



GEORGE McNEIL

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ABSTRACTSCAPES
AND
FIGURES

FEBRUARY 20-MARCH 31, 1985

UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY
UNIVERSITY CENTER AT BINGHAMTON
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

- Accord Abstractscape*, 1984, oil on canvas, 68x56 inches
Amaranth Abstractscape, 1983, oil on canvas, 56x68 inches
Earth-Air Abstraction, 1982, oil on canvas, 68x56 inches
Earth-Air Abstraction #2, 1982, oil on canvas, 68x56 inches
Emdown Abstractscape, 1984, oil on canvas, 68x56 inches
Enchanted Mesa, 1977, oil on canvas, 75x60 inches
Litence Abstractscape, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 56x68 inches
Mombaccus Abstractscape, 1984, oil on canvas, 56x68 inches
Mythic Landscape #4, II, 1979, oil on canvas, 68x56 inches
New Mexico Landscape: Rectangular Cloud, 1977, oil on canvas,
75x60 inches
Palentown Abstractscape, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 56x64 inches
Partov Abstractscape, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 68x56 inches
Sungem Abstractscape, 1983, oil on canvas, 56x68 inches
Amour à Trois, 1983, 2-color lithograph, 28x22 1/4 inches
Cigarette Head, 1971, 2-color lithograph, 28x22 inches,
Tamarind Institute
Christiana and Julia, 1983, black and white lithograph,
22 1/4 x 28 inches
Dalliance Disco, 1984, 4-color lithograph, 28x22 1/2 inches
Debonaire Disco, 1984, 4-color lithograph, 31x42 1/2 inches,
Hudson River Editions
Delusion Disco, 1984, 3-color lithograph, 22 1/2 x 28 inches
Deranged Disco, 1984, 4-color lithograph, 22 1/2 x 28 inches,
Gruenbaum Editions
Disturbed Disco, 1983, black and white lithograph,
28x21 1/4 inches
Dizzy Disco, 1983, 2-color lithograph, 22 1/2 x 28 inches
Double-Self, 1982, 2-color lithograph, 22 1/4 x 28 inches
Dream Image, 1983, black and white lithograph, 28x22 1/4 inches
Emperor Head, 1974, black and white lithograph, 25x19 inches
Heads, Hands, Bird, 1978, 3-color lithograph, 20x26 inches
Henry and Mara, 1980, 3-color lithograph, 28x22 1/2 inches
Highb Life, 1984, 4-color lithograph, 22 1/2 x 28 inches,
Tamarind Institute
Joey Loves Milly, 1982, 3-color lithograph, 22 1/2 x 29 1/8 inches
Millicent, 1976, black and white lithograph, 24x18 inches
Oh! That One!, 1983, 3-color lithograph, 28x22 1/4 inches
Siegfried and Brunilde, 1983, black and white lithograph,
22 1/4 x 28 inches
Sparklers, 1983, 3-color lithograph, 28x22 1/2 inches
Surprise #1, 1978, 4-color lithograph, 20x26 inches
What a Bore!, 1983, 3-color lithograph, 22 1/4 x 28 inches



Mythic Landscape #4, II, 1979, oil on canvas, 68x56 inches



Enchanted Mesa, 1977, oil on canvas, 75x60 inches

ABSTRACTSCAPES AND FIGURES

My love affair with landscape painting began in my first year at Pratt Institute. From having haunted museums and libraries, I knew that artists painted outdoors in the summer, so I went to my father's boathouse in Freeport, Long Island to sketch dunes, creeks, and fishing shacks. I was attracted to this subject matter because I knew the Brooklyn Museum collection of Cotman, Crome, and other early British landscape artists as well as the development of this open, free painting in Sargent and Homer. There, too, in the museum, on exhibition or in its library, I saw the landscapes of Marin, Hartley, and other modern artists. This contemporary work must have had considerable influence on me, because at the tender age of nineteen I was making what the world called modern art.

During my second year at Pratt my watercolor technique was strengthened by National Academician Anna Fisher, who taught me to paint spontaneously and boldly in pure, transparent colors. Although neither my teacher nor myself knew it at the time, this technique essentially was expressionist, not unlike that of the Fauvists some twenty-five years earlier. In looking at these 1928 watercolors now, I am pleasantly surprised to see that I juxtaposed alizarin crimson and Prussian blue taken straight from the tube to create vibrant, sparkling shadows.

Fairly art-wise as I was by this time, I achieved virtual abstractions by using flat, transparent washes of pure color. Since there are no details, like doors and windows in my fishing shacks, it might be argued that these non-objective sketches are incomplete beginnings. However, I have too many of these simple, direct watercolors; it is more likely that knowingly and intuitively I wanted something like modern art. Along with these lyrical abstractions, I painted highly expressionistic watercolors of distorted buildings set against storm-tossed bushes

and clouds. Here is the pictorial equivalent of the child being father to the man, for these free, open sketches made almost sixty years ago resemble my highly sophisticated abstractscapes of today.

For about sixteen years, until 1946, various factors prevented me from painting outdoors. From 1930 to 1932 I studied with Jan Matulka, one of the few abstract artists in New York at that time, and from 1932 to 1934 with Hans Hofmann. Their teaching made me into a truly modern artist, but my stringent cubist style was not conducive to the organic form and color of landscape art. Also, I was on the WPA Art Project from 1935 to 1940 and my presence was required in the city. My situation went from bad to worse: during the war years 1940 to 1946, I made no art at all as I worked on defense jobs and then served in the Navy.

This art and landscape deprivation changed dramatically when I moved to Laramie, Wyoming in 1946 and painted its plains, ravines, and mountains for the next two years. In retrospect, this immersion in landscape painting had an important role in my later development since it heightened my visual sensibilities. I continued to paint formal abstractions in my studio, but outdoors I responded to all the pictorial splendor before me, to green and yellow meadows, blood-red rocks, and white clouds moving against an ultramarine sky. Animating this panoply of sense was the play of sunlight and shadows over the whole of nature. Without any theorizing, by simply painting this highly sensate panorama, I supplemented my restrained cubist style with a Fauvist celebration of life.

This natural vitality transferred to my painting, and intuitively I learned that art could be like an organic form with a life and spirit of its own. Outdoor air, light, and color along with line and shape movements, especially when contrasted to the cold,

drab light and dull props of a studio, were a kind of magical instrument for inducing pictorial sensateness. I had heard the term "organic form" applied to the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright and to the sculpture of Henry Moore, but I thought that it was only another description of style. By painting outdoors, I began to understand its much larger meaning of art seeming to come to life. Now my landscapes began to assume a happy expressionism as strongly colored lines and shapes jumped about my form.

I returned to New York in 1948, and again sixteen years passed before I painted landscape subject matter. However, a paradox occurred. Between 1948 and 1950 I continued to make structured abstractions from the space seen in still lifes. But about the latter date these space-forms, as I called them, assumed more and more movement and their surfaces became richer, i.e., their entire form began to take on a more organic character. These were in the abstract-expressionist years, and I certainly was influenced by the free, wild painting that I saw around me. But equally important was the improvisational experience gained from painting my Laramie landscapes. In the early and mid-fifties I continued to start my paintings from still lifes, but almost immediately internal relations of form and color took over and free-form images assumed a figural character, though they could just have easily issued as landscapes. I had learned from my outdoor painting at Laramie the poetic premise of imaginatively evoking and conjuring subject-matter images.

I went to Paris in 1964 and again painted outdoors. After teaching in the morning I drove out to country places like Bougival, Varenne and Les Bruyères. What a difference there was between my dusty still lifes with which I used to get going on a painting and the intoxicating beauty given by sunlight on gold and green farmland, red-roofed cottages, and brilliant blue skies. Painting on 13-by-16-inch panels, I studied and related the ensemble before me until, frustrated by its everchanging com-

plexity, spontaneously I synthesized its parts into a massive, abstract configuration. In essence I tried to symbolize in form the strong feeling generated by the unique scene before me.

After Paris my subjects were taken from the Brooklyn waterfront, midtown Manhattan, and the East River where I continued to paint summer outdoor sketches through 1970. Since windblown water is inherently energized and abstract, it became a favorite subject for my abstract-expressionistic landscapes. Although the latter style had gone out of fashion, I blithely continued to excite my painting more and more, inspired, just as I had been at nineteen, by the moving shapes and energies of an evanescent nature. Usually I made a small painting on each of these excursions, so that by 1970 I had at least 150 city and landscapes. More important, this daily painting of natural forms enriched my sensibility and my ability to compose improvisationally.

When I was sixty, in 1968, I was traumatized by too much artistic stimulation. I had seen too many exciting scenes, read too many serious books, and devoured too many works of art: I simply was weighed down by a wealth of creative possibilities. How, I thought, could I ever realize all these artistic potentials? Rather than add still more inspiration, what I needed at my advanced age was to crystalize and consolidate the artistic motivation within me. I gave up working from nature altogether and instead improvised my compositions from the very beginning by throwing acrylic paint onto a moistened canvas. From these chance patterns I extricated and worked figures and landscapes into coherent forms.

There is nothing modern about this free composing. Leonardo wrote, "You should look at certain walls stained with damp or at stones of uneven color. If you have to invent some setting, you will be able to see in these the likeness of divine landscapes, adorned with mountains, ruins, rocks, woods, great plains, hills and valleys in great variety . . ." Previously, I improvised abstractions from objects and

energies seen in space; in the late sixties and seventies I reversed this process and transformed chance abstract patterns into figures and landscapes. After a lifetime of working from nature, I settled for imaginative composing. As artists say, "I painted from my head."

In 1971, I went to Tamarind Institute in Albuquerque to make lithographs and, as an unexpected bounty, found there the vast, open space of New Mexico. From nearby Sandia Mountain it was possible to see fifty miles away to the snow-capped peaks around Sante Fe. On my return to New York, I tried to express something of this infinite space in a series of open, transparent earth-air abstractions. This brings us to the imagined landscapes in this exhibition of which *Enchanted Mesa* of 1977 [Plate 2] is a late example. As described above, these paintings were completely improvised and great fun to make, because I transformed rocks into clouds and vice versa with the greatest freedom, a happy state for any artist.

Recently I was inspired to call these abstract-landscapes, "abstractscapes," somewhat like the poetic term, "inscapes." That is what they really are, landscapes of feeling and thought. Some 57 years ago, I fell in love with outdoor painting and the romance has endured. I expect to continue to extend the sensateness of my hybrid landscapes, to make them ever more vivid, alive, and exciting as pure art and as a transformation of nature.

* * * * *

My figure lithographs are something else. In contrast with the lyricism of my abstractscapes, they exploit the comedy and drama of our aberrant human condition. For some unknown but compelling reason, I expressionistically distort and dislocate my "human" subjects. *Cigarette Head* of 1971 [Plate 12], which I mention earlier shows an empty eye-

socket in an enlarged head marked by a strongly contrasted pattern of black and white. While I minimized associational values in my abstractscapes, with my figure compositions the opposite is true: to intensify expressiveness, I exacerbate psychological shock. In 1976, I continued this form dislocation in *Millicent* [Plate 14] where the eyes, nose, and mouth tip and skew against each other. Following the direction set by my paintings, I moved into more apparent absurdity with *Surprise #1* [Plate 16] by juxtaposing a bird and a red-orange and green head.

Humor then entered my human-condition repertoire with *Henry and Mara* of 1980 [Plate 17], which shows two Henry Miller lovers in a freaked-out embrace. (I really was interested in the compositional interplay of the two figures but I do not expect anyone to believe this.) More recently I have become fascinated with the delirium and madness of our Pop culture. This has resulted in a Disco series of which this year's *Delusion Disco* [Plate 13] is a typical example. Disco dancing is a perfect subject for distortion, ambiguity, and humor since I throw my beautiful people about at will. After all, anything goes in a disco.

I have been told that my abstract landscapes and my beat-up figures make me part of the New Expressionist movement. This disconcerts me because I have been an old expressionist for so long that it isn't funny. I am like Molière's Monsieur Jourdain who was surprised to learn that he had been speaking prose all his life.

Thus it goes: my good and bad times in art since 1971. Enjoy!

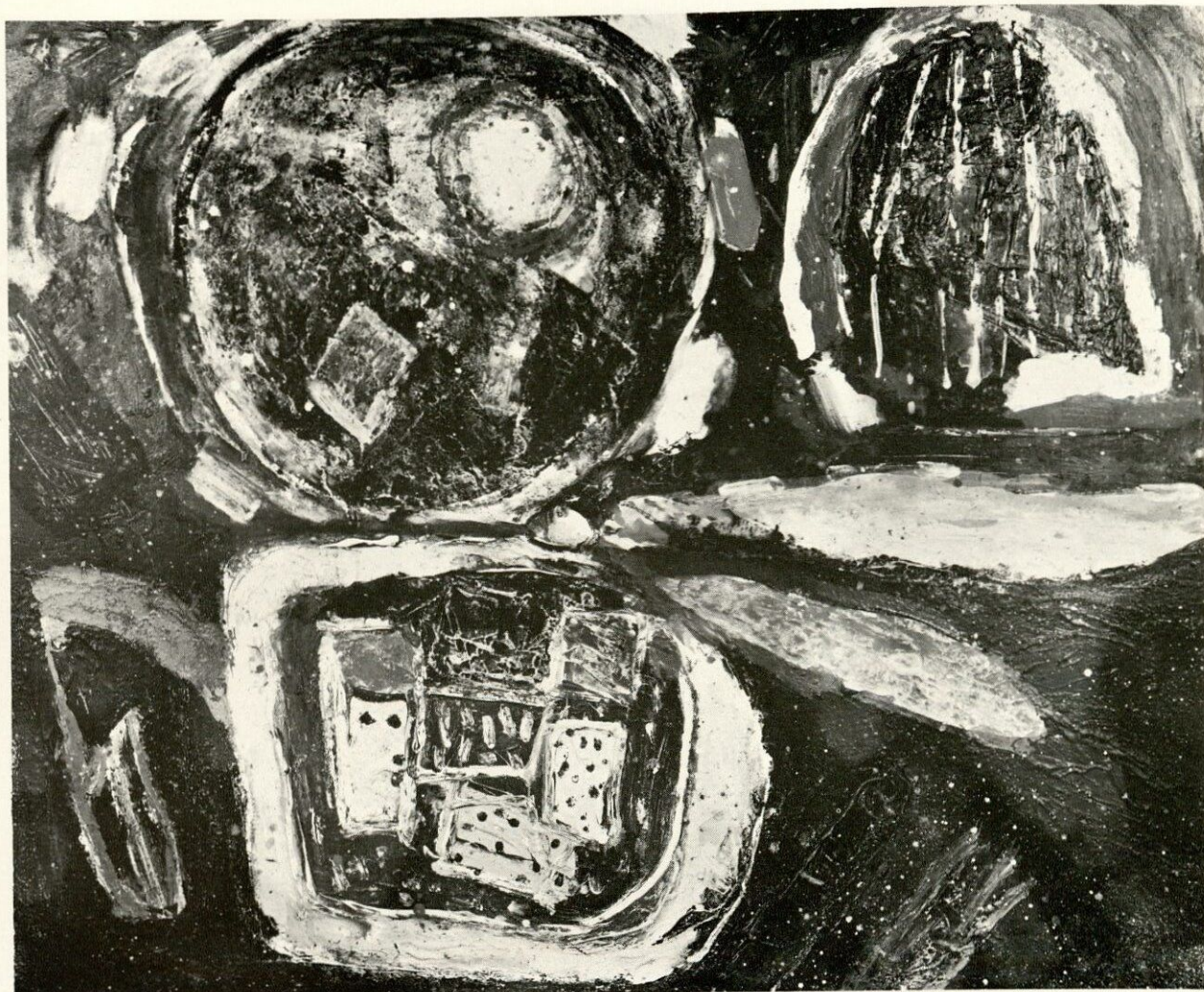
George McNeil
December 15, 1984



Palentown Abstractscape, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 56x64 inches



Earth-Air Abstraction, 1982, oil on canvas, 68x56 inches



Litence Abstractscape, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 56x68 inches



New Mexico Landscape: Rectangular Cloud, 1977, oil on canvas, 75x60 inches



Partov Abstractscape, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 68x56 inches



Accord Abstractscape, 1984, oil on canvas, 68x56 inches



Sungem Abstractscape, 1983, oil on canvas, 56x68 inches



Mombaccus Abstractscape, 1984, oil on canvas, 56x68 inches



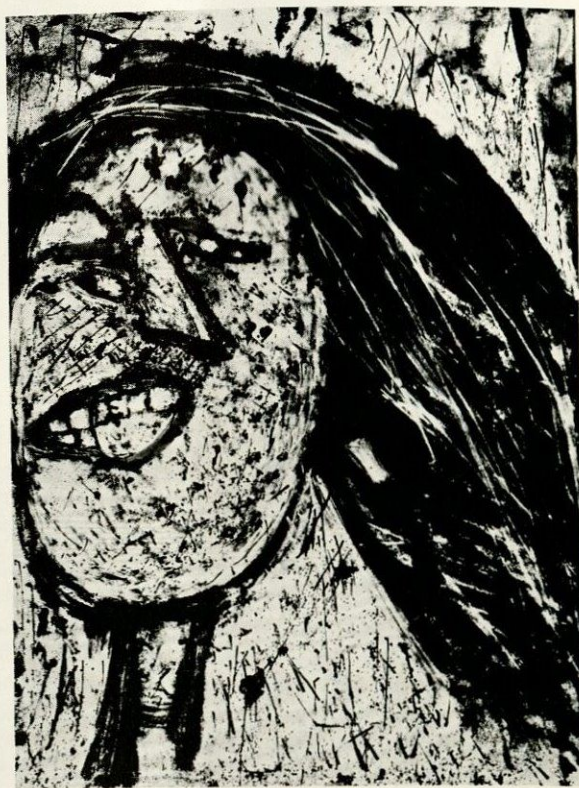
Emdown Abstractscape, 1984, oil on canvas, 68x56 inches



Cigarette Head, 1971, 2-color lithograph, 28x22 inches, Tamarind Institute



Delusion Disco, 1984,
3-color lithograph, 22½x28 inches



Millicent, 1976,
black and white lithograph,
24x18 inches

Deranged Disco, 1984,
4-color lithograph, 22½x28 inches,
Gruenbaum Editions



Surprise #1, 1978,
4-color lithograph, 20x26 inches



Henry and Mara, 1980, 3-color lithograph, 28x22½ inches



Emperor Head, 1974, black and white lithograph, 25x19 inches



Debonaire Disco, 1984, 4-color lithograph, 31x42½ inches Hudson River Editions

BIOGRAPHY

Born February 22, 1908, New York City; studied at Pratt Institute, Art Students League, Hans Hofmann School, Columbia University.

American Academy of Arts and Letters Award, 1982; Tamarind Artist-in-Residence 1984, 1976, 1975, 1971; Guggenheim Fellow, 1969; National Council on the Arts Award, 1967; Ford Foundation Purchase, 1963.

One Person Exhibitions

Gruenebaum Gallery, New York, 1985, 1983, 1981
Artists' Choice Museum, New York, 1984
Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, 1982
University of Connecticut at Storrs, 1982
Dintenfass Gallery, New York, 1979
Berman Gallery, New York, 1977
Landmark Gallery, New York, 1975
Pratt-Manhattan Center, New York, 1973
Des Moines Art Center, 1969

Wise Gallery, New York, 1967, 1964, 1962, 1960
University of Texas at Austin, 1966
Great Jones Gallery, New York, 1966
Nova Gallery, Boston, 1961
Poindexter Gallery, New York, 1959, 1957
De Young Museum, San Francisco, 1956
Egan Gallery, New York, 1954, 1953, 1952, 1950
Brown Gallery, Boston, 1953
Lyceum Gallery, Havana, 1941

Group Exhibitions

The Painterly Figure, Parrish Art Museum,
Southampton, N.Y. 1983
American Abstract Artists, University of New Mexico
Art Museum, 1977
Advocates of Abstraction: the American Abstract Artists
1936-43, Downtown Whitney Museum, 1976
The New American Painting: the First Generation,
Museum of Modern Art, 1969
American Art of the 1930s, Whitney Museum, 1968
The New York Painter: A Century of Painting-
Morris-Hofmann, Marlborough Gallery, 1967
Whitney Museum Exhibitions: 1965, 1961, 1957, 1953
Recent American Paintings, University of Texas Art
Museum, 1964

Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts Exhibitions: 1966,
1962
Directions-Paintings USA, San Francisco Museum, 1963
66th American Exhibition, Paris, circulated by the Art
Institute of Chicago, 1962-63
American Abstract Expressionists and Imagists,
Guggenheim Museum, 1961
Some Contemporary Artists, Cleveland Museum of Art,
1961
Abstract Art in America, Museum of Modern Art, 1951
Abstract and Surrealist American Art, Art Institute of
Chicago, 1947

Public Collections

Brooklyn Museum Print Collection
Fort Lauderdale Art Museum
Michener Collection, University of Texas Art Museum
Museum of Modern Art
New York University
Oklahoma City Art Center
Smithsonian Print Collection

University of Michigan Art Museum
University of New Mexico Art Museum
Walker Art Center
Weatherspoon Gallery, University of North Carolina
at Greensboro
Whitney Museum

University Art Gallery Staff

Josephine Gear, Director

Nancy Gonchar, Curator

Michael O'Kane, Technical Coordinator

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Catalog design: Nancy Gonchar

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