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Art Lecture notes:

Melzac was a prominent figure in the art world for several decades; every institution in D.C. benefited from his collection of Color School and Abstract Expressionist art. His commitment to the art of his time was exceptional. The art of his time?:

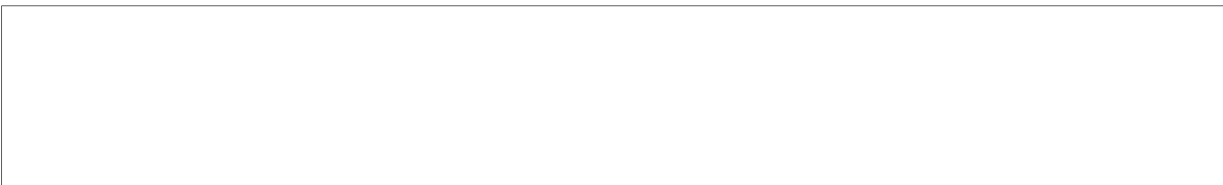
- A certain mix of elements brought about a flowering of the visual arts:
- the existence of institutions where art could be shown;
- the availability of mentors;
- patrons of the arts willing to support new artists, their work.

In D.C., the Institute for Contemporary Art, the Washington Workshop for the Arts, the Phillips Collection, the American University's programs for arts and artists, AND Melzac, who acted as a liaison between developments in New York City and D.C. By training, Melzac was an educator, by profession, a businessman, and by avocation, a patron of the arts.

In the 1950s, Melzac was very supportive of local artists, was instrumental in developing the atmosphere that resulted in a fruitful artistic environment. Melzac returned to the midwest for a while in the 1960s, but returned to D.C., by which time things had really taken off, due partially to the writings of art critic Clement Greenberg.

Melzac collected not only local artists, but also deKooning, Kline and others (whose base was in NYC). The National Museum of American Art received a good many pieces from Melzac for its permanent collection.

In Washington, in the early 1960s, the focus was not only on Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, but also on Howard Mehring. The background: the key artist of the Abstract Expressionist movement, Jackson Pollock, created a new style with flat space, where form and drawing were one. This influenced the younger artists, especially Noland (who taught art at Catholic University) and Louis in D.C. The "epiphany" moment came when Noland and Louis were introduced to Helen Frankenthaler's "stained" paintings, which exerted a powerful influence on the D.C. artists. With staining, illusionism and illusionistic, 3-dimensional space are eliminated.



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MEHRING:

"Orange," dated early 1960s. The paint is stained directly onto/into the canvas, creating an even, all-over image. Medium is acrylic, not oil: acrylic [a man-made medium] creates a different kind of image, it doesn't necessarily show the hand of the artist. This is art in a kind of purified

form. In the 1950s, the idea (promoted by critic Greenberg) that art is moving toward a purer form by eliminating figuration and the mark of the artist's hand, was gaining favor in art circles. It emphasized that every part of the surface is as important as every other part, that color and structure are one. Color has a lyrical quality. The fact that paint could be soaked right into the canvas helped create an overwhelming lyrical experience, with the viewer being invited into the space of the canvas. Color is the primary vehicle, color and structure are married; any emotional experience could be conveyed by this pure, disciplined image.

"Gray"--beautiful layers of color, very evocative (of storm, etc.). The goal is to achieve the kinds of effects one experiences in music: tone, rhythm, syncopation, intonation.

Mehring was the youngest of this group; he attended McKinley High School in the District, and studied under Noland at Catholic University. He was a poignant character (he died in 19789 at age 47), who exhibited in a cooperative gallery. By 1960, even the noted critic Clement Greenberg (based in NYC) had noticed him. Melzac financially supported him for a period in his career.

CONSTANCE BERGFORS:

Attended Smith University and studied at the Corcoran. Her husband was in the foreign service (? , this is not definite), and she also studied in Italy. In the early 1970s, she was painting geometric shapes floating on the surface, and from this moved to shaped canvases, such as those in the CIA halls, which are put together in a several-part composition. Her works were shown at Gallery 10 in D.C. She now works in sculpture, in both stone and wood.

Her works focus on color relationships, with very pristine shapes and surfaces. She is thinking of distillation, of purification; there is, in some of the earlier shaped pieces, a gestural surface treatment, a carry-over from her previous compositions. In most of the CIA pieces, there is no surface treatment; the colors are closely keyed; there is no sign of the artist's hand. This allows the viewer to appreciate the juxtaposition of color and forms, without extraneous concerns, such as biography, subject matter, etc. The 5-part composition shows closely-keyed colors, and takes into consideration the way the wall is incorporated into the composition. The wall is her canvas (on which she distributes the shapes). Color is the most important element. The forms are depersonalized in such a way that there are no distractions.

DOWNING: a colleague and partner of Mehring. Unlike Mehring, however, he was not from D.C., but from Virginia; he attended the Pratt Institute in NYC and came to D.C. in the early 1950s and decided to stay. He had a cooperative gallery called EUREKA. Downing is a more cerebral, intellectual kind of painter, more calculating; Mehring, by comparison, is more romantic. Downing started out doing rectangular paintings, choosing the circle or the dot as his "subject" matter. Finding the rectangle to be dissatisfactory, feeling constrained by it, he developed parallelogramed-

shaped canvases, as a way to break out of the traditional rectangular shape. The shape of the canvas is the shape of the color. Like Bergfors above, he uses the wall as the background space. [In the shaped painting on the first floor] Downing avoids any sense of illusionism; there are no illusionistic details, forms; the primacy of color is still important. If anything, there is almost a space-age kind of illusionism.

By 1966, it was apparent that D.C. artists were not getting all their due; the minimalists--mostly in NYC--had come on the scene and were getting a lot of the credit for some of the innovations seen earlier in D.C. artists' work.

An early Mehring on the 2nd floor (the gray "diagonal" painting), must be circa 1958 or 1959): the color is stained into the canvas. This produces extraordinary subtleties. It shows great control, considering that Mehring worked on the floor, and he could not necessarily control how the colors would combine (flow into one another). Visually, it's very arresting, very attractive. The design extends all the way to the edges. The diagonal design is very evocative; only after the execution of the painting was the decision made to orient it in this fashion. Hence, the composition is not preconceived; a certain amount of spontaneity is allowed. It results in a kind of cosmic space, a sense of the heavens, of atmosphere, of sunrise, oceans--all of this is evoked. This painting shows us how interesting abstract painting can be.

ALMA THOMAS: perhaps the most interesting character in Washington's heyday; came from an upper-middle class African-American family. Her family moved to D.C. to further the daughters' education. Born 1891--died 1978.

Not until she was in her 60s did she come into her own as an abstract painter. She was a teacher; she was the first fine arts student at Howard University. She also studied at Columbia University, Teacher's College. She became an expert marionetteer. In the 1950s, she went back to school, to American University, and met Kenneth Noland and a number of other artists. In 1960, she retired from teaching junior high school, and became totally devoted to painting. All her paintings were done in her kitchen on 15th St. Unlike other D.C. artists, she painted in a rather traditional way on a stretched canvas. She exhibited at the Dupont Theatre Gallery; in 1960, she had a sold-out exhibit there. In the 1970s, she had an important show at the Whitney Museum in New York [the Whitney is devoted solely to American art]. Her work shows an interest in a) nature (the experience of flowers and trees, light's reflection), and b) "space"--as in "outer space": she was intrigued by the space walk and her own first plane trip.

"Mars Reflection", ca. 1970: rippling rhythms of color, with color receding and then projecting forward: a kind of musical quality, musical notations.

Next to Thomas is a Howard Mehring work, ca. early 1958. We see the ways he was experimenting with color, the way stains work. It evokes "romantic" applications, with sweet effects, lyrical expressions of color.

He said "I try for the qualities of music--line, tone, dissonance." The work shows a very complex mixture of colors and atmospheric effects.

An interesting aside: there were people in NYC who did not believe these paintings were done in the 1950s: they were beyond the progressive line Greenberg had written about!

Another Downing, a series of dots, ca. 1960: he had chosen the dot, a circle, as the module of color to contain the expression. Color is intuitively understood, not intellectually. Downing saw himself in a romantic way. The circle is a matter of preference: he liked the way the brush moved in a circle. The color can move while being still, producing a simultaneous feeling of equilibrium and containment. A word of advice to the viewer: resist thinking of this as Op Art: Op Art has a different rhythm, different movement and syncopation. Here, there is a serendipitous spontaneity, even within a rather structured format.

The small Mehring, early (date?): this work exhibits a kind of daring, as well as competence, for someone who was still in his 20s. A sureness and confidence in the execution and manipulation of colors.

Thomas Downing's "Dapple" (Jackie's favorite), ca. 1960: he uses the vehicle of the circle or dot in a different way than in the grids. The color is closely keyed and saturated. There is movement, an openness of space. The viewer gets involved in the rhythm and the space. This is a very romantic painting, with a space that is almost a kind of ether, a color that floats and bounces and moves. Although Downing does not seek to create a 3-dimensional space, this painting is not flat.

NORMAN BLUHM: he was not a D.C. color painter but a second-generation Abstract Expressionist. This gives one a sense of Melzac's breadth. Bluhm was born in the late 1920s in Chicago, but spent most of his childhood in Florence, Italy. He returned to Chicago and studied architecture under the renowned Mies van der Rohe. During World War II, he was a bomber pilot. After the war, he studied art in Paris on the GI Bill; in France he became acquainted with the daughter of Henri Matisse. Bluhm was a member of a circle of painters and artists in Paris in the 1940s and 1950s. He returned to the U.S. ca 1955, where he came in contact with Joan Mitchell and others, and began to build on an association with the New York School of painters (Abstract Expressionism). His work, however, showed a "refined sense" in comparison to the NY School. He was interested in Jackson Pollock's idea of drawing and form as one, but Bluhm refused to give up the use of oils, as well as the idea of the importance of one part of the painting over another.

"Inside Orange," 1966: Two biographic facts, a) that he studied architecture, and b) that he was a pilot, affected his paintings. His works have a strong sense of structure, as well as of infinite space, a sense of the cosmic. Bluhm has a great sense of color, and a sense of freedom, a romantic approach that allows for accidents, drips, etc. There is a choreography of color in his work; unlike the Washington Color School,

a "sensual cacophony" of color. Also unlike the Washington Color School, he continued to work from the figure throughout his artistic career.

Gene Davis, died at age 65 in April 1985. "Black Rhythm," dated 1964. Davis is known for his striped paintings. Melzac arranged for his first one-man show at the Poindexter Gallery in NYC. Davis was a quintessential character: he began as a sports writer and covered the early Redskins; he also covered the Truman Administration as a Washington Herald correspondent. Around 1949, he went into psychoanalysis and became convinced that he wanted to paint. His first show was in 1953. He began to develop a gestural style, in the Abstract Expressionist vein. But toward the late 1950s, he produced his first "pinstripe" painting. His aim was to purify painting; to do so, he emphasized color, reduced painting to the most basic notions. "My work is intuitive and romantic," he said. The stripes have a built-in unity. In order to grasp his work, one cannot view it all at once; one color is followed throughout the painting. This allows for a rhythm to come through, a syncopation. Davis said "I paint by eye." He did not use a straight-edge when painting the stripes.

Andrea Epstein, worked in NYC, a younger artist in whom Melzac believed. There is in her work a relationship to Abstract Expressionism, to deKooning and Gorky. A sense of biomorphic form, with a strong calligraphic quality, an interesting suggestion of space. The second work is freer, broader, bolder...

Norman Bluhm: this work represents a stage before he got into the more open kind of composition; the "hallucinatory" character of the drips is emphasized.

Mehring [the large square(?) with dots arranged in triangular shapes]: Again, there is an analogy to music. He noted that he wanted the picture to "open out," not to heat up around the edge. He calls these works "collage paintings." The edge is carried back into the picture. The surface is stippled; his later compositions are based on X and L shapes. In Mehring's later works, he is very geometric, hard-edge. By 1968, he had given up painting, but began to draw again in the 1970s. He died in 1978 at age 47.

The last Norman Bluhm is also his earliest one in this collection. "Passing Waterfall" has a lyrical, overall quality, with several layers of color.

Next, on third floor, is a Downing dated 1959, a series of concentric squares, with a large orange interior. Downing moved from this to the dots, then the grids, then finally to shaped paintings. Melzac saw these artists through all of their ups and downs. The viewer is directed to look at the edges in this painting: at first the painting looks solid, geometric, flat. But on second glance, the stain is uneven, evoking a very human feeling. The painting achieves a "velvety" quality. The corners are left off in some places. In its plainness, it is very evocative, inviting. It invites the viewer into the center of the painting. If oils had been used, it would have produced a flatter, more reflective surface.

The last two Downings, "Ruttled," 1965, and Planks, ca. mid-1960s: In "Ruttled," (the parallelogram with the circles), the idea of the parallelogram is to unlock the color; the color comes out at you, with interesting rhythms and movement. Downing's choosing of three colors and black circles is very daring. His intellectual fixation is to arrive at a perfect communication of color. In "Planks," Downing has completely given up the rectangular composition. There is, however, an illusionistic, optical quality in this work; the colors are no longer limited by the wall and by composition. The juxtaposition of colors is very subtle. Color is used in as unadulterated a manner as possible.

Robert Newman, the "arrows" painting on first floor OHB, near corridor. Born in Idaho, studied in California, works in New England. This work is probably from the mid-1960s (no date given), from a series called "Space Signs." He shows an interesting use of color here, it dances around with a sense of whimsy and a sense of humor. He was responding to the coming dominance of the minimalists and the humor of Pop artists. This shows that Melzac's interest in collecting went far beyond the Washington Color School. (b)(3) 70

To close, a 1971 newspaper article wrote that in a "proud coup," Melzac "humanized" the interior of the CIA headquarters.