper
14 3/4 x 10 1/2 inches

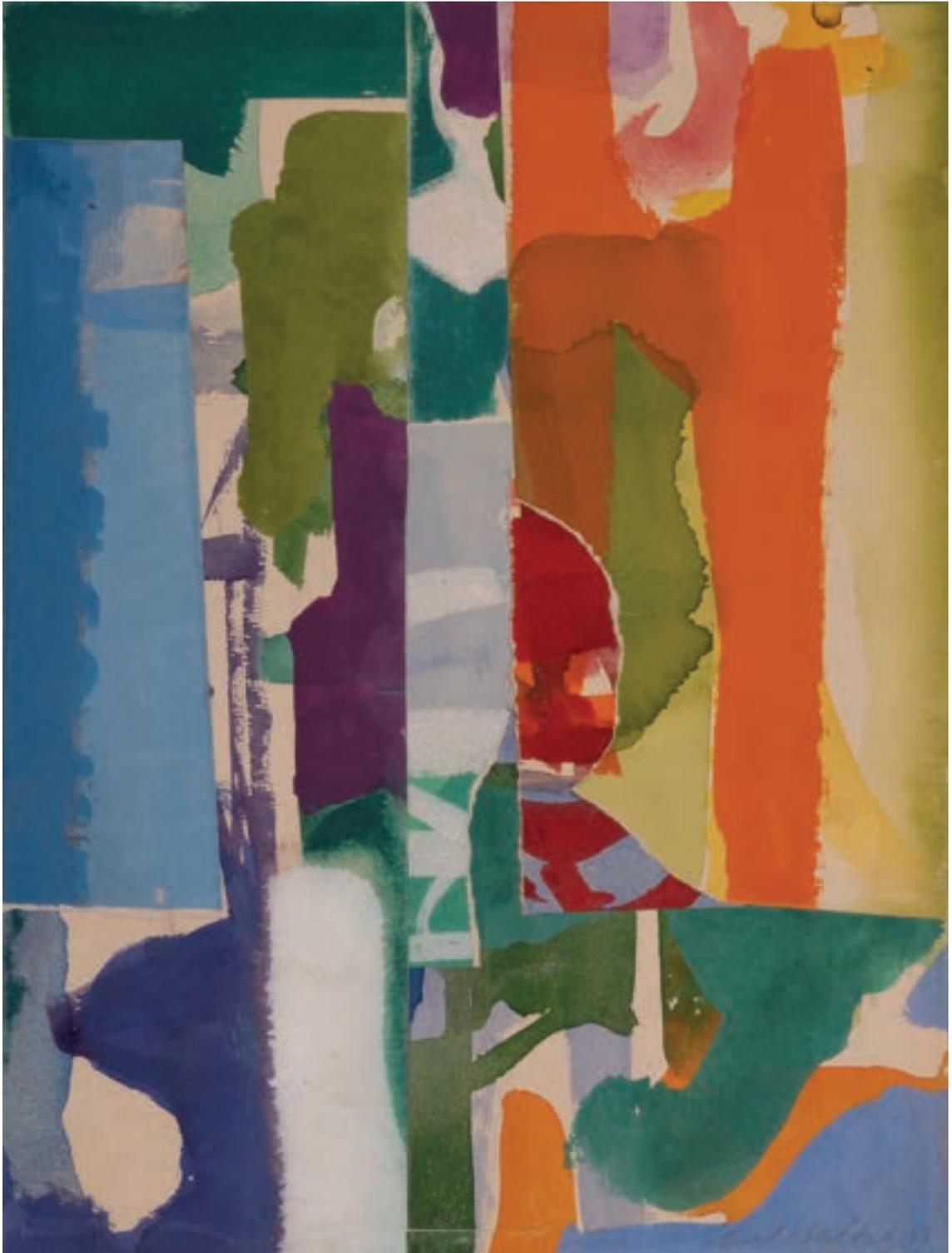
Holty writes "The only answer I could honestly give was that the colors worked by seduction and that after I had ministered to my hunger for colors, as I occasionally did, I became disenchanted with more opulent means and reverted to simple color arrangements that were satisfying and allowed me to do certain things not available to the colorist, i.e. the use of nuances and contrasts of translucencies with opacities."

1958

Collage #385

Ink, gouache, collage on paper
12 x 9 inches

Holty writes "The vertical heat of the sun. The colors of the rainbow but hardened and unpretty"

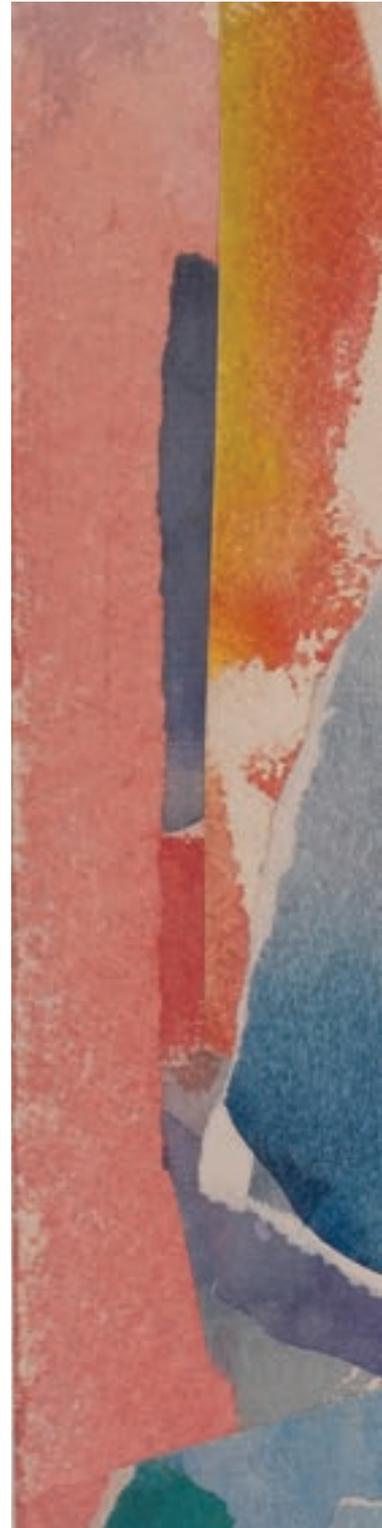


1958

Collage #384

Ink, gouache, collage on paper
12 1/2 x 9 inches (detail)

Holty writes "Forms of green and blue invade a reddish field with increasing urgency. There appear to be more of those forms that begin at the lower left and around each other upward as plants or flowers in the spring might be left to do"







circa 1958

Collage #396

Ink, gouache, collage on paper
15 1/2 x 10 inches

1958

Collage #383

Ink, gouache, collage on paper
15 1/2 x 10 1/4 inches

Holty writes "The blue grillwork on a bridge structure i.e. a structure inspired by a bridge becomes unreal through the interference of the alien reds."





1958

Collage #388

Ink, gouache, collage on paper
12 x 9 inches

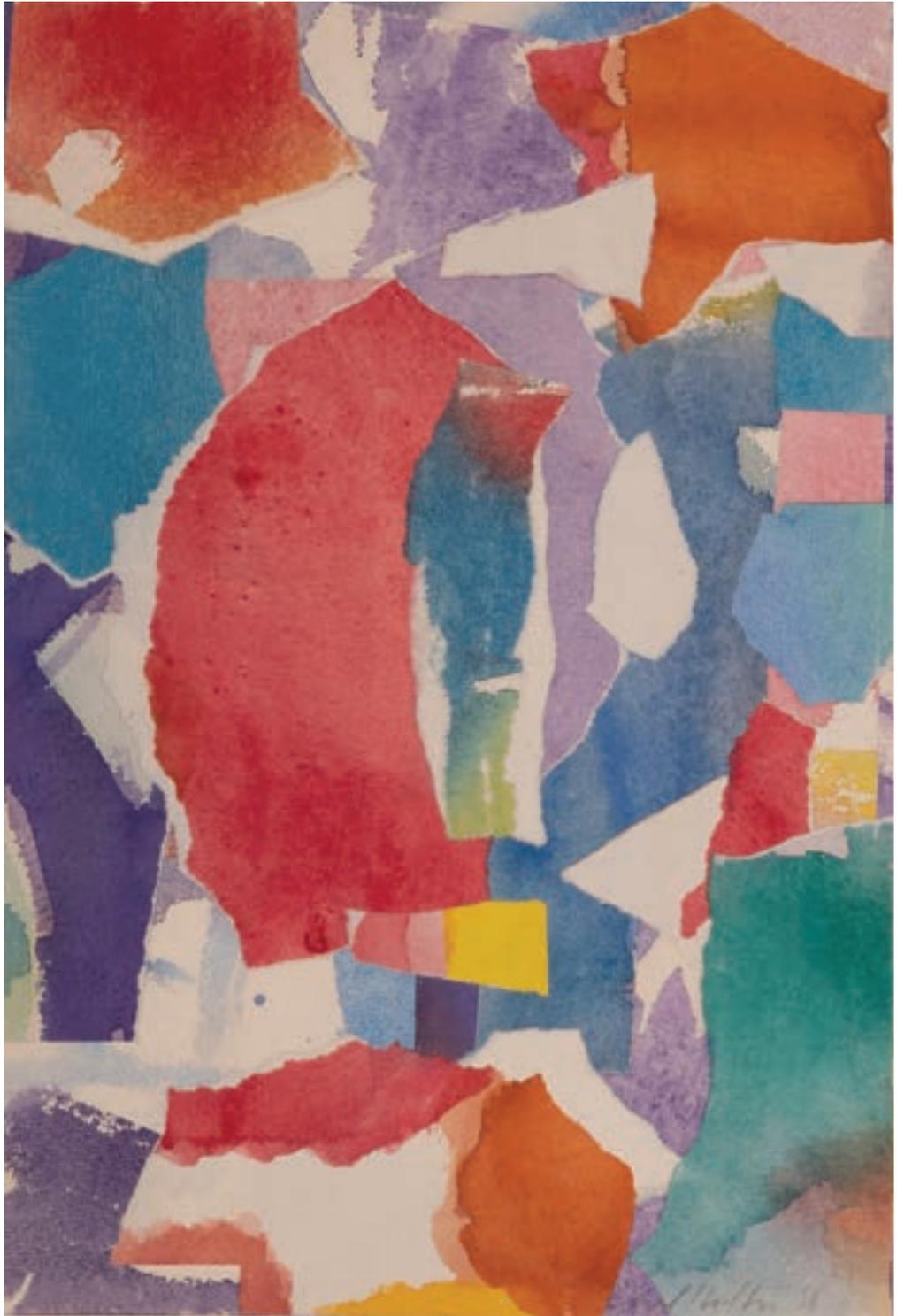
Holty writes "Objects that heartily emerge from the passing of reds blues and yellows over a white field."

1958

Collage #389

Ink, gouache, collage on paper
13 1/2 x 9 inches

Holty writes "A waterfall that turned red. The natural colors of the original vision is altered violently by the covering over with heavy red and orange"





1959

Color Theory #616

Red, White, Blue

Oil on canvas on Masonite

9 x 12 inches

1960

Green Ice

Oil on canvas

56 x 48 inches





1961

Flowering

Oil on canvas
38 x 36 inches

Alfred Hitchcock

Desolate prairies and monumental vistas featured in Alfred Hitchcock's 1959 spy thriller *North by Northwest* were Holty's inspiration for the dramatic composition in this canvas from 1960.

1960

North by Northwest

Oil on canvas
66 x 50 inches





1962

Twelfth Night Blue

Oil on canvas
70 x 56 inches

Conceived of as a diptych, the titles of *these two paintings* suggest Holty is referencing Shakespeare's Twelfth Night characters Viola and Sebastian, twin siblings separated by a shipwreck.



1962
Twelfth Night Red
Oil on canvas
70 x 56 inches



circa 1962

Shale Shiefer

Oil on canvas

41 x 31 inches

In the 1960s Holty had reached a level of harmony in his own work freely exploring formal aspects of earlier theories while adopting new modes of expression. It was a satisfying period where he achieved monumentality and strength from nature and pursued larger ideals surrounding the senses, feelings, memories, and space. Holty, the art intellectual, had arrived at his own mountain top.

early 1960s

Monument

Oil on canvas

60 x 46 inches





circa 1963

Untitled #161

Oil on canvas

48 x 35 inches

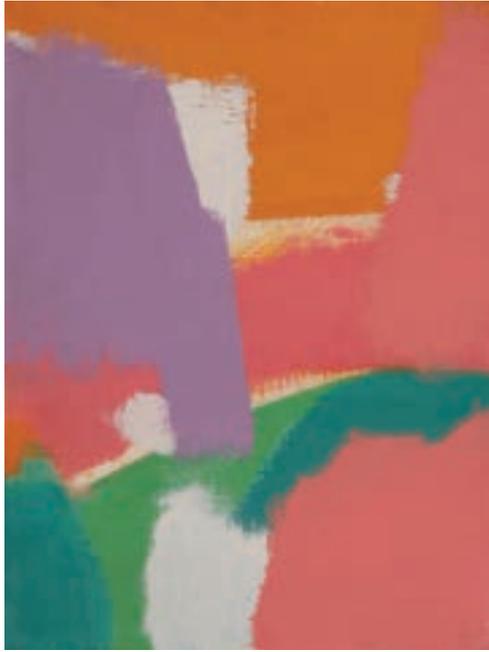
1963

Moving Red

Oil on canvas

60 x 46 inches





1963

Color Theory #650

Purple, Orange, Green, Pink, White

Oil on canvas on Masonite

11 3/4 x 8 7/8 inches

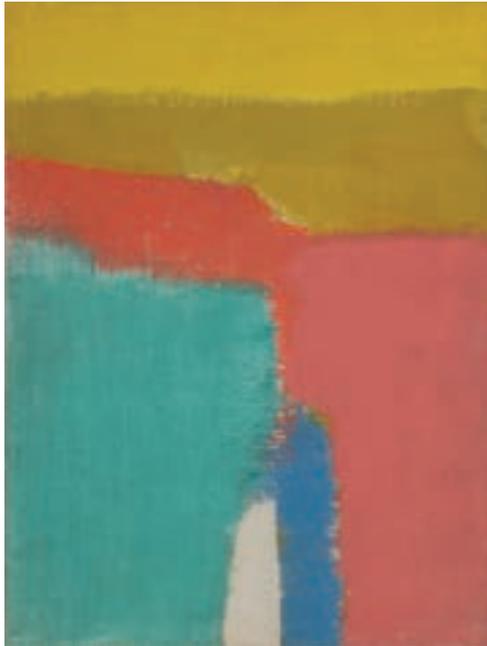
1963-64

Untitled

Oil on canvas

76 x 60 inches





1963

Color Theory #656

Yellow, Pink, Green, Blue, White

Oil on canvas on Masonite

12 x 9 inches

Rothko

Upon hearing his dealer Mr. Graham say that his work was too much like Mark Rothko's and Clyfford Still's, Holty replied "In Rothko's work the "space" is purely phenomenal. One can't very well use large rectangular areas of harmonized color without attaining a sort of "wall" space (architectural). I don't believe he even cares about the space I seek to attain. In his earlier work, where there was some resemblance to my more lyrical canvases, and his

were very good, the space was very approximate and never holds up to scrutiny. Still's work is based on the imitation of natural elements of area (trees, mountains, caves) and is hardly abstract at all."

1964

Vise

Oil on canvas

60 1/4 x 48 1/2 inches





1962

Encounter

Oil on canvas
70 x 56 inches



1964

Mirage

Oil on canvas
60 x 54 inches



1964

Untitled: Green, Red

Oil on canvas
32 x 18 inches

1964

Gray and Rose

Oil on canvas
60 x 54 inches

Many of Holty's later compositions exhibit strong diagonal gestures derived from his observance of tree forms in nature.





1963

Color Theory #654

Red, Blue, Green, Yellow, Orange

Oil on canvas on Masonite

11 1/2 x 7 3/4 inches

early 1960s

Pink Sand

Oil on canvas

48 x 36 inches



Technique

Romare Bearden described Holty's technique of painting as placing a canvas in a horizontal position and applying washes of diluted paint with broad huge brushes, walking around the canvas to check and get perspective on his composition. Bearden explains that "Holty's composition depended on an interpretation of color planes from each side of the canvas, as opposed to the usual method of planes moving in varying approximations of depth from a frontal position."

1967

Diagonal

Oil on canvas

60 x 48 1/2 inches (detail)







1966

Russet

Oil on canvas
66 x 52 inches



circa 1965

Forest Glade

Oil on canvas
70 x 62 inches



1970

Color Theory #560

Orange, Green, Blue, Red

Oil on canvas

12 x 9 inches

1969

Red, Gray #5

Oil on canvas

60 x 50 inches





1970

Untitled #58

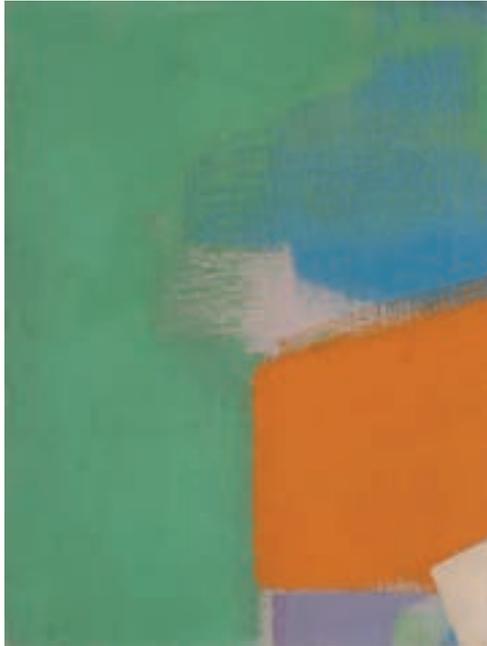
Red, Purple, White
Oil on canvas
40 x 30 inches

circa 1970

Blue, Green, Purple

Oil on canvas
76 x 62 inches





1972

Color Theory #567

Orange, Green, Blue, Lavender

Oil on canvas on Masonite

12 x 9 inches

1971

Light Gray, Yellow

Oil on canvas

66 x 55 inches

Holty writes "The big and seemingly eternal problem is the constant re-structuring of paintings that I want to appear not to be structured at all, that I want to have appear as color poems."





1970

Color Theory #565

Green, White, Orange

Oil on canvas on Masonite

11 3/4 x 9 inches

1971

Rose, Yellow

Oil on canvas

60 x 48 inches





circa 1970s

Color Study #957

Watercolor on paper
8 1/8 x 6 1/2 inches

Transparency

Holty writes "The light I have in mind is created through the relationships in equilibrium of tones, tints and colors and whether pigmentally translucent or not has the quality of transparency and lightness at all times."

1972

Pink, Gray

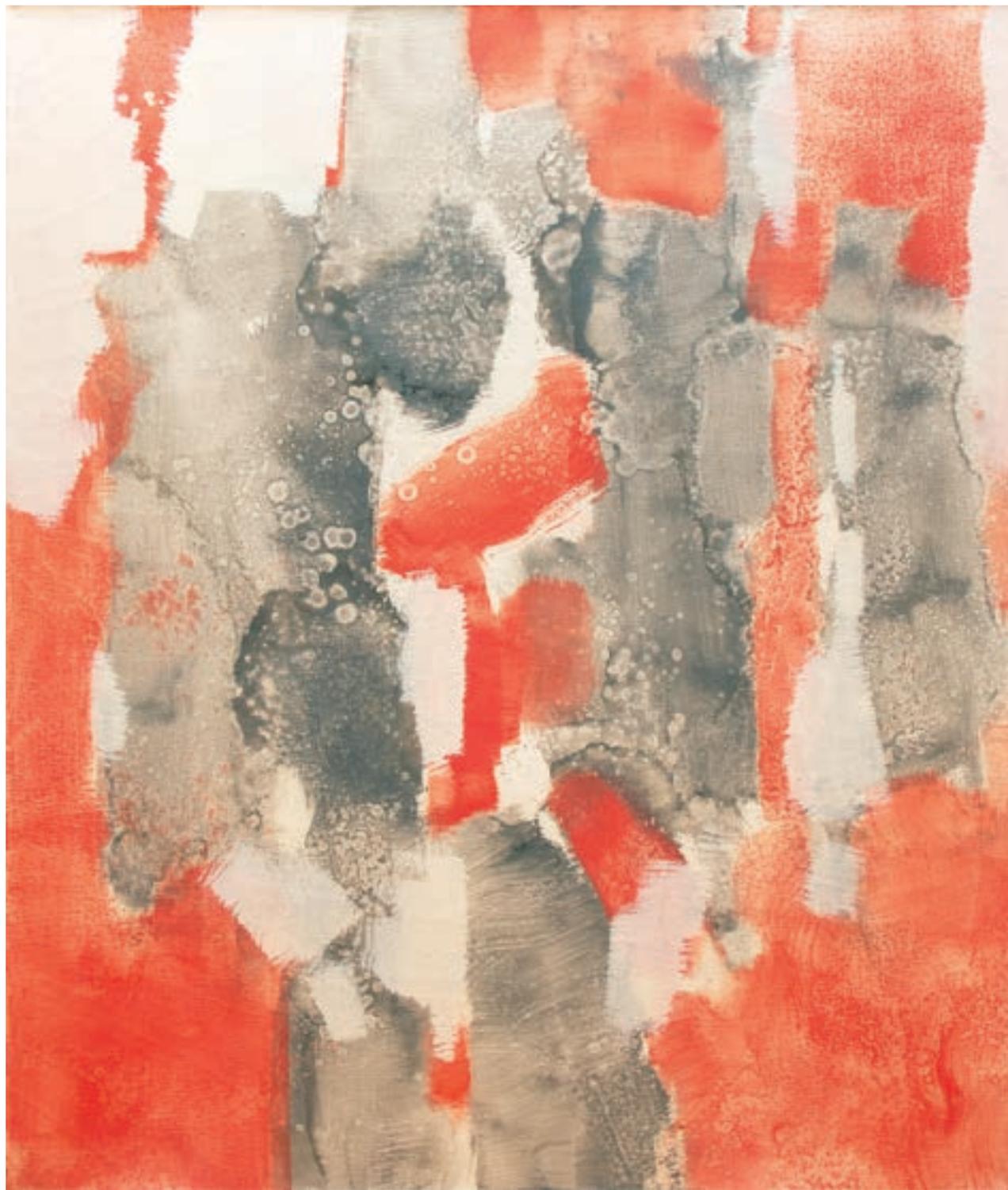
Oil on canvas
66 x 55 inches



1973

Last Picture

Oil on canvas
72 x 60 inches



Photography: Pedro Garcia
Layout: Mark Ostrander
Printing: Printed in China by
Permanent Printing
August 2021

Rear cover:
circa 1955

Color Yellow Square #6

Oil on canvas on Masonite
12 1/4 x 9 1/4 inches (detail)



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