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Howard Mehring: From the Gestural to the Sublime

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“[Mehring’s] sureness, from the beginning, is extraordinary. It rescues him from the Burkean ‘terror.’ His sublime is the calmest – the most beautiful of any American painter’s.”
– Carter Radcliffⁱ

This exhibition discloses the experimental and innovative forces that engendered Howard Mehring’s stylistic evolution during the critical period from 1956 to 1961. From the age of twenty-five in 1956 Mehring advanced, within five years, beyond the prevailing style of abstract expressionism into his own lyrical style. The artist’s agile progression culminated in the “allover” paintings, original works which are delicate, expansive, ineffable, in a word – sublime.

Mehring’s precociousness captured the attention of his fellow Washington Color painter Gene Davis, who recalled:

Howard Mehring’s show at the Origo Galleryⁱⁱ [1959] had about five different styles of painting. And Nolandⁱⁱⁱ was experimenting with several types of work...None of us knew quite where to go... it’s a myth...that there is a clear-cut father-son relationship in this business. Let’s just say we all had access to the same sources and we all drew certain conclusions. Anyone who thinks that there is this historically neat division – Noland and Louis, and then the second generation, Davis, Downing and Mehring (and now a third generation!), is kidding himself!^{iv}

Selected works from 1956 and 1957 exemplify Mehring’s early stylistic experimentation. ***Untitled (green), 1956*** features oil and enamel thickly applied with prominent brushstrokes and drips, techniques resonant of New York action painters such as Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock. Mehring’s energetic paint handling yields to calmer, subtler imagery with a smoother surface in ***Larch, 1956***. This work demonstrates his assimilation of the pouring technique pioneered by his older Washington, D.C. colleague Morris Louis and signals an emphasis on color as Mehring’s primary means of expression. ***Untitled (blue gesture), 1957*** displays once again the action of the artist’s hand, yet in a more fluid, calligraphic motion. Using Magna^v acrylic thinned with turpentine, he demonstrated his command of Helen Frankenthaler’s method of staining pigments into unsized canvas. On this change of approach Mehring reflected, “I was staining and Pollock was dripping. The drips tend to sit on the surface out in the front of the canvas while the stain penetrated it and it became a unified surface.”^{vi} Because of the surface quality he could achieve with Magna on unsized canvas, Mehring preferred it to other types of paint, with which, he asserted, “You don’t get the same sense of color weight

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that you get from Magna.^{vii} The color weight and surface qualities Mehring valued are manifested in *Untitled (mist), 1957*. Gesture is still present, yet it has been sublimated into softer, more diffuse imagery, attaining an ethereal effect. At this point in his career, Mehring was coming into his own as an artist with a distinguishing and confident new style of painting.

As Mary Swift observed, "By 1957 Mehring's work became assured. He is staining into unsized canvas and making the painting he wants."^{viii} Jane Livingston affirmed, "By 1957 Mehring had developed a style and methodology that were fully mature and bore most of the seeds of his later more radical work. Moreover the paintings from this early mature phase are at least equal in quality to anything done later."^{ix} *Equinox, 1957* embodies the quality of Mehring's works from this initial mature period. The importance of *Equinox* in the artist's oeuvre is evident in Livingston's catalog preface for Mehring's retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery of Art (1977-78), wherein she recounted that this work was at the core of her curatorial vision: "In 1976, I proposed to organize a relatively modest Mehring exhibition, presenting the major paintings from the years 1957-58, such as *Banner, Equinox, Playground, and Frontenac*."^x Livingston further noted:

Mehring shows a formidable command of his medium, Magna paint applied with brushes or sometimes directly from the can, using it with an intricacy, control and flexibility that few other artists at this time or since can rival. Mehring's prodigious calligraphic fluency expressed itself in these 1957-58 pre-allover paintings to an extent unequalled except in recent small drawings.^{xi}

Swift characterized *Equinox* as a seminal work:

In *Equinox* ...we see the seeds of the small-increment, allover principle, certainly derived in part from the late Monet, that would soon be exaggerated and extended into a cycle of work that is one of Mehring's outstanding inventions – that of very fragile, very small, free-hand elements dispersed more or less uniformly over a comparatively large, actually a metaphorically vast, surface.^{xii}

She elaborated that the work "has a base of pink calligraphy, but on top of this stained-in darker pink or red is a repetitive pattern, similar in shape and making a regular pattern across the surface of the painting." Swift observed, "This painting is not bounded by the frame edge, but stretches beyond it...Under the calligraphy are shapes like blue footprints reminiscent of the handprints which occasionally appear in Pollock's work."^{xiii} She also suggested:

The rhythm of the darker calligraphic shapes seems to be derived from jazz. Mehring usually played music while he

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worked. It also again attests to the wrist facility of Mehring who was able to throw out these shapes with such consistency and beauty. This is a luscious painting and was never repeated.^{xiv}

Subsequent to *Equinox*, Mehring created his signature allover style. About his breakthrough technique he revealed:

I work rapidly and impulsively over the whole surface in waves of color. With thin washes I can achieve a sense of richness and depth ambiguously maintaining flatness....I weight and mix each color carefully using each as an interior pressure working for expansion.^{xv}

Swift elaborated:

Ultimately this period [1959 – 60] evolved into a style which was characterized by small dots as in... **Gold, 1960**. These paintings are usually large canvases in which patterns of color built on a basic dot form encompasses the entire canvas. Although the end effect seems like one color, they are usually composed of layers and layers of color, making them very rich and sometimes quite dense.^{xvi}

She noted, "*Gold* is a big tan picture, but upon closer inspection, glimpses of pink become apparent. The layers and multiple layers give the paintings their richness and feeling of depth."^{xvii} An early example of the richness and depth of Mehring's large-scale allover imagery is seen in **Untitled (blue silver), 1957**, where he used a silvery metallic paint in combination with darker pigments. The artist also applied the allover technique to smaller-scale works, including **Untitled (green velvet), 1959**, **Untitled (black), 1959**, and **Spring, 1958**. Though physically smaller, each of these works display characteristically subtle combinations of colors forming multiple layers and giving rise to delicate imagery which seems to expand deeply within, as well as beyond, the surface of the canvas.

The works the artist created during this period won him international critical acclaim when exhibited in two shows in New York in 1970. In his review of an exhibition of Mehring's paintings from 1957-58 at A.M. Sachs gallery, Carter Radcliff wrote, "His sureness, from the beginning, is extraordinary. It rescues him from the Burkean 'terror.' His sublime is the calmest – the most beautiful of any American painter's."^{xviii} Alluding to Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Radcliff affirmed that Mehring achieved sublimity in his paintings without sacrificing beauty. Earlier that year A. M. Sachs had exhibited works by Mehring from 1958 – 60. These two exhibitions proved revelatory for the audience in New York, where thus far Mehring had been known for his later hard-edged work. Reviewing the works from 1958 - 60, Robert Pincus-Witten asserted, "The issue that will be stressed in this exhibition is how Howard Mehring had achieved a soaked in allover dispersal

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as early as 1958...In fact the proportional smallness of Mehring's stroke to the breadth of surface strikes me as their most original aspect."^{xix} Radcliff, too, remarked upon the vastness evoked by the allover paintings, "Mehring's originality here was in painting boundless expanding paintings without relying on Pollock's frenzy or [Barnett] Newman's 'sublimity.'"^{xx}

At the time Mehring was imbuing his allover with a sense of boundless expansiveness, he was also exploring the construct of liminality, creating imagery distinguished by transitional passages which induce sensory thresholds. This is not to imply that Mehring consciously deployed principles of psychophysics.^{xxi} But rather to suggest that he intuitively probed notions of the lower ranges at which visual stimuli, such as color difference and brightness contrast, can be perceived, as well as the threshold levels at which an increase or decrease in a visual stimulus can be perceived. Emerging in 1957, this line of experimentation produced ***Black Jack, 1957***, a small canvas painted thickly in brown and black oil pigments so dark that it is difficult at first to visually differentiate that the dense composition is in fact a bisected field. A similar arrangement appears in the larger work ***Untitled (copper), 1957***, which is painted in warm tones of Magna, where Mehring again obfuscated the division between the right and left sides of the composition. In ***Mixed Dapple with White Edge, 1958*** white pigment around the outer edges of the canvas contrasts with imagery on the interior, where brown, gold, green, red and yellow pigments form orbs, meld into fluid patterns, coalesce, and, in some places, fade out to the point that they almost seem to disappear. In ***Untitled (yellow gray diagonal) 1961*** Mehring once again bisected his composition, this time diagonally with an edge formed by juxtaposing two fields of layered color dots without using line. Mehring's investigation of liminality reaches its apogee in ***Aura II, 1961*** with a vertical field of lush bands of gray, pink, red and white dots that advance, blur and recede, evoking congruous waves in an immaterial sea or, successive phrases of music in a fugue. The distinction between music and painting is a threshold Mehring was eager to pervade as he broke through stylistic boundaries moving from the gestural to the sublime. He explained, "Painting is only now coming into its own, beginning to be really abstract, like music. By contrast, I feel that abstract expressionism is still spatially rooted in nature, in landscape and still life. We are just starting to explore pure color, pure line, pure form for their own sakes."^{xxii}

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ⁱ Carter Radcliff, "Howard Mehring, Sachs Gallery, New York," *Art International*, Vol. XIV, no. 10, Dec. 1970, p. 68.

ⁱⁱ The Origo Gallery was formed by Mehring, Thomas Downing and Betty Pajak in 1959 at 2008 R Street, NW, Washington, DC.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kenneth Noland was Mehring's professor at Catholic University in Washington, DC, where Mehring received his M.F.A. in 1955.

^{iv} Davis, Gene, and Donald Wall. *Gene Davis*. New York: Praeger, 1975, pp. 152-154.

^v "In 1946 [Leonard] Bocour's acrylic resin paint, Magna, first appeared on the market. Bocour began giving artists tubes of the new paint to test its potential. Among the first experimenters were Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, Jackson Pollock, and, beginning in 1947, Morris Louis." Upright, Diane. *Morris Louis: The Complete Paintings*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1985, p. 49-58.

^{vi} Swift, Mary. *Howard William Mehring 1931 – 1978, Washington Color Painter* (Master's Thesis, George Washington University, 1978, p. 20.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 20.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 26.

^{ix} Mehring, Howard, and Jane Livingston. *Howard Mehring: A Retrospective Exhibition, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., December 10, 1977-January 22, 1978*. 1977, p. 10.

^x *Ibid.*, p. 7. *Banner* is in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum; *Playground* and *Fontenac* were in the permanent collection of the Corcoran Gallery of Art. *Fontenac* is currently in the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 10.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. 11.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 10.

^{xiv} Swift, p.29.

^{xv} Livingston, p. 11.

^{xvi} Swift, p. 33.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, p. 35.

^{xviii} Radcliff, (Dec. 1970), p. 68.

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^{xix} Robert Pincus -Witten, "New York: Howard Mehring, Sachs Gallery, *Artforum*, vol. VIII, no. 10, June 1970, p. 82.

^{xx} Radcliff, Carter, "Review of Howard Mehring at A.M. Sachs Gallery, New York," *Art International*, Vol. XIV, no. 6, Summer 1970., p. 142.

^{xxi} On sensory thresholds see: Smith, C. *Biology of Sensory Systems*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008, pp. 35 -37.

^{xxii} Ahlander, Leslie Judd. "An Artist Speaks: Howard Mehring," *Washington Post*, Sept. 2, 1962, p. G7.