

*Ray Mead, the Anthropomorphic Gesture*

By Christopher Lee Bayes

A Thesis in the Department of Art History

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## ABSTRACT

### *Ray Mead, the Anthropomorphic Gesture*

Christopher Lee Bayes

Ray Mead (1921–1998) was one of just a handful of painters working in English Canada whose career followed abstraction from its early (and often maligned) inception, through its “heroic” phases (in the late 1950s and 60s) and into its current decline as an influential avant-garde practice. His later work, though continually done in a formally Modernist style, nonetheless had a little of what could be dramatically called postmodern sentimentality. This thesis not only documents Mead’s development as an artist, but also examines his work within the shifting context of modern and postmodern ideologies—especially as they relate to the changing notions of subjectivity. The underlying premise is that abstract painting is anthropomorphic by sight alone. Within this scenario the “eye” (the limiting conditions of sight) becomes a model for the ego’s place in the world as a reflexive entity (or the conditions of the “I”). Thus, “subject matter” is as much an issue for the viewer today, as it was an ongoing question for painters working in the 1950s. By engaging such theorists as Jean-François Lyotard, Immanuel Kant, Clement Greenberg, Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, formal changes in Mead’s work are related to developing ideas of subjectivity, as his painting moved from an aesthetics of the Beautiful (favouring consensus, completeness, consistency and wholeness of form) towards an aesthetics of the Sublime (a fleeting sense of joy and terror in the face of the unrepresentable).

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But during a lengthy and often trying writing process, it was Alana Muraca who was always there for me, and whose patience, though tested, never wore through (completely).

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## INTRODUCTION

We can think of the artistic development of Ray Mead as a nomadic journey. As a founding member of Painters Eleven he was at the forefront of modern painting in English Canada throughout the 1950s, yet his most accomplished works came later, perhaps as late as 1996, at a time when the harshest critic could have looked upon them nostalgically, dismissing him as hopelessly out of date. Yet, I see in Mead's work—alongside his formalist underpinnings—an ongoing exploration that reflects many of the changes in the way that we think and write about abstract painting. There was a progression following abstract art from its formative stages, through the 'heroic' years, and into its current decline as a progressive avant-garde practice. His later work, spanning multiple generations and movements, as it does, seems to have a touch of what one could dramatically call postmodern sentimentality—though they are still done in a formally Modernist manner. This thesis is an examination of Mead's work within these two contexts (the modern and postmodern)—often the same work spans both. More than that, it is also an examination of the ways in which these two ideologies relate to shifting notions of subjectivity, both in terms of a painting's 'subject matter' and in terms of the subjectivity of the viewer, and how these shifting notions can be read into Mead's work.

At the heart of Mead's painting is essentially an interweaving of multiple (re)interpretations of Immanuel Kant's two-part *Critique of Judgment*. Emphasis shifts from the Beautiful (favouring consensus, completeness, consistency and wholeness of form) towards the Sublime (a fleeting sense of joy and terror in the face of the unrepresentable) as Mead gradually loses faith in the idea of painting as a consistent,

coherent image, an object even, and searches for more experiential or phenomenological modes of painting. It is a move that can also be considered a turning away from the objectness (or an exploration of the medium) towards the subjective experience of a painting.

It is this shift in the very ‘subject matter’ of his painting that I think can be anthropomorphized into a discussion about subjectivity. It is a shift from a stable, consistent, even if yet to be discovered, sense of subjectivity towards fleeting, ephemeral notions of identity—a subjectivity that is constantly in question. And I think that these underlying notions of subjectivity are at the heart of much of the criticism surrounding abstract painting, even if they go somewhat unstated.

» » » §

Now, there is always a certain degree of difficulty in reconciling the career of a specific artist with a particular theoretical framework. And Mead, of course, did not articulate the development of his work in the same way that I wish to contextualize it—he so often talked about his paintings more formally, referring to explorations of ‘line’ and ‘surface’. However, he did tend to change the ways in which he engaged these terms over the years, placing more and more emphasis on them as ontological events rather than technical skills (thus hinting at his keen knowledge of art history as postmodern notions came pressing in on his rather modernist art education). In this regard Mead is, I think, emblematic of many artists—Frank Stella, Charles Gagnon, Guido Molinari, Jack Bush even—who continued to explore, each in their own very specific ways, the limits of abstraction along ontological lines (*how a painting is*) as their earlier formal concerns (*what a painting is*) became less fashionable. Barnett Newman, in particular, has had his work re-

examined by Jean-François Lyotard and Yve-Alain Bois in terms of the immediate and unreferential nature of the Sublime. Focusing on the ‘perception’ of painting as a phenomenological ‘event’, rather than a set of formal problems, these writings have become foundational—the model—for my examination of Mead’s work.

Also foundational have been the numerous interviews between Ray Mead and Joan Murray to whom we all owe a debt of gratitude for her efforts to document—often straight from the artists’ mouth—the work of not only Mead, but of many of his Canadian contemporaries at times when their study might not have been so fashionable. Recorded by Murray between 1977 and 1991, Mead was quite lucid in these conversations, referring not only to his life and work, but also providing insight into the ways he ‘thinks’ as a painter. These interviews, along with Murray’s 1981 exhibition catalogue Ray Mead: Two Decades, are by far the most extensive sources on Mead’s career available. All other information concerning Mead comes from (often brief) newspaper and magazine articles, and short catalogue essays. For me this presented both an obligation to document Mead’s career more fully and the freedom to interpret his work in unexplored ways.

With “Emblazon”, the first and most lengthy chapter of this thesis, I felt a responsibility to gather up and record the major events of Mead’s career—so that, at the very least, there was a fairly comprehensive record of Mead’s life as an artist. I have used the chapter to write about his work within the context of the developing theoretical framework in which it was created, in what I think is a fairly straightforward way (though there are times, many times, when I could not resist adding my own interpretations).

The next two chapters (“Beholden”, and “Cleaving”) show the freedom I felt in being, as far as I know, only the second person after the aforementioned Joan Murray to

write extensively on Mead's work.<sup>1</sup> In these two chapters I explore Mead's painting in relation to more contemporary theories of 'subject matter'. My working premise is that abstract painting is anthropomorphic by sight alone; and that Subject matter is as much an issue for the viewer today, as it was an ongoing question for painters working in the 1950s. "Beholden" places Mead's work within the context of Modernism, explaining how, although avant-garde at the time of its creation (especially in Canada), it was indebted to a theoretical framework of self-criticism and autonomy. However, the brief chapter does not take a traditional look at the development of Modernist ideologies. Rather, it is an attempt on my part to reorient what I think are the important themes of Modernism as they will relate to Mead's work in the final chapter. That final chapter, titled "Cleaving", is, again, an exploration of how I think Mead's painting interacts with some of the important theorists addressing issues of subjectivity (Immanuel Kant, Clement Greenberg, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek). The chapter shows how the formal changes in Mead's work relate to shifting notions of subjectivity, as his painting moves from an aesthetics of the Beautiful to an aesthetics of the Sublime. It is premised on the notion that the 'eye' (the conditions of sight) becomes the model for the ego's place in the world as a reflexive entity (or the conditions of the 'I').

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<sup>1</sup> A fact that I find fairly disturbing given (what I think) is the moderately high stature of Mead as an artist—though isn't it true that the history of Canadian art is filled with so many of these oversights.

CHAPTER ONE  
*Ray Mead, Emblazon*

*"Now information is by definition a short-lived element. As soon as it is transmitted and shared, it ceases to be information, it becomes an environmental given, and 'all is said', we 'know'."*  
- Jean-François Lyotard<sup>1</sup>

*"... a work of art is avant-garde in direct proportion to the extent that it is stripped of meaning. Is it not then like an event?"*  
- Jean-François Lyotard<sup>2</sup>

Ray Mead was an émigré. A nomad in the classic English manner. "You know the difference between you and the American painters," Clement Greenberg once told him, "you always seem to be painting the space between cities and they're painting the core of the cities."<sup>3</sup> He was also a modernist, in the most grandiose kind of way: "I like to see where I've been," Mead said, not of his nomadism, but of his surfaces, "I don't want it to hide or take it away."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde", *The Inhuman* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) 105.

<sup>2</sup> Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde", 106

<sup>3</sup> Ray Mead, Interview with Joan Murray, transcript, 16 Sept. 1986. Robert McLaughlin Gallery. Oshawa, Joan Murray Artists' Files, Ray Mead.

<sup>4</sup> Ray Mead. Interview with Joan Murray, transcript, 4 Jan. 1979. Robert McLaughlin Gallery. Oshawa, Joan Murray Artists' Files, Ray Mead.

Still, I can't help but think of Ray Mead as *Fifth Business*.<sup>5</sup> He was one of just a handful of Canadian painters to follow abstract painting from its humble beginnings, past the boiling point, and well into its decline as a substantial avant-garde practice—yet without the bravado of many of his contemporaries. Joan Murray assures us that among those “visionary prophets of art about art, Ray Mead has a secure place.”<sup>6</sup> And indeed, there is much to admire within his keenly developed, highly sensitive tonal arrangements. Often they are so freely handled that his talent seems to hide behind a pretence of casual effortlessness. In the best of his work nothing is forced or trite. Such canvases fill so naturally with marks and colour, one after the other, that among the Canadian abstract expressionists he is a classicist of the first order.

Still, there never came the international success of a Jack Bush with his dazzling washes of tints so unabashedly prismatic in arrangement, or Guido Molinari, the model for cosmopolitan conceptualism, or Yves Gaucher whose monotone series of the 1960s were the standards for purity and excellence. Nor did he ever really match the swagger of his fellow Painters Eleven—the conquering hero, William Ronald; or Harold Town, the raging *enfant terrible*. Such were the circumstances for Mead despite early on being “ready for any top notch gallery in New York, or anywhere” according to Clement Greenberg who, at the time of his 1956 visit to Toronto, considered Mead (along with Jock Macdonald) as among “the most creative individuals without accents of statement introduced from other artists’ works anywhere.”<sup>7</sup> In the early 1950s he had, in fact, been offered a New York show at Charles Eagan’s gallery (representing such notables as Jackson

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<sup>5</sup> Robertson Davies (speaking as Tho. Overskou) describes *Fifth Business* “as those roles, which being neither those of the Hero nor Heroine, Confidante nor Villain, but which were nonetheless essential to bring about the Recognition or the dénouement... in drama and opera companies organized according to the old style.” (Robertson Davies, *Fifth Business* [Penguin Books: Markham, 1970] 5).

<sup>6</sup> Joan Murray, *Ray Mead: Two Decades* (Oshawa: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1982) 4.

<sup>7</sup> Jock Macdonald, letter to Maxwell Bates, 3 July 1957. McGill University, McCord Museum of Canadian History, Archives. In his letter to Bates, Macdonald makes reference to his many discussions with Greenberg as well as to letters written by Greenberg to Macdonald after the 1956 visit.

Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning) but unfortunately the gallery failed before the exhibition could materialize.<sup>8</sup> “He just missed it”, Mead said (of Eagan), “but he made *them* known.”<sup>9</sup> It wasn’t until 1999 (while he was represented by Christopher Cutts’ Gallery in Toronto) that Mead got his first solo exhibition in New York City, at the Howard Scott M13 Gallery (although he did have a show that toured Europe ten years previously).<sup>10</sup>

Throughout his career, Mead seemed to look out from the periphery, to be mentioned only in passing—simply a member of Painters Eleven (and a minor player at that)—in the canonical surveys of Canadian art. As an Englishman in Hamilton and then in Toronto with its lingering post-war Protestantism, he was, at best, on the margins of advanced cultural production in the 1940s and 50s. Yet, as Joan Murray notes, this distance from New York and from Paris—their messages delivered only as black and white magazine reproductions—allowed Mead and his group much more freedom in their ability to interpret the artistic world around them. A fascination with non-Western culture, for example, became just as important to Mead as the New York City art scene. And his work bears the struggles of this assimilation. As natural as it may seem to be, it is also marked by the struggle of ‘*working through*’, as Freud would say. Abstraction, its various processes and styles, remained always an intellectually challenging exercise for him.

In Montreal during the 1960s, Mead was the only non-French-speaking artist in Denyse Delrue’s stable (her “maverick” as he once said)—part of the scene, yet somewhat

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<sup>8</sup> Ross Fox, The Canadian Painters Eleven (1953-1960) From the Robert McLaughlin Gallery (Oshawa: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1994) 16. Dorothy Pfeiffer mentions a solo exhibition having taken place in New York in 1955 in her review of Mead’s 1963 showing at Montreal’s Galerie du Siècle. I’m sure she is referring to this ‘near’ show at Eagan’s, since there are no other references in the literature to a New York exhibition actually taking place (aside, of course, from the 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Exhibition of American Abstract Artists with ‘Painters Eleven’ of Canada exhibition at the Riverside Museum in 1956). (Dorothy Pfeiffer, “Mead at Galerie du Siècle”, Gazette, 16 Nov. 1963: 17).

<sup>9</sup> Ronald Weihs and Judith Sandiford, “Ray Mead Today”, Work Seen 9 (Summer 1991): 5.

<sup>10</sup> Ray Mead in Europe ’89 toured to Amsterdam, The Hague, Copenhagen and Madrid.



removed. Being neither Automatiste nor Plasticien, he would go through galleries thinking, “[I]t’s terrible to find that there is no one like you. You sort of feel very lonely and you think perhaps I’m all crooked or cracked up myself.”<sup>11</sup> Though he learned much from the Montreal artists (especially from Molinari, Gaucher and Tousignant) and their objectification of painting, his art remained rooted in the less fashionable English manner of his artistic schooling and in the Toronto style which had supported his initial breakthroughs into abstraction.<sup>12</sup>

A kind of nomadic meandering, defining Mead’s career geographically, also informed his painting stylistically. Always somehow slightly off kilter, his work reflects an ongoing contemplation of the most radical and exciting artistic advancements to take place in this country during its heroic years of high modernism. “I think painting is an old man’s game really”, Mead has said, “I think that where I am now is a slow development.”<sup>13</sup> But like the surfaces of his canvas, this development is interposed by a series of dramatic punctuations and radical stops and starts that mark out a deep-seated personal commitment to making art.

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Born in Watford in Hertfordshire, England in 1921, Mead came to Canada in 1946 with an appreciation of art nurtured in him by his grandmother. It was an appreciation rooted in European art and had more than just a little touch of the Englishman’s sensibility.

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<sup>11</sup> Mead, 29 Oct. 1981.

<sup>12</sup> Joan Murray writes: “By contrast with Automatists in Montreal, members of the group [Painters Eleven] exhibited a consistently more muted palette and a more lively surface, often addressing the canvas as a responsive object through bold stroking on a coloured ground.” (Joan Murray, Canadian Art in the Twentieth Century [Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1999] 102.)

<sup>13</sup> Mead, 4 Jan. 1979.

My grandmother [a woman who once overturned her dining room table so he could pretend it was a pirate ship]... I remember, when I was very young, she used to lug me off to the Tate Gallery and the National Gallery and she had quite advanced sense for her period of time, but never the less I was made to look at the Velasquez, his Rokeby Venus, I think it was called, where Venus has a cupid holding a mirror for her to look at and that's a very tonal painting that Velasquez.... She would [also] make me sit and look at Gauguin's Nevermore and Van Gogh in the Tate which not many people like her would think of looking at in those free terms. Then there was the Victoria and Albert of course, Turner's lovely drawings, rooms and rooms of those I remember.<sup>14</sup>

It was his grandmother's influence that instilled in Mead a love of large areas of colour. Mead remembers in her house a small painting by the tonalist James McNeill Whistler and a landscape by Gils Anderson (the 'Cézanne of South Africa'; something of a family myth, he was purportedly a distant relative). When Mead was five years old, she would bring him "lovely blue" wrapping paper, used for sugar and raisins, from the local store for him to draw on.<sup>15</sup>

It was also during these formative years that an uncle who could paint and draw gave Mead his first art training. Already at an early age he recalled having been determined to become an artist without really knowing exactly what that entailed. He also recalls (as seems to be obligatory for the biographies of so many artists) sketching by the harbour in St. Ives when he was just ten years old. An older man walking by stopped to admire his work. "You have a very living line", he commented, and then added coyly, "you don't know about me [yet], but I'm Ben Nicholson."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mead, 4 Jan. 1979.

<sup>15</sup> "I remember I used to get very annoyed, I used to try and draw on the grass [but] my pencil went right through [the paper]." (Mead, 4 Jan. 1979). Such a poetic memory would not be at all out of place in describing his later work from the 1980s and 1990s. Joan Murray writes: "Perhaps an early industry in making marks accounts for something open and playful in his works today. 'To begin with, mine are simple childhood marks, but controlled,' he says." (Murray, Ray Mead: Two Decades, 7)

<sup>16</sup> Val Ross, "A Very Living Line", Globe and Mail, 21 Sept. 1998: A14. Whether or not the memory is true (for Mead was the consummate story-teller, often more candid and entertaining in his interviews than his more serious Painters Eleven contemporaries—who generally recalled events differently than he did) it nonetheless shows the importance—in his mind at least—of English art on his development.

The first “real” artist to teach Mead (around 1934) was the amateur sea and landscape painter Charles Holmes, who, according to Mead, was “quite good”.<sup>17</sup> Then from 1937 until 1939 he studied at the Slade School of Art, where he was trained in draughtsmanship and painting by artists such as Randolph Schwabe, Gilbert Spencer and John Nash:

[Y]ou were taught to think rather than draw in a sense. Nobody criticized how you did anything, but you were asked why you did it. I mean for instance, one day you could be drawing a nude and you’d be drawing from the edges of the paper rather than from the middle shall we say, so you draw the empty spaces and still unite the middle. You could draw any size you wanted and the guy would not say it’s not neat or it’s not tidy, or anything like that, he’d ask you why you did it. It would make you think. The teachers were very good.<sup>18</sup>

He was influenced too by the major English artists of the time: John Piper, Ben Nicholson, Wyndham Lewis, Leon Underwood, Mathew Smith, Victor Pasmore, Mark Gertler, a young Henry Moore and Augustus John.<sup>19</sup> Such influences would account for the restraint of Mead’s early work, which was based much more on his ability to compose and on his technical draughtsmanship than on expression (it is important to note that nowhere does Mead cite French or German artists as being influential to his early work). After graduating from Slade, he studied engraving at Bolt Court Technical School,<sup>20</sup> and then briefly with Ben Nicholson at St. Ives. It was perhaps a hallmark of Mead’s early work

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<sup>17</sup> Mead, 4 Jan. 1979.

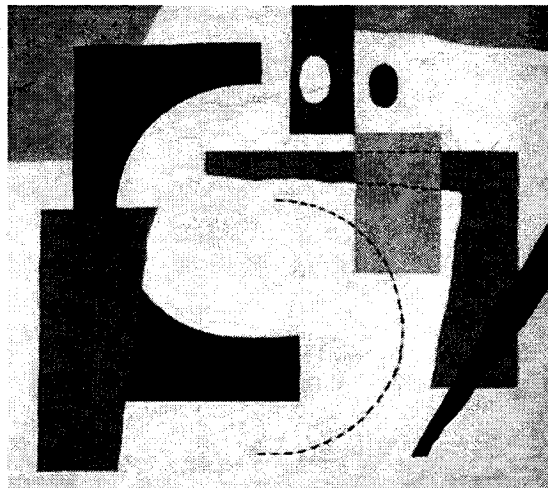
<sup>18</sup> Ray Mead, Interview with Joan Murray, transcript, 4 Sept. 1977. Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, Joan Murray Artists’ Files, Ray Mead.

<sup>19</sup> “In those days, oh I guess Augustus John influenced almost everybody, it was the only way to draw. You know, I think we even began to sign our drawings like him.” (Mead, 4 Jan. 1979)

<sup>20</sup> Established in as a guild and technical school in 1894 by the National Society of Lithographic Artists, Designers and Writers and Copperplate and Wood Engravers (later known as SLADE) it enabled lithographic artists to improve their craft and acquire a grasp of the latest photo-mechanical processes being developed in the late nineteenth century. Through a series of mergers it eventually became part of the London College of Communication, the largest constituent college of the University of the Arts London (now the biggest university in Europe dedicated to art, communication, design and related technologies). It gave Mead the technical skills to pursue a career in commercial design and illustration.

(and, as we shall see, an ongoing source of tension in his later paintings) that he “learned to think rather than draw”, as he said, “or to think before I drew, which is better.”<sup>21</sup>

They [his English art teachers] were quite advanced for their time, but they weren’t actually abstract. The first time I came into contact with abstraction was through John Piper [fig. 1]... I went to [a friend’s] office one day, I was still in school at the time, and I went to his office and saw a beautiful cover that John Piper had done. That was before he was doing his romantic church ruins. He was very hard-edge. He did abstractions in blacks, and reds, and whites I remember. I was very impressed with it.<sup>22</sup>



1. John Piper, *A Few Forms Moving I*, 1935  
Oil on canvas

Fresh out of school on the eve of the Second World War, like so many young British romantics, he joined the air force. “I used to carry paint around with me continually and leave stuff behind”, he remembered, “wherever I was, I’d leave a trail of paint tubes

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<sup>21</sup> Joan Murray, *Ray Mead: The Papers* (Oshawa: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1988) 12.

<sup>22</sup> Mead, 4 Sept. 1977. Though perhaps best known for his neo-romantic paintings of church ruins (from the 1940s onwards), John Piper’s work in the 1930s was marked by a strict tension between abstraction and realism. At the time, he was among the most important artists working in Britain. His abstract painting, while relatively short-lived, was fairly diverse. It ranged from a lyrical painterly style and lively use of collage (inspired by Picasso and Braque) into pure abstraction done in the international modernist style (these hard-edged, geometric abstractions were what Mead found so appealing). Studio visits to Constantin Brancusi, Jean (Hans) Arp, Jean Hélion and Alexander Calder in 1935 also had a noticeable influence on his work. Each of Piper’s painting seemed to mimic many of the major European artists of the time (though, as was the case with many of his British contemporaries, exploitations of surrealism and expressionism were lacking from his work). The later half of the 1930s, however, saw a return to representation. The abstract order and harmony of his work became unsettled by the onset of war and an attempt to find a more heroic and romantic means of expressing the permanence of his English heritage.

and brushes I couldn't pack."<sup>23</sup> In 1939 he got his first taste of American-style painting on a trip to New York City as part of the Arnold Plan (in which R.A.F. members were sent for training in a neutral country). He was immediately drawn to the semi-abstract geometric shapes of Stuart Davis:

I don't think he was too well regarded at that time. There were other more flamboyant characters... I saw [his work] in a downtown gallery in New York and... I was so impressed with it that I found a little book on him, a very small book, about four by five inches, I was so very impressed with it, the lettering, the gas signs. To me that reflected what America was all about. To me, as a stranger.<sup>24</sup>

Early on in the war, while returning from a mission over Germany, Mead's plane lost an engine and crash-landed at the base. Presuming both pilots were dead, medics didn't bother sending out an ambulance until they saw the two crewmen staggering away from the wreckage just before the plane burst into flames. His co-pilot lost a leg, while Mead suffered lower back damage. After that he was stationed in North America, training pilots at Mount Hope airfield base (now Hamilton's John C. Munro International Airport) as part of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. He made a brief return overseas after the war but eventually settled in Hamilton in 1946, intent on starting an art career. There he would remain until 1952. It was in Hamilton that he met and married his first wife, Mary Lockett, with whom he had two daughters, Judy and Dede.

The art climate in English Canada at the time, though changing, was still under the sway of the Group of Seven and not particularly receptive to abstraction. Landscape dominated the annual shows held by the Canadian Group of Painters and the Ontario Society of Artists. Mead's wife recalls the reception his work got at one such show:

I remember starting to howl when he had his first paintings hung and I was so proud to go and see them and they were hiding behind a door and when you opened the door there was Ray's painting. Wasn't that dreadful. Can

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<sup>23</sup> Weihs and Sandiford, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Mead, 4 Sept. 1977.

you imagine putting a painting there. He was really ashamed of the thing that it was there...<sup>25</sup>

Yet, in Hamilton Mead also met a kindred spirit in Hortense Gordon, freely acknowledging that “she educated me more than any art school.”<sup>26</sup> Thirty-five years his senior, and a friend and former student of Hans Hofmann, she was among the first Canadian painters to turn to ‘American-type’ Abstract Expressionism with her oil paintings from about 1946 or 1947.<sup>27</sup> Her work could loosely be described as a personal take on late Cubism. With paint that was rough, rugged and coarsely applied, it was dominated by colour tensions, by spatial or formal relations, and by what she called ‘negative and positive surges’, her own interpretation of Hofmann’s ‘push and pull’ theory of plasticity. Ross Fox writes that “her paintings are brawny rather than cerebral or spiritual, and have an unabashed rough-hewn cast.”<sup>28</sup>

I found her a very enlightened lady [Mead recalled]. She showed me ways of thinking that hadn’t occurred to me, *and I think this happened a lot*. She was a marvelous person. Her whole being was what she did and she got very little reward out of it, but she believed in what she did. She was very sincere and her whole house was full of treasures, to her and to others, people like myself: books, good Japanese prints, and every wonderful thing. You could just sit at the table and go through books you weren’t able to afford to buy and not speak. She’d read a book and you’d read a book....<sup>29</sup>

It was Gordon who convinced Mead to participate in the 1950 Jubilee Year Canadian Art Show at the Art Gallery of Toronto. It was considered at the time to be the “most ambitious showing of current Canadian art ever undertaken.”<sup>30</sup> “It’s funny, I often

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<sup>25</sup> Mary Mead speaking at the end of an interview between Ray Mead and Joan Murray. (Mead, 4 Jan. 1979)

<sup>26</sup> Weihs and Sandiford, 5.

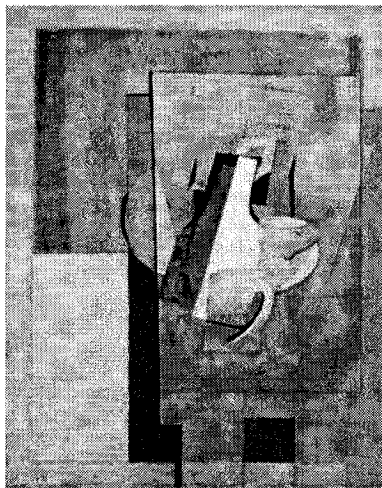
<sup>27</sup> The difficulty of chronologically ordering Gordon’s oeuvre has yet to be resolved. See Fox, 10. See also Paddy O’Brien, A Dedicated Life: Hortense Crompton Mattice Gordon, 1886-1961 (Chatham: Thames Art Gallery, Chatham Cultural Centre, 1993) 18.

<sup>28</sup> Fox, 11.

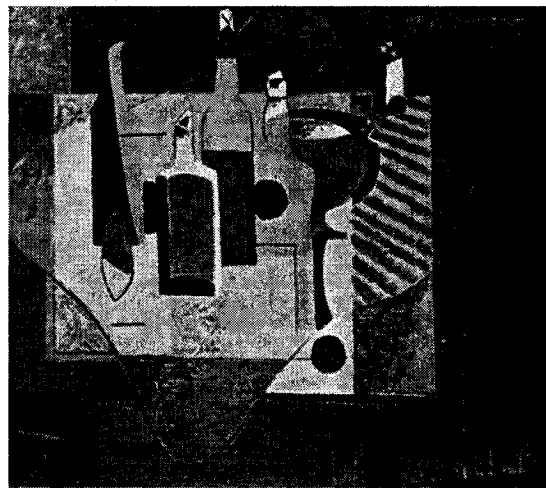
<sup>29</sup> Mead, 4 Sept. 1977.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Duval, “Shining Hour For Art”, Saturday Night, 21 Mar. 1950: 8. The bulk of the show consisted of 154 paintings (by artists from coast to coast) and brought together “a number of pioneers of Canadian art with the great group of younger painters who have benefited from the pioneers’ struggles....There could be no happier opportunity to salute their achievement than during this current exhibition which presents a cross-section of what is best in Canadian painting today.”

wonder why I was accepted by that show there. She [Gordon] found out what I did and she phoned me....”<sup>31</sup> In Saturday Night, Paul Duval singled out Mead’s Still Life as representing a “new spirit in Canadian paintings... which brings artists closer to the core of form, structure and creative design.”<sup>32</sup> It was Mead’s first big break in the art world (and the beginnings of a revolution for English Canadian painting): “[T]hat [show] sort of established me with other people that I got to know there—Harold Town and Walter Yarwood—we began to seek each other out.”<sup>33</sup>



2. Ben Nicholson  
1945 (Still Life), 1945  
Oil on canvas



3. Bottles in the Evening, 1950  
Oil, charcoal and graphite on canvas

In 1952, at the eightieth annual exhibition of the Ontario Society of Artists, at the Art Gallery of Toronto, Mead’s Bottles in the Evening (1950, fig. 3) won the \$500 Taber Dulmage Fehleley purchase award (given out to encourage Canadian painting). From more than five hundred entries by artists all across the country, it was selected as “the picture

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<sup>31</sup> Mead, 4 Sept. 1977.

<sup>32</sup> Duval, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Mead, 4 Sept. 1977.

which contributed most to progress in Canadian painting.”<sup>34</sup> Subdued in colour and relying primarily on line and form, the overlapping silhouettes in this work owed much to his early English training, and in particular, to an infatuation with the austere work of Ben Nicholson (fig. 2), whom he’d gotten to know personally. Vaguely cubist, but with an emphasis on tone and shape rather than planes or facets, the painting showed that Mead was clearly more concerned with a classical rather than a baroque dynamic. “It’s a shame that I did miss the expressionisms. I knew nothing about them. I was brought up in a totally classic thing as I said, Nicholson, Piper.”<sup>35</sup>

I was a flat painter. I never liked too much animation or animated surface. I thought it an excuse for bad shape. Now this comes back from my early training where you can’t flatter a bad shape into being good by making the surface like a ploughed field.<sup>36</sup>

Though there was a chic, sophisticated fluidity to much of Mead’s work from the early 1950s—especially in his abstract watercolours and ink drawings—the work continued to rely on draughtsmanship, in much the same way that Bottles in the Evening (fig. 2) had, to create balance and rhythm. Line was used pleasingly, in the service of shape, rather than urgently or specifically as an engaging element in its own right; and colour was harmonious, not evocative. Works as varied as Still Life on a Green Field (1950, fig. 6),<sup>37</sup> Fantasy, Pink and Green (1951, fig. 4), and Untitled (1953, fig. 5) seemed to be working through some of the major modernist tenets (Cubism, Surrealism, Constructivism) as a series of watered down exercises. In these works, the eye seldom wanders too far from the centre and the feeling is one of composure more than of experimentation. “My aim is toward clarity and the elimination of obstacles between the idea and the painting and

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<sup>34</sup> “Bottles in the Evening”, Star, 14 Mar. 1952. Jack Bush, Grant MacDonald, A.J. Casson, John Martin and Sydney H. Watson formed the judging panel that narrowed the 500 submissions to the eventual 105 paintings and 10 sculptures shown in the exhibition.

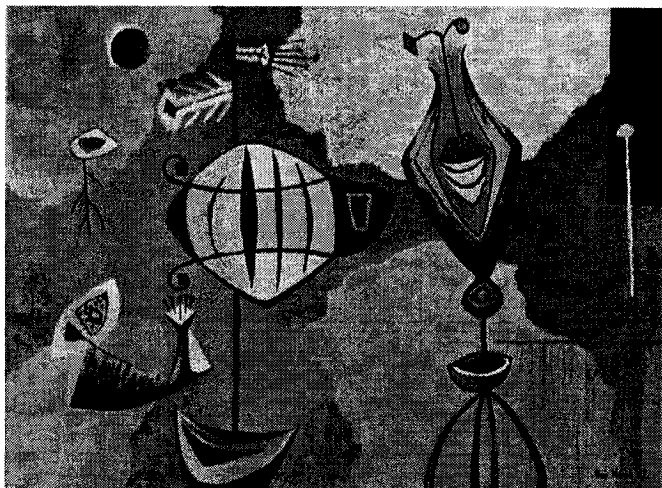
<sup>35</sup> Mead, 4 Sept. 1977.

<sup>36</sup> Mead, 4 Sept. 1977.

<sup>37</sup> This work was Mead’s submission to the OSA’s 1951 annual exhibition.



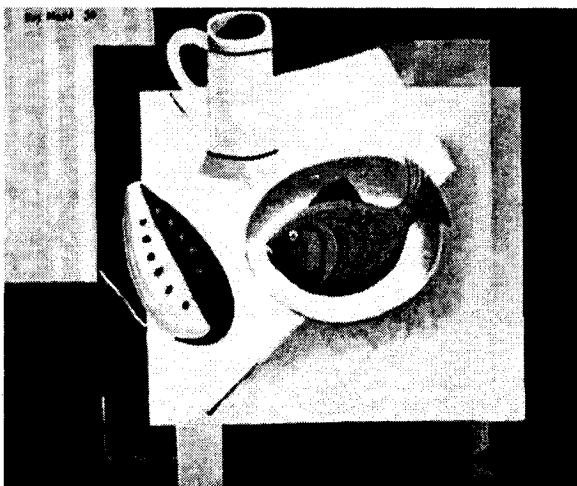
between the idea and the viewer”, Mead said;<sup>38</sup> the overall effect seems to be that Mead illustrates rather than expresses his ideas.



4. **Fantasy, Pink and Green, 1951**  
Gouache, ink, graphite and sand on  
deckle-edged paper board



5. **Untitled, 1953**  
Pen and ink, on paper



6. **Still Life On A Green Field, 1950**  
Oil on Canvas



7. **Franz Kline**  
**Untitled II, c.1952**  
Brush and ink and tempera  
on paper collage

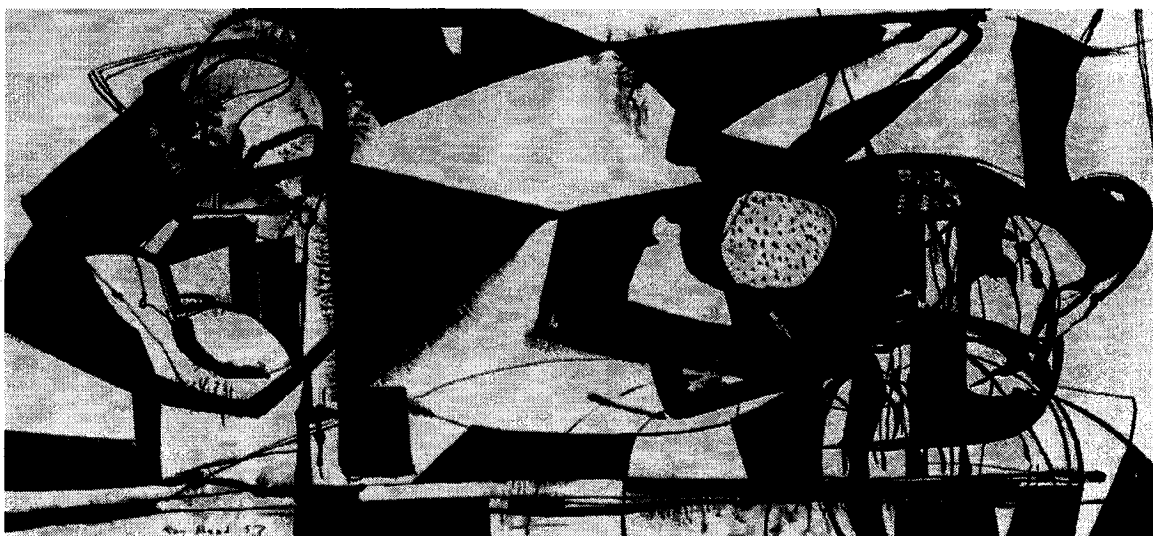
<sup>38</sup> Ray Mead, Artist's Statement, Canadian Abstract Exhibition (Oshawa: South Ontario Galleries, 1952).

In 1953, the same year that Painters Eleven was founded, Mead made another important trip to New York City. There he saw, again at Charlie Eagan's Gallery, works by Robert Motherwell and Franz Kline (fig. 7).<sup>39</sup> "There were little drawings on telephone book pages and all the type was painted out with white paint just to leave his blacks—which *then cleared my mind*. They weren't calligraphy, he was painting white areas as well as black areas!"<sup>40</sup> Kline did not paint figuratively—putting distinct contours on top of the support—but was working towards an all-over composition (though in a manner quite unlike that of Jackson Pollock) in which shape, line, colour and space (positive and negative) were all part of the same overarching gesture. His work had very little to do with contemplation or observation. Instead it was concerned with tension and thrust. Each brushstroke was vibrant and filled with action, yet held in check by the overall composition of the work so that rather than exploding outwards (as the painting of de Kooning seemed to) his work seemed to pulling from the edge. The effect was an overall tautness that could fly apart at any moment should one of the brushstrokes be broken. This is what gave the work its immediacy. And it was this immediacy of 'drawing' that "cleared" Mead's mind. The influence could be seen almost immediately in drawings such as Untitled (1953, fig. 8) that seemed to seek relief from his draughtsman's tendencies. Less concerned with contour, line is exploited for its direct emotive possibilities, the composition becoming more dynamic and less centralized.

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<sup>39</sup> "I went down to New York and I met with a dealer called Eagan... There was that whole group there [Kline, Motherwell, de Kooning, Guston] and he was surprised that I knew about it.... He said one thing that 'a least you coming in here and talking to me has stopped me from going crazy' because nobody was going in. He was a very fine guy, he was the best at that time and nobody came." (Mead, 4 Sept. 1977.)

<sup>40</sup> Mead, 4 Sept. 1977.



8. *Untitled*, 1953  
Ink and mixed media on paper

The brashness of such American-type painting combined with the excitement of the founding of Painters Eleven.<sup>41</sup> It opened Mead's work to the expressive possibilities of working with paint. In fact, expressive possibility and artistic freedom seemed to be the underpinnings of Painters Eleven's formation. The style of the Group of Seven, especially in its more dogmatic OSA incarnation, had dominated up until the 1950s.<sup>42</sup> And remarkably, A.Y. Jackson, writing for the *Toronto News* from 1942-1946, still represented "the heart and soul of vital painting in... most of English-speaking Canada."<sup>43</sup> The future members of

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<sup>41</sup> The members of Painters Eleven were: William Ronald, Kazuo Nakamura, Tom Hodgson, Harold Town, Ray Mead, Walter Yarwood, Oscar Cahén, Jack Bush, Alexandra Luke, Jock (J.W.G) Macdonald and Hortense Gordon. The group was formed in November 1953 after an exhibition (*Abstracts at Home*) by seven of these artists was organized by William Ronald for the Robert Simpson department store. They met in the studio of Alexandra Luke after a publicity shoot with the aim of organizing more exhibitions for themselves. Though the members of Painters Eleven differed widely in background, experience and ambition, they were all united by their interest in contemporary international art and in the belief that the exhibition of their work would be better achieved collectively than individually. Their aim was to raise the profile of abstract art in Canada. They chose the name, Painters Eleven, as an ironic reference to the Group of Seven whose influence in the province had largely held back the acceptance of experimental abstract art. In 1960, the group officially disbanded having achieved their goals. They received critical acclaim for their work both nationally and internationally and helped to create a vibrant art market in Toronto, where they were hugely influential for a subsequent generation of painters.

<sup>42</sup> The frustration of more avant-garde minded artists could be summed up by Graham Coughtry's famous quote from *The Varsity* (the University of Toronto's student newspaper) when he wrote that it was as though "every damn tree in the country has been painted."

<sup>43</sup> Dennis Reid, *A Concise History of Canadian Painting* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988) 247.

Painters Eleven banded together in opposition to this national movement, which had prevented Modernism from growing in English Canada.<sup>44</sup> Their aim was to exchange artistic ideas and to raise the level of sophistication of Toronto painting so that it was more in line with what was happening elsewhere in the world. But most importantly, they wanted to create exhibiting opportunities for themselves. The jury system had weighed heavy on most of them.<sup>45</sup> So the importance of 'freedom' in the group's conception could be seen not only in their diversity of mannerisms (though most members had a tendency towards vigorous brushwork organized around roughly organic cubist shapes), it could also be read in their various artist's statements: "There is no manifesto here for the time. There is no jury but time.... But there is a profound regard for the consequences of our complete freedom."<sup>46</sup>

Because of their attempt to break-free from the lingering dominance of landscape painting in one swift blow, Painters Eleven seemed to burst onto the scene in 1954. And by the following year George Elliot had observed a "gentle revolution" in Ontario art. In his review of the 1955 exhibition of the Ontario Society of Artists he noted an unusual new look. For the first time the strongest section was nonobjective painting—the core of it by seven members of Painters Eleven.<sup>47</sup> The relative suddenness of this revolution was aided by the fact that there were only a handful of abstract painters working in English Canada at the time (and all but a couple were already members of Painters Eleven). As a result, the development of modern art in Ontario did not have the same continuity that it did in the

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<sup>44</sup> The foreword (likely written by Harold Town who penned most of Painters Eleven's statements) to their 1957 exhibition at the Park Gallery (Oct. 31 to Nov. 16) showed a remarkable awareness of their place in the world. There was always a little tension between their national and international aspirations: "What might seem novel here in Ontario is an accepted fact everywhere else. Painting is now a universal language; what in us is provincial will provide the colour and accent; the grammar, however, is a part of the world."

<sup>45</sup> "We were tired of being told where to hang, how to hang, and when to hang", said Harold Town. (Harold Town, Interview with Joan Murray, transcript, 11 Feb. 1979. Robert McLaughlin Gallery. Oshawa, Joan Murray Artists' Files, Harold Town.

<sup>46</sup> Statement from the second Painters Eleven exhibition held at the Roberts Gallery Feb. 11-26, 1955.

<sup>47</sup> George Elliot, "The Search for Vitality", Canadian Art 12 (Spring 1955): 95-98.

United States or Europe, which seemed to go through well-defined cubist and surrealist phases. Instead it was brought about by individuals rather than a progression of stylistic movements. This also meant, according to Ross Fox, that the “[t]he Toronto version of Abstract Expressionism was in fact less heterogeneous than the New York version, which was multi-faceted. [But that] Abstract Expressionism also had a longer and, in a sense, fuller life in Toronto.”<sup>48</sup>

However, more than his contemporaries, Mead (who had largely avoided the stylistic pressures of the Group of Seven because of his British upbringing) remained under the influence of European Expressionism: painters like Pierre Soulages and in particular Nicolas de Staël (fig.11), whose Tachism can be seen in Bouquet<sup>49</sup> (1956, fig. 9) and Unfinished Walk (1955, fig. 10). Ross Fox points out that “[a]lthough Mead was attracted to the New York School, he felt himself more a European painter at this time.”<sup>50</sup>

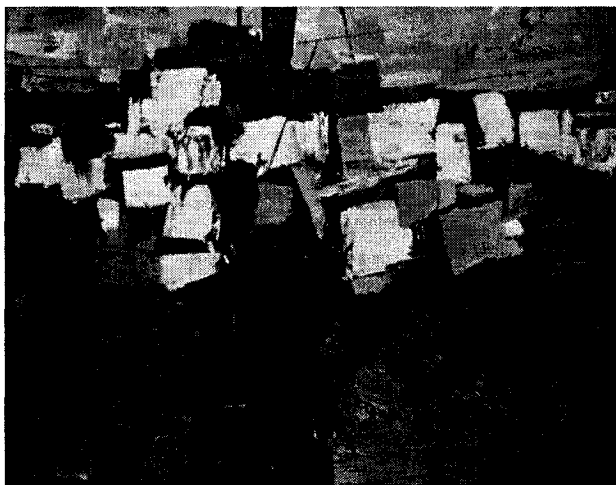
Over the next several years, Mead’s work grew rough, tense, and direct—less doted upon—his motion-laden impasto jumping from the surface of each canvas with an urgency equal to the air of experimentation he now found growing in Toronto.

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<sup>48</sup> Fox, 7.

<sup>49</sup> Bouquet, now part of the Robert McLaughlin Gallery collection, was purchased by Alexandra Luke at Mead’s two-man show (*Recent Paintings*), with Walter Yarwood, at Av Isacc’s Greenwich Gallery in 1957.

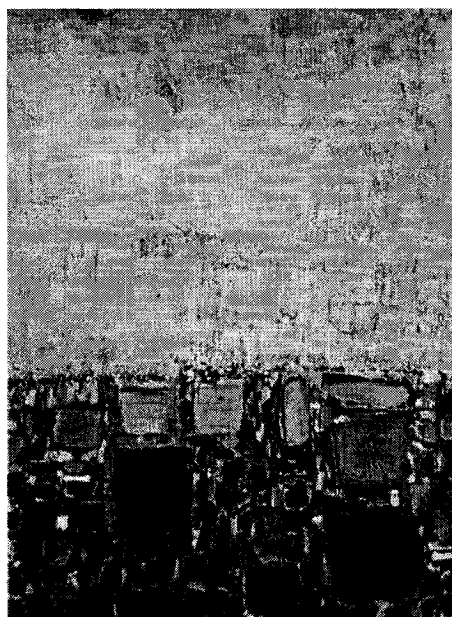
<sup>50</sup> Fox, 17. In a 1956 review of painting at London’s Tooth Gallery (England), Patrick Heron (who had studied at Slade at the same time as Mead) commented that “since 1945 no foreign painter has had such an influence on the English avant-garde as de Staël.” (Patrick Heron, “London: Exhibition of Paintings from 1952 to 1955 at Tooth Gallery”, *Arts* 30 [May 1956]: 12). Mead recalled of this period that “things were changing somehow, and I don’t mean just in England or America. The same thing was going on in Germany and in a different way, Spain, and France. It was in the air; people were abandoning the old painting. Like after the previous war, suddenly we came out wanting something...” (Weihs and Sandiford, 5).



9. Bouquet, 1956  
Oil on canvas



10. Unfinished Walk, 1955  
Oil on canvas



11. Nicolas de Staël  
Composition of Roof Tops, 1952  
Oil on board

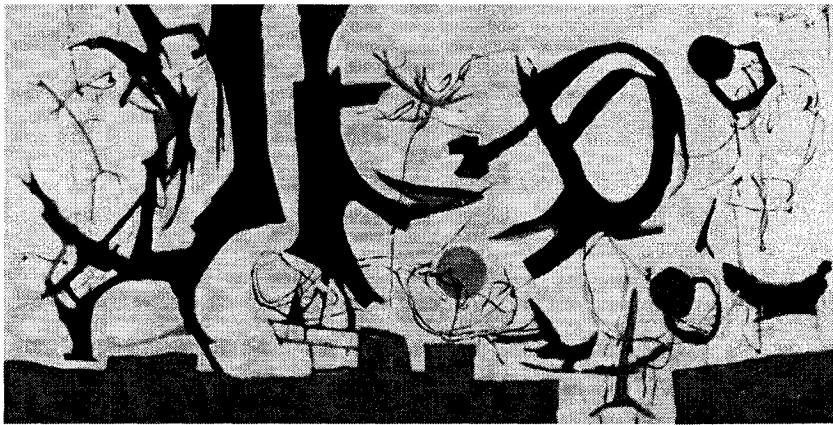
“As far as I’m concerned, in paint, it was the world I lived in at that time. It was the only answer to anything I ever had”, Mead said of Painters Eleven.<sup>51</sup> Where Hortense Gordon had opened him up to ‘Hofmann idealism’, a rather precise notion of painting that

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<sup>51</sup> Mead, 4 Sept. 1977. “As soon as Painters Eleven was founded we all went farther than when we had shown in the Society of Canadian artists....”

was expansive, to be sure, but not entirely out of line with his carefully considered English art training, the rest of the group—and William Ronald in particular—showed him a boisterous new way: one that was loose in composition, with an all-over application:

When I suddenly met Bill, there was a whole new liberty, which was good for me. Mrs. Gordon gave me some sense of order.... She made me understand [the] in[s] and out[s] of painting, not the normal composition I had been used to. Another use of colour—not the impressionistic base, the illusionistic colour. Then on the other hand, Bill Ronald illustrated to me the liberty of not being too serious about oneself... *we were just painting* [...] I think in our own way, perhaps he was very different to myself, but he understood me better than any of the other painters.<sup>52</sup>



12. William Ronald  
**Slow Movement**, 1953  
Casein, automobile lacquer,  
duco and graphite on canvas

Mead's fine English sense of line, encircling elegant forms, had been exchanged for small, anxious strokes applied in brisk swipes of the brush or palette knife (Unfinished Walk (1955, fig.10), Bouquet (1956, fig. 9) and Crescendo (1957) are the works most often reproduced as representative of this 'early' mature style). But this opening out into expressionism had not come as easily or naturally to Mead as it did to some of his young friends; for him art-making was always an academic as much as an emotional process

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<sup>52</sup> Mead, 4 Sept. 1977. Mead and Ronald often worked together in Ronald's Bloore Street studio. "He and I were very good friends. I helped him [name paintings].... The terrible thing about Duco was when you were in the studio, you could get asphyxiated because of the fumes. We always got headaches. If you sat there too long you fainted. He used to paint with rubber gloves, so he wouldn't get his hands dirty. It was amusing, because I was always filthy. He could paint in his 'going out' clothes."

("Ray was the most intellectual of the eleven of us", remembered Ronald).<sup>53</sup> Unlike Tom Hodgson or Oscar Cahén or Walter Yarwood, Mead was forced to abandon 'drawing' altogether as a means of working expressionism into his paintings. In this sense, he was unique among the eleven, especially in the early years of the group's formation. The facets in Bouquet were not drawn onto the surface, but rather, were held together, partly by differences of tone, but mostly by the various directions and velocities of the brush marks, causing the energetic composition to appear as an event rather than a depiction.

Yet what is hypnotically captivating about such works is not the tenseness of the brushwork, but its varying degrees of crudeness. There was an ambiguity Mead seemed to feel about the fine distinction between (high) art and (offensive) gesture, as if he could not in good conscience put himself completely at ease with this new style. It was somewhat oppositional to his technical schooling (and in comparison to the precise linear manner of the English abstractionists, North American Abstract Expressionism was down-right hedonistic). He was committed to the newfound ideas swirling about him concerning gesture and expression but would take years to reconcile them in his work. For Mead, there was always a certain degree of trepidation—a trembling—between composing and experiencing a work of art. "You can't paint anything into a painting that you haven't got to put in", he would later say, "and if you can't do it well enough and take the time to think about and search it out, it will always look slick and... unhappy."<sup>54</sup> The more one looks at Bouquet the more it softens in tonal arrangement. Unable to call to fruition the promise of its initial exploding gesture, it hesitates, caught somewhere between Turner or Whistler and the chauvinism of the New York school.<sup>55</sup> What may have been counted as a

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<sup>53</sup> Speaking at the opening of Ray Mead: Two Decades. (Kay Kritzwiser, "Mead's Time Has Come", Globe and Mail, June 1982.)

<sup>54</sup> Weihs and Sandiford, 8.

<sup>55</sup> "I mean the man I would have to relate to I suppose, I keep coming back to the darn fool Turner. You know I was brought up on him and I still keep going back and admiring his colour... I would draw a direct



positive in 1956 becomes decidedly awkward (albeit ceaselessly interesting) fifty years later: the work looks both old-fashioned and fresh at the same time (where the work of some of Mead's contemporaries simply looks dated). Concisely put by Rodolphe de Repentigny, "Mead develops cubist ideas, generally in lively tones."<sup>56</sup>

A way out of this aesthetic bind arrived in 1957, with the (now almost) mythic visit of Clement Greenberg to Toronto. The visit was arranged by William Ronald. Mead recalled it in 1977:

My memories of it are rather nice actually. You know, we all waited for the great arrival and he arrived, a very nice person, got out of his car, Jock's car as a matter of fact, and I showed a rather large black painting [now destroyed] with nothing else in it. I thought he'd laugh at it. To my amazement he didn't. He said it's rather funny that you're doing that, and [Clyfford] Still, he's doing the same thing.... [I commented] "I suppose it's a very simple thing." And immediately he [said] "No, it's not simple. Actually it's very complex.".... After that, he made me think a little. I know it became powerful teaching.<sup>57</sup>

It was indeed a valuable lesson for him. Several years earlier, he had abandoned the 'black' theme when Jock Macdonald had chastised him for sending Dark Viaduct (Robert McLaughlin Gallery) to the 1955 Canadian National Exhibition: "You're going out of your mind. It's just an empty black painting."<sup>58</sup> "Any remark he [Macdonald] made about painting I always treated with tremendous value. He always had a way of seeing..."<sup>59</sup>

Greenberg was also impressed with Mead's collages. "You see, I was doing collage long before they were seen very much in Canada using sacking and painting a canvas black

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line for myself [to his work]... no one else in the world ever sees this, but it doesn't alter the fact that I was brought up on him and I know him better than most Canadian painters." (Mead, 4 Jan. 1979)

<sup>56</sup> Rodolphe de Repentigny, "At Last, the "Eleven" at Their Best", translation of "Images et Plastiques, Enfin, "Les Onze" à Leur Meilleu", La Presse, 3 May 1958.

<sup>57</sup> Mead, 4 Sept. 1977.

<sup>58</sup> Joan Murray, Ray Mead: Two Decades 8. Jack Bush also told him "God, you've gone too far" but Mead was, as he said, "very proud because they hung it right next to a Borduas." (Weihs and Sandiford, 4)

<sup>59</sup> "I realized that this man was searching—far beyond most people's ideas of what you would like to do... I would say he was the main painter, he was the only level headed one... I would still say that Jock came out quietly as the one who guided us." (Mead, 4 Sept. 1977)

and stretching things across it and things like that.”<sup>60</sup> Greenberg suggested he work one of them up to nine feet, but at the time Mead couldn’t afford the cost of materials.

It could be argued, however, that more significant than his association with Painters Eleven, was Mead’s relocation to Montreal in 1958 by MacLaren’s, a prominent advertising agency where he worked as art director (eventually becoming vice-president).<sup>61</sup> Working alongside his fellow group members in Toronto had imprinted upon him a specific kind of modernism—a modernism in which the expressive possibilities of painting were based on the unique mannerisms of the individual artist. It was a notion reinforced by Greenberg’s visit and his observations that “what you have to do is to realize within yourselves you have the personal abilities to say something as profound as anywhere in the world.”<sup>62</sup> According to Greenberg, “I really feel you people might have a better chance of

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<sup>60</sup> Mead, 4 Jan. 1979.

<sup>61</sup> Mead’s Appointment as senior art director of MacLaren’s Advertising Co., Montreal, was significant enough to be reported in the *Montreal Star* (“MacLaren Advertising Appointment”, 17 Oct. 1957). He had been a senior art director in the Toronto office for the previous three years, but was asked to go to the Montreal office and “make changes”. “I’m not sure now what they were,” Mead remembered, “but they made it worth my while” (Marlene Hore, “Vodka and Mead”, *News Print* 7 [1980] 2-4). Already with the company for eleven years at that point, he had received awards from both the Montreal and Toronto Art Directors Clubs.

Being an art director, Mead didn’t run into the same problems that other Canadian artists—like Jack Bush, who eventually sought psychotherapy (Mead, 4 Jan. 1979)—had in keeping his commercial and artistic ambitions from blurring. “I didn’t have the battle that a lot of the others had in the sense of being critical and pure... I didn’t want to be an illustrator. I didn’t want to be a designer. So being an art director, which is purely using other people to put together an idea that you... have, has made painting and keeping it the way I want it much easier” (Mead, 4 Sept. 1977). “I think perhaps they learned to put hot licks on things to make them what they weren’t... I mean I have all the commercial tricks, which I happened by sheer luck of my environment and my beginnings, to avoid. I didn’t have to do this, I picked other people in my job to do the hot licks” (Mead, 4 Jan. 1979).

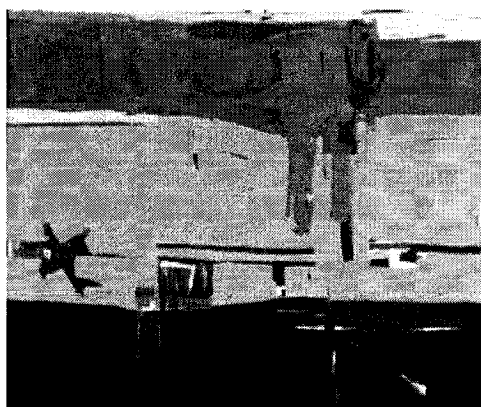
The environment at MacLaren’s was encouraging, “with a lot of interesting people” around. Many of the staff were also writers and painters on the side (especially at the Toronto office). “It had a super man there then who would be the general manager a fellow called Ferris. James T. Ferris and he was a most encouraging man to be young around... anytime I had something to show him he was the first one there with his friends to come and see what these young fellows were doing...” (Mead, 4 Jan. 1979). Bertram Brooker, “who was a good writer and an excellent draughtsman”, also worked for MacLaren’s and was someone Mead “admired very much.” “I found him a very impressive man. He impressed me so much as a matter of fact that I had a book by Kandinsky and I really didn’t want to part with it but he offered to buy it from me so I had to sell it.” (Mead, 4 Sept. 1977).

It is important to remember, however, that despite the encouraging atmosphere and the support from the rest of Painters Eleven, the demands of his job made Mead primarily a weekend and holiday painter for much of the early part of his early career.

<sup>62</sup> Macdonald.

getting something important out of yourselves simply because you're so much more open and ready to take experience as it comes."<sup>63</sup>

The move to Montreal, followed by the break-up of Painters Eleven (in 1960) came at just about the right time for Mead. "We were looking at each other too much. A little bit of everything was rubbing off on everybody else."<sup>64</sup> In Montreal he was challenged by a new conception of painting that was intellectual rather than emotive in nature. It relied heavily on flat colour and strict composition rather than gestural brushwork to convey ideas (over visceral feelings). The work seemed foreign to him, yet at the same time reinforced a push already in his work towards simplification, open forms, and big organic shapes. It was happening, as early as 1958 with his Montreal-inspired Beaurepaire Summer (1958, fig. 13). Thick and painterly, scarred over and taut with the surface tension of handling, the painting began to organize itself into flat areas of more highly keyed colour, replacing earlier tonal organizations with prismatic combinations. Mead recalled: "I had always leaned towards the flat painting but this was the turning point. When I hit Montreal, I saw what I call my weakness... I never quite painted hard-edge but let's just say the drawing, the colour, were all one."<sup>65</sup>



13. Beaurepaire Summer, 1958  
Oil on canvas

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<sup>63</sup> Macdonald.

<sup>64</sup> Hore, 3.

<sup>65</sup> Mead, 17 June 1981.

The most advanced work being done in Montreal in those years was more in tune with (though certainly not informed by) the colour field painting that Clement Greenberg saw as a way out of the swelling mannerisms accompanying the decline of Abstract Expressionism. It was a conception of painting he surely would have suggested to Mead in their 1957 meeting.<sup>66</sup> Building their paintings on a foundation of strict intellectualism, Montreal artists presented Mead with a “tougher school of painting”<sup>67</sup> that left little room for lyrical flights of fancy. The younger painters—Molinari (fig. 14), Gaucher (fig. 15), Tousignant—opened Mead’s eyes to new possibilities. “I wasn’t the little smart ass I thought I was”, he said.<sup>68</sup> Their work was much different “from the more decorative style, the specialistic style that was happening in Toronto, the surface decorating school... these people went in another way... You began to draw back from clever brushwork.” “I didn’t go the whole distance”, Mead remembered, “to terribly flat painting, because I still felt that it didn’t quite give me enough of what I wanted. I like some emotional quality in my surface...”

Of particular importance to him was the work of Yves Gaucher:

You begin to analyze what he was doing.... It gave you another attitude towards the thing called painting. In other words, the painting became an object all of its own. It wasn’t an emotion on a piece of canvas only. It

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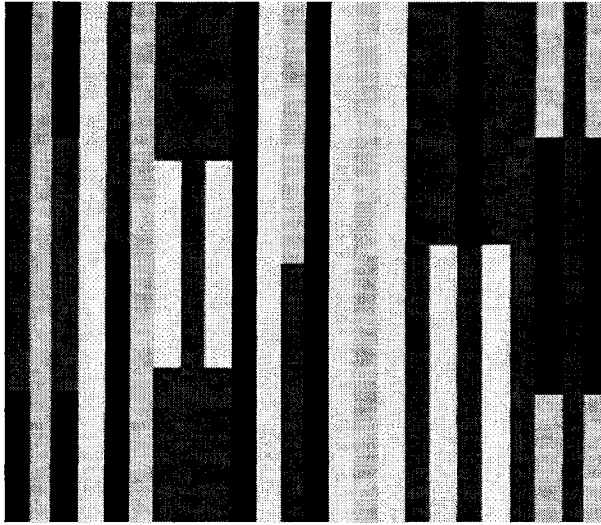
<sup>66</sup> Both Joan Murray and Ross Fox describe Greenberg telling Jock Macdonald and Jack Bush to thin their oils and to paint as they did in watercolour. See also Clement Greenberg, “After Abstract Expressionism”, *Art International* 6 (Oct. 1962): 24-31.

<sup>67</sup> Ray Mead, Interview with Joan Murray, transcript, 17 June 1981. Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, Joan Murray Artists’ Files, Ray Mead.

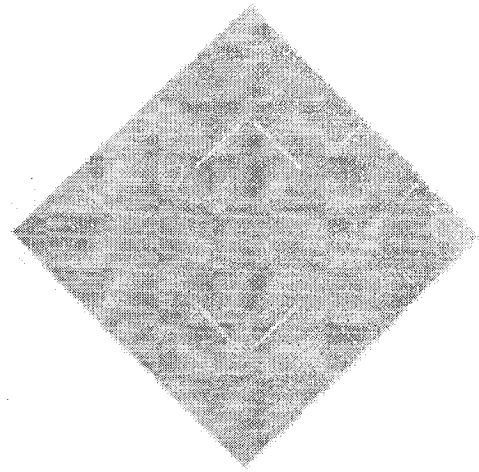
<sup>68</sup> Mead, 29 Oct. 1981. Mead was friendly with almost all the major Montreal artists, but especially admired Molinari, Gaucher, and Tousignant’s tough approach to painting:

You would sit with Molinari and he would simply say “I’m not a painter” and that made me think again. “Don’t call me a painter, I’m something else because I’m not trying to create paintings. I’m thinking my way through something else... Don’t confuse me with people who just think about brushes. I’m taking painting in another direction if I want to go to it.” Even more recently I saw his show. It was here last year and there was all this monochrome and nothing else in them. They were enormous but they were the most beautiful pieces of painting I’d seen in a long, long time. They were hard to take but they were painting. (Mead, 17 June 1981)

became a living unit, a living thing. It could have nothing in it but it...  
*became a painting.*<sup>69</sup>



14. Guido Molinari  
*Equivalence*, 1959  
Acrylic on canvas



15. Yves Gaucher,  
*Circular Motion*, 1965  
Acrylic on canvas

It was also in Montreal that Mead had his first real commercial success as an artist:

Just after I had moved down here, Painters Eleven had a show at École des Beaux Arts and Paterson Ewen happened to be there. He sought me out and introduced me to a lady who, he said, wanted to meet me. It happened to be Denyse Delrue. At the time she had a gallery on Crescent Street and she began to show my work, I mean right away as soon as I got there... when you look back now, she had almost, at that time anyway, the pick of what you now think of as Montreal.<sup>70</sup>

It was the first time in his career that Mead had been paid to paint. “That was when I started to paint bigger”, Mead recalled.<sup>71</sup> And he found Delrue’s enthusiasm was infectious.

A fixture on the Montreal art scene, she always knew who to invite to her openings.

“Everybody would be there, the painters particularly. She made sure the painters got

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<sup>69</sup> Mead, 17 June 1981.

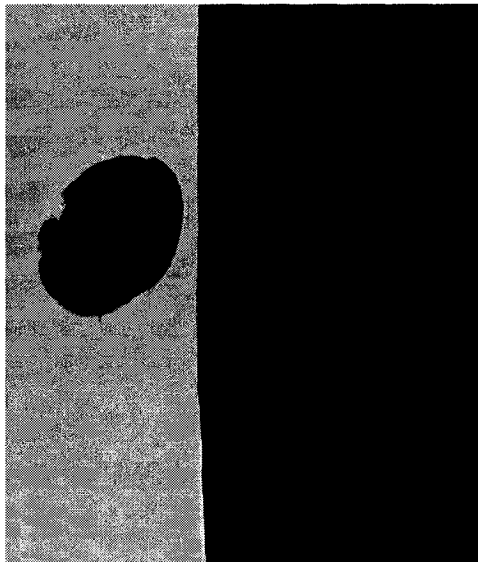
<sup>70</sup> Mead, 17 June 1981. For the Montreal scene, one needn’t have looked further than Galerie Denyse Delrue, which represented: Guido Molinari, Yves Gaucher, Claude Tousignant, Paterson Ewen, Françoise Sullivan, Charles Gagnon, Marcel Barbeau, Jacques Hurtubise, Paul-Émile Borduas.

<sup>71</sup> Joan Murray, “Canadian Classic: Ray Mead”, unpublished, n.d. (c. 1987). Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, Joan Murray Artists’ Files, Ray Mead.

there.”<sup>72</sup> He had solo exhibitions with her in 1963<sup>73</sup> and 1964<sup>74</sup> (as well as several group exhibitions).

Of the first exhibition, in 1963, Dorothy Pfeiffer wrote that Mead had apparently:

successfully resolved several of his recently created large paintings into intensive simplifications of the emotional reactions he himself undergoes when confronted by the power and mystery of nature [...] From observation of his present interesting show, it would appear that Ray Mead—a versatile, ever-searching artist, as both today’s and previous exhibitions have demonstrated—is at present in the throes of transition, a situation which makes his current presentation all the more engrossing in content and in quality—and ‘quality’ it most certainly has, at once paradoxically both secretive and invigorating.<sup>75</sup>



16. Door, c. 1960-61  
Oil on canvas

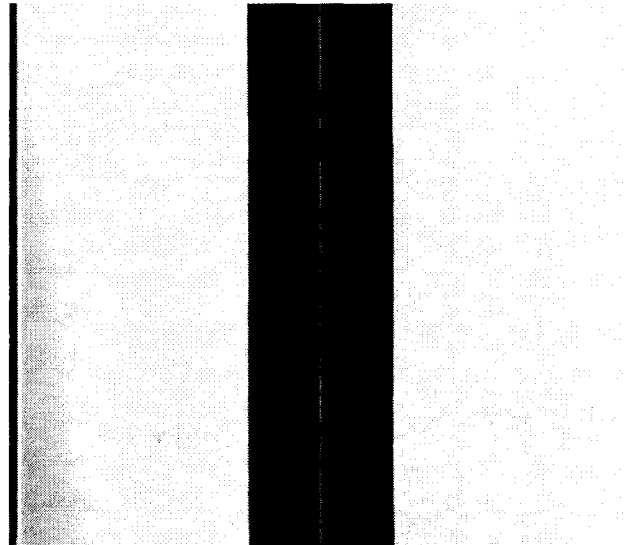
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<sup>72</sup> Mead, 17 June 1981. Mead described Denyse Delrue as “a short, round, happy little lady. Very, very bubbly and full of enthusiasm. I think she was one of those people you’d like if you were a painter because she loved her painters. It’s almost a thing that dealers perhaps don’t do any more but she showed a great love for her painters” (17 June 1981). Unfortunately her gallery went bankrupt more than once. In 1962 it was reopened as *Galérie du Siècle* on Sherbrooke Street West. See Julie Marcotte, *Les Galeries Denyse Delrue (1957-1984)* (Montreal: Université du Québec à Montréal, 2000).

<sup>73</sup> The show included works such as *Door*, *Nimbus*, *Flowers of the Wall*, *Red Beach*, and *Mexican Garden*.

<sup>74</sup> This later exhibition included works such as *The Way Home*, *I’m Hot*, *Long Wait*, *Moving From the Centre* and *Throughway*. It should be noted that while works for this show had all been completed within the preceding year, some pieces exhibited in the 1963 show were dated as early as 1960.

<sup>75</sup> Dorothy Pfeiffer, “Mead at *Galérie du Siècle*”, *Gazette*, 16 Nov. 1963: 17. Similarly, Robert Ayre likened Mead’s work to the American “transcendentalist” painters Gottlieb and Rothko writing “[H]e is not a “hard-edge” painter; he is not measurer; he does not calculate: he feels. He conveys space and timelessness without depth, his surface is without shine, his flat forms reverberating in solemn tones.” (Robert Ayre, “Interesting New Shows”, *Montreal Star* 21 November 1963).



17. *Throughway*, 1964  
Acrylic and pencil on canvas

But Pfeiffer's review only hints of the transformations to come. Between the 1963 and 1964 exhibitions, Mead's work showed dramatic changes in experimentation with form: it 'hardened' considerably. The 1963 show now seems organic and playful; a painting like *Door* (c.1960–61, fig. 16) looking almost as spontaneous as the memory upon which it was loosely based: "[O]h, my grandmother's house had very big doors, very high doors and very high ceilings... you could go and look down the long dark hall and there was a door there that opens and you see a gleam of light from the back garden."<sup>76</sup> Just one year later Mead's work was remarkably different, enough for Robert Ayre (of the *Montreal Star*) to disavow his review of the earlier show:

When I reviewed Ray Mead last November, I neighbored him with the American transcendentalists—Mark Rothko, not Ralph Waldo Emerson—and said that, while he painted squares and circles, he was not a measurer, not a hard-edge painter. Well as you will see in his new exhibition, at *Galérie du Siècle* until October 18, he has become hard-edge. He is not

<sup>76</sup> Mead, 4 Jan. 1979. He has also described the painting more formally: "[D]oor... meaning as most titles do, they have some implication but it is like looking through something outward and you've got these large dark masses on the side with very little tonal difference only a very slight colour difference. And then in the light area I think there is sort of an oval shape, but it's shattered as if it has disintegrated into a light that is an unrealistic light, but is something, and beyond these areas [you look] out through the door." (Ray Mead, telephone interview with Joan Murray, Transcript, 12 November 1981. Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, Joan Murray Artists' Files, Ray Mead)

painting squares and circles now, but—with the exception of “The Way Home,” which is a colored horizontal highway through white—vertical stripes.”<sup>77</sup>

The influence of his new surroundings were obvious, but with these works Mead was not at all addressing the same artistic issues as his younger French contemporaries. While Molinari, Gaucher and Tousignant were exploring the limits of perception and objectivity in painting,<sup>78</sup> Mead was exploring the limits of drawing and mark-making. “In Throughway [1964, fig. 17], I’m getting simpler again. I have taken out almost all conventional drawing. Seeing other people’s striped paintings is strange. I woke up one day and found other people, like Guido Molinari, had been doing stripes for totally different reasons.”<sup>79</sup> Mead’s conception of painting was, and remained, pictorial rather than primarily perceptual in nature. The lines of Throughway were not mechanical to the same degree as Molinari’s and his initial pencil marks could still be seen on the canvas. Instead of referencing purely optical sensations the painting stages a *drama*. Its central white ‘line’ is never really so uniform as our initial expectations would have it appear. It wavers slightly as it makes its way down the surface. It doesn’t unite the work (as do Barnett Newman’s ‘zips’), but tenuously holds the two halves of the canvas apart. And the composition, despite its initial appearance, does not rely on formal design concerns, but rests solely on a

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<sup>77</sup> Robert Ayre, Montreal Star, 3 Oct. 1964.

<sup>78</sup> In their own way, each of these painters sought to make painting objective by moving away from any hint of literary narrative in their work (to the point where even the slightest suggestion of a figure-ground relationship became far too lyrical). “[I wish] to bring it [painting] back to its source”, Tousignant wrote, “where only painting remains, emptied of all extraneous matter—to the point at which painting is pure sensation” (Claude Tousignant, Art Abstrait [Montreal: Ecole des Beaux-Arts, 1959]). To achieve this pure sensation (devoid of figurative or metaphorical associations), he (like Molinari and Gaucher) relied purely on the plastic elements of painting to dynamically establish the integration of colour with structure, thus presenting complex visual experiences through the simplest of means. When one looks at the work of Tousignant and Molinari in particular, the rhythmic interrelationship of repeating coloured bands (concentric circles or vertical bars) gives the work a dynamic shifting sensation as the eye runs over the surface unable to find a resting point. That each coloured band derives its particular look, in part, from its relation to the other coloured bands next to it means that the composition is never stable. Each colour seems to be constantly shifting hues as one moves across the surface. By exploiting the very nature of colour, Molinari is able to achieve what he calls “continuous perceptive restructuring of the painting” (quoted in Reid, 294).

<sup>79</sup> Murray, Ray Mead: Two Decades, 16.



literary rhetorical model (that of antithesis), the execution of which had to be ‘convincing’, both plastically and narratively, in order for the painting to function as a work of art.

Introduced into the painting by the slight imperfection of line is conflict, bringing with it a sense of dramatic pathos. The white line, with its slight quaver, gains ‘meaning’ or weight by virtue of pointing towards universal models of struggle (akin to the yin and yang; light and dark; good and evil). Though the look is minimal the tension is literary (or metaphysical) rather than objective in origin. The work is not simply an object, to be viewed, it is poetic and contemplative—almost the opposite of *Plasticien* ideals. This was as ‘hard-edged’ as Mead ever got.

The struggle for Mead, when it came to minimalist-type painting, lay in the ideologies of objectivity that came with it. By ‘removing all clever brushwork,’ an artist could theoretically reach the point where a ‘painting’ became merely a prefabricated object with little or no aesthetic value. At this point one reaches a contradiction of contextualization. A (minimal) painting must be labeled as ‘Art’ from the onset before the artist is free enough to frame it as merely an object (its avant-gardism—its artistic value—coming from the object’s ability to place the idea of ‘art’ in quotation marks simply because of the creator’s faith in his or her artistic practice). Such conceptualization, it could be reasoned, aestheticizes an object on false grounds by removing it from any recognizable artistic framework, *only* to praise its artistic value because of this very removal. The work then becomes a void at the centre of a theoretical maelstrom, a mere example, emptied of any plastic substance. *It is art only because it is not art—or it is art only because one says so.* And not because of its plastic means. Such a theorization short-circuits the work’s aesthetic state of being. It also short-circuits Mead’s conception of the transcendental beauty of art:

I think that points up the weakness of minimal painting. Once the gesture is made, it’s only for those who really know it was made. For anybody

coming on it later, it can be very misleading. They don't know what they're looking at because there's nothing there....  
I think as soon as you stretch a canvas, you've made a painting. But it's not necessarily a good one. It's what you do with the next step, the next step.<sup>80</sup>

Throughout the 1960s, Mead showed at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts with Paterson Ewen (1964), and in various touring and group exhibitions including: *The Formal Lyricists* (1960, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts);<sup>81</sup> *The Non-Figurative Artists Association of Montreal* (1960-61, National Gallery of Canada);<sup>82</sup> *5<sup>th</sup> Festival des Deux Mondes, La Peinture Canadienne Moderne* (1962, Spoleto, Italy); *Centennial Exhibition* (1967, Art Gallery of Hamilton); and *Toronto Painting 1953-65* (1972, Art Gallery of Ontario and National Gallery of Canada).

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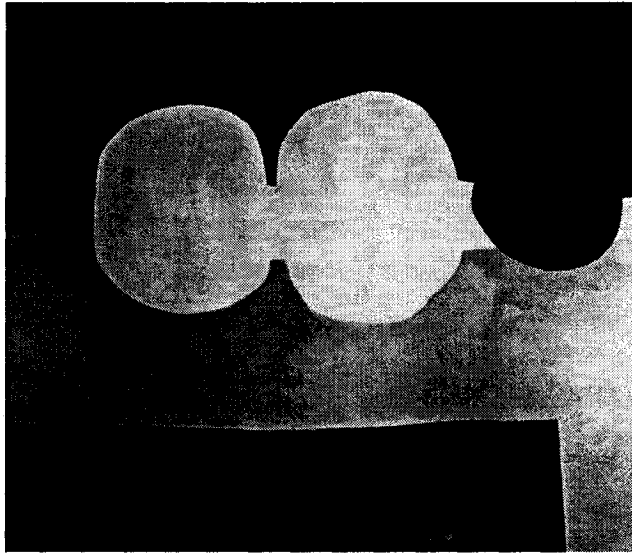
<sup>80</sup> Weihs and Sandiford, 9. Surely, much of Mead's conceptualization of minimal art initially came from his conversations with Molinari (and the other Espace Dynamique artists) for it is clear that he was taken by their objective approach to painting. But he continued to think about minimalism for the entirety of his career. In 1991, he gives the following example to point out the weakness of minimal and conceptual art:

A lady told me a funny story about her daughter who was doing art history at Western. She went down with these other students to the new National Gallery. She saw [Jana Sterback's] meat dress and so on. And she came to a room opposite and sitting in a row there were one, two, three buckets. She walked around, and thought, "Being the National Gallery, I guess they're important, but I really don't get it. Three buckets." Some of the other students were going "Oh! Isn't that wonderful. Look at that." Then a man came along, took the buckets and carried them out. They were there to catch drips from the leaky roof" (Weihs and Sandiford, 9).

<sup>81</sup> This show was an attempt by Mead, Paterson Ewen, Henriette Fauteux-Massé and Maria Virginia de Verso to establish an artists' group with the hope of becoming an international movement. In a formal statement the group wrote that their paintings were "very different from one another, yet have some things in common... These are mainly a search for equilibrium between lyricism and formalism, enriched by all these years of complete plastic freedom... We are not as geometric as the Plasticiens and as free as the Automatistes." ("New Artists Group Plans Joint Exhibit", *St. Laurent News*, 7 Jan. 1960)

<sup>82</sup> According to NFAAM's president Jean McEwen: "One of the major strengths of this Association is the great diversity in expression of its members, for all non-figurative painters of value, residing in Montreal or the vicinity, can become members" (Jean McEwen, introduction, *The Non-Figurative Artists' Association of Montreal* [Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada, 1960]). See also *The Non-Figurative Artists' Association of Montreal: Sir George Williams Art Galleries, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec* (Montreal: The Galleries, 1983).

Claude Picher of the National Gallery of Canada (Exhibition Extension Services) took a somewhat more conservative approach in his foreword to the same catalogue: "The National Gallery recognizes the importance of this Association's contribution to painting and accordingly will take every possible opportunity to disseminate its artistic message. In this way the Gallery retains its essential catholic character as a national institution. Without necessarily passing judgment on their work as the best, the Gallery does acknowledge the technical and aesthetic stature of the members of this group."



18. *Flowers of the Wall*, 1963  
Oil on canvas

The degree to which the Montreal scene had affected Mead's career could also be gauged by his inclusion in the 1964 Canadian Art article "Phenomenon: Colour Painting in Montréal".<sup>83</sup> Here, Andrew Hudson wrote that "what the new abstract painters have in common is a delight in colour relationships: whatever else they may intend, they mean their colour, and it is chiefly on their colour that they stake their chances for failure and success." *Flowers of the Wall* (1963, fig. 18) was reproduced on the first page of the article. In this work the surface is united through the use of broad, harmonious areas of colour rather than the rapid gesture that brought consistency to Mead's work in Toronto. But again, this painting was not typical of the Montreal scene; it represented a compromise between the Montreal aesthetic (as represented by Molinari and Tousignant, for example) and Mead's own quirky mannerisms. Hard edges are softened considerably with under painting and bleeding variations of tone; it is expressive equally for its colourful juxtapositions and uniquely personal rendering of form, which in feeling at least (if not application) sublimates the spirit of Mead's anxious Painters Eleven brushwork. Colour and

<sup>83</sup> Andrew Hudson, "Phenomenon: Colour Painting in Montréal", Canadian Art 21 (Nov.-Dec. 1964): 358-361.

contour articulated such paintings, just as the distinct brushstroke (of his Toronto work) gave way to the edges of his shapes. They were “no less personal but more profound in their commentary on plastic syntax”, observed Alfred Pinsky, who also noted that in these works there was no escaping the contemplation of their being:

Constant vigilance is necessary, since good painting, no less a series of destructions than creations, is intolerant of poorly stated shapes. Colour and shape vying with each other’s insistent role on the canvas and picture plane set up their own tensions and demands and must be carefully adjusted to each other. A slightly changed contour, or a subtle indentation in the shape’s edge, slowly, but with fearful commitment, for these are acts of purification, bring the painting to its equilibrium. This is Mead’s plastic language.<sup>84</sup>

Although not nearly as successful as Door (fig. 16) from 1960–61 (one of the first paintings Mead did in Montreal)—primarily because it lacks the kind of visual surprise and formal confrontation needed to make it as visually captivating as Door, which combines simplicity of design with dramatic under painting—Flowers of the Wall nonetheless showed a revised consideration of the figure-ground relationship and a reworking of the place of draughtsmanship in Mead’s art. Such work also seemed much closer to his own sensibilities than the somewhat idiosyncratic Throughway (fig. 17), which, although interesting in its own right, seemed to be overly pressured by outside forces. “I began to notice pretty soon that I was too fluent with the line”, Mead has said. “[I]t was too easy so I have really taken drawing out of my painting, drawing in the academic sense... it all came too easy for me to draw fluently from my early training.”<sup>85</sup>

Next to his initial (and inevitable) breakthrough into abstraction, this became the central question concerning Mead’s art: *to what extent—and in which ways—should a painting be expressive?* Expressive in its individual parts—in line, colour; or composition? Expressive

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<sup>84</sup> Alfred Pinsky, “Ray Mead at the Galerie du Siècle, Montreal”, Canadian Art 21 (Mar.-Apr. 1964): 62. The earlier work Nimbus (1961) was reproduced as an example, but I think the quote equally applies to Mead’s various ‘styles’ of the 1960s, each of which could be said to be exploring the same aesthetic problems.

<sup>85</sup> Mead, 29 Oct. 1981.

of mood? Of the artist's state of mind? Expressive of its underlying theoretical and aesthetic foundations? *Expression*. Having missed the 'isms' of expression as a young art student, Mead now oriented the bulk of his artistic output toward this question.

Yet in 1964 Mead abruptly stopped painting for a period lasting about eight years. The break was triggered by medical problems arising from new allergies to turpentine and white lead, but was also reinforced, to a certain extent, by dissatisfaction and confusion over the volatile art world. "They wanted me to paint their way, I wanted to go my own way."<sup>86</sup>

"I don't think that consistently painting makes you a good painter", Mead has said. "[Y]ou could become like a decorator or something like that... I mean, if you stop painting, like for about ten years, and when you look at that break, you find that perhaps this is where you really learned."<sup>87</sup> Much of his time from 1964 to 1972 was spent drawing and taking massive numbers of photographs (most of which he later burned; "[They] were terrible. I was no photographer. I had a friend that was. And when I used to go and look at his stuff, [I'd think] 'Oh shit, give it up.'").<sup>88</sup>

I did some drawings at the time and I went to a lot of shows and did things. I went down to do some work with a puppet man in New York. One day I had some time to spare, so I went to the Museum of Modern Art and as I walked in, it suddenly started again.... Before that I had a dream where Hans Hofmann gave me a painting lesson and showed me a new way to paint. And all these things began to happen; perhaps it was my subconscious.... It was around Christmas I started painting rather weird stuff.<sup>89</sup>

When he returned to painting in 1972, Mead seemed to pick up almost exactly where he had left off. But now he had a reaffirmed commitment to colour buoyed by a change of media introduced to him by Jack Bush, "I like acrylics now, one can paint

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<sup>86</sup> Murray, *Ray Mead: Two Decades* 11.

<sup>87</sup> Mead, 4 Sept. 1977.

<sup>88</sup> Weihs and Sandiford, 5.

<sup>89</sup> Mead, 4 Sept. 1977.

rapidly one over another and change a canvas in one day.”<sup>90</sup> Acrylics gave his work a calm sense of immediacy—it was more prismatic and less muted in tone. The new paint didn’t hold a brushstroke in quite the same way he was used to. The resulting softening of brushstrokes was accompanied by a hardening of edges. Line, stroke and shape all became plastically integrated, almost indistinguishable, without the latent sense of modeling that is the hallmark of oil painting. Where oils gave a rich, textured tonality, particularly to the dark earthy hues, the effects of acrylic paint tended towards transparency and luminosity. They allowed for the ‘mixing’ of even colour in layers of binder rather than through the blending of pigments in a single application. The results—while poorly suited to small, subtle gradations of tone, such as one would expect to find on the surfaces of illusionistic painting—allowed for a greater purity of high-keyed colour and a strange, trembling chromaticism in the darks. With under painting, Mead’s blacks, for example, were able to achieve a wide chromatic range without becoming dark, murky, or overly dense. “Black is a delightful colour and it has so many variations.... There’s the cold blue blacks, there’s the warm carbon blacks, there’s the brownish blacks....”<sup>91</sup>

Acrylic paint allows for a full richness of colour while establishing a flat surface; it confronts the viewer head on, tending not to deteriorate into an ambiguous haze. In Mead’s hands, it added a sense of purity and directness to his work:

Ray Mead: It’s colour within a narrow dark range which gives it a power like a drum. It sort of, *it’s there*. It’s like a great wall. It stops you. It’s a thing.

Joan Murray: It’s strong.

Ray Mead: It’s a thing.

Joan Murray: It has a presence.

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<sup>90</sup> Mead, 4 Sept. 1974.

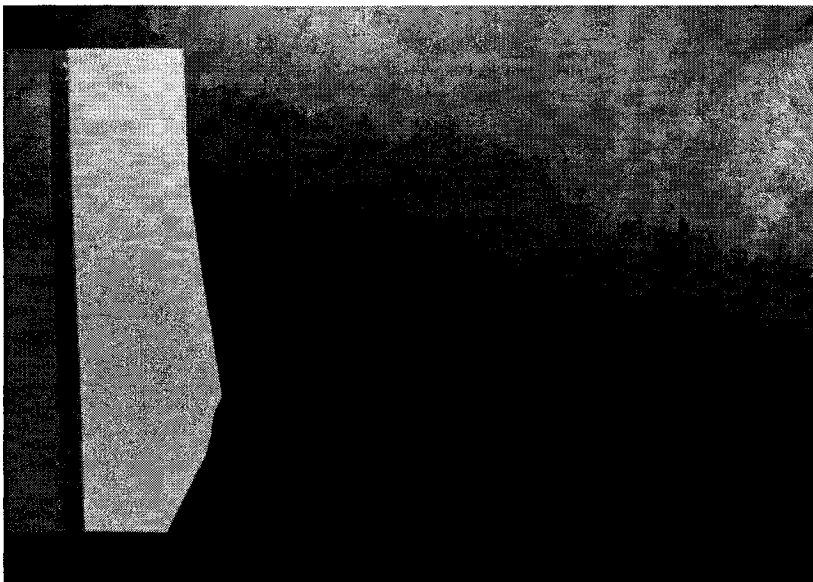
<sup>91</sup> Mead, 29 Oct. 1981. “Black is a decision making colour. I like to be very frontal. It is what it is. There’s no seduction. It’s frank.” (Mead, 4 Sept. 1977)

Ray Mead: The painting becomes a thing.<sup>92</sup>

Ross Fox described this work well when he wrote that:

Mead composes in broad areas of colour where there is flatness, yet not flatness, and a hard edge which is yet softened at times... His paintings convey an inwardness and contemplativeness without any implicit spiritual dimension. Mead's art was of matter and the senses, colour and the emotions.<sup>93</sup>

But along with the thoughtful simplification of colour and an elegance of composition, the best of these paintings also give the suggestion of great powers held in abeyance. "I'm not a colourfield painter that's for sure. I'm not an expressionist"<sup>94</sup>, Mead said, yet there are elements of both in his work, as if the surface of the canvas were only a front for some battle stirring beneath.



19. *Morning Glory*, 1980  
Acrylic on canvas

"It's not a painting of a morning glory [Mead wrote of *Morning Glory* (1980, fig. 19)] but that feeling you get of the colours in a morning glory with the darkness of

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<sup>92</sup> Mead, 29 Oct. 1981.

<sup>93</sup> Fox 46. Admittedly, this could describe Mead's work from almost any period.

<sup>94</sup> Mead, 17 June 1981.

everything around it in the early morning. It's partly subconscious."<sup>95</sup> In Morning Glory the ragged outer edge of yellow makes a gestural stand against the imposing blue ground swirling around it. Keyed slightly towards magenta—both in opposition to the yellow and in complement to the red beside it—the ground simultaneously seduces and repels the burst of early morning light. This work is really two colourfield paintings in one. But where the formalist's eye might see a tumultuous battle of figure and ground, there is instead only a poetic meditation on surface tension. The entire painting pushes in from the frame: the animated blue and the highly keyed red, green and yellow all seem to come to a head along a meandering, yet deliberate edge. And that edge is where figure and ground become meaningless. Without becoming a colourfield painter, Mead had his own way of resolving traditional aesthetic dichotomies. Often his 'shapes' did not appear to sit on top of a ground, but rather to butt up against it at their edges, creating one plane with dramatic stops and starts of colour.

In this respect, Morning Glory speaks of a *confrontational moment* rather than the *infinite continua* that many other 'traditional' colourfield paintings feign as they seem to go beyond their frames ad infinitum. And to this end, Mead's work (again, in contrast to more 'traditional' colourfield painting) also speaks to the starkness of its boundary (beyond which no painting is even possible). Perhaps this is the "hard-edgedness" that Greenberg admired so much in Mead's work; however, I would rather it be described simply as 'uncompromising'.<sup>96</sup>

"You reach a point when you are old enough when you say to hell with it", Mead said.<sup>97</sup> This is the kind of sentiment that would pervade much of his work for the next decade and a half. Within simplified compositions and sophisticated colour arrangements,

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<sup>95</sup> Murray, Ray Mead: Two Decades 17.

<sup>96</sup> Clement Greenberg, letter to Joan Murray 23 November 1981. Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, Joan Murray Artists' Files, Ray Mead.

<sup>97</sup> Mead, 17 June 1981.

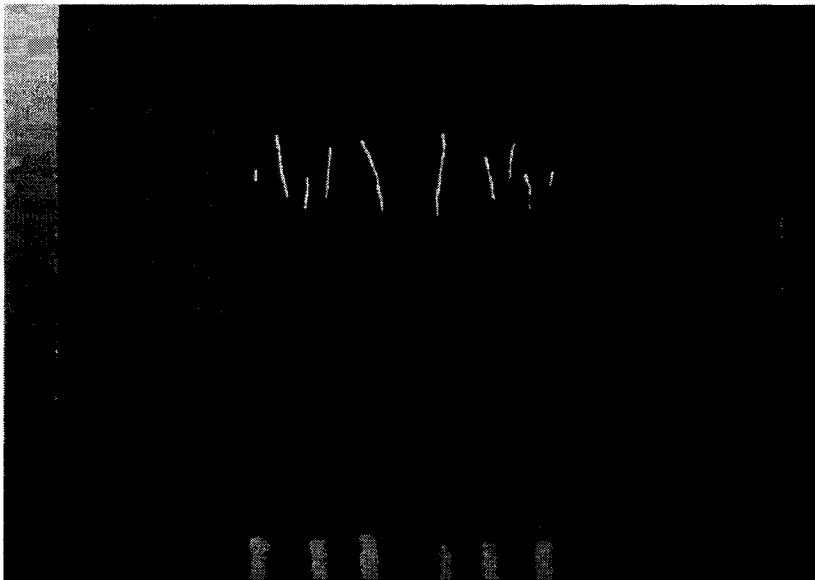


he was, with the simplest of marks, able to create a deeply rich body of work culminating in a mid-career retrospective at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa, curated by Joan Murray.<sup>98</sup> In a letter to mark the occasion Clement Greenberg (with whom Mead had kept in brief contact, off and on, since 1956) wrote:

I also remember enjoying being with him & his wife. Ray was so refreshingly un-earnest, one of those Englishmen who export well & contribute to my Anglophilia.

My treacherous memory says I lost touch with him after he moved to Montreal. I don't at all remember my visit to him there (senility). What I do remember was the "hard-edgedness" of his painting, & how good it was without being sensationally so. I would ask about him when I visited Toronto & never get clear news. The last time I was in Montreal—2 or 3 years ago, maybe more—I'd forgotten he was there. Which I now regret.

I'm glad Ray's having a retrospective; people may wake up to him. He should have come through the way Jack Bush did; why he didn't is another one of those questions of which abound in the life of art [sic].<sup>99</sup>



20. *Garden of Oedipus*, 1980  
Acrylic on canvas  
170.2 x 226.1 cm

Of all the works that were in the show, The Garden of Oedipus (1981, fig. 20) is certainly the most striking in its frankness and emotional depth. Mead's comments on the painting are so full and revealing, they deserve to be quoted at length:

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<sup>98</sup> Ray Mead: Two Decades was held at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa from January 5<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup>, 1982.

<sup>99</sup> Greenberg, letter to Joan Murray 23 Nov. 1981.

This one here, the large black one, which for want of a better name I call The Garden of Oedipus, it was thought about for quite a long while before I did it. I kept having problems when I kept thinking of the small notations I had made being bigger... they tended to be very, very, busy—which I didn't want—and I had to decide where they had to go. So I worked out the proportions of the canvas very carefully to what I wanted, which was carefully measured. The proportions of the canvas are not terribly accidental at all. They are carefully calculated and I started the painting knowing very well that first of all the black itself was perhaps under painted with blue first and then over painted with quite a lot of layers of thin black paint to give it a sense of having been on a journey. And it was dark space rather than black paint. It wasn't shining shoes so it had that velvety—it sounds as if I'm dwelling on the painting of it, but the painting of it was very important to me because it was creating dark light, almost, rather than light light; and if it was just black paint, it was rather useless.

Then down the edges I had already decided that I wanted to have that very small amount of orange... but looked as if it was squeezed out rather than put on top. I didn't want it to be a line, so I underpainted the corners first of all with the orange I wanted, and then I started work with that deep sort of plum colour which was just a slight tonal bit above the black. I found the orange was warming so then I painted the orange over with a green knowing that I would then cool the purple down a bit and take it out of the orange red range and make it balance between tone[s] with a greater mass of black, still needing that orange as if it was squeezed out. It's a little glimmer of light being squeezed out by big shapes.

I then wanted those marks on it right from the beginning... I thought that they would solve my problem. And that peculiar yellow which is almost a painful yellow, it's not a yellow at all, it's a yellow with amber in it and it's that peculiar brassy, dull brassy look. They weren't put on with a brush. They were put on with reeds to give it that scratched, how do you explain it? To give it that uncalculated look, although they are quite calculated. They are scratched on with paint. A reed dipped in the paint and then carefully scratched on to give it an almost childish clumsiness against the very sophisticated black paint....

I cut out stripes of [red] paper the exact same colour and kept moving them until they were right balanced and the right size. I then took a certain brush I knew would make a certain thing I wanted and just did them.... As I took the paper off I replaced it with a quick stroke of this colour and it was absolutely left untouched. And if you notice they are all slightly different shape[s] and variet[ies] and different densities; different edges which gives it this almost as if it happened by accident look.<sup>100</sup>

This 'accidental' look, Mead said, gave the viewer a way into the painting. It softened the work, creating "the imperfection to make it a human art rather than just a

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<sup>100</sup> Mead, 29 Oct. 1981.

sheet of colour.”<sup>101</sup> Here Mead was influenced by Paolo Uccello and by Zen painters of twelfth century Japan who always left something “not quite right” as a way into their surfaces. “In other words you went in through the imperfection into this total perfection of minimal means which could be very frightening if you saw it as it was, at its best.”<sup>102</sup>

But the work would have been little more than a study in proportion, interval and balance if not for the psychological depths accompanying its formal concerns. Though the title surely came from Mead’s fondness for Greek mythology, it can also be read as a Freudian slip betraying a certain tension that underlies Mead’s work from his earliest abstract paintings onwards. Resolution of the Oedipal complex marks one’s entry into the symbolic order and is only completed by the inculcation of a fully functioning superego. Acting as guide, the superego gives models (both conscious and unconscious) which orient one to the world around them. But more importantly, it forces a split in the ego, forever cleaving identification and desire, and creating the *ontological void* into which *subjectivity*, as a fully reflective practice, is emblazoned both as a symbolizing force (ordering the physical world according to a unique point of view) and as a symbol (of its own existence).

However, in the original myth, as compensation for this symbolic entry, the guilt-ridden Oedipus gouges out his eyes in shame. He can no longer stand the sight of his own existence. It has taken on an accusatory air, and his natural surroundings now ‘look’ back at him with hostile, judgmental eyes. The secret he carries inside has recast the world. Thus, passage into symbolic representation also involves, to a certain extent, the traumatic loss of a specific kind of sight. The observing eye is turned inwards, transformed into the mind’s eye, where everything has some sort of egocentric meaning beyond its outward appearance. This transformation is what gets played out in Mead’s fanciful garden, for it is the same traumatic loss that the artist experiences when s/he gives up natural models for

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<sup>101</sup> Mead, 29 Oct. 1981.

<sup>102</sup> Mead, 29 Oct. 1981.

artistic models—abstract or otherwise—of representation (and as I have previously noted, in Montreal Mead was confronted by a younger generation of painters who forced him to choose between the objectification and the aestheticization of abstract painting, a choice he was all too conscious of).

Against the amassing “dark light”, all that Mead can manage are ten childish lines repeating in vain some futile attempt to scratch out the eyes—not in order to become blinded to the world, but in an effort to re-inscribe ‘sight’ within the pictorial realm. The Garden of Oedipus mimics the original ‘gesture’ upon which all abstract art is based: the cutting off of the natural world from a world of the purely optical. This is to say, that it replays some original trauma in which the reflexive, symbolic gaze is amputated from the utility (universality, homogeneity) of sight, and is inscribed back within the work itself. ‘Looking’ back at the viewer (with hostile, judgmental eyes, so to speak) is a mirror for the experience of ‘seeing’, which is also the experience of creation: the sublimation of desire for demand. Those ten scratchy lines represent the repression of the natural eye’s desire to ‘see’ (in terms of sensory sensation) by the ego’s demand to look at the world symbolically—ordering it terms of meaning and metaphor.

So natural is this movement that “the Oedipus complex is abandoned, repressed and, in most cases, entirely destroyed”<sup>103</sup> (a little glimmer of light being squeezed out at the edge). *Squeezed out at the edges, rather than put on top*: this is what gives Mead’s painting its uncanny nature—the repression of colour under washes of black paint. Only with the repression of colour (squeezed out, yet seeping back in) can the phallic lines begin to emerge so dominantly. The gaze is held captive by the starkness of this new beginning, yet, still, out of the corner, a glint of orange light catches our eye. It hints at something primal and aphasic. It hints at the underlying Thanatos that has allowed each mark to appear (on

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<sup>103</sup> Sigmund Freud, New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, James Strachey, ed., (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1965) 116.

top) so vibrantly. Again, in Mead's work there is always tension between gesture and colour: a rivalry of identification and desire bayed by the intervention of a supra-artistic voice, a voice calling out for 'Beauty'.<sup>104</sup> It is this voice of perfection, demanding some semblance of order, that is only admitted into the pictorial realm through the incision of some sort of imperfection (like that of the initial oedipal tension): as a suture that heals over the blemish that it simultaneously highlights. It is also the voice of sublimation.

This tension again seemed to reach a crisis (though of a different kind) around 1986, with Mead's move back to Toronto and another shift in style. It was all triggered by dramatic personal loss:

[It sounds] macabre... but the day my wife died, I came home and I looked at a painting that to me was essentially finished. I looked at it and I was in not a very good mood and I literally repainted the whole bloody painting, over the good one... quite a good one anyway... because it didn't say enough for me. So I realized that was a very important day actually. I realized my painting wasn't saying enough for me. And that was a big change in my approach to the surface of the painting and to my reaction to a painting. Here something had happened in my life and it wasn't saying anything. It was just a very good painting and that bothered me very much.<sup>105</sup>

This time there was a conscious attempt on his part to disavow all 'conciliation' in his work:

I look at paintings and say they're too goddamn polite and destroy their politeness. They're for people's living rooms or something and I don't want to paint [like that]. Painting has to be more essential to me... I make this remark which makes people laugh... and I just go on working... and I destroy the politeness, the rightness of the paint, everything.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> For Freud the superego was the place of 'perfection.' It separated human beings from the rest of the animal kingdom. "The superego is the representative for us of every moral restriction, the advocate of a striving towards perfection—it is, in short as much as we have been able to grasp psychologically of what is described as the higher side of human life" (Freud, 98). Is not this striving towards morality, towards perfection, that same voice (now more hostile and intimately embedded within the psyche) that had been previously given, by Immanuel Kant, the name "Beautiful"?

<sup>105</sup> Mead, 16 Sept. 1986. His wife, Mary, died of cancer in 1985. Afterwards Carolynn Lund, a recently widowed neighbour, became his close friend and confidant. "This magic thing happened", she said (Val Ross, "A Very Living Line", *Globe and Mail*, 21 Sept. 1998: A14). They were married in 1987.

<sup>106</sup> Mead, 16 Sept. 1986.

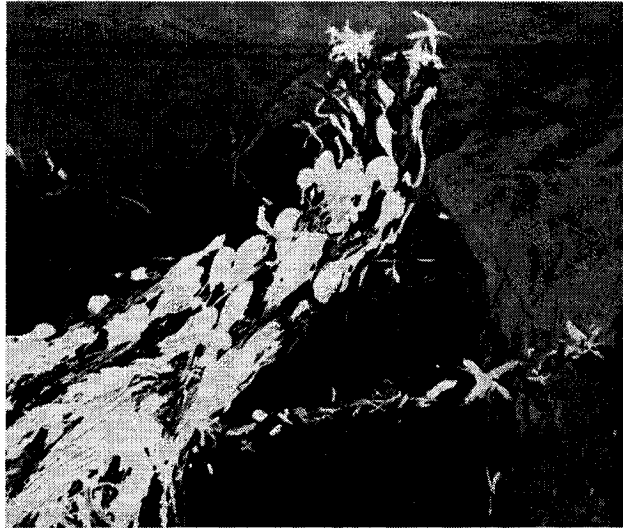
Mead's decisive attack against politeness could also be interpreted as the mindful choice to value *looking* over *placing*: an attempt to have each painting reveal itself in a profound way, almost as if it were in a hostile, antagonistic dialogue with the artist, and by extension the audience, rather than a slow conversation with the history of art. By this I mean that Mead looked back to his roots and consciously chose gesture as a vibrantly renewed outlet for artistic expression. As Miriam Shiell wrote in 1988: "In the decade since Ray Mead joined the gallery,<sup>107</sup> we have watched from the sidelines as he slowly yet thoughtfully developed his mature style. In 1987 the butterfly has emerged from the chrysalis."<sup>108</sup> The work produced at this time also represented a certain loss (or giving up) of control on the part of the artist, as he gave in to expressionism and vibrant brushwork even more fully than he had in the 1950s.

Mead openly attacked the tact of his earlier reliance on tonal design (I am thinking here of Bouquet (fig. 9) in particular) to compose his work. Such design softened the harshness of the work's initial gesture. He removed himself from the well-mannered social contract, so to speak, by engaging in spontaneous, decadent compositions. It was yet another way to subvert his skills as a draughtsman; by embracing rather than subduing his gestural breakthroughs from the 1950s.

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<sup>107</sup> Mead was taken on by Theo Waddington Galleries in the late 1970s (his first showing was a group exhibition in 1978). Waddington was his first commercial dealer since returning from his eight year painting hiatus in 1972 (Denyse Delrue's gallery had gone out of business and Mead chose to work without a dealer for several years). Mead participated in numerous group and solo exhibitions throughout the various incarnations of Waddington and partners (both in Montreal and Toronto), but by the early 1990s Miriam Shiell (Waddington & Shiell Galleries) had decided there wasn't going to be the market for Canadian painters and moved towards more international artists. Simon Dresdnere, a long time admirer, took Mead on with two solo exhibitions (in 1991, 1992, Galerie Dresdnere) before he joined the Christopher Cutts Gallery (around 1992), his dealer until his death in 1998.

<sup>108</sup> Miriam Shiell, preface, Ray Mead: New Paintings (Toronto: Waddington & Shiell Galleries Ltd, 1988) 5.



21. Nakiska, 1987  
Acrylic on canvas  
165.1 × 195.6 cm

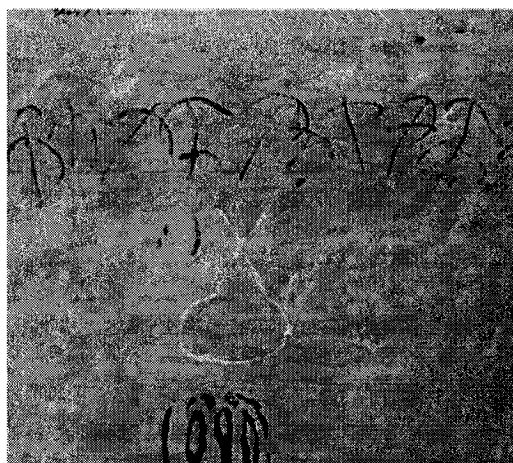
These new paintings shifted the conflict in Mead's work from a tension between line and colour to one between the universal and the particular. This type of story-telling element, new to Mead's work, appeared for just a brief time. In a work like Nakiska (1987, fig. 21), the compositional thrust seems to loosely allude to an overall narrative (some sort of Dionysian push) while each swash of paint *refers* only to the act of its own creation. It aims towards an abstracted mythological Eros, yet its manner becomes quite literal in that its plasticity only references the action taking place inside the frame. Never were Mead's edges so direct and sentinel as they are in this work. Never did they seem to work so hard to contain the action inside and to differentiate it from the backdrop of the gallery wall. As if the thrust could connect up to the natural world, if only it weren't painted so directly and if only the boundaries weren't so sharply articulated within our field of vision.

But, typical of Mead's mannerisms, what could have been a work steeped in the pure ecstasy of painting is somehow delayed from achieving that ecstatic climax. We see instead the gestural equivalent of some deep seated, yet unfulfilled, desire as the central thrust fails to reach the limits of the frame, nailed down in place as it is by the weight of three green shards. Likewise, the barbed row of 'x's' comes close, but fails to reach the edge

of the painting, where it too could join up with some larger cosmic 'push' beyond the frame. This delayed gratification gives the work a mysterious, rather than revelatory, feel. Not only is the origin of the thrust hidden behind each mark, it has no conclusion. The movement, one could imagine, starts somewhere outside the frame (perhaps as a part of the natural world) but remains trapped—unresolved—within the artwork itself. And the painting's psychical drive is never released. It is this lack of release that, in the end, forces each mark to refer back to its own creation, rather than to a larger whole. An archetypical narrative is usurped by specificity of the moment.



22. **Without Memory**, 1987  
Acrylic on canvas



23. **Yellow Abbey**, 1987  
Acrylic on canvas

In Without Memory (1987, fig. 22) there is the invocation of a painting—well, the evocation of a painting narrative—yet the words we would ordinarily use to describe it (colour, form, line, surface—the compositional elements) are indistinguishable from their initiating marks. Each element appears to be in the service of its own spasmodic articulation rather than a sanctioned composition. Each gesticulation is on a different



chronological plane from the next. Yet, as in Nakiska, you get the feeling that it could also be part of some ancient mythology, written out in lost hieroglyphs that can never quite be translated properly into the present. The work slips between modes of traditional (even abstract) representation and becomes a kind of marker that tells ‘it has happened’.

Literally, the layers of paint pile up on each other, as in Yellow Abby (1987, fig. 23), writing and (re)writing the painting over and over again; however, this ‘journey’ has little to do with a specific, predetermined aesthetic outcome. It is simply the story of accretion (of history):

The painting is a constantly living thing [Mead said], a living piece of canvas or paper you’re working on and you come towards a whole. And then the thing is to realize when you’ve reached that completeness, to leave it alone. It’s very difficult because you can go on. If you’re not careful, you’ve really painted two pictures, or three pictures, on the same piece of canvas where you kept moving along. And you can lose it.<sup>109</sup>

The work was about the process of painting—the joyfulness of applying paint—rather than the placement of shapes. It was a process seeking to come to terms with its own existence; a process seeking to come to terms with the expressive dynamics of the brush moving across canvas. And these terms did not come straightforwardly for Mead. For his ideology of art was also about keeping the integrity of each work, and not getting swept away into to abject hedonism:

This is where you really have to start using your head in painting. It’s not easy to retain that first excitement that you get from that first big mark or whatever it is. It may be a big circle of red in the middle. You don’t know, but there it is. Now what do you do with it? *But you know that it is not a piece of painting yet.*<sup>110</sup>

It was a question of applying the appropriate type of gesture to the canvas to achieve a painting. So it was partly a question of style. The implications of ‘style’ point towards a preconceived set of ideas about how to paint—in short style points to a predetermined

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<sup>109</sup> Ray Mead, Interview with Joan Murray, transcript, 13 Oct. 1989. Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, Joan Murray Artists’ Files, Ray Mead.

<sup>110</sup> Weihs and Sandiford, 9.

outcome. It implies that artists know exactly how to express their ideas, or emotions, before a painting is completed. With this group of paintings, Mead was working differently than he had with Garden of Oedipus (fig. 20): more spontaneously, less measured. To mark up the canvas with the 'appropriate' style would have been to forsake the excitement of the initial (pre-oedipal) gesture and allow the work to be moved towards traditional notions of Beauty and the conventions that come with it.

By mimicking the "first big mark, or whatever it is", Mead, as he implied, was not working towards conclusion. Rather, he was looking for an appropriate place to stop. Richard Kidder perceptively wrote of these paintings from the late 1980s that "the shapes on the finished canvas suggest that the finished painting has, in some natural fashion, reached a state of completion only as the most prominent and recent stratum of an archaeological process."<sup>111</sup> And perhaps it was this lack of pre-ordained finality that Joan Murray saw as "joyful" in this work:

Mead has never struck me as a particularly playful artist, but his most impressive recent work amounts to a series of magic, adventurous essays in the intense pleasures provided by vibrant, unexpected colour. His calligraphic lines and simple shapes layered on rich surfaces have a deceptively easy look.<sup>112</sup>

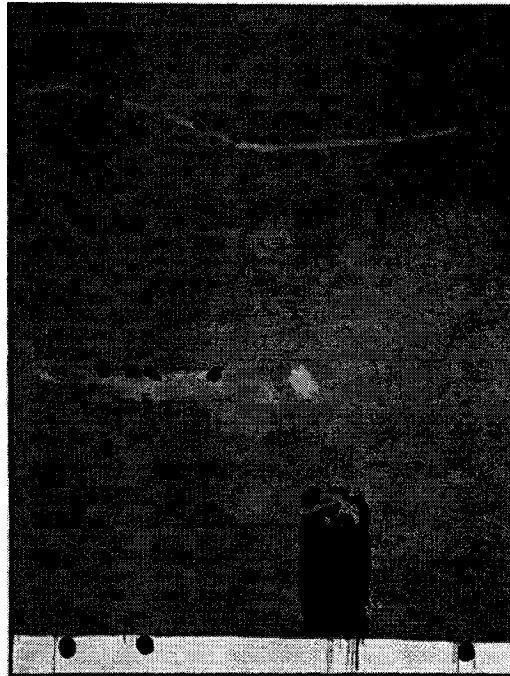
Still, I would suggest that it was only in the last three years of his career that Mead was fully able to come to terms with the phenomenological implications of what he had seen so long ago in New York City slashed across the torn out pages of a telephone book—and was finally able to come to terms with it in a manner that satisfied his fondness for large open areas of colour. For it was not the immediacy of the initial mark, its freshness,

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<sup>111</sup> Richard Kidder, Ray Mead: New Paintings (Toronto: Waddington & Shiell Galleries Ltd., 1988) 7.

<sup>112</sup> Murray, "Canadian Classic: Ray Mead." "This gaiety was surely absent from Mead's earlier work in the 1960s, when the forces stripping his paintings of their incidentals, reducing his palette to its basic components and the visible world to its basic geometry, were formal ones. An air of austerity overcame his earlier bold colour and his spontaneous handling."

that he was after, but the timeless *gesture* that he had been searching for. Despite some initial entanglement, they are not at all the same thing.



24. Lagoon, 1994/95  
Acrylic on canvas

Mead's works from about 1995 to 1998 are alarmingly sparse compared to what had come previously. These paintings appear to be fleeting and ephemeral rather than built-up and constructed across the surface of the canvas. Often they are organized, as in Lagoon (1994/95, fig. 24), around a series of marks, or crises, energizing and piercing the surface rather than filling it. In many ways Lagoon is barely a 'painting' at all, threatening as it does to fade away into incompleteness at any moment. It has no formal unity—barely a form upon which to base an aesthetic judgment, really... *Describe it: grey, a fleshy line, a few dots, drips of black paint.* One takes an inventory, perhaps, but without recounting a structure. It's as if as soon as you turn your head the work will fall apart, leaving only an invoice or debt—and scarcely even the memory of a painted work at all.

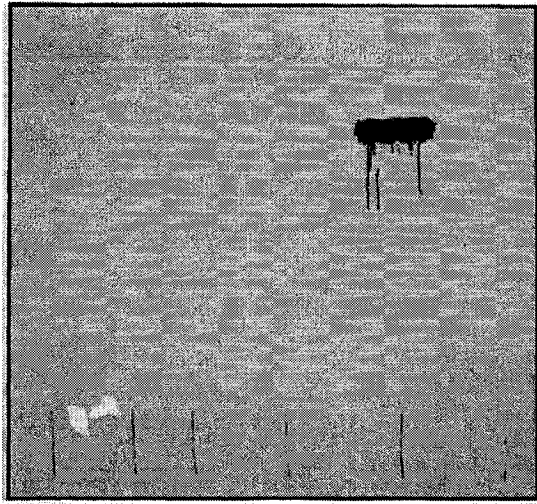
With many of these later paintings, Mead removed all *image* from his art. Image is the byproduct of draughtsmanship, of drawing (something he was constantly confusing with 'gesture'). An image is what gets applied to a painting, brought into a painting from the outside; from the world of symbols and archetypes, from the imagination, or from the subconscious. (An) image thus pretends to extend a painting beyond its limits, giving to it some measure of symbolic support in the realm of ideas.<sup>113</sup> But of more concern here, in the case of abstract art, is the fact that the 'image' also removes a painting from its immediacy—taking it away from its own articulation as a performative (visual) medium. These later paintings (though it could be argued that this is generally true for much of Mead's work to differing degrees) are not concerned with the manipulation of space, nor with the portrayal of ideas, only with the sensation of time—with experience.<sup>114</sup> Interpreted as a neutral receptacle, between Thanatos and the annunciated (between desire and identification), the notion of image that Mead was trying to rid himself of reduces painting to the mere symbol of an idea—like say, the *idea* of creation—rather than the enactment of creation itself.<sup>115</sup> Rather than simply substituting itself for an idea, the 'import' of this new work lay entirely in the congruency between the field to which it *referred* (or measured) and that which it *declared* for the beholder. *In a kind of seizing of the moment, so to speak.*

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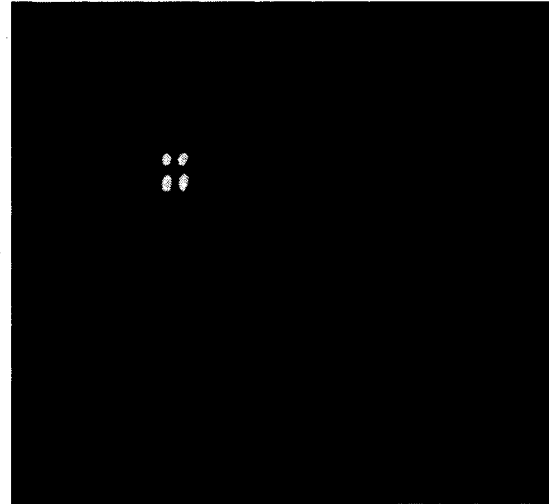
<sup>113</sup> This is not to say that image-based paintings are less powerful (or less valid, or desirable even) than direct paintings; only that one cannot create an "image" of an experiential painting.

<sup>114</sup> In this regard Mead had another less likely model in the New York school of painters: Barnett Newman. "It's rather funny I was reading somewhere a while ago about a detailed study written by a critic on the west coast about Barnett Newman and it mentioned his great love for a certain painting in the Metropolitan and guess what it was—it was a Turner and he figured he related to this because Turner's spaces were so empty and he figured that he was a romantic... and carried on to the extreme position what Turner had started... I can't remember the name of the painting now, but it was a Turner I know." (Mead, 4 Jan. 1979)

<sup>115</sup> Yve-Alain Bois writes that this "means that a painting should not *contain* ideographs [i.e. a character symbolizing the idea of a thing without indicating the sounds used to say it] but rather should itself be an ideograph" (Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990] 193).



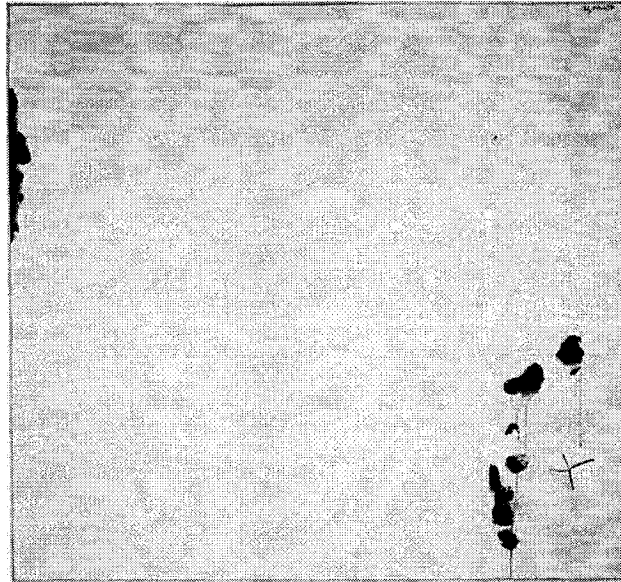
25. Untitled, 1997  
Acrylic on canvas



26. Crossing, 1997  
Acrylic on canvas

Mead replaced the temporality of the past, akin to that of marking, with one of the present. The series of visual phenomena (the lines, dots and drips) now formed the event itself, without any reference to painterly origins. The work engaged the viewer in a completely different manner than had his previous work. It aimed beyond the traditional aesthetic situation—where, accosted by a bold gestural confrontation, the viewer simply ‘looked’ at a painting—working it over and controlling it. Instead, these new paintings gave the viewer a stake in the creation itself (at least on a visual level). Still concerned with the myth of origins, this new work spoke of creation in the present tense—addressing the viewer directly, not through the distance of narrative (so characteristic of fiction) which places the viewer as a bystander in the third person. It develops right in front of the eyes but with no fixed structure to settle on, no rest to the visual exploration and no place for the viewer to seize control of the painting visually—only the sporadic movement from one (visual) punctuation to the next without beginning or end. Lagoon, Untitled (1997, fig. 25), and Crossing (1997, fig. 26) hold very little back. Emptied out, there seems not to be any hidden core, no chirographic act referencing back to the ‘beginning’ (or to the ‘ending’

for that matter) of the work, objectifying it; only the act of engagement itself. And only as it relates to the phenomenon of looking.



27. Stargazer 1, 1998  
Acrylic on canvas

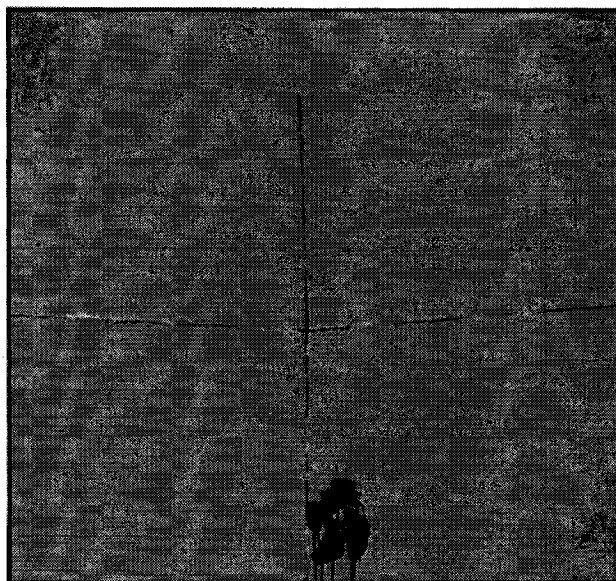
Stargazer 1 (1998, fig. 27) is not ordered in space, either perspectively with regard to the picture plane, or across the surface as a field of relational colour. Rather it is organized around a logic of *accentuation* and *punctuation* which does not really relate to the act of painting—not to the highlighting of certain shapes, nor to the design of regulated surface patterning—but instead points towards a visual event. For accentuating and punctuating are not physical markings so much as they are acts of presentation.

Where Nakiska (fig. 21) and Without Memory (fig. 22) attempt to tell the story of their own creation as a mysterious event, Stargazer 1, attempts the ontological. It simply tries *to be*. It tells of its own creation as an ongoing presence. And as a presence occurring only as the viewer looks at the work. A slash of blue, a drop of paint, an 'X', a dash of ochre, all 'appear' within (... *on top of*... ?, *across*... ?, *before*... ?) the parameters of the canvas.

However, this appearance has nothing to do with revelation—in the sense of revealing a

complete idea (or composition even)—it is about the process of looking without resolution. The composition is so simple as to be nullified and dismissed. As if initially caught out of the corner of the eye by a sideways glance, one finds that everything disappears the more closely it is examined for its structural value. The placement of markings is not nearly as important here as the length of time one spends visually engaged with, as opposed to studying, the work; for this is where its aesthetic impact would seem to lie (if anywhere at all).

“It’s very hard to explain a painting”, Mead said, “because I just pull things out of the air you know. To me, painting’s magic.”<sup>116</sup> It is as if the work seems barely able to survive the scarceness of its own creation.<sup>117</sup>



28. Crossing, 1997  
Acrylic on canvas

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<sup>116</sup> Mead, 16 Sept. 1986.

<sup>117</sup> Lyotard expresses a similar sentiment, though in much more poetically profound words when he writes: “The paint, the picture as occurrence or event, is not expressible, and it is to this that it [the painting] has to [must] witness.” (“The Sublime and the Avant-Garde”, 93)

Like Stargazer 1, Crossing from 1997 (fig. 28) also seems to situate itself purely within the realm of the visual, yet outside the dogma of painting—again, aiming not at all for articulation, but for presence. In this work Mead refused to make a choice between optical and perspectival space.<sup>118</sup> This allowed him to draw equally on ‘line’ and ‘surface’—which are his words—or what I have been referring to as gesture and colour. Often one will dominate over the other (i.e., a heroic gesture will simply happen to be of a certain colour or, as with colourfield painting, the mark of the brush will be subdued to achieve bold colouring), but in Crossing an equal attention to each causes a destabilization of the painting’s optical space. Line or gesture acts as surface spreading out across the canvas, cutting into it, and establishing the presence of the picture plane. Yet the colour (or surface) remains ambiguous at best. Sometimes it lies ubiquitously in the background (for instance, behind the inky black swirls at the bottom); while in other places it becomes rigid and frontal—as if the painting were not premised on two intersecting lines at all, but instead on four massive cadmium squares ever so close to touching one another. This ambiguity is precisely the visual aspect that forbids this particular painting from coming to a close. There isn’t the context usually needed to ascribe distinct and purposeful characteristics to its colouring.<sup>119</sup> Is it the surface on which gesture appears or a physical amorphous presence squeezing all gesture out of the work? It doesn’t seem to either articulate the contours of

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<sup>118</sup> By optical I am referring to space that expands across the surface. It is flat space, achieving its rhythm through shifts of colour and existing only within the world of drawing and painting. Perspectival space on the other hand refers to a traditional illusionistic depiction of depth. This space is not necessarily realistic, but forms and colour push forward and recede backward (often based on tonal variations) with respect to the picture plane.

<sup>119</sup> I think that ‘colour’ generally does not possess any distinct characteristics—only the attributes ascribed to it by each particular context. The feelings we get from certain colours come not from their particular hue but from the associations we have made for them or the associations made by their relation to other elements in the composition.



shape or facilitate the staging of markings. Rather it is evoked as a kind of modulation shifting between these ambiguities.

So we look at the painting, fixed on its crux, waiting for the moment when it gives out. The moment when the red surface comes together, unified and closed. We are transfixed, but that moment—though we can imagine it—never comes. All we have is the time we spend looking; the cadence of the painting. The very next moment (in which the ambiguity between colour and gesture is resolved) remains distant and imagined. All we have is this aphasia (the moment of possibility before the actuality of articulation).

“Painting gets more and more difficult”, Mead said, “I sit and look at them for hours and hours when I’m working. I’m not admiring them, I’m trying to distill them. It’s the non-painting that takes the time.”<sup>120</sup>

This ‘non-painting’ is the very act of looking as a painterly gesture. For what is a gesture? Not the culmination of some action or event—but its interruption. A mark destined to be suspended at its apex. An utterance left hanging on the tip of the tongue. This is what makes the distinction between the excess of Bouquet (fig. 9) or the accretion of Yellow Abbey (fig. 23) and the evanescence of Crossing and Stargazer 1. They are open and without resolution. Of this acme Lacan writes that meaning is always ‘inscribed behind’. And so, where a line may define a shape or spatial relation, its gesture defines a moment. This subtle twist of perception is the distinction between a brushstroke and a gesture: “[I]t is this very special temporality, which I have defined by the term arrest, which creates its signification behind it,” Lacan says, “that makes the distinction between the gesture and the act.”<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Quoted in Christopher Hume, “Mead in Canada”, The Toronto Star 12 Sept. 1996: G7.

<sup>121</sup> Jacques Lacan, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998) 116.

What Garden of Oedipus (fig. 20) celebrates, Crossing resists whole-heartedly. By displaying for us the transformation of sight as it passes from desire to the symbolic register, Oedipus misses the moment of crossing over and has already given up his eyes to cryptic markings. He misses his (liberating) moment of blindness, so to speak. In this way Oedipus is caught up in the very negation of gesture—Mead’s Oedipal painting is about the re-inscription of an image to *feign* creation by substituting it with a symbolic new beginning (a beginning which cuts off the natural world from the world of the purely optical).

But in psychoanalysis one also works through the ‘negation of negation’, which is to say one towards the return of what has been repressed. And in Crossing is not the arresting ‘moment’ of its gesture (a moment of pure possibility yet to be inscribed from behind), the reincarnation of Oedipus’ repressed Thanatos?<sup>122</sup> Is not the *crossing gesture* the replaying of that cut which separates desire and identification—prior to it being sutured over by the superego—by that subconscious command for Beauty. For if those four massive squares, ever so close to touching one another, were to come crashing together, if the background were to appear solid if only for a moment, then the cut would be terminal, not arrested, closed rather than open, and would have already left its final determining mark as a scar. Freud tells us that the superego is both “a residue to the earliest object-choices of the id” and “an energetic reaction-formation against those choices.”<sup>123</sup> The gesture, in its arrest, reiterates in the visual realm the stalemate of the death drive prior to sublimation. Joan Murray writes “many in the [Painters Eleven] group, especially Mead, believed that accidents, upon which art depended, had to be held in tension with acts of

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<sup>122</sup> The death drive should never be understood as terminal. Its aim is not to destroy but to suspend. It is therefore the drive to maintain a minimal distance (as close to collapse as possible) between identification and desire in order to sublimate libidinal instincts. The goal is to control these instincts rather than have them play themselves out ad infinitum.

<sup>123</sup> Freud, 34.

control.”<sup>124</sup> In Garden of Oedipus Mead sublimates these accidents. In Crossing they are suspended.

Looking, like gesture, has a ‘fascinating’ effect. It, too, suspends seeing, freezes the visual sphere, and attuning itself to a specific part of it, highlights and picks out certain accents and punctuations from their natural surroundings. It too arrests at precisely the same moment that it cleaves. For whatever is under the spell of our gaze is ontologically suspended somewhere between the imaginary and the symbolic, between desire and identification. It is both pulled from the environment and added to the visual field. Arrested. Emblazoned. Cleaved. In this way looking could be considered the primary creative gesture.

*It's the non-painting that takes the time*

Ray John Mead, September 22, 1921—September 5, 1998.<sup>125</sup>

*Father invisible  
Arcing painted  
Fingers across burning  
Canvas 'til beauty  
reigns in  
Nothingness and  
All is shown  
to be  
- Blake Walden Lund (stepson)*

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<sup>124</sup> Murray, Canadian Art in the Twentieth Century, 103.

<sup>125</sup> Ray Mead died of injuries from a fall (possibly caused by a stroke) on September 5, 1998, at the age of seventy-six.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Ray Mead, Beholden*

*“Autopoiesis attempts to define the uniqueness of the emergence that produces life in its fundamental cellular form. It’s specific to the cellular level. There’s a circular or network process that engenders a paradox: a self-organizing network of biochemical reactions produces molecules, which do something specific and unique: they create a boundary, a membrane, which constrains the network that has produced the constituents of the membrane. This is a logical bootstrap, a loop: a network produces entities that create a boundary, which constrains the network that produces the boundary. This bootstrap is precisely what’s unique about cells. A self-distinguishing entity exists when the bootstrap is completed. This entity has produced its own boundary. It doesn’t require an external agent to notice it, or to say, ‘I’m here’. It is by itself, a self-distinction. It bootstraps itself out of a soup of chemistry and physics.”*  
- Francisco Varela<sup>1</sup>

*“One can strive to determine this something by setting up a system, a theory, a programme or a project—and indeed one has to, all the while anticipating that something. One can also enquire about the remainder, and allow the indeterminate to appear as a question-mark.”*  
- Jean-François Lyotard<sup>2</sup>

If I am going to consider Ray Mead to be a modernist painter—overtly he is—I think it’s best to take pause for a moment to ask what exactly it is that’s at stake when we talk about ‘modernity’. It is not my intention here to elaborate on the debate between Modernism and modernity. Rather, I should like to narrow the context somewhat by placing Mead’s work within the realm of ‘Contemporary Modernism’ (modernism in its fashionable ‘post’ phases). But (as if that were not enough) I would like to come at it by

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<sup>1</sup> Francisco Varela, “The Emergent Self”, *Third Culture*, John Brockman, ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) 354.

<sup>2</sup> Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde”, 91.

addressing the idea of modernist painting given to us by Clement Greenberg.<sup>3</sup> In 1960 he wrote that “[t]he essence of modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself—not in order to subvert it, but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.”<sup>4</sup> The basis for this self-definition, however, is not rooted in the formalism of a work of art. It is based purely on the sovereignty of the aesthetic experience—for example, the experience one has when looking at a painting.<sup>5</sup> “[O]nly by showing that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right” could painting “save” itself from being “assimilated to entertainment pure and simple.”<sup>6</sup> For Greenberg, it was the *experience* of the picture plane—its flatness, its pervasiveness, its stringency—that was “most fundamental in the processes by which pictorial art criticized and defined itself under Modernism.”<sup>7</sup>

However, I am forced to wonder, what are the ontological implications of Greenberg’s assessment? For the directness of the support, besides limiting the artist’s practice of painting, *must* also limit the experience of painting (and to put it philosophically, it must also limit the existence of [a] painting). These too are questions of self-definition (in many ways the essence of Modernism)—not just about the mode of

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<sup>3</sup> Greenberg, of course, draws from Immanuel Kant “the first real modernist” “because he was the first to criticize the means itself of criticism” (Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting”, from The New Art: A Critical Anthology, G. Battcock, ed. (New York: Dutton, 1966) 101) and Charles Baudelaire (associated first and foremost with the privileging and isolation of the aesthetic experience), combining them with a Marxist doctrine of historical inevitability.

<sup>4</sup> Greenberg, “Modernist Painting”, 101.

<sup>5</sup> This point cannot be stressed emphatically enough, for a misrepresentation of Greenberg’s art criticism has been predicated by people who have mistakenly believed that the formal aspects of a painting were the end in themselves (in Greenberg’s mind). Greenberg clearly states that it would be erroneous to believe that “what he describes, he also advocates.” He also describes as “preposterous”:

that he would “regard flatness and the inclosing of flatness not just as the limiting conditions of pictorial art, but as criteria of aesthetic quality in pictorial art; that the further a work advances the self-definition of an art, the better that work is bound to be. The philosopher or art historian who can envision me—or anyone at all—arriving at aesthetic judgments in this way reads shockingly more into himself or herself than into my article (Clement Greenberg, “Postscript to Modernist Painting”, Esthetics Contemporary, R. Kostelanetz, ed. [Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1978]).

<sup>6</sup> Greenberg, Modernist Painting, 102.

<sup>7</sup> Greenberg, Modernist Painting, 103.

creation, but also about the means by which one comes to experience a work of art. For experience (aesthetic or otherwise) lies as much with the viewer as with the painting.

In this way, because of its flatness, the modern abstract painting and the modern viewer are linked through the experience of looking in a way that was not possible with representational art; primarily because the mimicry of realistic painting lead viewers towards the beauty of the natural world or towards known narratives and away from the (self) reflection of the viewing experience. That modern art tends towards abstraction is also indicative of Greenberg's observation that while "[t]he Enlightenment criticized from the outside... Modernism criticizes from the inside, through the procedures themselves...."<sup>8</sup> This proposition, that Modernism criticizes from the inside, gives rise to a couple of leitmotifs that will underpin my thoughts about Mead's abstraction in the next chapter. Firstly, the essence of Modernism (and modernity as a whole) is subjectivity (and the essence of subjectivity is self-definition); also, it is neurotic; and, more closely related to the discussion at hand, abstract painting by its very nature is anthropomorphic—primarily addressed not to questions of 'painting' (the flatness of the picture plane and such), but to showing up our ontological relationships with the world. Based on metaphysical subject matter and an objective plasticity, a modernist painting shares a fairly close affinity with the all too human body and soul dichotomy.

To go along with these motifs, I shall, much to my own surprise, make the observation that 'modernism', under the peculiarities of our present day historical circumstances, is itself going through a modernist phase; a hyper-modernist phase. Out of fashion, agitated to a state of neurosis, lacking in faith, 'modernity' has become a constant problem unto itself. Accordingly, Lyotard has written that "modern temporality,

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<sup>8</sup> Greenberg, "Modernist Painting", 101.

comprises in itself an impulsion to exceed itself into a state other than itself.”<sup>9</sup> So is there not then a little *Eros* (in contrast to the *Thanatos* already mentioned in relation—though certainly not exclusive—to Mead’s painting) at work in this modernist project?<sup>10</sup> One can perhaps, read into various modernist movements an ongoing attempt to perpetuate and repeat our primal libidinal tensions by projecting them in an infinite and varied array of discourses (as a series of perpetual questions concerning their very nature).<sup>11</sup>

But an air of non-deliberate parody now seems to cling to everything modern; although, I suppose, when one stops to think about it, haven’t the underpinnings of modernism always been more or less so? Laid bare as a kind of oscillation between regret and assay for the ‘project of modernity’, even as such a ‘project’ remained largely in the process of working through its own self-definition in whatever artistic venture came under its sway.<sup>12</sup>

Yet the *history* of modernity is not at all what concerns me here.<sup>13</sup> If we were suddenly able to peel back the archaeology classifying modern painting by its various styles

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<sup>9</sup> Lyotard, “Rewriting Modernity”, 25. Also from “What is Postmodernism?”: “Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief, and without discovery of the ‘lack of reality’ of reality, together with the invention of other realities.” (Jean-François Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” (appendix), *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993] 77)

<sup>10</sup> The death drive (*Thanatos*) is really not the drive towards finality, but the drive to reduce tension—the drive to collapse the distance between desire and identification. It is pure gesture, never conclusion or reconciliation, rather their suspension (for conclusion would simply imply a new beginning). Mead’s later paintings (I have hypothesized) show this by their openness (in opposition the symbolism—or finality—displayed in *The Garden of Oedipus*). *Eros*, then, must exert its force in the opposite direction, as the drive to multiply the dialectic between identification and desire through infinite incarnations, and in infinite directions. It is the drive of new beginnings.

<sup>11</sup> As Lyotard has said: “modernity is constitutionally and ceaselessly pregnant with its postmodernity” (“Rewriting Modernity”, 25).

<sup>12</sup> The question ‘what is painting’, for example, gets taken up by the avant-garde (from Manet on) as successive generations of artists seem to usurp and precipitate themselves. “What space does Cézanne challenge? The Impressionists’. What object do Picasso and Braque attack? Cézanne’s. What presupposition does Duchamp break with in 1912? That which says one must make a painting, be it cubist. And Buren questions that other presupposition which he believes had survived untouched by the work of Duchamp: the place of presentation of the work. In an amazing acceleration, the generations precipitate themselves.” (Lyotard, “What is Postmodernism?”, 79)

<sup>13</sup> The history of Modern ideologies is far too complex to elicit an explicit explanation here, however the one who introduced the concept of “the modern” as a value in art and in whom the aims “High

and aspirations (*the very skin of Modernism*), what we could arrive at is a kind of phenomenological modernism. What would be left? What would we be looking at? This throwing off of skins is what each and every (modern) painting strives for (a kind of self-articulation). For staring back at each artist from each blank canvas, is the simple question, *what am I going to paint?*<sup>14</sup> Modernity, in either its philosophical or stylistic or cultural, and especially in its current theoretical forms, is a constant question mark preceding its own questioning—an imaginary mark, shifting with each successive generation, and each successive work. Though we mistake as often as not, the ontological manifestation of each style, for style in its archival sense.

This particular schematization (*not a question without answers, but an answer begging questions*) allows 'modernism' as a theoretical body to be bracketed off as an 'object' of study that *is* simultaneously the *means* of such a study (situating it nicely within the ontological gap created by the ego in the separation of its super ego and id incarnations). The modern painting (again, in this schematization) is not an answer to—or model for—

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Modernism" are perhaps firstly articulated and advocated was Baudelaire—associated first and foremost with the privileging and isolation of the aesthetic experience: "Poetry has no other end but itself: it cannot have any other: and no poem is so great, so noble, so entirely worthy of the name as that which has been written simply for the pleasure of writing a poem. If a poet has followed a moral end he has diminished his poetic force and the result is most likely to be bad." Similarly Goethe, Schiller, Schelling and Hegel have also insisted that art has no aim outside itself. And these qualities—considered by many, the essentialist interpretations of the aesthetic experience—tied to a close examination and renovation of the medium are indicative of a second "High" Modernism, largely English and American in nature. An earlier "Radical Modernism" had been defined in terms of a "cultural emancipation" (Edwin Muir), as a complete break with past traditions. To some the break was "catastrophic" in nature, "the aim of five centuries of European effort is openly abandoned" (Herbert Read), with the common factor being that of Expressionism (though early Expressionists made a point of declaring how unmodern they were as the term had become, at the time, old-fashioned and bourgeois in many circles). Thus, it could be argued that the "cult of modernism" followed an original creative period with a substantial gap. In fact, Perry Anderson writes "the conception itself [that of modernism] is scarcely older than the 1950s, as a widespread currency" ("Modernity and Revolution", *New Left Review* No. 144 (March-Apr., 1984), p. 108). Before their academicism the major art movements of the twentieth century—Expressionism, Dadaism, Cubism, Surrealism, etc.—coexisted under the ill-defined period concept of "the modern", a much broader construct than the attributes known today as "Modernism."

<sup>14</sup> In a 1968 speech paying homage to Baudelaire as an art critic, Barnett Newman praised the poet for "his ability to understand the most fundamental of all the problems of a painter, the problem every painter has, no matter what his style, namely—what to paint" (quoted in Harold Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994) 24. Newman partially answers this question himself: "[t]he self, terrible and constant, is for me the subject matter of painting" (quoted in Rosenberg, 21).



the questions of modernity, but a perceptible, isolated, experience that one must question with each viewing. Kant's breakthrough gives some insight about how to address such 'objects':

Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them a priori, by means of concepts, have, on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

Here, the human subject is made the origin of experience and, from this premise, the conditions of possibility from a subjective standpoint are shown to be, at the same time, *the* conditions of possibility, objectively speaking. In other words, the structure of one's experience and the structure of the world, in the sense that it is occupied by perceptually graspable things, are two sides of the same coin.<sup>16</sup> Hence there is a neurotic schism within modernity that allows its 'insides' (our subjectivity, our perception of it, its self-critical nature) to appear most prominently as the outer surface—as the limiting boundaries of its very articulation. So it is also no coincidence that modernism is, quite literally, as we have seen in Mead's painting, an investigation of surfaces. For the surface of each painting, becomes, in a way, the limits of modernist thought, as far as painting is concerned. This situation in and of itself is somewhat peculiar, philosophically speaking, for the art critic and the artist do not necessarily study modernity *per se*, but look at (create even) a set of ideological practices and cultural artifacts (a set of imaginary bootstraps concerning auto-articulation) which are said to be 'modern'.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Pure Reason, (London: Macmillan, 1990) xvi).

<sup>16</sup> This is Kant's Transcendental Deduction, the central argument of The Critique of Pure Reason.

<sup>17</sup> Hence Hilton Kramer (with his own axe to grind) is able to pen the following (and somewhat disagreeable) criticism of Greenberg:

What one sees in Mr. Greenberg's criticism is the aestheticism of Roger Fry, itself derived from a synthesis of the aesthetic doctrines of Wölfflin and Mallarmé, fitted out with a principle of historical development drawn from Marx and employed with great skill in the defense of a point of view which is completely hostage to the New York

Still, one could say that a modernist painting always presents itself in spite of itself. The essence of any thoroughly modern painting, is precisely that its *artistic capacity* lies beyond the so-called (and wholly arbitrary) 'rules' or characteristic *style* of its aesthetic presentation. In order to be saved as works of art, such paintings parody—rather than strive to exhibit—those elements which would otherwise reduce them to mere 'examples'. If a painting were to orient itself too closely (or exclusively) towards the flatness of the picture plane, for example, as an end in itself, it would become part of the dialogue taking place outside of the experience of viewing it. It would be based on formalism rather than the sovereignty of aesthetic experience. Since there can be no painting of a painting, so to speak, no archetype for painting which is itself a painting, the work of art must at once espouse and denounce—parody—those elements which give to it its modern style, and be situated within a larger humanistic field as utterly autonomous.<sup>18</sup>

Severed from the burdens of history and documentation, this ontologically modern painting would exist in a sudden flash between painting and viewer, mimicking and repeating from either side, some initial self-discovery; some quest for autonomy. And the quest for autonomy and self-definition would be played out with each viewing. The subject matter would then be 'here?'—not who or what but the command 'look!' And the goal would not be conclusion, but a kind of 'working through' as Freud would say. A working

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School. This is the great strength and weakness of his criticism: that its intellectual rigor is supported by—is, indeed, derived from—a living body of art which provides the values by which all prior accomplishments may be judged; and that it is so radically incapable of accommodating anything in the art of the past (or the present) which has not been sanctioned by the practice of those few artists whose work is regarded by Mr. Greenberg as occupying the historical center of our time (Hilton Kramer, "A Critic on the Side of History: Notes on Clement Greenberg", *Arts Magazine* [Oct. 1962] 62).

<sup>18</sup> Thierry de Duve writes of the avant-garde: "Painters and sculptors, progressively turning away from the observation and imitation of outside models, turned inwards and started to observe and imitate their very means of expression. Instead of exerting their talent within relatively fixed conventions, the modernist artists put those conventions themselves to the test and, one by one, discarded those whose constraints they no longer felt." (Thierry de Duve, "Back to the Future: the Sequel", *Theory Rules*, Jody Berland, Will Straw & David Tonas, ed. [Toronto: YYZ Books, 1996] 33).

through to come to terms with the notion that such self-definition (objectively or subjectively) has no ostensive place except in its very questioning.

This is where we must start out from: in parodying, rather than illustrating or imaging, its own autonomy the modernist painting manages to carry over a residue that would otherwise be lost in the translation from ideology to artifact, that would otherwise be explained away by modernist theory. It is based on subject matter, rather than utilitarian use, and rather than documentation, this is what the modern painting carries over. This is what makes the experiencing of it aesthetic.

And so it is within these parameters that I would like to orient the painting of Ray Mead. This is what is at stake when I call him a modernist painter, esoteric as my conception of it may be. And it is not to say that the artist himself would have approved of such classifications or that there are not other more traditionally modernist contexts to which Mead's work belongs. My purpose is to follow a career, which, spanning multiple generations and movements as it does, seems to move lightly across a 'gap' between what one could dramatically call modern and postmodern sentimentalities, without overtly addressing them as such, in order to engage the work theoretically. So again, rather than offering a summation or the multiple histories, ideologies and theories of modernity (as they intersect with the artist Ray Mead), I will humbly offer, when pressed, a simple working premise: modernism as the negotiation of autonomy.

CHAPTER THREE  
*Ray Mead, Cleaving*

*"...the reality I see is never "whole"—not because a large part of it eludes me, but because it contains a stain,  
a blind spot, which indicates my inclusion in it."  
-Slavoj Zizek<sup>1</sup>*

*"...the self, terrible and constant, is for me the subject matter of painting."  
-Barnett Newman<sup>2</sup>*

In 1981, on the occasion of Ray Mead's 'mid-career' retrospective at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery<sup>3</sup> Clement Greenberg wrote humbly of the artist's accomplishments in a letter to Joan Murray (director of the gallery and curator of the exhibition): "My memory gets worse & worse. I don't remember visiting Ray Mead all that many times." But "what I do remember", he says, "is thinking him arrived in his art—arrived as hardly any one else in Painters Eleven was at the time of my 1956 visit."

But what does it mean, as Greenberg puts it, to arrive *in* one's art? The question seems so very off the cuff. So dismissive, abrupt really, is Greenberg's comment that he threatens to completely squander what such praise would otherwise promise to deliver: a promise to get at the very heart of Mead's abstraction.

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Zizek, *The Parallax View*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006) 17.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Rosenberg, 21.

<sup>3</sup> "Two Decades Ray Mead" was held at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa from January 5 to 31, 1982.

‘Arrived *in*’? We are, in no small way, faced here with a statement about subjugation; we are confronted with a quandary about what it means to be ‘in’ (*trapped... caught... witnessing... creating... wrestling with?*). What is in? Who is in—in what? (His art?) We are working with a question mark preceding its proper questioning, so to speak. It is a question about subject matter, about the subject matter of Mead’s art in 1956 (and its congruency with Mead’s subjectivity—again, presumably in 1956).

It was this kind of questioning about *subject matter*—still very relevant today—that became so pivotal to 1950s abstract art. There was a kind of neurosis surrounding work, which was very much conflicted by its physical and metaphysical underpinnings—so much so that the question of what one was going to paint became inseparable from the confusion surrounding how one would paint ‘it’. It was a struggle that seemed to reach a state of such manic fervor that virtually all ‘advanced’ art (and philosophy) of the time is marked in some way by this tension between subject and object.

*What does it mean to arrive in one’s art?*

How does one arrive? We can arrive, presumably, only on the basis of coherence (or finality or uniqueness or autonomy). The inference being that there is something ‘solid’, stylized, and concrete at which to arrive as well as ‘something’ solid and concrete, ‘someone’, who arrives there. Yet *what* arrives? The coherence of Mead’s work is presumed (its plasticity, its style, its finality, its modality), but also perfectly conjured up is some sort of *trompe l’oeil* to support this mythic arrival: the artist as sole creator, the critic who openly opines, and the mass of individuals we generally refer to as ‘the viewer’. Yet even here, at the very beginning, the arrival blurs. Is this *trompe l’oeil* not simply a shift in perspective? Well, it is a shift of a specific kind: a parallax shift, as Slavoj Žižek describes it:

The standard definition of parallax is: the apparent displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background), caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight. The philosophical

twist... subject and object are always inherently “mediated” so that an “epistemological” [the theory of knowledge] shift in the subject’s point of view always reflects an “ontological” [the nature of being] shift in the object itself.<sup>4</sup>

As artists began to conceive of the medium in a self-critical way, the objects they painted shifted in nature from narrative to plastic (and abstract) realities. Thus, paintings began to become objects of contemplation in terms of their own existence, rather than depictions of stories to be decoded.

Greenberg knew of such arrival and of such parallax shifting. He was conflicted by it throughout much of his writing. It happened at the precise moment when, his back to the canvas, he would pivot around on his heel and his eyes met the surface of a painting for the first time. In this aesthetic experience, so dependent on “the interplay of expectation and satisfaction (or dys-satisfaction [sic])”, the “full effect can be gotten and has to be gotten”, as he said, “*from a split second glance.*”<sup>5</sup> What is this full effect? It is the effect of arriving *in*. The gaze of the critic arrives in the painting. It no longer looks out at the rest of the natural world, it looks back from within the surface of the canvas. It looks inward towards aesthetic judgment. What is the full effect of this arrival of the gaze within the painting? Greenberg writes a partial answer for us:

*Esthetic judgment—esthetic intuition—closets you with itself and with yourself.* That it’s *arrived at* in a theater, a concert hall, or crowded art gallery changes nothing in this respect. Nor does it change anything in this respect that you discuss your judgment with others and compare it with the judgments of others, or that your attention is swayed by what others say or write. You’re still left to make the judgment—have the intuition—all by yourself. And you’re left to make it—receive it, rather—in complete freedom. [*my emphasis*]<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006) 17.

<sup>5</sup> Clement Greenberg, “The Factor of Surprise”, *Homemade Esthetics: Observations on Art and Taste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 31.

<sup>6</sup> Greenberg, “Esthetic Judgment”, 16.

Yet, no sooner does he predicate the experience of art on autonomous subjectivity ('it closets you with yourself in complete freedom') than he immediately tries to repress this staging:

Now it's precisely *the subjective* that, more than anything else immediate, gets in the way of the distancing that is essential to esthetic experience. The "subjective" means whatever *particularizes* you as a self with practical, psychological, interested, isolating concerns. In esthetic experience you more or less distance yourself from *that self*... The greater—or "purer"—the distancing, the stricter, which is to say more accurate, your taste or your reasoning becomes. [*my emphasis*]<sup>7</sup>

But Greenberg does not contradict himself here. I think that the careful wording of his statement (and one can bet Greenberg always chose his words carefully) indicates precisely the type of arrival we are looking for here.<sup>8</sup> The self that must be distanced, within any artistic encounter, is the socialized self (the agents of the ego which bring to the encounter outside and irrelevant concerns). The suspension of these social agents brings one closer to the phantastic 'subject matter' that underpins our ontology.<sup>9</sup> Or to put it in Lacanese, "Sure, the picture is in my eye, but I, I am also in the picture."<sup>10</sup>

In this sense, perhaps more than any other thing you can say about abstract painting generally, and the axiology presented as lucidly in Mead's work as in anyone else's, is its implication that at all times there is something gazing upon it—that it is

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<sup>7</sup> Greenberg, "Esthetic Judgment", 17. (Though I will admit that there seems to be a difference between the way Greenberg and I use the term "subject").

<sup>8</sup> Greenberg had a very peculiar relationship with the gesture of the artistic moment. For him it was the precise instant where one is "completely free" to submit to the objectivity of taste: "the objectivity of taste is probatively [sic] demonstrated in and through the presence of a consensus *over time*. That consensus makes itself evident in judgments of esthetic value that stand up under the ever-renewed testing of experience" (Greenberg, "Can Taste Be Objective?", 26). But far from being schizophrenic, such a relationship is revolutionary. Does it not hint at the very beginnings of subjectivity? "The subject's elementary, founding, gesture is to *subject itself*—voluntarily, of course: as both Wagner and Nietzsche, those two great opponents, were well aware, the highest act of freedom is the display of *amor fati*, the act of freely assuming what is necessary anyway." (Zizek, *The Parallax View*, 17)

<sup>9</sup> The same subject matter, perhaps, that painters were searching for in the 1950s as they abandoned regional and patriotic motifs in favour of experiential modes of painting.

<sup>10</sup> Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 63.

constantly caught up in the dialectic of 'seeing'. The premise being that this dialectic makes the modern work of art completely anthropomorphic.

» » » §

"Here is canvas and nothing about it must ever be destroyed... anything marked upon it has to always have *the feeling of the whole*" Mead wrote of Door (fig. 16), "[T]he essential thing... [is] to maintain the reality of the painting and to make certain that it... [does] not owe its being to the transient effects of colour and constant light changes, that it... [has] a reality within itself."<sup>11</sup>

Mead's desire to give Door its own 'reality' is really a desire to close the painting off from the homogeneity of the optical field and to remove it from the trappings of external metaphor, especially those such as the conventions of landscape and the 'heroism' of the Group of Seven whose members ground themselves in the natural world. To do so he had to *objectify* the work, and to distance it from the subjective 'reality' of his viewers, whatever it was that particularized them with practical, psychological, interested, isolating concerns. His painting becomes literally that which (confronts, irritates, disturbs, bothers) *objects* to the consistency of vision; that which *objects* to personalized 'reality'. And it was an objection that, because of the nature of the medium, had to be brought about optically. The only way to accomplish this was through the closure of the picture plane, which forced the work to appear as a smudge in the visual field, as completely incongruous, rather than as a recognizable scene (either pictorially or literarily). Though he openly admitted to the

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<sup>11</sup> Joan Murray, The Best Contemporary Canadian Art (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1987) 112. The purpose of this volume was to identify the "living greats of Canadian art" and to show some of "the most exciting and most influential examples of contemporary art". A list of one hundred artists was compiled by the author and each was asked to select "their best work, or some work of great importance to them, and tell why they chose it" (p.vi). In 1987, Mead chose Door as the painting that best represented him.



metaphor, everything Mead did pictorially was an attempt to destroy the underlying 'door' motif of the painting (*a kind of optical sublimation of his childhood, perhaps?*). One would scarcely recognize the work as a doorway if they happened upon it unlabelled (and there is something disturbing about finding so poetic a memory buried in such a formal work, though this is beside the point). Still, you can almost share in his ecstasy of getting everything into its right place:

I also remember the excitement of putting the orange mark on the right. This immediately controlled the painting and kept it well within the framing on the right side. It also took the eye behind the black to come forward again in the light ochre area on the left. By doing this I was able to take the oval shape and put it in the position that appears to be a short distance behind the large dark mass, thus giving the painting a controlled depth of field.<sup>12</sup>

The distancing that he achieved is one of 'otherness' congruent with Greenberg's description of aesthetic experiences: "the satisfaction has to be *of* a certain expectation, the resolution has to be *of* a certain tension: the expectation and the tension created within and by the experience of the work of art itself, and not by anything outside of it."<sup>13</sup> The painting achieves the satisfaction of being other than what is normally found in the optical field. In that it has captured the viewer's gaze, the satisfaction, in this case is also the satisfaction of *seeing*—or more precisely, of being looked at (that there is a mirror hidden into the abstractness of the work is appropriate, though coincidental).<sup>14</sup> The twist becomes then, the peculiar kind of objectivity that the painting has achieved. Object-relations, in the psychoanalytic sense, theorize that the ego exists in relation to other objects; objects that can be invested with psychic energy—objects that fulfill some sort of desire. In the objectivity of the painting the ego sees—rather, replays—a model for itself. That this model is engaged, here, by sight alone only deepens the connection.

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<sup>12</sup> Murray, *The Best Contemporary Canadian Art*, 112.

<sup>13</sup> Greenberg, "The Factor of Surprise", 32-33.

<sup>14</sup> "I loved this idea, you could look through and see a mirror down the hall through that door half closed...." (Mead, 4 Jan. 1979)

Joan Murray notes: “Mead’s way of making work has a direct physical relation to his mental procedures.”<sup>15</sup> He sees the image he wants as “almost there”, claiming: “[My] objective is to try to achieve it. I try to empty my mind to reach the images back inside somewhere. I use my technical skill to set the image down.”<sup>16</sup> Clearly his art making, in that his subject matter comes from internal manifestations rather than external models, has been linked to his life in a fundamental way:

I’ve come here as a guest and I want to have contributed something and made sure that people know I’ve existed as a human being that’s what it’s all about, that’s ego by the way, it isn’t really, but it’s a very humble desire to let people know that I existed.<sup>17</sup>

His work is a sign of his existence; one wonders if it is even a substitute for his being. But this connection has been made—in the majority of his work prior to 1990—in such a way that this existence is conceived of as contained and whole. Both his work and his actuality are closed.

We have already seen how, after moving to Montreal, Mead toiled with the concept of ‘drawing’—or mark-making—in an attempt to create a more disciplined type of painting. With work from this period up into the 1980s Mead said he wanted “nothing that didn’t complete the whole.”<sup>18</sup> He wanted to submit to the new ‘reality’ of the work.

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<sup>15</sup> Murray, Ray Mead: The Papers, 12.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Murray, Ray Mead: The Papers, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Mead, 4 Jan. 1979.

<sup>18</sup> Murray, Ray Mead: The Papers, 12.



29. Untitled, 1961  
College, ink and pencil on paper

This is may be even truer of his drawings than it was of his paintings because of the directness of the medium; they were, after all, “like rehearsals for a dance”.<sup>19</sup> With Untitled (1961, fig. 29) the opening splash of ink sits almost at the centre of the paper—perhaps as the artists’ own subjective desire displayed as embryonic (id-ish) markings. Everything else in the work strives towards containment, towards circling in on this primal force. Not to eliminate it, but to illuminate it *within boundaries*. To provide a space for such force to be displayed. The field on which the swash is enacted, the white of the paper, extends out indeterminately as a blank slate, conceivably able to take on more markings (with the addition of more and more pieces of paper). Yet *this mark* has been framed. It becomes a

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<sup>19</sup> Murray, Ray Mead: Two Decades, 4.

logo for the artist's uniqueness, done in his consistent (autobiographical?) style and under the weight of his personal mannerisms (by means that have been struggled for and teased out—*arrived at*—after years of practice). Each mark, like a signature, is unique to Ray Mead. And of these drawings, he has said that they're his "way into life", a way to "explore how I get [arrive] in there."<sup>20</sup> With them he is putting his "life in order on paper really to see how orderly it is."<sup>21</sup>

Bouquet (fig. 9), or Unfinished Walk (fig. 10), or Beaurepaire Summer (fig. 11), they coalesce into coherent works of art through what was at the time considered radical avant-garde gesture, their materiality drawing attention equally as both object and action—as *something painted*. The works seem to be constructed, if not organized, on top of the surface; built up and arranged according to the traditional plastic elements of painting upon which they were based: handling, surface, depth, image-ground relationship, etc. We could say that the 'subject matter' of these works of art is *painting* itself, painting in the 'pure' plastic sense since, despite the referential nature of their titles, there are no natural underlying motifs from which they are abstracted. Each work is wholly given, complete, and self-contained. Mead's work of the 1950s was about searching for the objective limits of painting. Mead tells us that what was important to him was the process (or mechanics) of painting, his "journeys", as he liked to put it:

I like to see where I've been. I don't want it to hide or (to) take it away. Sometimes I like to show I've painted that, and another area goes over it; it's all part of like reading the surface. I mean my surfaces are meant to be read, you know. You can go up and you can still read them, you know, there's little things in there, changes and hints of journeys and decisions.<sup>22</sup>

The unity of more traditional genres of painting (held together by subject matter in the regulative sense—landscapes, still lifes, portraiture, history painting) was (I dare say

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<sup>20</sup> Murray, Ray Mead: The Papers, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Mead, 29 Oct. 1981.

<sup>22</sup> Mead, 4 Jan. 1979.

radically) exchanged for a sense of *écriture*, where the artist quite literally leaves his unique mark (no longer burdened by the responsibility of mimesis) on the world. Style is equivalent to 'being' or subjectivity in so much as both are unique to the artist. And, looking back on it, there was a certain degree of blurring to the extent that the 'artist', as a somewhat vague concept, was as much defined by the painting as the work of art was a natural extension of some unique individual. The effect was that the work is not only autonomous objectively—a material exploration of the medium—but also reveals, idealistically, a conception of individuality that was seen, more or less, as a consistent whole.

Because it deals primarily with the plastic elements of painting Bouquet is addressed principally to itself. *Painting*, both the physical and ideological limits of painting (or what were then considered to be those limits by the contemporary avant-garde) are, together, the subject matter of this work (and those like it). 'Painting' is simultaneously the subject and the *means* of this particular work. So ontologically speaking, Bouquet is the articulation of its own creation. The *method* of painting is also the *content* of the painting. The 'voice' of painting, so to speak, becomes its own subject of utterance. It is autonomous in that it doesn't rely on conditions outside of the painting to give it value.

Such a painting, such a conception of painting, relates loosely to modern notions of identity, whereby the ego is able to form a unique and, more importantly, a self-defined boundary between itself and the rest of the world—simply through its own autonymic articulation. Jürgen Habermas has credited the popularization of letter writing in the mid-eighteenth century with contributing to a heightened awareness of one's own subjectivity, whereby attentive self-observation organized around the pronoun 'I' has the specific intent

of stirring or arousing the emotions of another in one's absence.<sup>23</sup> And Lyotard, too, places the birth of the modern subject within this autobiographical I-paradigm, using the written confessions of Saint Augustine as an example.<sup>24</sup> By writing down his transgressions Augustine subjectifies himself as the unique source, or cause even, of his transgressions. This he can only do as the events of his life are organized and contained, written down in some coherent manner. *He articulates his own parameters of being, engendering his very subjectivity* (or some symbolic version of it).<sup>25</sup>

And so to a large extent the viewer too, in Mead's early work, is isolated and unique; set apart from the work, they judge it, and become the basis of their own unique sense of taste, a coherent and autonomous 'self' which is, perhaps, the cause of these judgments from which either 'pleasure' or 'displeasure' arise.

» » » §

It is easy enough to say that Ray Mead has arrived, or that we have arrived at Ray Mead's work, or even that the work has arrived. We can see this easily enough in the flashes of white paint trying so desperately to escape in small bursts from the blackness of Bouquet (fig. 9). Each one—so blatantly a substitute for the hand of the artist and his initial swiping of paint—seems to be symbolically saying *'I am here'*. The title, too, conjures up more than the simple *vie mort*, alluding also to an exchange of symbols. "Bouquets don't

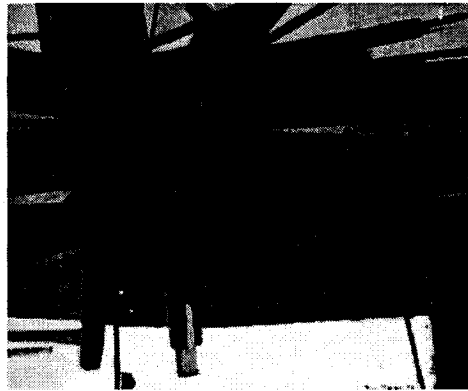
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<sup>23</sup> Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, (Cambridge, the MIT press, 1996)

<sup>24</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, The Confession of Augustine (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> However, since the ego constructs itself by identifying with an image outside the self it is always an inauthentic agency, an agent of sublimation functioning to conceal a disturbing lack of unity: "...despite wanting to say everything, the I infatuated with putting its life back together remains sundered, separated from itself. Subject of the confessional work, the first person author forgets that he is the work of writing. He is the work of time: he is waiting for himself to arrive, he believes he is enacting himself, he is catching up to himself; he is, however, duped by the repeated deception that the sexual hatches, in the very gesture of writing, postponing the instant of the presence for all times." (Lyotard, The Confession of Augustine, 36)

mean bouquets... when I did it I felt that it was a sort of a bouquet, flowers” but more than that, “*it was something you offered someone.*”<sup>26</sup> Mead offers the viewer an encounter in which the subject matter of the artist, his personal and peculiar handling of paint, his intimacy with the medium, becomes the subject matter of the work itself (symbolically saying ‘I am here’).



30. Tide #22, 1956  
Oil on canvas  
50.8 x 60.9 cm

The calligraphic void of Tide #22 (1956, fig. 30), so reminiscent of Pierre Soulages or Franz Kline, like the white dashes (though somewhat more subdued), fights to establish a sort of presence within its more traditionally landscaped background. This work in particular is illustrative of the ambiguous ‘place’ of subject matter within a work of art—we can never be quite sure if the void sits across the surface of the painting or bubbles up mysteriously from deep within.

Each of these early works deals with subject matter allegorically. In many ways, these works are allegorical simply because they are done in the style of ‘Ray Mead’. And they seem, in his place, to speak for him—or rather, from his place, they seem to speak of him (*allos* = other + *agoreuei* = to speak) “[M]y journeys, as I call them. I like to see where I’ve

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<sup>26</sup> Mead, 4 Jan. 1979.

*been. I don't want... to hide.*"<sup>27</sup> The originality of Mead's painting manner is a clear index of his uniqueness as an individual. And there is a sacrificial coming together in that a body of work is substituted for the body of an artist because the 'subject' of each corpus is assumed to be the same—the truncated physical expression of an otherwise incoherent inner narrative. This substitution is made possible because the work of 'art' is phantasized to be more than the just the 'stylings' of modernist aesthetics and the *being* of the artist is imagined to go beyond the sum of his memory, paintings, personality, actions, scars, etc. It is the union of these two ambiguous 'worlds'—neither one particularly presentable—which allows for their perceived equivalency, each propping the other up.

» » » §

But again, *what arrives?* With Modernism's shifting of focus from external to internal criticisms, there came also the artists' radical shift of position in relation to the works they created. On the one hand their work was the result of some hard-fought inner turmoil. On the other it was immaculately conceived, especially in the eyes of the viewer who was after all left to make aesthetic judgments 'in complete freedom'. More and more the artist was seen in the same terms as the viewer of his or her work, subject matter came to each from some unknown place:

The artist ceases to be guided by a culture which made of him the sender and master of a message of glory: he becomes, in so far as he is a genius, the involuntary *addressee* of an inspiration come to him from an 'I know not what.'

...it explains why reflection on art should no longer bear essentially on the 'sender' instance/agency of works, but on the "addressee" instance. And under the name 'genius' the latter instance is situated, not only on the side

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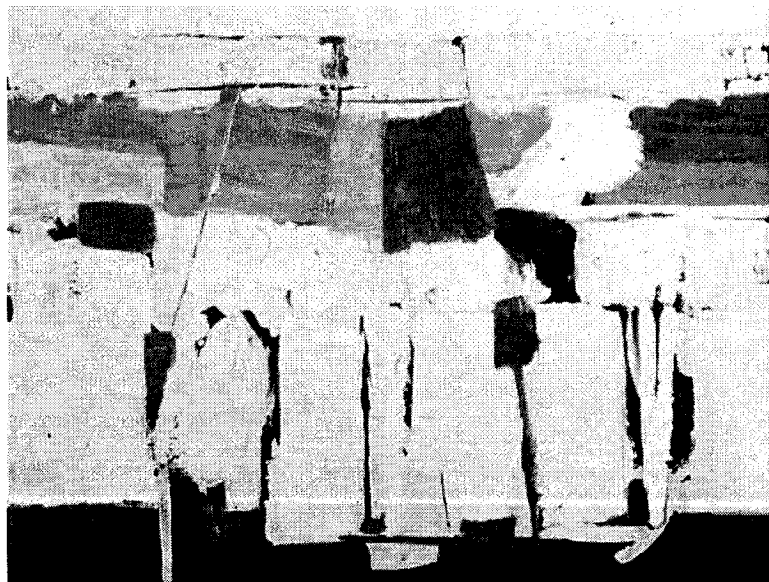
<sup>27</sup> Mead, 4 Jan. 1979.



of the public, but also on the side of the artist, a feeling which he does not master.<sup>28</sup>

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The more we focus on ‘reading’ the material surface of Mead’s painting, the more our autonomy is enforced in a fundamental way. The work appears as a visual smudge, as I have said, objectified from the rest of the world. But these paintings also act as a constant and unrelenting anamorphosis when compared to the backdrop around them. Perfectly aligning themselves with the eye of the ‘viewer’ they are ceaselessly in focus, and in plain view—as opposed to, say, genre paintings, which are almost always seen askew, from off to one side; the viewer is rarely in line with their optimal vanishing point. Although perspectivally constructed, they are rarely in alignment with the rest of the world from the viewer’s perspective.



31. Red Rectangle, c. 1957  
Oil on canvas

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<sup>28</sup> Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde”, 97.

Certainly a painting like Red Rectangle (c. 1957, fig. 31) has a strong landscape composition (“I never think of a figure when I’m doing a shape”<sup>29</sup>). Its horizontal band of reds, oranges and yellows establishes a solid horizon, while a corresponding strip of dark gray at the bottom anchors a rather ambiguous mid-section. However, the painting offers up only the landscape schematic without any of its aerial nuance. Richly handled whites sabotage the mid-ground by spilling out over the grey fore ground and dragging the dark red and green under painting up to the fore in bits and slashes (*do they appear as marks or punctures?*). The central red square, lost somewhere between the fore ground and coloured horizon, is never quite able to be pried away from its place in the row of yellows and oranges—despite the lower right corner that seems to lift up and flap away from the surface. The painting takes the landscape schema and violently flips it up onto the vertical plane, pressing everything forward against the surface of the canvas. The memory of a landscape is evoked, but in such a way that remembering is fiercely interrupted.

The work is combative. There is a strong confrontational frontality to it. One cannot help but address it vertically, in an upright manner, feeling both feet planted firmly on the ground. But with the absence of any orienting focal point there is no optimum vantage point. No matter the angle or orientation of viewing, this painting remains completely attuned to the eye’s line of sight; yet set apart from the natural world by the smear of its ‘reality within itself’. Rather than receding in space it projects a sort of blind spot (an anamorphosis), or vanishing point outwards, which orients the rest of the world according to the archetypal gaze upon which subjectivity is premised: for the one who ‘looks’ becomes utterly unique in so much as no other individual can at the same time look upon *this painting* from the same place at the same time.

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<sup>29</sup> Mead, 4 Jan. 1979.

When looking so intently at Red Rectangle it is difficult not to see a little Merleau-Ponty. “My gaze does not merge with the outline or the patch as it does with the redness considered concretely”, he writes, “it ranges over and dominates them.”<sup>30</sup> This is what I meant when I said Mead’s work is anthropomorphic, for within the context of painting subjectivity is formed under the weightiness of the scopic domain, in relation to external objects. The gaze organizes what it sees (its initial sensory perceptions) according to stops and starts, according to edges and surfaces, which then delineate shapes and objects. And these objects are conceived of wholly and placed into the natural world without gaps in the field of vision. But the limitation of the gaze is that it cannot penetrate surfaces. The entire sighted realm is based on the eye’s inability to penetrate, yet complete capacity to dominate and organize surfaces coherently. This uniformed organization (the surface of the natural world, so to speak) is perceived in complete opposition to the interiority of the subject perceiving, who has no outward surface to speak of except the impenetrable skins of what it perceives, or at least this is the case for our sense of sight. “[H]enceforth [within the optic domain] the immediate is no longer the impression, the object which is one with the subject, but the meaning, the structure, the spontaneous arrangement of parts.”<sup>31</sup>

That the eye can only begin to see what is foreign to it, these are its limits. It makes out forms and patches of colour based on difference alone. Merleau-Ponty writes:

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<sup>30</sup> Merleau-Ponty, The Phenomenology of Perception, (London: Routledge & Kegan Ltd., 1962) 13. He could easily be describing the red square so much a part of the ambiguity of Red Rectangle when he writes:

That a quality, an area of red, should signify something, that it should be, for example, seen as a patch on a background, means that the red is not this warm colour which I feel and live and loose myself in, but that it announces something else which it does not include, that it exercises a cognitive function, and that its parts together make up a whole to which each is related without leaving its place. Henceforth the red is no longer merely there, it represents something for me, and what it represents is not possessed as a ‘real part’ of my perception, but only aimed at as an ‘intentional part’ (Merleau-Ponty, 13).

<sup>31</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 58.

We are not called up to analyze the act of attention as a passage from indistinctness to clarity, because the indistinctness is not there. Consciousness does not begin to exist until it sets limits to an object, and even the phantoms of 'internal experience' are possible only as things borrowed from external experience.<sup>32</sup>

It is only under the power of the gaze that the living body becomes an exterior without interior and subjectivity becomes an interior without exterior each fashioned in opposition to one another.

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Under this scopic rule the ego is frustration in its essence; and "not frustration of a desire of the subject, but frustration by an object in which... [our] desire is alienated."<sup>33</sup> Where the (smeared) object *objects* to the natural order of the word, the subject is that which *subjects* itself to the object (to objectivity; to the new 'reality' of the work).<sup>34</sup> For there is no unformed positive space (no blank slate really, and perhaps no metaphysical state even) in which the ego appears, only the limits of sight placing it at the centre of the optic domain. And by ego, I am referring to the viewer stripped of the socialized self and placed at the centre of the aesthetic experience. The ego recounts itself in a fetish of imaginary identification with some other double—an image of closure hewn by the eye—at once a rival and a paranoid persecutor. Always attuned to the line of sight, this is what gazes back at from each painting, from that very position so foreign to the place from

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<sup>32</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 27.

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1977): 42. Slavoj Žižek takes this line of reasoning a step further writing "it is not sufficient to say that the ego forms its symptoms in order to maintain its precarious balance with the forces of the id. Ego itself is, as to its essence, a symptom, a compromise-formation, a tool enabling the subject to regulate his or her desire." (Slavoj Žižek, "A Hair of the Dog That Bit You", *The Žižek Reader* [Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991] 274)

<sup>34</sup> see Žižek, *The Parallax View*.

which we look.<sup>35</sup> But this “frustration on the part of the mirror double *is* constitutive of the ego”<sup>36</sup> according to Lacan (via Slavoj Žižek), to the extent that what is formatively seen as a frustrating external hindrance, blocking the ego’s satisfaction, in the end comes to be “*experienced as the ultimate support of its being.*”<sup>37</sup> Supportive to the extent that this ‘gaze’ (this smudge in the optic field) constitutes our wholeness, reflects it: *sanctions it along the edge of a painting, perhaps.*



At the centre of our visual world, the eye remains strangely illusive. It is always hidden. For you can’t ever see the eye, only ‘see’ with it—and there is nothing in the field of vision to let you infer that it in fact is being seen through such an oculus, only the ubiquitous visual field. The eye therefore, does not at all belong to the seeing world; it is the boundary of that world, *in the same way a painting (in the modern sense) does not at all belong to the practice of painting, rather it only marks the limitations of such practice.*

And at every turn we are forced into the connection between the ‘eye’ and the ‘I’. In a parallax shift. Against a molted background the edge of painting suddenly emerges as a smudge on the landscape aligning itself perfectly with the eye centred in our optical field as the limits of sight. In that moment an otherness is cleaved out. A reflective shift of the gaze causes the living, breathing eye to be burned inwards replaced by the internal mind’s ‘I’. But what is there to suggest that this inner ‘I’ is actually located in any kind of a positive perceptive field or oriented anywhere except towards this homophonous substitution with the eye? This ongoing questioning of the self. It announces its existence only upon

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<sup>35</sup> It is this otherness which we believe keeps the visual field in tune [the same for everyone] outside of our gaze; it is the same otherness which regulates our desire and observes, sanctions, our identification

<sup>36</sup> Žižek, “A Hair of the Dog That Bit You”, 274.

<sup>37</sup> Žižek, “A Hair of the Dog That Bit You”, 274.

reflection—upon looking, and judging—in a spiraling vortex. ‘I’ fall away to an endless point, ‘reality’ being coordinated only through ‘me’. The world reveals itself through—is interrupted by—the boundaries of the ‘I’.

*Subject matter* is not given to the world but is the boundary of such a world. No aspect of our experience is a priori.<sup>38</sup> We are cut under this gaze, and our eye seems barely able to hold up. Strewn from the body it is torn between looking outwards and the frustrated otherness looking in.

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When looking at Mead’s career, I can see to a certain degree, an interweaving of Kant’s two-part *Critique of Judgment*<sup>39</sup> (though this is not atypical of painters from Mead’s generation, who also explored the limits of abstraction). With the New York school of painters in the 1950s there was certainly a revitalization of the ideologies of the Beautiful and the Sublime, which Mead surely would have been aware of, especially given his contact with Greenberg. Though he did not engage in these concepts outright (at least I have not come across anything that would indicate this) one can read into his work a

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<sup>38</sup> The early Wittgenstein writes: “The *I* occurs in philosophy through the fact that the ‘world is my world.’ The philosophical *I* is not the human being, not the human body, nor the human soul with which psychology deals. The philosophical self is the metaphysical subject, the boundary—nowhere in the world.” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. [Toronto: Mayfield, 1998] 38-39)

<sup>39</sup> The premise of the book—running through contemporary phenomenology, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis and critical theory—is that subjectivity and objectivity are abstractions from a much more fundamental and complex dynamics; and that those occasions when we attempt to ‘come to terms’ with the heightened sensation of an artwork become essential if we are to understand any of our cognitive and moral contact with the world:

[I]n [dealing with] a product of fine art we must become conscious that it is art rather than nature, and yet the purposiveness [the appearance of design or purpose] in its form must seem as free from all constraint of chosen rules as if it were a product of mere nature (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987] 306).

In Kantian philosophy an “aesthetic idea” is “...a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e., no concept, can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it.” (Kant, 314)

shifting of emphasis from the Beautiful (favouring consensus, completeness, consistency, wholeness of form) towards the Sublime (a fleeting sense of joy and terror in the face of the unrepresentable) as Mead gradually lost faith in the idea of painting as a consistent, coherent image, searching for more experiential or phenomenological modes of painting. It is a move that can also be considered a turning away from the object-ness (an exploration of the medium) towards the subjective experience of (a) painting. “I realized my painting wasn’t saying enough for me”, he said (without using this Kantian terminology), “and that was a big change in my approach to the surface of the painting and to my reaction to a painting.”<sup>40</sup>

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So the ‘subject matter’ of paintings from the Stargazer series, (c. 1993–98, fig. 27) cannot be considered the nature of painting as a medium, but ‘*painting*’ in the phenomenological sense—the experiencing or ‘event’ of (a) painting. The subject matter is *the instant*, or the showing up of the gaze. Organized around a series of crises, the marks liberate the surface rather than filling it. The work is governed not by the materiality of the medium, but by the *sublime*, by the fear of nothing else happening. “It’s really something quite transient. It could float off. It’s a goddess you could have missed because it has such a short life.”<sup>41</sup>

This work calls into question the stability of Mead’s earlier work, threatening, as it does, to fall away into complete incompleteness. The terms of Modernist criticism, based on Kant’s “Analytic of the Beautiful”, which could quite easily and accurately assess

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<sup>40</sup> Mead, 16 Sept. 1986.

<sup>41</sup> Mead, 13 Sept. 1989.

Mead's work of the 1950s and 60s, becomes problematic with these works, somehow missing the point. Greenberg writes:

...results are all that count in art for art (whether formalized or unformalized). Results here mean value judgments alone, nothing else: the intuitive registering of the esthetically good, bad, middling. This registering decides everything in art as art. All other questions about art in itself, about esthetic experience in itself, cede to it. The sole issue is value, quality.... The tissue, substance, essence of esthetic experience are results that are value judgments. When art is given to experience as or for anything else it's no longer or not yet art, and the experience of it is no longer or not yet esthetic.<sup>42</sup>

How could the closed-ness of such discourse ever begin to describe the openness so freely displayed in Mead's later work (figs. 24, 25, 26, 27, 28)? It does not engage the viewer in a discussion, on the grounds of taste, about some Beautiful object before them. It forces them into a phenomenological discourse; about how 'things'—these paintings—exist in the world. The gesture of Stargazer 1 is different from the allegorical brushwork of Bouquet (fig. 9), arrested between its representation and what it endeavors to present. It is given by so many little accentuations and punctuations that fall from the brush in a succession of small, fleeting... what?... here the homology gets stuck. For the work fails on a symbolic level. It cannot refer back to the hand of the artist because it seems yet to be completed (as if the hand should be still working). It cannot project the closed objectivity, constitutive of the viewers' subject, because it appears too ephemeral, too transient. The mirroring of objectivity upon which the ego is based remains incomplete—or rather the 'object' (that which objects to the nature world) has taken on a different mode of presentation (that of the gesture), causing the ego to be subjected to the artistic encounter in a completely different way, as if arrested at its apex, so to speak). This painting does not reflect the constitutive gaze; it absorbs it.

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<sup>42</sup> Greenberg, "The Language of Esthetic Discourse", 65-66.



If Bouquet is able to articulate its own existence by virtue of its subject matter (which is painting, as both the means and contents of the work) then Crossing (fig. 21) is 'empty' in the same way that Lacan uses the term "empty speech".<sup>43</sup> Freed from the *contents* of subject matter, such emptiness opens up a place for subjectivity to be filled in *later*. It points to the *possibility* of subject matter. The 'emptiness' of "empty speech", in opposition to "full speech", lies in the "ultimate nullity of its enunciated content":

And Lacan's point is that human speech in its most radical, fundamental dimension functions as a password: prior to its being a means of communication, of transmitting the signified content, speech is the medium of the mutual recognition of the speakers. In other words, it is precisely the password qua empty Speech that reduces the subject to the punctuality of the 'subject of the enunciation': in it, he is present qua a pure symbolic point freed of all enunciated content.<sup>44</sup>

How does this 'emptiness' come across in a work like Stargazer 1. Firstly the viewer is unable to flesh out the work in any kind of formal narrative. There is a void when it comes to describing the look of the work with any kind of poetry. Then, there is the *feeling* the work gives off, that it is timeless. The painting is not an 'example' of any particular 'kind' of painting since its means and subject are not necessarily congruent. Lyotard captures it best when he says: "Not elsewhere, not up there or over there, not earlier or later, not once upon a time. But as here, now, it happens that,... and it's this painting. Here and now there is this painting, rather than nothing, and that's what is sublime."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> "[I]t is only empty speech that, by way of its very emptiness (of its distance from the enunciated content that is posited in it as totally indifferent), creates the space for 'full speech', for speech in which the subject can articulate his or her position of enunciation" (Žižek, "A Hair of the Dog that Bit You", 272).

<sup>44</sup> Žižek, "A Hair of the Dog that Bit You", 272.

<sup>45</sup> Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde", 93.

What is sublime with Lagoon, Crossing and Stargazer 1, (figs. 24, 26, 27, 28) is their lack of ending, an ending, which in terms of the gaze would be constitutive of our ego formation. But it is not the threat of nothingness that announces this sublime feeling; we delight (or take negative pleasure) instead, in that there *is* something here, rather than nothing (we delight in the ‘terror’ of being placed in the proximity—in being affronted by the possibility—of nothingness). For the sublime puts one in touch with the most minimal of occurrences, the moment when subjectivity is posed as a question, not an answer—‘me?’ “It is at the very least a sign, the question-mark itself, [but] the way in which *it happens* is withheld....”<sup>46</sup> And it is this tension between symbolic failure and immanent phenomenological failure which marks the sublime as “the instant which interrupts the chaos of history and which recalls, or simply calls out that ‘there is’, even before that which is has any signification.”<sup>47</sup>

And so if taste, if aesthetic judgment, testifies that between the capacity to conceive and the capacity to present ‘forms’ there is harmony, a free play between the imagination and understanding despite the lack of any determining ‘rules’, then the sublime is an altogether different sentiment. What dominates the sublime is the unrepresentable. The imagination fails to present an object, a form, which might, if only in principle, come to match an abstract concept. We have an Idea of the world in its totality, or of consciousness, or of being, let’s say, or even of what a properly Modern painting should be, but we do not have the capacity to present an example of it. We have an inkling of our own subject matter, I suppose, but are powerless to present an image of it. The fundamental task of the sublime work of art is to bear pictorial witness to the inexpressible: “The inexpressible does

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<sup>46</sup> Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde”, 92.

<sup>47</sup> Lyotard, “Newman: The Instant”, 87.

not reside in an over there, in another world, or another time, but in this: in that (something) happens.”<sup>48</sup>

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Slavoj Žižek writes: “[W]hat opens up the space for such sublime monstrous apparitions is the breakdown of the logic of representation: that is, the radical incommensurability between the field of representation and the unrepresentable Thing, which emerges with Kant.”<sup>49</sup> In this sublime instant, the gaze is laid down to one side. Unarmed, it no longer runs rampant over the surface of the painting. And the painting no longer looks back with constitutive otherness. The eye, as the receptacle of pure light, which is to say the receptacle of the pure moment, is unhinged from the ‘I’—beginning now with the question of sensory impressions (who, what, is impressed, is subjected?), rather than ending with the coherence of surface.

What is glimpsed in this moment is that freedom (the freedom to judge aesthetically) was only possible on the basis of a certain fundamental alienation. Mead’s earlier abstract expressionist works were beholden to a certain kind of presentation characterized by what Slavoj Žižek calls the logic of “unmasking”.<sup>50</sup> In unmasking Modernism reaches its self-critical fulfillment as meaning gets arbitrarily produced by the movement of signifiers. Or to put it another way, subject matter gets shifted around from site to site as various objects are revealed to be signs of its coherence. Each work attempts to unmask its central void (its subject matter) only by supplementing it. Revealing its unrepresentable foundation as simply the method of its articulation. We can see this in a

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<sup>48</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde”, 93.

<sup>49</sup> Žižek, “A Hair of the Dog that Bit You”, 277.

<sup>50</sup> Žižek, “The Obscene Object of Postmodernity”, 40.

work like Bouquet (fig. 9) where the active brushstrokes reference the missing hand of the artist. The work unmask the unrepresentable void at the centre of presentation itself, showing it to be an allegory for the interiority of the artist. In an attempt to regain closure the work reorients itself—it shows up the indeterminacy of the medium as a solution to the problem of self-definition, solving in the process the ambiguities of *subject matter*—*what are you going to paint?—why I’m going to paint in my own style of course for that is the only possible way I can paint.*

But once the brushstroke fails in its attempt to give us a mark that taken together with other marks, adds up to a consistent whole, as it does with Stargazer 1 (fig. 27), it has failed in its reference and we can lay our focus on that which lies in opposition to the signifier or allegory. Here, we are put in uneasy proximity with ‘the Real Thing’, that, obscene, revolting, *central impossibility* around which every signifying network is sutured. And we confront it not as a sign of unrepresentability, but as the immanent failure of the symbolic order to present anything (the frightening realization that the law is necessary but not necessarily true). We are now dealing with what Žižek calls the “postmodernist break”, which rather than unmasking a symbolic system, reveals its subject matter outright. For those little drips and drabs, that vacant ‘x’ (from Stargazer 1) cannot possibly show us anything else but the discrete flash of their existence, clinging to representation only as a lost cause.

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Thierry de Duve ingeniously observes that the modern aesthetic question is not “What is beautiful?” but rather, “What can be said to be art?”<sup>51</sup> And what Lyotard calls modern is art that devotes its technical expertise “to present[ing] the fact that the unrepresentable exists.”<sup>52</sup>

Mead certainly didn’t set out to, nor did he succeed in, answering these questions. “[I]f you can position yourself within your historical time,” Mead said, “what more can you do? You can’t do tomorrow and you can’t do yesterday....”<sup>53</sup> Mead’s history saw these questions of unrepresentability start out as smaller questions concerning expression—and questions concerning what to paint and how to paint it. Still, in small ways his work does get oriented towards larger questions of how to make visible that there is ‘something’ which cannot be seen? For painting, of course, will always present *something*. Kant points to ‘negative presentation’ where ‘formlessness or the absence of form’ provides a possible index to the unrepresentable. But there still remains the paradox that allusion to the unrepresentable can only be made by means of visible presentation. And this paradox is not so far removed from Mead’s exploration of the interconnections between gesture and colour. For, as I tried to expand upon in the first chapter, he was using both to express more than simply the conventions of good form. For him it was always a question of expression. And for him expression was never simply a mark on the canvas. “When you are stuck with just yourself, some paint, and a piece of canvas, you’ve got to invent everything”, he said, “and it’s got to be constructed correctly and built correctly.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Thierry de Duve, cited in Lyotard, “What is Postmodernism?”, 75.

<sup>52</sup> Lyotard, “What is Postmodernism?”, 78.

<sup>53</sup> Weihs and Sandiford, 8.

<sup>54</sup> Weihs and Sandiford, 6.

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