

ALEXANDRE GALLERY

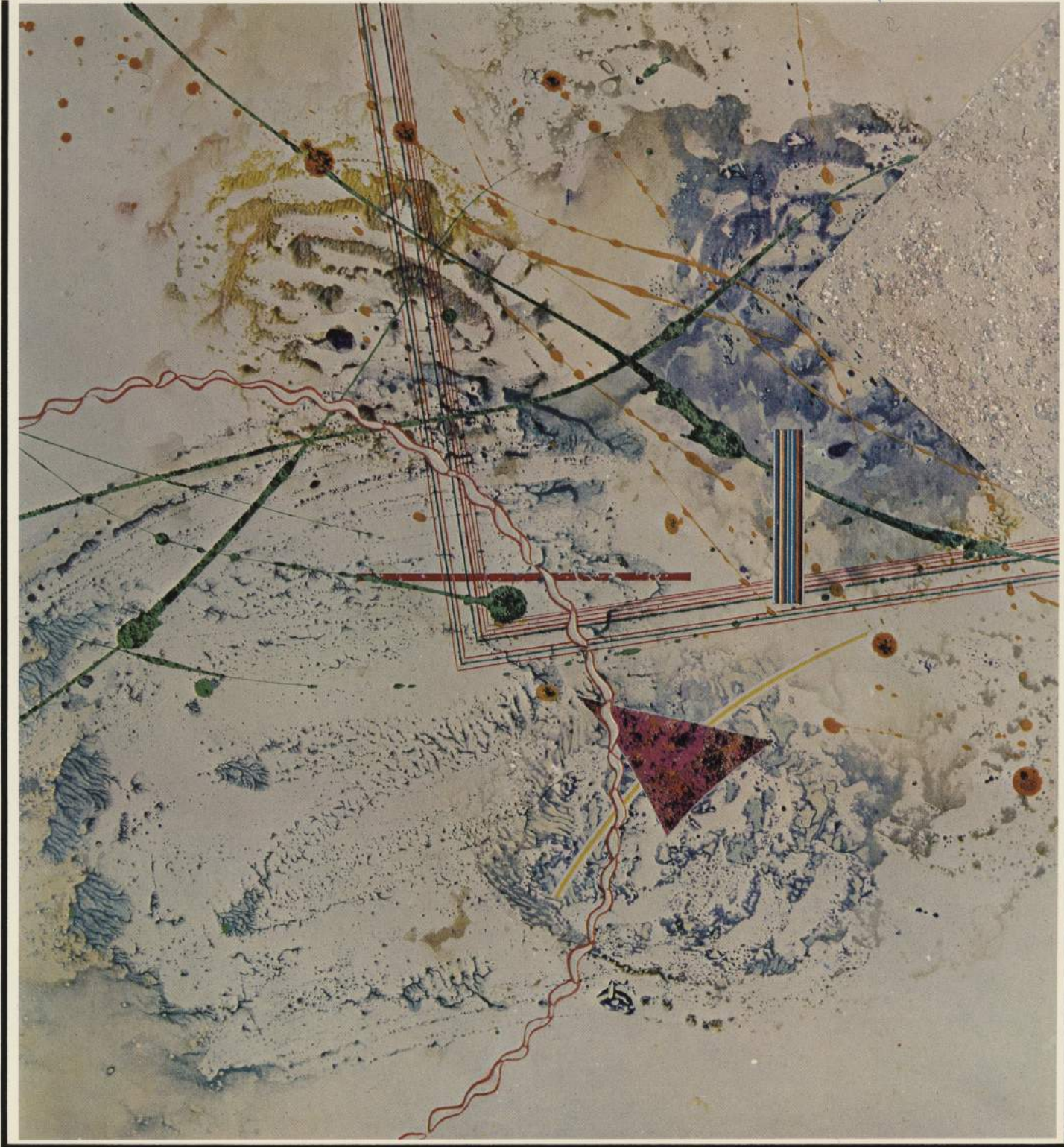
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Willingness and Reverence

An Interview with Pat Adams

Interviewer: Robert Boyers

44

This is an edited transcript of an interview conducted at the home of Pat Adams in Bennington, Vermont.

RB: Suppose we just begin at the beginning. When did you become interested in painting?

PA: I cannot remember not painting. Painting, dancing, and music lessons began when I was seven years old.

RB: Were the members of your family involved in the arts?

PA: No, although all the Smith women played the piano, and I recall great-grandmother Allen's painting of calla lilies which hung in my grandmother's bedroom; there I heard, among other stories of the family's life in Montana mining towns, of great-aunt Amelia who painted landscapes in oil and sold them.

RB: Did you continue to go to art school as a teenager?

PA: My home town—Stockton, in California—fortunately had been given a small museum and an excellent little collection of paintings—works by Matisse, Segonzac, Bougereau, J. B. Pyne, among others—and its director, Earl Rowland, who had been a student of Robert Henri in New York in the twenties, took an interest in developing my work. He was energetic in pointing out particular pictures in the galleries and gave me books to read on Degas and Renoir.

RB: So you did have considerable experience even before you went to college and got your formal art training.

PA: The summer before I went to Berkeley, I attended the California College of Arts and Crafts; and in other breaks from academic studies I went to the Chicago Art Institute, and studied Sumi painting with Chiro Obata at the College of the Pacific.

RB: And did you find that at Berkeley you began to think of yourself as a professional painter, as someone who would devote her life to painting?

PA: I don't know that I ever thought about such a decision or labeled what I was doing. I seemed to be doing it, to know and take the next step.

RB: Did you come shortly to think of yourself as going to school to particular masters? Let's say, as following a certain progress in your work that would take you where you wanted to go?

PA: The many artists with whom I studied were

stylistically extremely diverse—which may have bred in me a certain independence. Among my teachers were Margaret Peterson O'Hagan, who had been an assistant to Hans Hofmann and whose work drew upon primal forms within Northwest Indian art; and Otis Oldfield, a survivor of the Battle of the Marne, who recommended the fencer's attack in his impressionist brushwork; and Erle Loran, whose analysis of Cezanne's space and motifs continues to be a useful text. But it was Worth Ryder, the man who brought Hans Hofmann to this country, who influenced me most through a course called "The Architecture of Painting" which involved examining the formal elements out of which visual statement is made. Our text was Albert Barnes' *The Art in Painting*, which predicates distinct and separable effects as attributable to the behavior of line, color, space, and so forth. Ryder's teaching prepared me to think, to understand the terms through which one arrived at form rather than to proceed through emulating style.

RB: Do your early paintings look anything like your paintings do now?

PA: Works of the mid-fifties are similar in the density and complexity that has been deepening in the seventies. After school-day essays in realism, impressionism, cubism, I began to think specifically about the attenuation of form through feeling and to consider what substance permeated all sorts of visual differences. In a way I backed into an almost Mondrian-like attitude of extracting a motif which I saw running through all the visual material before me. And I began to think more about what was between things; I became less interested in things themselves. "Betweenness" was what I was seeing. Working in Italy in 1951, I realized a grid-like pacing of visual items had emerged, and the identifiable objects of normative vision had dropped away.

RB: When you speak about grids and extractions and so on, do those words describe to you anything like the stages in which you execute a painting? Do you start with some primary structure you want to impose?

PA: I try to objectify an apprehension of reality. To me the word "grid" suggests what beat and measure mean in music. It is a schema for equalness of focus, an overallness of surface. The visual event rides on it. In my thinking this term has become differentiated further to mean a scanning pattern of attention. Throughout these permutations my intention has been to substantialize the surface and create a climate or situation in which color and shape are emergent. With this apportioned continuum, I locate qualities that may induce the feeling insights I wish to arouse. But it seems to me that more and more nameable items, nameable structures,



Pat Adams

photograph by Alex Brown

Willingness and Reverence

An Interview with Pat Steingart
Interviewer: Robert Rauschenberg

46

"I try to objectify an apprehension of reality. To me the word "grid" suggests what beat and measure mean in music. It is a schema for equalness of focus, an overallness of surface. The visual event rides on it."

have been displaced. They are subsumed by some other means of holding the surface.

RB: Yes, so that now the viewer has much more sense of being encompassed by a vision that is unquestionably of a piece. You feel you would really do violence to the painting if you began to break it up into discrete elements, to name the items of structure that make it up.

PA: Good, but I want very much to present precise specifics, an array of disparate particulars. I am a realist. We are alert to differentiations and enjoy sorting, placing and appraising the values they present to our experience. And yet, simultaneously, I prefer the override of a oneness, of a configural 'take' of which I can inquire how it is that this event holds, by what means these items maintain some reach toward each other, are alert to each other.

RB: I'm especially interested in the way your paintings suspend unexpectedly in one portion of the canvas, say, a great triangular shape or an even band of color. I think of those shapes as testing the capacity of the painting as a whole to accommodate what is really not predicted.

PA: What you say pleases me, for although you see and feel this 'encompassing,' you question how it is that it can work. I want these paintings to be pleasurable and to rouse people up so that they can do what they need to do. I am concerned with more than delectation, and I see these works as starting up a series of questions, a feeling-inquiry into how many differences can be permitted. What extension is necessary for the realization of each item? What governs any situation? How is it that an odd array of things can work? Are the constraints we perceive imposed conditions or natural givens? What suffices? These questions we ask of ourselves not only within the context of art, but elsewhere as we make choices, as we govern ourselves.

RB: Recently I read a lecture you delivered at Yale-Norfolk, and had some trouble bringing the political remarks into relation with my experience of the paintings. But after a while I felt easier about the whole thing.

PA: I don't want words to lead your experience of the paintings, to interfere with or dilute the confronting presence of the work itself. The connection must reside in an *apparency*—is there such a word?

RB: If there isn't, there should be.

PA: The painting itself sets off these concerns in you. It is like looking upon our time objectified, recognizable to anyone. The artist scans the times, appraises his reading, and then comments upon it, makes proposals. There is one painting called "Willingness"

which contains an unlikely group of occurrences; it proposes, and tests, for the willingness to entertain the bewildering circumstances of the condition of being alive. In a sense, this willingness includes the ability to consider what you may not be able to choose or do. The event occurs and is sustained within a climate both open and generous, the differences are enjoyed, the most unlikely items are linked on some level.

RB: That reminds me of something else you've talked about, the artist's experience of limitation at a certain point in the execution of the work. At that point, the authority of the painting takes over so that the artist's sense of freedom, of the capacity to choose, is brought up against something resistant.

PA: Absolutely. And how dismal it would be if it were all my will. Only when constraints and proposals are engaged does it all really become interesting. I like every bit within the work to have "high will," insistence. I am willing to let my willfulness be but part of what happens.

RB: That says a lot about your liking for the word *reverence*. It's an interesting word, a word I find very difficult to communicate to students, I might mention. My students at least find the word doesn't at all address what they think they're feeling when, for example, they write a poem. But I think a good explanation would have to include some of the observations you've made.

PA: I think of reverence as giving everything its due regard; it is a form of care, a loving tenderness towards how things are.

RB: Of course the reverence expands to include the things one makes, to the marks that you put down on the canvas. They require respect of their own. . . .

PA: . . . the respect being that you notice what they are and indeed nurture what it is that is there. So that a dialogue develops, a responsiveness that is distinct from being merely reactive.

RB: You've spoken of reverence as "the very foundation of culture," referring to the *I Ching*. Certainly it serves as a means by which to distinguish a good artist from an inferior artist, the latter not knowing how to let things be in the way that they ought to be . . . so that some artists find themselves imposing their wills on everything in an unfortunate way.

PA: Yes, it takes periods of watching what's going on, to learn when to check and form and alter . . . or let things run their course.

RB: Do you find it's possible to teach students how to be more reverent towards the things they are making?

PA: In what we call "crits" we work together to

notice what it is that is in the painting. Intentions are considered, but the difficulty lies in acquainting oneself with what actually has been done, in appraising what is visually evident. I don't know how to describe the transmission of this notion; however, one needs to quiet oneself in order to attend to what is there.

RB: I hear what you are saying and recall that one of the first things I notice in your painting is texture and especially the grainy, sandy areas, and I wonder at what stage in the execution the 'sanding' becomes critical.

PA: The pictures have become more complicated in the last four or five years. It is hard to say at what point a particular texture may come. Tactile qualities exist from the beginning; with any touch to the canvas all visual properties are activated. As I come to know a picture, I find it may need a particular act. In working upon the large canvas "Aufgehoben," one of the last things I did was to reinforce certain initial blot imprints. I added, as well, with touches of my finger, many very small intense color marks that looked as if they could have happened in the first throw of the paint and sand. Big or small, random or rendered, are not clues to stages in the development of the work. I have to see what circumstances have been brought fortuitously forward from both accident and strategy. As a picture ends I may feel that a dispersion of red points will produce the suffusion, the precise blush that I want.

RB: What is the relation between texture and the specifically circumscribed shapes in the paintings?

PA: Early, as early as 1956, I realized that texture was a kind of grain that was "pre-shape." I became interested in the run from unconfined substance—how a "thing" without definite shape can be apprehended—to that which began to condense into shape and become more of a tangible, tactile circumstance. Often when I find that a shape has formed I begin to break it down internally, so that it seems to back into its own grain, to return itself to area. This route can become convoluted.

RB: Do you select the sand, the texture deliberately?

PA: I had seen some monotypes of Prendergast in which the third pull of the monotype seemed to me to have so much air, so much climate. It was that particular condition I love to breathe in, and it occurred to me that I desired a more translucent sheen or glistening quality in my work. I started monotyping large-scale onto my canvases. Much of what you see is the result of my discovering that the medium I used with oil paint could be dissolved by turpentine, which subsequently permits a blotting from one area of the canvas to another. Then I was searching for a glass-like substance that would ex-

48

tend the color even further and give me a certain hard translucency. A colleague at Bennington, Bob Coburn, suggested I use mica. And that turned out to be marvelous: it had that subdued dazzle, a way of catching light. Also, graphite when burnished can assume black, grey, or shine, depending on the angle of the viewer's approach. I was interested in the destruction of the surface through these visual ambiguities and, at the same time, in heightening the literal materiality of the paint surface through the introduction of sand, lustre powders, and egg shell. The sand performs variously in creating fine intense points of color—discrete minutiae; for it, too, can seem to extend the paint, giving air and light as it irradiates its hue to surface areas between grains. At times I've powdered up pastels and scattered the irregular bits to increase the saturation within the optical mix.

RB: How exactly do you apply these things?

PA: There are different ways, but they all depend on the wet paint or color-free binder. The canvas lies on the floor and a binder is brushed, blotted, flung on its surface, and these various pigments are placed or scattered into the adherent.

RB: When I walked through the recent show at Zabriskie I couldn't help thinking that the paintings are so beautiful, and so unlike what we've been trained to expect. This is a period, after all, in which many artists positively despise the impulse to make beautiful things.

PA: Beauty has been out since, when? Victor Hugo? Can that still be an avant garde notion, "épater le bourgeois," an imperative issued a hundred years ago? Shock no longer seems a useful device for change; as a strategy, we watch its course in Italy with the terrorists. Rather let's try to induce reverence, and caring. So many people are displaced, disfranchised, struggling for some modicum of justice.

RB: And a beautiful painting on the wall?

PA: It seems to me I could live under the conditions proposed in those pictures.

RB: That coherence in the paintings comes through in the larger works as well as the smaller ones. Do you ever conceive of the small paintings as trial runs or sketches?

PA: Size has to do with energy and the short spans of time I have to focus on my work. The larger works require a larger energy. Materials have to be marshalled and sometimes an assistant scheduled. This necessitates studio management of the sort that I work into during the four months in which I paint each year. Throughout the spring of 1977 a National Endowment for the Arts grant enabled me to gain momentum and

move into my work more deeply, sustaining the vision forming there. And as you know, I work on twenty or thirty paintings at the same time, starting off pieces some of which may resolve quickly, and concluding others, some of which have been moving along over five or six years. The procedures are the same for all the works: papers or canvas, large or small.

RB: I thought we might switch gears for a bit and talk about 'nourishment.' Are there contemporary painters you especially admire and look to for nourishment?

PA: Anything that rouses up my spirit seems good to me, alive, contemporary—be it pyramids or Matisse cut-outs. I found Miro's new lithographs the best things that I saw in New York last spring. In the main I draw sustenance from artists and works whose spirit is akin to mine. Hieronymus Bosch and his "Garden of Earthly Delights," Balthasar Neumann's *Vierzehnheiligen*, Mnajdra's rock engravings, Vermeer, Turner, Merovingian gold and garnet brooches . . . I carry in my notebook postcards of Piero della Francesca's frescoes in San Sepulcro and Monterchi. Their works lend affirmation to my feeling choices and persist in influencing my visual thinking. You can see about us here how the continuous shifts of light and weather upon the fixities of pond, rock, woods and field feed my vision. I turn to poets: Yeats, Stevens, and more recently John Ashbery, to gain a certain detachment from the inner routings of my own nature.

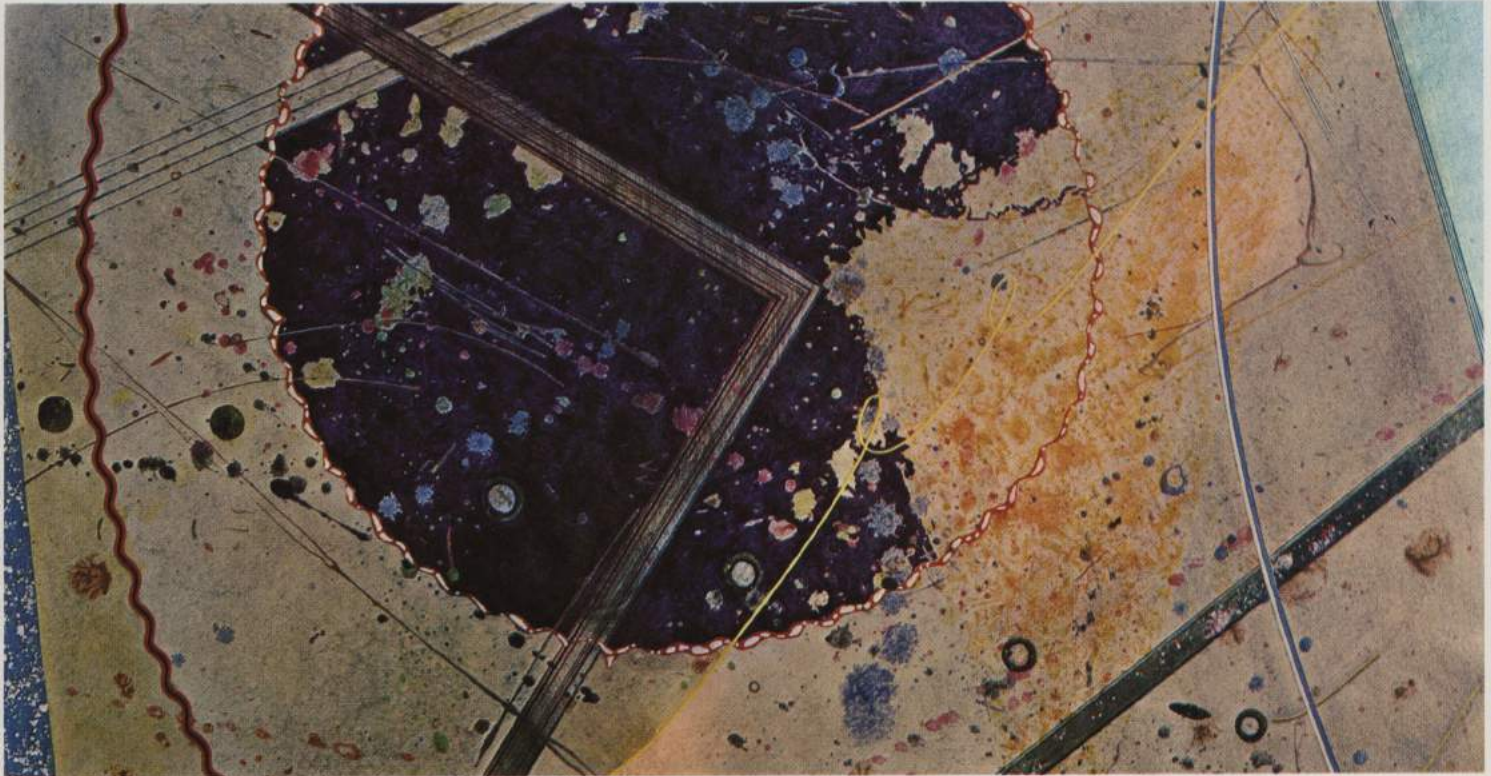
And I am compelled to see what is out there: zeitgeist scanning. I find myself troubled by the contraction of spirit one perceives in recent political events. I resist that short-term, narrow-gauged meanness.

RB: One more question. Are you interested in art criticism, and if so, is there any particular critic or kind of criticism that you most admire?

PA: Criticism is crucial to any effort, and artists exercise it steadily throughout their working procedures. Most art criticism presently has devolved into reportage—a descriptive review in formal terms and rhetorical judgments intoning taste. Or there are the critics who turn from art works and the notions arising within art to model their criteria and concerns upon issues established in such social sciences as linguistics or anthropology. What I call criticism would ask the critic to note more carefully the registration of affect and to inquire further into the perceptions generated by the work itself. It seems to me the critic's task is to point to the ideas and statements adduced from the art object, and to place them within current social-cultural dialogue—a dialogue grounded from the beginning in the questions, what is man? what are our values?

ALEXANDRE GALLERY

SEPTEMBER 1978



Gaudemus, 1977
acrylic and ink on paper
11 1/4 × 21 1/4"
collection: Mrs. Richard Gallen

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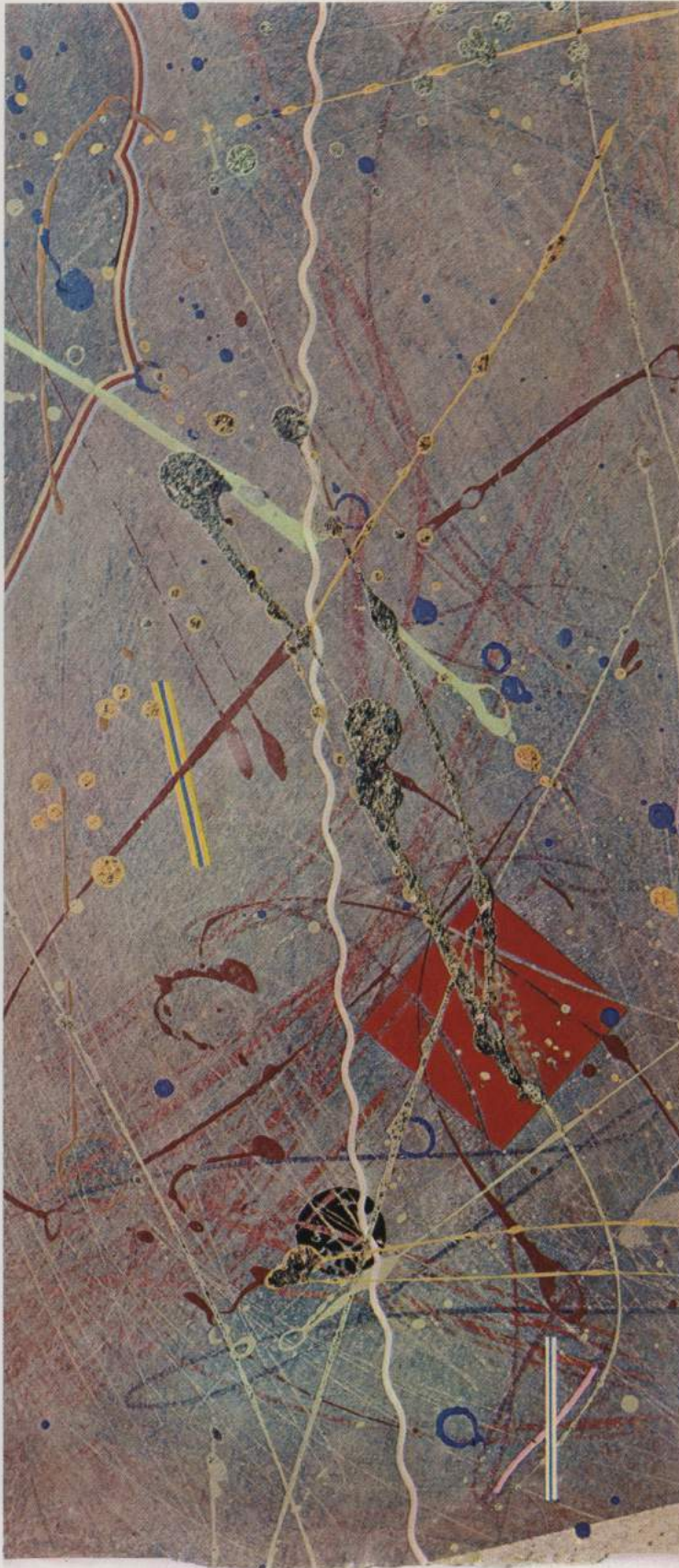
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Governing, 1977
acrylic and mica on paper
4 5/8 x 17"
courtesy of Zabriskie Gallery

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SEPTEMBER 1978



No Things Lost, 1977
acrylic on paper
14 1/4 x 6 1/4"
courtesy of Zabriskie Gallery

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BENNINGTON REVIEW



Aufgehoben, 1978
oil, isobutyl methacrylate and eggshell on canvas
80 × 90"
collection: Graham Gund

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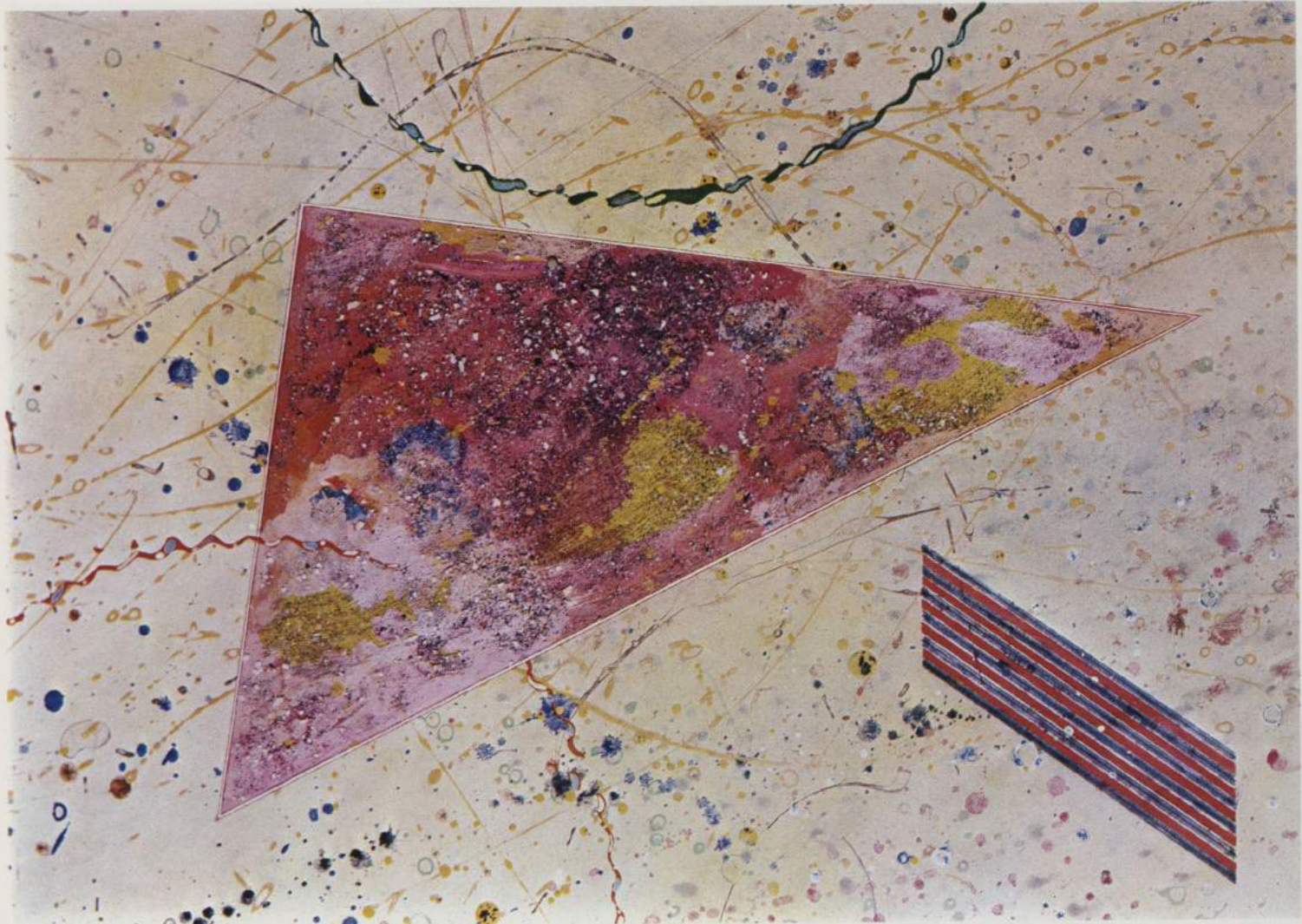
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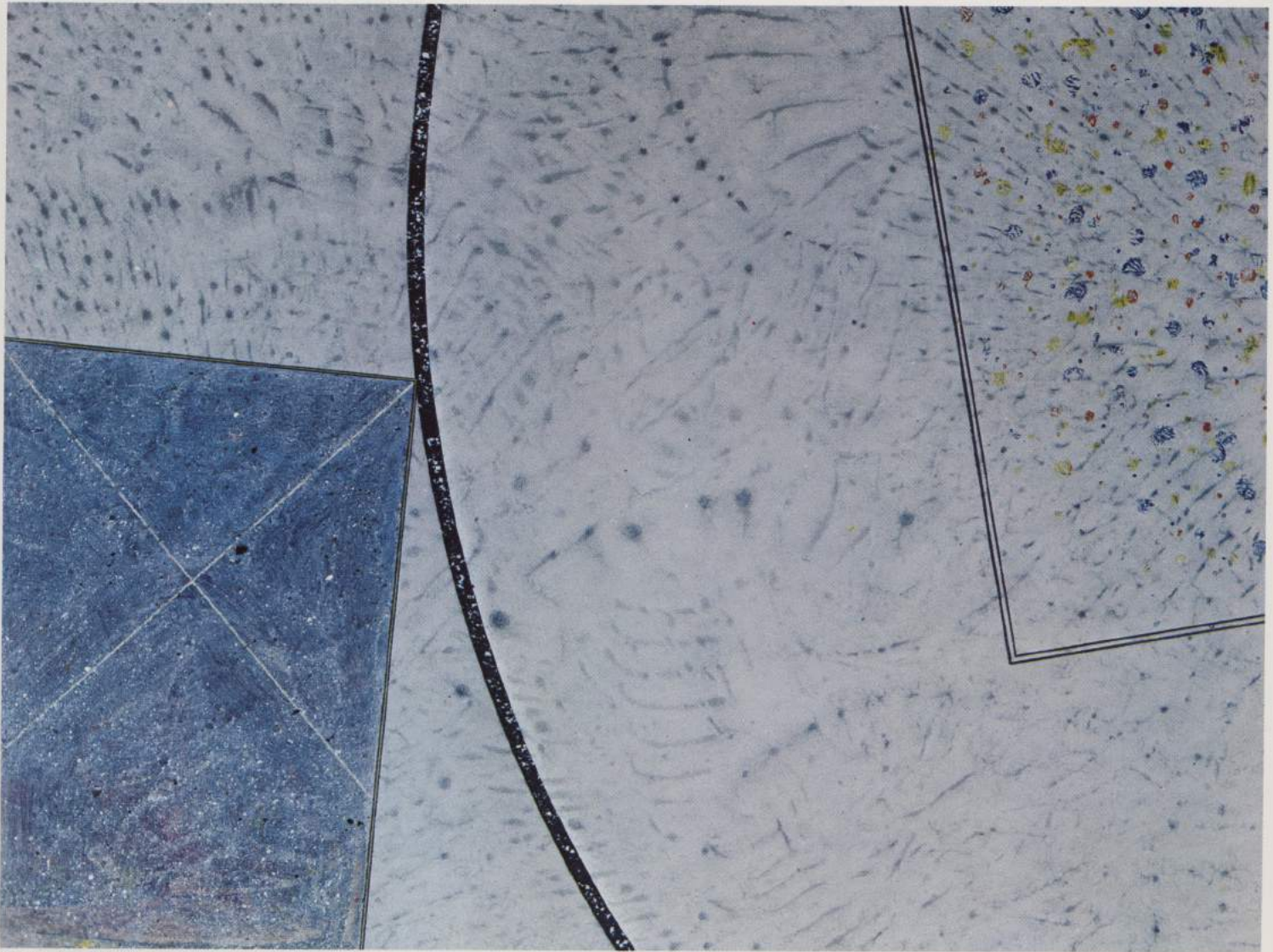
It Comes To This, 1978
oil, isobutyl methacrylate, eggshell and mica on canvas
80 × 100"
courtesy of Zabriskie Gallery

ALEXANDRE GALLERY

BENNINGTON REVIEW



Presents, 1977
acrylic, ink and mica on paper
14 3/4 × 20 3/4"
collection: David and Ruth Spelman



This Is, 1977
acrylic and mica on paper
16 1/6 x 22 1/4"
courtesy of Zabriskie Gallery