THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CANVAS

GEORGE MUELLER: HIS LIFE AND WORK

THROUGH THE AESTHETIC LENS OF JOHN DEWEY

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Abstract

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In this dissertation, I review Mueller's life and work within the comparative aesthetic contexts of John Dewey and the analytical framework of Immanuel Kant. Kant's philosophy of aesthetics was the foundation for establishing the aesthetic standards used by critics during the Abstract Expressionist movement; Dewey's philosophy of aesthetics was not.

I combine interviews with George Mueller and my own thirty-year expertise as a painter and professor of art with scholarly research to utilize John Dewey's Pragmatism in relation to Mueller's work. I include an appendix of interviews with the artist and a separate reference section that lists and catalogues much of his work. Most important, the dissertation encourages readers to approach not only Mueller's work but *all art* through a pragmatist point of view, to assume responsibility for renewed critical thought, to pull art back into the sphere of human necessity, and to balance its relationship to critical theory.

Dewey tells us of what art is capable, of what viewers are capable. Art is not an intellectual or political exercise prescribed by culture, politicians, art markets, or ambitious writers, or if it is, it shouldn't be. Authentic art is a re-enactment of real experiences and that has nothing to do with abstract or representational imagery, philosophical pondering, or the making of careers. It does afford viewers the ability to relate and build an individual aesthetic from experience: An aesthetic life, as the

pragmatist philosopher, Richard Rorty would have us create for ourselves. “[He] urges the conclusion that we must create ourselves and must do so by self-enriching aesthetic re-description” (Schustermann 246), as artists are supposed to do in every work.

Acknowledgements

When I thought of writing about a painter, only one interested me. Thank you, George Mueller for sharing so much about life and work and teaching me how to see. Thank you, Eleanor for pulling me into the creative, interdisciplinary atmosphere of Drew University where I was encouraged and inspired by Dr. Liana Piehler and Dr. Virginia Phelan, two of Drew's best, without whose guidance and support I would never have attempted to finish this degree.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The Other Side of the Canvas

The painter George Mueller once described the New York Art Scene in the 1950s as a poker table, around which sat major "players." As a young artist, he had wanted to sit at that table and contribute to the game. An Abstract Expressionist painter in his early twenties, Mueller had already won the attention of New York art critics. He looked the part: tall, lanky, intense. He drank, smoked and could stare into cameras. He could also paint.

Fresh from Cooper Union, Mueller was signed by Borgenicht Gallery and had seemingly found his niche in the New York art marketplace. In the late 1950s, as the latest edge sharpened itself on "Popism's" soup cans, cartoons, and perfume bottles, the crustier New York School painters graduated into the textbook canons and began to turn a formidable profit for dealers. Mueller was featured in shows, written about by the critics, and provided the kind of management reserved for favored initiates being groomed for positions within the art canon. He was not exactly "cutting edge" since the Pop artists were then engaged in the painting of soup cans, but his work did support the earlier major Abstract Expressionist players. He was perhaps to assume the role that a Feininger or Leger played to the giants of Cubism, Picasso and Braque, supportive of the canon but somewhat of a late comer.

By the mid 1960s, however, he had tuned into a different station. He found his

own expression and the harsh repercussions of a complex marketplace simultaneously. His dealer, Grace Borgenicht, uncomfortable with Mueller's new hard edged, geometric experimentation, strongly *encouraged* the earlier paintings reminiscent of gestural artists: painterly, abstract, loose. The earlier canvases were mysterious and dark, beautifully varnished, soft forms painted in luxurious golds and rich sooty blacks with touches of fading red. But coming as they did after Dekooning, Motherwell, and Pollack, these pieces were almost too decorative.

Perhaps because of his initial success, Mueller rapidly found his feet as a mature painter. His later canvases looked as if a lens had been focused on his earlier sfumato forms. The new compositions were clean and hard, the shapes no longer hidden in half shadow. He tightened every form into precise, honed bands of color, at times searingly bright and unsettling. Later he used blocks of solid color; designs that gradually present as abstract metaphors, edges in subtle relationships, unerring choices of color, and dizzyingly balanced shapes pulling together to form cohesive compositions. Interiors and pieces of rooms, landscapes and dreams, not merely design but in fact, a very personal inner life reveals itself in completely abstract territory.

Self-absorbed and seemingly unconcerned with the industry beneath his early success, he ignored repeated attempts by galleries to place him back into his painterly *dis*-order and stubbornly continued to travel his own, very focused road. Finding Borgenicht Gallery unwilling to support or promote his latest work, Mueller switched to Grippi Gallery, then to Waddell, and then to Straley Galleries. However, personality conflicts and continued lack of support for his artistic freedom eventually led to insurmountable disagreements there as well. By the time Mueller's work had been

reviewed in magazines, collected by major museums, won a Guggenheim Fellowship and acclaim at the Brussels Biennial, he had come to a mutual standoff with New York's "edge." Though he never interrupted his work, his turning away from New York, the galleries, the openings and parties permanently closed the door to a serious art market, a permanency that, as a young man, he had perhaps not anticipated nor fully understood.

The "industry" of The New York School/Abstract Expressionism was created not exclusively by the painters themselves but by critics and aestheticians who discovered the new "Art" and acted as interpreters for the public. Clement Greenberg, with his love of Kantian aesthetics, was a brilliant and sensitive writer who became absorbed with this new "Art." In fact, he did much to create it without ever picking up a brush. The New York School was elitist and proud of it, and Greenberg positioned the movement with analytic philosophers in general, and Immanuel Kant in particular. At that time, there were a number of young artists doubtful about swimming in the pool with Greenberg's concepts of "Art"; they felt their dealers' leads too short. Franz Kline had doubts about the blurred relationship between critics, money, and what *he* was attempting to put down on the canvas. Jackson Pollock was confused and often described as feeling himself backed into a corner. Clifford Still simply left New York to paint alone in a barn in Maryland, and Jack Tworkov was ignored in Provincetown. George Mueller was another young artist in conflict when he turned his back on New York, moved to a remote studio on a mountain in Northern New Jersey and essentially set up shop for himself. He painted.

Recently, while talking about his work, Mueller himself dropped the word "pragmatist" and little neurons fired in my head. I realized I had always viewed Mueller's

work within Greenberg's context of analytical aesthetics, founded on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. I assumed all serious painters from the 1950s had been born of Greenberg. And according to Kant and Greenberg, art objects, paintings, and sculptures *cannot* be aesthetic in themselves. "The *judgment* of taste is aesthetic" (Wenzel 4). Understandably critics would be fond of this premise because in its extreme simplicity, it suggests that the real beauty of art lies not with the finished product but in the viewer's *process of judging* the work of art, a completely intellectual and narcissistic process. By contrast, John Dewey's theories of pragmatism advocate for an art that is born of personal experience; art is the natural reenactment of life. The art object evokes or enhances direct experience in the viewer and both artist and audience interact in a process of communication that shares little with philosophy or theory. Dewey claims that "theories" kill the connection between art and life, and he was directly opposed to Kant's take on the visual arts. He wrote: "Expression as personal act and as objective result are organically connected with each other. It is not necessary, therefore, to go into these metaphysical questions…when we can approach art directly" (Dewey 82).

Unfortunately, once identified with a writer's "ism," an artist often proceeds forever tethered to a market created by explanations that might never really address the work actually hanging on the wall for all to see. The antidote to such myopia lies in examining four questions: Which comes first: the review or the painting? Who is more essential to guide our understanding of art: the critic or the painter? What happens when painters do not fit into a niche created by a writer's critical theory? Are paintings valid without critical interpretation and public acclamation?

In this dissertation, I review Mueller's life and work primarily within the

comparative aesthetic contexts of John Dewey and the analytical framework of Immanuel Kant. Kant's philosophy of aesthetics provided the foundation for the aesthetic judgments used by critics during the Abstract Expressionist movement; Dewey's philosophy of aesthetics was not. More recently, critics and philosophers in the 1980s and 90s have revisited and resuscitated Dewey's ideas about pragmatism, aesthetics, and experience (Richard Rorty, for example, a neo-pragmatist philosopher); yet in the 1940s and 50s, Dewey's ideas were largely ignored by the New York School "players." This myopic view of the new art might well have been justified at the time by critics like Greenberg, who were fighting hard to defend a completely new aesthetic to a baffled public. Art critics then doubted the public's ability to understand the complexity of modern art, and perhaps a few doubted themselves. Over-zealousness and a need to tie artistic criteria to science and philosophy may have been the only way to convince themselves and the public that Abstract Expressionism needed to be taken seriously. However, there were and are still innumerable painters, including Mueller, ill-fitted to follow theory, and they deserve a second look through a different, perhaps less dogmatic lens. I demonstrate that Mueller's work forms an important, if overlooked, component of contemporary painting and argue for the reassessment of his position within the American Modernist canon.

I combine interviews with George Mueller and my own thirty-year expertise as a painter and professor of art with scholarly research to utilize John Dewey's Pragmatism in relation to Mueller's work. I include an appendix of interviews with the artist and a separate reference section that lists and catalogues much of his work. Most important, the dissertation encourages readers to approach not only Mueller's work but *all art* through a pragmatist point of view, to assume responsibility for renewed critical thought, to pull art

back into the sphere of human necessity, and to balance its relationship to critical theory.

A survey of existing discussions includes Richard Rorty's collection of essays, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982). Rorty has been the most influential contemporary philosopher to rethink earlier philosophical claims on aesthetics generally and has urged a neo-pragmatism. He compares Kant (an analytic philosopher) with Dewey (a pragmatist). He writes of John Dewey's accomplishments admiringly:

> Dewey pressed holism to its extreme, criticized customary paradigms of 'truth' and 'necessity,' showed how remote from actual life the Cartesian distinctions were, did his best to debunk the purity of philosophy and traditional notions of necessity, broke down distinctions between disciplines and cultural forms, and tried to elaborate a vision of life in which the consummating value was aesthetic rather than cognitive. (Rorty 35)

Rorty's perspectives focus not only on the future of philosophy but integrate Art into the interdisciplinary structure of neo-Pragmatism. More recent offshoots of Dewey's principles with respect to art are the works: *The Art Instinct* (2009) by Denis Dutton, *Art Without Borders* (2009) by Ben Ami Scharfstein, and *Homo Aestheticus* (1995) by Ellen Dissanayake. All three books discuss the need for humans to participate in the arts and argue that contemporary society has been excluded from them by constrictive art theories. Dissanayake writes in her Preface, "aesthetic is not something added to us--learned or acquired like speaking a second language or riding a horse--but in large measure is the way we *are, Homo Aestheticus,* stained through and through and poorly understood among intellectuals who think and write about the arts" (Dissanayake xviii).

Scharfstein, who explores the global nature of art, adds: “Without art, without the imagination that creates, appreciates, and embodies itself in art, human beings would be far sadder, duller approximations of what they in fact are…Art expresses the communicative nature of all human beings and for that matter, of all social animals” (Sharfstein 3). These titles are essential resources when exploring the important relationship of art to culture and human development, of art as innate, and the impact that aesthetics can have on human destiny. A gem of a book written by Leonard Meyer describes varied aesthetic criteria in music, *Music, The Arts and Ideas* (1967), which applies to the visual arts as well. Additionally, *Hydrogen Jukebox* (1991) by Peter Schjeldahl and *Evaluating Art (*1988) by George Dickie bring up questions of “aesthetic theory” and how they shape minds and markets. In a 2008 article, “Danto and Art Criticism,” Cynthia Freeland explores the critic Arthur Danto’s claims of interpretation and questions the impact he has had on the philosophy of contemporary art and his “endorsements” of some artists over others as being too subjective and without fair criteria.

Every serious artist and educator I know (critically acclaimed or not) worries about the future of art in our culture. We may all disagree about what constitutes good art, but we are all agreed that we are in stagnant waters. In fact, many of us feel we are in the shallows and have bottomed out since the 1960s. Yet museums are expanding and art is being bought and sold in a market that continues to thrive based on the critical profession that has outgrown its own cultural claims. Everyone in the field is aware that critics have come to regard themselves as necessary prescribers of cultural bifocals, assisting an inept, ignorant public to interpret the complex visual language of art. This

can in part be attributed to principles created by 1950s analytic theorists (Abstract Expressionists) and the subsequent backlash of the 1960s (Pop Art Movement). The Abstract Expressionists elevated art to a philosophy for which the public had little patience, and Pop Art lowered the standards to such base commercial levels that the public concluded: "Anything can be art." Today's result: a visual and critical language so specialized about inner dialogue, social responsibilities, art trends, and history that no one can comfortably approach a gallery without a Master's degree in hand. This intimidation inflates prices and lowers standards.

Perhaps artists' dialogue, their vision and concerns *are* truly different from those of other human beings; I suspect they are not. I *am* suspect of the *dialogue* created by critics only, which has proven to be very different from the perception of both the public and visual artists. Art critics have placed their profession beyond extinction by positioning their own writing above the same visual artists whom they presume to explain. Their writing no longer follows art, enhancing its meaning, but rather, in some cases, precedes or is symbiotic with artwork that is too anemic to stand alone. Although there has long been a relationship between the visual arts and critical theory, the relationship has become inverted. When the artwork becomes a hollow meta-critique of the critics' critique, there is no room for what Hemingway called "honest" art or communication to grow.

Insecure art educators, too, have been caught up in the theoretical mumbo-jumbo. Too often they behave defensively or intimidate their own students. The territorial message from the educated to the non-educated is clear: *do not attempt to participate or question what you cannot possibly understand.* Seen exclusively through a narrow lens,

the public is shut down and away from any attempt to think critically about themselves, the culture they live in, or the artwork that sifts from it. A single lens created by a few powerful writers should not be the only one available for the public to pick up and adjust for themselves. Definitive, theoretical, dense categorization, while comforting to dealers, collectors, and gallery salespeople, damages stimulation of any new creative avenues for young artists.

In interviews some fifty years after Mueller's debut in the New York world of art, he speaks clearly about his work. Viewing his paintings through multiple lenses, such as John Dewey's Pragmatist lens, sheds light on Mueller's work and his decision to remove himself from a market which insisted on very narrow artistic criteria. It also allows us to play with the idea of simply *looking* at Mueller's work, or any work, to spend time engaged with an image. Because as Dewey would concur, interaction with art is ultimately the *only* key to connecting with the human on the other side of the canvas and so much more relevant than reading an explanation that may well kill comprehension before it begins.

Chapter 2

"A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man"
"Hushed Reverberations"

-Personality Patterns of the Artist
-Connecting the Young Artist to his Newark Immigrant Roots

Fig. 1. *George Mueller, age 5 in the country.* 1934. Photograph.

Beneath their window, an endless floor of unbroken snow covered Newark's familiar grunge. Its surface, a continuous white shell, pulled everything into *one* thing. Here and there, small black shapes attempted to climb out onto the crust, but they were unable to, overcome by the perfect solid mantle of white.

Inside the apartment the air smelled fat, of food and breath contrasting with the cold glass. His mother breathed carefully as they gazed into the street. Nothing moved about her except her fingers stroking the side of his temple. Sometimes in hot weather his mother would lay her hand on his head. "You're overheated, George," she would say to him, "be still," and he would stand under the weight of her hand. Now, outside, the weight of the snow pressed the street down. It stopped the trucks, the barking dogs, all disturbances as it pressed clean air into his room.

It cannot be proven that certain children are born artists. No gene has yet been discovered for the inclination to play with oil paint or pastels. Some might argue that good old fashioned trauma is essential for any healthy budding imagination. After all, Virginia Woolf had been molested; the Australian writer, Jane Frame, had been institutionalized as a child. DaVinci struggled, at least, with his bastard status, and Michelangelo certainly had "father issues." George Mueller's childhood lacked all such convenient explanations for his creative inclinations. Why does one child turn away from parents and convention (and say what you will, leaving parents and convention behind are essential for any artist) and bond instead with the world of shapes and edges around him? Why did Mueller, as a small boy, look so deeply at illustrations in magazines or study so intensely the backgrounds of comic book frames instead of following the

Superman adventure as his friends had? Why did he spend time exploring the way in which things--buildings, machines, neighborhoods-- were held together, or how natural shapes sat next to constructed shapes? Why his fascination with seemingly ordinary color? He will tell you that as a child, he recognized the poetry of space while his older sister didn't care to. He might also tell you that his childhood was very pleasant and uneventful. He spent his days looking carefully, building things, listening to music on the radio. There were neither traumas nor beatings, no instances of being locked away in household cupboards or chained to the basement radiator. His parents were placid, and in his childhood, he was neither overactive nor depressed.

James Joyce was tormented by the ordinary, invisible bonds around him. He sensed the "nets" of culture and family that could trap him, smother him, while most children welcome, even require those nets. They anchor a young life and set a boy onto a secure path, perhaps one similarly traveled by parents. But like Joyce, Mueller resisted those constraints from the very beginning of life. In Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* his little James does not fall victim to the kind of parental abuse seen on modern daytime television: instead he is burdened only with a slightly different perception. He is burdened with *sensitivity*. The very sensitivity that made James's childhood experiences *extra*ordinary: rough play with other children, being ill and needing his mother, or the timbre of a priest's voice, made his acuity positively decisive. The images become psychically bruising, catalysts which required him to struggle as a writer, to articulate their importance in his memory. His encounters with others and his daily experiences, even the commonplace, were not dropped and left to lie behind as he stepped from them into adulthood. Instead, they became *material*, were perceived as

being special, or punishments, or exquisite rewards, or beautiful encounters, and they propelled Joyce out of provincial Dublin and into the world of literature.

Like Joyce, every young artist harbors extraordinary sensation. After all, if it isn't in abundance, why bother to try and do anything about it on canvas or paper? Why attempt to harness what isn't felt? For the young artist, even a mundane childhood is perceived with a certain amount of anguish and is punctuated with a yearning to do something else. For Joyce it was a clean break from Ireland, mother, and the Catholic Church. For Mueller there was a yearning to do something about the tender way his world fitted together, to reorganize it, recognize it, stay present with it.

In 1934, five year old George Mueller's Newark was a small managed world, arranged behind modest immigrant walls and wooden fencing. The Muellers' was an unpretentious apartment surrounded by working-class, conservative German-Austrian culture. Born in 1929, the year of the Great Depression, at St. Barnabas Hospital, little tow-headed George Ludwig Mueller would have been unaware still of the economic turmoil outside, of influenza and death, of the hungry jaws of World War II, or of the seeds of a racial catastrophe that would ultimately level his birthplace. In 1934, his childhood was lovingly confined to the small spaces allotted him by protective parents, who had suffered through the death of an infant born before him. As many immigrants were, his parents and grandparents had been chased around the globe by disease, war, authority or poverty. George's mother, a mild, intelligent woman, knew uncertainty well, having fled to this country alone, without her parents, from war-torn Austria in 1920. She was barely out of her teens, and she knew the weightlessness of being without language or family in a foreign land. War-time immigrants were either obsessive about fitting in

and obeying authority or boldly claiming their beliefs in the “new world.” George’s parents wisely chose an unadventurous way of life.

Refugees who sailed into America’s harbors in those days, “embraced” by the Statue of Liberty, de-liced at Ellis Island or its equivalent, came to their feet quickly or felt the harsh consequences. Mean labels were applied at the docks: Irish drank, Scots were cheap, Italians were Cosa Nostra and would cut you for a nickel, and in the early part of the twentieth century, blacks were openly lynched. Jews were hated just for being Jews, and all immigrants stole jobs away from worthier Americans, but the Germanic immigrants were especially suspect after World War I, even more so during and after World War II. Landing in those ports was a harsh business.

George Mueller’s father, George Sr., had been born in this country. His family had landed in Newark from Alsace-Lorraine with the 1860s’great immigration wave, and like so many immigrants, had stayed on in Newark without investigating America’s interior.

> The steady flow of U.S. bound immigrants turned into a tidal wave after the turn of the century. Worries over the newcomers centered on cities such as Newark, where two-thirds of the 350,000 population (1910) were either foreign born or children of immigrants. Well over 100,000 Newarkers were Jews, Italians, and Germans, often referred to as “ignorant Europeans.” Ethnic groups clustered together in neighborhoods attempting to reconstruct their lost origins. (Tuttle79)

George Sr.’s parents had moved to the heart of an African-American neighborhood and established a small grocery store: wooden floors, pickle barrel. They

extended credit and sold groceries and dry goods to the poor blacks leaving the south. In the years following 1860, the neighborhood had become densely populated by slave refugees fleeing the Civil War. They descended on northern cities like Newark and Paterson to work as laborers and quickly found themselves in segregated neighborhoods. “During the Civil War, New Jersey earned a reputation as the most traitorous state in the North because of its opposition to ‘Lincoln’s War.’ So many ‘Copperheads,’ as anti-Lincoln men were called, clung to the prevalent stance that, quite plainly, nothing was wrong with slavery” (Tuttle 39). The Newark area was fully industrialized early in the century and war with the south threatened business, or so it was assumed. In reality Newark’s businesses prospered during and after the Civil War. “The black population in Newark grew to 10,000 by 1910, as more people came seeking industrial jobs in the city. But most would be disappointed since these jobs and the labor unions were off limits to African Americans” (McCann). The neighborhoods of Newark between the years of the Civil War and WWII lived relatively quietly together but were strictly segregated: Irish, German, Italian, African-American, Jewish, and Polish. Each area supported its own.

With so many dissimilar cultures, strong communal bonds formed quickly. As an adult, George Mueller Sr. worked his entire life for a surrogate: “Uncle Otto,” who was of German descent and a feisty immigrant had established his own company and earned himself no small amount of money and prestige in Newark. Otto was not related to George Sr. but had taken the young man under his wing. It is important to note that George Sr.’s family, then, had had time in this country to establish roots before facing the Great Depression. Though too poor for a college education or to indulge in unburdened adolescence or travel, George Sr. was fortunate to have found work through the worst

years of the Depression, when financial disaster had crushed so many other poor immigrants. Through consistent effort, the young Mueller family, George Sr., Margaret, and their two children: George and Doris, lived in New Jersey, not well off certainly but never without basic comforts.

The young Margaret Jochum was fortunate to have found and married George Mueller Sr.. She had survived the roiling seas from Europe to New York in steerage, her belongings in one small box. Many years after immigrating, she recalled arriving in port. She was so distraught that she would have turned back immediately but did not believe she could have survived the return trip. The sea had been stormy for the entire two week journey; young Margaret, never before aboard a ship nor indeed ever away from her small village of Iglau, Austria, was sick into the ocean everyday, unable to eat or sleep for the constant nausea. She lay in clammy quarters on the giant vessel that reeked of petroleum and vomit. Staggering off the ship finally, she was equally distressed by what lay in front of her: a city, crowded, ugly, industrial, crisscrossed with rail tracks, choking smoke and deafening noise, so unlike the small pastoral village outside Vienna where she had grown up before the war.

> With feeble drainage systems in place, a decent rainfall turned the streets into rivers of impassable brown muck that swallowed wheels and mule hooves. Flooding was worst, and the risk of malaria highest, in the marshy Down Neck (later known as the Ironbound) area inhabited mostly by poor immigrants. The smoke and chemicals emanating from factories and tanneries were inescapable, and the stench of coal dust, animal dung, and

> raw sewage was everywhere. Packs of wild dogs bedeviled Newark neighborhoods and Newarkers died each year of rabies. (Tuttle 36)

Margaret's Austrian family was of genteel, rural-bourgeoisie stock. Her father had been an engineer; in uniform with stop watch, a fresh flower in his buttonhole, an important figure in her small Austrian village. Margaret seldom recalled her first days in this country, perhaps because they had been so traumatic for her. Because she believed in looking forward, she seldom spoke of regrets and never challenged reality. She never spoke of her parents or what had become of them in Austria, but by the end of World War I, Austria and its bucolic villages, like the larger cities, no longer existed:

> In Austria: the countryside picked bare of its livestock; the empty shelves in the shops; the spread of tuberculosis; the men in rags. Starving children begged in the streets. Girls from good middle-class families sold themselves for food. When several police horses were killed in one of the violent demonstrations in Vienna the flesh was stripped from their bones within minutes. (MacMillan 248)

Margaret's older sister, Sophie Jochum, had arrived several years before and had found employment in the silk mills of Paterson, later marrying and raising a family there. Neither sister ever returned to Austria. They spoke infrequently of their lives before marriage and they never saw their parents again.

Both girls were intelligent and attractive. Sophie married a Polish immigrant (Anthony Kulick) who fought with the American infantry in WWI, losing an arm. Marriage was either hell for young immigrant women who labored in factories in New

Jersey or it was sanctuary. The homesickness, the insecurity, the monotonous drudgery of daily factory life were demoralizing, and young immigrant women were defenseless, often victims of urban predators. As Erik Larson wrote about the young women arriving in Chicago from rural towns at the turn of the century:

> Women as a class were so wonderfully vulnerable, as if they believed that the codes of conduct that applied to their safe little hometowns might actually still apply once they left behind their dusty, kerosene-scented parlors and set out on their own…stepping from trains and grip cars, inevitably frowning at some paper that was supposed to tell them where they belonged. (Larson 62)

Nor was Newark's crime rate very different from any other urban center crowded with poor immigrants. Larson describes the situation in Chicago. "Vanishments" were simply a fact of city life:

> Ordinary vanishings--Polish girls, stockyard boys, Italian laborers, Negro women--merited little effort. Only the disappearance of moneyed souls drew a forceful response…The women were presumed to have been ravished, the men robbed…found bodies went to the morgue; if unclaimed they traveled next to the dissection amphitheater at Rush Medical College and from there to the articulation laboratory for the delicate task of picking flesh and connective tissue from the bones and skull, washing all with bleach and remounting same for the subsequent use of doctors, anatomy museums, and the occasional private collector of scientific novelties. The

> hair was sold for wigs, the clothing given to settlement houses. Like the Union Stock Yards in Chicago, nothing was wasted.(102)

In Newark, poverty, prostitution, gambling, and graft were as rampant as in any other industrialized center with inadequate social services. New Jersey historian Brad Tuttle wrote: “Prostitution, casual sex, gambling, drug use and disease shocked Newark’s traditional moral code. Reformers blamed the condition on the lack of supervision of young women, the influx of immigrants and corrupt policemen who refused to enforce laws” (Tuttle 91). Both Jochum sisters were grateful to have found safety in marriage to reasonable men, and for their respective families to have remained close for the rest of their lives.

Outside the Mueller’s Newark apartment, the Great Depression rolled on. While little George learned to crawl and speak, it was as if a collected consciousness, a radio wave moved over the landscape whispering to a displaced generation in America’s history. Artists like Edward Hopper painted people as hapless rag dolls in the teeth of staggering global economic and psychological circumstance. Idiotic musicals and stamping chorus lines attempted to sell the public silver linings, when in truth the only clouds on the American horizon contained the very dust that had once been America’s precious farmland, blown and scattered from the dust bowl and disbursed as useless soot over the entire country. It was a time when people of all ages, men and women and teenagers, rode the rails from one end of the country to the other out of boredom, confusion, poverty, or apathy: aimless, quiet, and hungry. The young and prosperous “New World” at the turn of the century had been reduced to a bleak empty stage by the end of the 1920s. As Tuttle relates, “by 1931, with a total of 3,646 banks going under, an

estimated sixty thousand Newarkers—30 percent of its workforce—were without jobs, walking the streets or trying to sell apples"(104). For the young Muellers, stepping into the rough world of events in America such as World War I and the Great Depression, living conservatively and supporting their two remaining children was all they attempted. There was no time for art, poetry, theater, or literature. Work was all.

Life for baby George began in an African-American neighborhood in the heart of Newark, in an apartment above Nana's grocery. As George later remembers, it was not a particularly auspicious beginning but perhaps anticipates his ultimate command of shape and space. If the aim of this dissertation were to explore the "psychology" of George's later work, and it isn't, these early years would be the place to begin, for even though he was very young, his memory of this early confinement and how his small world was locked into precise shapes reveals a telling awareness of space and dimension:

> The entire space in the back was surrounded by very tall boards--solid--no one could see in and we couldn't see out. There seemed always to be a dog barking somewhere beyond that fence. Who knows what went on beyond those high board fences in the back yard? We weren't allowed in the store (whenever we went there we would cause some problem) and my grandmother would chase us upstairs or out to the back yard which consisted of intricate flower beds with small walks between the beds. Well, there just wasn't much room for kids. The store was promising because there was candy in there, but we weren't given any. My sister and I would carefully open the bubblegum packets to steal the baseball cards when no one was looking. My grandmother was not a particularly warm

> person; in fact we didn't like her and I'm guessing she didn't care much for us either. She would scold us in the yard but there was nowhere else to play and clearly flowers were more important to her than grandchildren. The yard was small, the space was confined, controlled and the outside world, we were led to believe, was a very dangerous place. Why? We were never told. (Mueller Interview #2)

This painting, created in 2010, was not, according to Mueller, a conscious reconstruction of anything. He recognized it only after its completion as being Down Neck, the "Ironbound Section" of Newark. The inferences to his grandmother's backyard are all mine, not his; however, the feeling of oppression and confinement remind me of Mueller's childhood stories. The industrial landscape beyond the impossible barrier, the hot sky, the surreal bed/window structure in the middle is a foreboding scene and yet, intriguing as well.

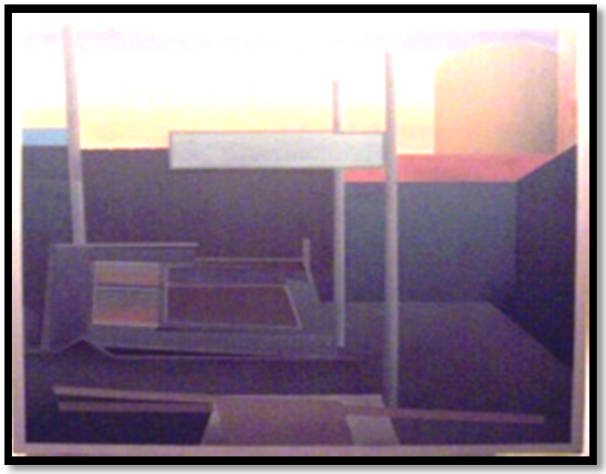


Fig.2. *Down Neck*, 2010. Acrylic. Collection of the Artist.

In a 2001 pencil drawing, the Newark backyard returns. Mueller has drawn himself in short pants: *unusual because he seldom draws any figures*. He is laughing mischievously in a backyard with canvas shapes filling up the space around him. In this composition the inhibiting board fence has been replaced by still empty canvases: perhaps, the liberating promise of the art still to come.

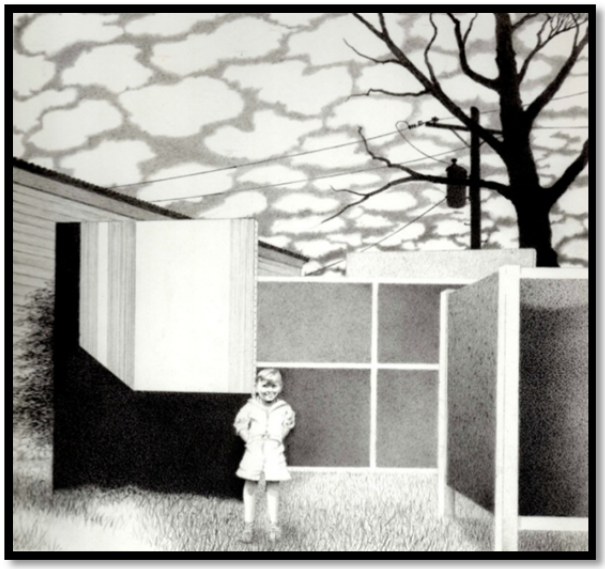


Fig.3. *Durante Vita.* 2001. Graphite on paper. Private Collection.

By his fifth year, the family had moved to 5th Street in Newark. At last the five year old was allowed the physical freedom that five year olds require. The day the family moved from Nana's grocery, George remembers his older sister taking him for his first walk outside the confines of the old boarded-up yard: "I felt something very like panic. At the time I was convinced I would never live to see my parents again. The world was flat, we'd be lost forever, fall off, but the world turned out to be round after all" (Mueller Interview #2).

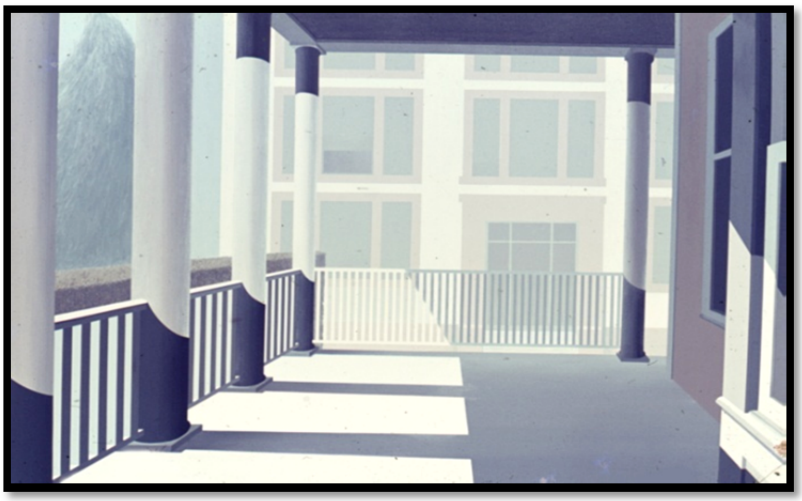


Fig. 4. *Summit Street.* 1960s. Acrylic on canvas. Collection of H. Wachtel.

Fifth Street was a pleasant broad street, lined in soft red brick, shaded in summer by large handsome trees bordering wide sidewalks. In an interview, George remembered,

> One day the WPA workers came along and covered the entire street with black tar! I was distraught for a long while. Life was all wrong on that street then.

> Something that had been so perfect was now lost, changed, *wrong*. Fortunately, on another day the same crew came back and scraped the tar off again! I have no idea why, but it made all the difference to my well-being" (Mueller Interview #2).

George had friends on 5th Street, and there was stick ball, stoop ball, ring olivieo, *a sort of a tag/ball game*…lots of physical freedom, games on the wide front porches where marbles were won and lost and model planes built. As an adult, his continued appreciation of light and open space began on these porches and later constituted the subject matter for a series of large canvases, his Summit Street paintings.

In the 1930s, as most of America struggled financially, the young Mueller family managed to find a foothold in the American dream. Margaret, with her strong accent, had learned to speak English well. She managed the home and children and rarely complained of routine; they were lucky to be where they were: 5th Street in Newark, New Jersey. There were no luxuries; the family did not own a car and never traveled beyond the state. However, each summer the women and children escaped the heat by spending partial summers in a rural lake community: Greenwood Lake, New Jersey. This rural environment left an indelible impression on young George.

The husbands stayed behind, common among the families of inner cities. To leave the men, the extreme heat, the threat of polio and summertime squalor for the modest camps, wooden cabins, and boarding houses that populated the Catskills, Poconos, and Bear Mountain was partially what kept city families plodding through the dull winter months. Removing to cooler climes during the summer months was the usual practice in Europe, and every immigrant family that could manage the change did so. Summers were miserable in coastal cities, particularly in lower Manhattan and New Jersey. Mosquitoes

took over early in the spring; black-tar, flat roofed, brown-stone buildings collected the day's heat like giant solar cells, making it nearly impossible to breathe at night. With morning came a sickly lethargy, people barely moving through their days, exhausted from lack of sleep the night before.

Cabins without electricity or plumbing in the cool mountains, where children could swim and play games or read a book at night by kerosene lantern, or camp out on a porch, was a diversion worth waiting all winter for. Here young Mueller first compared nature's space and color to the urban concrete world. At Greenwood Lake, when only eleven years old, he began to notice how landscapes could be put together, reconstructed in art. Fascinated by night, by changing light and the mystery of forms in darkness, he felt a yearning sensibility of shadows and light interacting in nature. Sleeping out on an open porch with cousins, he waited for dew to fall, for darkness to change the shape of surrounding woods, or blackness to transform contours of objects. He discovered the quality of that early light which cuts a delicate lacey edge on the horizon, silhouetting trees.

Somewhere nearby, someone at a boy's camp played taps each dusk as the sun faded, and Mueller felt as if on stage with someone working lights behind a screen. He was infatuated with the "strangeness," the ambiguity of light and color. He felt that it was not enough to *be;* he felt the need to do something about *being*, to fix the natural world in place, to document it or improve upon it. In his book, *Art as Experience*, John Dewey discusses these "urges" suggested by nature and manifested in art. He writes:

> I do not see any way of accounting for the multiplicity of experiences of this kind except on the basis that there are stirred into activity resonances of dispositions acquired in primitive relationships of the living being to its surroundings, and irrecoverable in distinct or intellectual consciousness. Experiences of this sort take us to a further consideration that testifies to natural continuity. (Dewey 29)

At the age of eleven, in summer, as George rode his bike down a dirt road toward a favorite place with pasture and barn, he made a plan to return with paper and pencil: to confirm perhaps, to verify the "perfection" of a natural landscape. After that summer, he would hop into the backs of trucks in Newark with friends and ride anywhere, looking for places to sketch.

Fig. 5. *Barn*. N.d., Pencil on paper. Private Collection.

One of Margaret's favorite stories was of five year old George and the snow storm. That morning, standing at the window, had been a rare moment for her, a quiet interval. Perhaps she was moved by memories of winters in Austria, recalling lost parents and friends. That morning she shared an appreciation of the physical world with her child who seemed, from a young age, able to see and comprehend beauty. The story speaks clearly about the preferences and abilities with which young George was undoubtedly born. In an interview with him in 2012, while talking about memory and painting, he said:

> The visual world inside could be memory. My mother once told a story about when I was a very small boy, after an enormous snowstorm in Newark where I grew up, she lifted me up to the window. I remember that scene, looking out over these fantastic white hulking forms that enclosed our street. She said that while we were watching, the neighbor came out to shovel his walk and I became inconsolable. I threw a tantrum. I kept saying, 'He's ruining it!' Ruining what? Well, ruining the organization, the aesthetic. Ruining the way it all fit together in my eye; *certainly not the neighbor's.* It was my first memory that the world could be beautiful and visually perfect or truly wrong and ugly. (Mueller Interview #1)

Much like his memory of the streets being tarred, he was unusually conscious of what he saw, not necessarily of the speech or relationships of the adults around him but of how the world appeared. Mueller said:

> In my early life, no one dies, there is no polio, it's uneventful, no trauma, violence. I didn't question anything. My parents didn't talk a great deal of their past but then, I never asked. I don't think I even cared. Everything looked fine to me. (Mueller Interview #2)

For remember what Virginia Woolf wrote of artists: "The mind of the artist, in order to achieve the prodigious effort of freeing whole and entire the work that is in him, must be incandescent…there must be no obstacle in it, no foreign matter unconsumed" (Woolf 56).

Dewey put it this way:

> Life goes on in an environment; not merely in it but because of it, through interaction with it. No creature lives merely under its skin; its subcutaneous organs are means of connection with what lies beyond its bodily frame…the career and destiny of a living being are bound up in its interchanges with its environment, not externally but in the most intimate way. (Dewey13)

These interchanges become evident in Mueller's later work. As Dewey points out, whatever life exposes us to will eventually be made use of. Little Mueller playing on the porch, carefully watching his street, appreciating light and space, was busy all the while, drinking in the vocabulary he would use in work fifty years later.

> The live creature adapts its past; it can make friends with even its stupidities, using them as warnings that increase present wariness. Every living experience owes its richness to what Santayana calls 'hushed reverberations'. Art celebrates with peculiar intensity the moments in which the past reinforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what is now. (18)

We construct our own experiences, construct ourselves. Our aesthetic is soaked into our being, our experiences are who we are. It is a mysterious and wonderful process that belongs entirely to the individual taking in what is around him and returning a honed experience for others to share.

Mueller's development of aesthetic sensibility was not so much a result of immigrant parents striving to instill a "higher" purpose to advance their son's life in

America. In fact, years later when Mueller won a Guggenheim Grant and an enormous amount of money, his parents didn't know what a "Guggenheim" was, were suspicious that so much money was being "given" to their son, and urged him to settle down to a good "Ad- agency" desk job! Young Mueller saw differently from the beginning and chose to build his life's work on that difference. Dewey claims that difference is there for anyone, and if not used as art, to be called upon to appreciate the art of others. Sometimes environment gets in the way and sometimes it provides energy necessary for future artistic growth. As will be obvious in his later work, Mueller's early Newark beginnings provided him with a basic language that both supported his adult personality and inspired the paintings to come.

Chapter 3

"Sublime Awe"

"I don't know much about art, but I know what I like!"
Art, Art History, Art Criticism and Aesthetics

One evening as I passed through his graduate painting class, I heard Leon De Leuw say, "*It is a rum thing."* He was standing in front of a large canvas absorbed in some problem, and I knew that he was referencing the painter Miro who, at the peak of his career, when asked by LOOK or LIFE or some such magazine: "What is Art?" (*and even as graduate students hearing the story, we lean in a little closer to hear, because we aren't sure either),* Miro replied; "Art is a *rum* thing." It is a modest answer and it strikes me as a true answer, because I have heard myself say it after tired hours of chasing shapes around a canvas.

As one of Leon's graduate painting students, I loved the aestheticians then. As a rule, they didn't paint with paint but they could spin webs of myth and interpretation with words. Critics like Clement Greenberg or Harold Rosenberg could evaluate the precise weight of an abstraction and predict what it might bring to bear on its respective age. They debated at length about what artists like Leon were attempting to do. But for me, few ever said it better than Miro. In the end, contemporary "Art Criticism" is fun to read but it *will* forever arrive at the party exuding too much glitter and noise. It seems, too often, wrapped in the useless currency of indistinct language: an incestuous sort of text that builds upon itself. For people who do not spend time chasing shapes or words, their

expectations that Art Criticism will explain the “rum” part of art is usually frustrated because criticism too is a “rum” thing. In fact the whole business of making art and looking at art and interpreting art for others who are looking at art is very rummy.

Although the public may not be generally cognizant of them, critics and art historians play a major role in developing art markets and directing the historical cultural canon that will later distill and condense entire epochs into neat timelines listing innovative artists and noteworthy works of art. Classes in art history teach nearly identical content year after year to hundreds of thousands of pupils who believe they are being educated about past, present, and diverse cultures. But if we were to examine the curriculum of these art history undergraduate courses closely, we might think that true art, great art was limited to only a few thousand pieces spanning the Neolithic and contemporary cultures. One reason: art history texts are costly to produce and publishers are sensitive about copyrighted images. Consequently, the whole of art appears in textbooks as: *The Woman Willendorf, The Great Pyramids at Giza, The Book of Kells,* Michelangelo’s *David*, or Titian’s *Odalisque*. It is unfortunate that for so many educated people, art is limited to the generic, without their even being aware of it. And for the most part, educators themselves, dealers, and collectors have come to rely on critics and historians to illuminate the meaning of art, to explain its significance to them, and to eliminate the messy business of forming aesthetic judgments in this contemporary, non-judgmental climate.

There are artists who use their knowledge of art history as an armature upon which to build their own visual language, but the majority of working painters do not pay a great deal of attention to what critics and historians are thinking and writing about

before creating their art. Painters like George Mueller, although very knowledgeable about his field, are more concerned with working through specific problems in the studio each day. But worrying about what a writer may or may not write, or about an obscure aesthetic principle that may or may not guide the taste of the public about a painting that is not yet a finished painting often concerns those artists who have tasted success (money and acclaim) early in their careers and subsequently harbor doubts about the integrity of their future work. Even worse are those who do not harbor doubts. Whatever the relationship may have been to artists historically, criticism in the twenty-first century has made its way into the driver's seat and is steering the course of art history. Those artists who feel that the weight of their success is controlled by words and media are aware they may not be in control of their aesthetic decisions. What then is the relevance of any visual art that has been directed by the non-visual artist? What does it say to society? What does it say *about* society?

Written in 1931, *The History of Art Criticism* was Lionello Venturi's contribution to this discussion. It is noteworthy because he distinguishes between what painters think they are doing when they create an art object and how art history records that object and consequently trains others to "see" it (Venturi 17). Critics and historians do something very different from artists when using *aesthetics* (the philosophy of beauty) to promote and explain, to judge a work that is not their own, to impart a cultural consequence of an object on an age. In spite of how difficult it was for DaVinci to paint the Mona Lisa, it might have been easier than inventing the complex legend of its creator after the fact! For the work of art remains forever as the artist left it, but the myth is a work in progress, continuing to be worked and reworked, spun and sold, never quite completed.

Venturi's account of art history and criticism begins with Ancient Greece and chronicles a path that eventually establishes professional criticism in the 1930s as an affected and powerful branch of "Art." The modest criteria used by the ancient critics swells by the Renaissance and expands and swaggers as it rolls down the path of history until it finally eats up this philosophy or that philosopher, crushing historical fact while holding the skimpy artist aside for dessert.

Early writings tell us that, "Antiquity launched the critical problems of art without attempting to solve them." Ancient critics "used acute and unbiased observations and very fine sensibilities." Later, Greeks and Romans valued "imitation, proportion, and of course, moral content" and, while apparently not much formal art criticism developed during the Medieval Period, there is the inclusion of "spiritual value" (58). But the profession of criticism exploded with the Renaissance as nearly all painters, sculptors, and architects wrote about what they did and how they did it: Michelangelo, DaVinci, Alberti, Ghiberti. There were also "writers" who wrote exclusively about them and the art they made: Manetti wrote about Brunelleschi, and Vasari wrote *The Lives of The Artists*, full of description and anecdotes about the artists' personalities. It was Vasari who was the first "star maker" in the modern sense. He capitalized on the "personality" of the artist and fused it into the greatness of the objects made. He contributed to Renaissance "criteria" that centered on the personality of his hero, Michelangelo.

This is reasonable, after all. The Renaissance, we are told, was about MAN, man at the center of all things. Art theory as well focused on Man and man's perspective of reality, a linear perspective. Anyone who has read anything about the history of western

art, especially Modernism, has read this much about it: Modern Art attempts to deviate from this Renaissance point of view.

Most artists during this era were guided not merely by commissions and praise but also by fairly strong Renaissance principles: for example, eyes were considered better drawn if they were *round* rather than *almond* shaped because the perfection of the *sphere* was a popular topic. One point perspective, linear perspective, was important because it mirrored the over arching philosophy that governed the Renaissance view of the world. The general public still expects some vestige of those strict Renaissance mimetic principles, if only to oppose them. To break the rules, one must know them.

In the 16th century, Italian Mannerism, according to Venturi, was an important interlude in the history of art. Many painters of the era became better at criticizing the earlier Renaissance painters than actually painting. An example of an artist/critic was Gian Paolo Lommazzo who was, perhaps, the first to formulate the elements that were considered necessary for "good" art. In fact, he may have been responsible for developing the idea of "good" art and "bad" art. He may also have been first to separate art from art *theory* (106-108). And herein lie the seeds of future problems for artists. Three distinct professions--art history, art criticism, and aesthetics--develop as offshoots feeding on the art object, and they have all three become competitive yet dependent upon one another. The results are often an art that is compromised as it is sifted through the filters of each profession, often separated from the viewer and even from the intentions of the very artist who made it. The artist then, instead of acting merely as a barometer of ideas and theories of his respective age, is manipulated by trends and a market controlled by powerful writers.

Further complicating matters for viewers, Lommazzo writes in the sixteenth century that the elements necessary for good art must include: imitation, proportion, movement, light and (interestingly)*"psychological expression"*(108). This implies that we, as viewers must now consider the state of mind of the artist while judging the art object. It further implies that without knowing the artist's state of mind firsthand, we will need not the artist, but a writer to clarify that mental state for us. For without factoring this in, we cannot fully understand or appreciate the art object. The audience, however capable enough in other professions, is presumed dull regarding what they see on a museum wall. They must rely on a "priest" of good taste. The appreciation of the artwork begins to separate from common sense and sensibility at this stage in history. As intermediary, the critic and/or the historian will eventually become an essential, strong authority.

Lommazzo may also have been the first to promote the modern science of art. Because he was a writer, determined to define "good" art and "bad" art conclusively, he suggested that a method unmistakably centered on a *theory* (aesthetics) should be used to evaluate art. Good art is that which could be tested and tried in *scientific terms* (108). Public opinion becomes a weak argument in light of definitive professional criteria developed by intermediary, priest-like authorities and scientific theory. At this point the public is bullied by the presence of two familiar sovereigns: *religion* (critics acting as aesthetic priests) and *science* (graphs and charts) conspire to keep the artists' images from being deciphered by the common man.

By the 1700s, philosophy and science were deeply imbedded in what some might consider the simple practice of looking at art. Immanuel Kant's *magnum opus* was

written in 1781: *Critique of Pure Reason*, a goodly portion of which is devoted to aesthetics, and it is one of many works by philosophers concerned with good and bad art and concepts of beauty and ugliness. Christian Helmut Wenzel, who sorts out much of Kant's philosophy for the lay person, begins his explanation of Kant with an apology to readers. Kant is difficult to understand, he warns, and doubtless Kant scholars will find fault with interpretations that do not address his *opus* in its entirety. It is a formidable work that laid the foundations for future philosophical premises; however, for our purposes I am interested only in those areas of Kant's work that have impacted modern art through the writings of the twentieth century art critic, Clement Greenberg (Wenzel 13).

When reading Kant or Wenzel's interpretations of Kant, we become aware that we are not likely to have an aesthetic "experience" when looking at pictures through a Kantian lens. Nor are we going to define what beauty is or what the objective criteria for art might be. Instead, we are going to examine a picture with complete *disinterestedness.* This is an essential Kantian "move": "disinterestedness versus interestedness," a concept that lies at the core of his philosophy and applies to fine art as well; "The first criterion that Kant's analysis provides for a judgment of taste is that of 'disinterestedness': an object is beautiful if I like it without interest…More generously, an aesthetic judgment is a judgment of taste in so far as it is based on satisfaction (pleasure) that is free from any considerations involving interest" (19). As disinterested, Kant is suggesting that we come to the object to make our judgment in a state of "pure contemplation…In other words, we do not bring past experiences or knowledge about the object into our judgment, at least not in the first "moment" (19).

Here we are at the museum with our good friend Immanuel Kant. We've had a fine lunch on 5th Avenue and we've been entertained by the street performers outside on the museum steps. Hand in hand we go together to visit that favorite DeKooning painting on the third floor. As we approach the painting, we are going to pause *first, to examine our ability* to make a *judgment*. First. We must examine our ability to judge this thing we are standing in front of and we are going to do that by breaking out that *examination of our ability* into "twelve distinct categories" with four distinct "moments" for each category (10). William Kreml explains further:

> Kant argued that since all external objects need a perceiver in order to be understood and that since any perceiver has his own perceptual biases (drawn mainly from his own experiences), the perceptions of what one sees …are all substantially colored…(therefore) the human perceiver is an intruder upon knowledge rather than a worthy facilitator or final recipient of it. (19)

In my opinion, approaching my favorite picture, consisting merely of an application of paint on a flat piece of fabric (but one that can magically transfer my memory and experience from the fabric back to me, transforming me and my understanding of my place in the world) with a set of rules of order is not wise and may well destroy the delicate exchange that *could* happen between a picture and a viewer. That an exchange can take place, under the right and unpredictable conditions between an artist who may have worked generations before the viewer's birth, is a miraculous bit of conjuring that seems well above and beyond Kant's rigid formula of "categories,"

"moments," and "laws." Approaching a familiar painting with Kant's criteria would be like chewing good food (*and counting every single mastication*) at least a hundred times before each swallow.

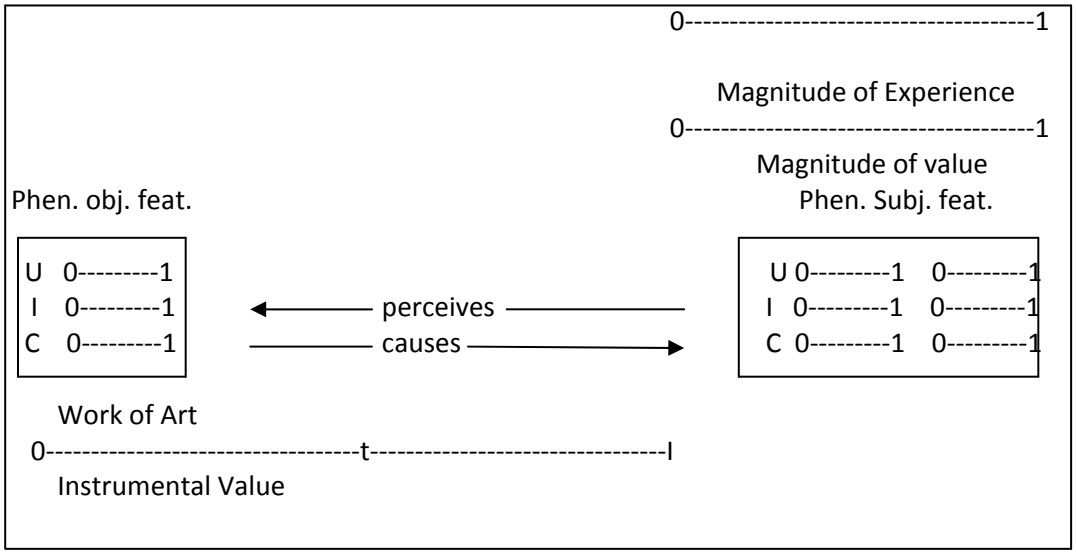
Kant states that "Beauty" cannot be *in* an object at which we are looking. Beauty cannot *be* in a painting. The beauty, writes Kant, is in our process of *critiquing* it. The critique *is* the art; "the judgment of taste is aesthetic" (Wenzel 4). "It is striking that Kant's aesthetics is not introduced under the heading of *'Aesthetics'* or '*Critique of Beauty,'* but appears under the title '*Critique of the* ***Power of Judgment.'*** Compared with previous aesthetic theories, Kant's approach is marked by a certain *shift of focus*, a shift from the *object* to the judgment *of* the object" (2). Critics might naturally congratulate a philosopher for this move because it eliminates the need of any art other than the critics' point of view. But, Kant's elegant theory regarding aesthetics has simply thrown out the baby and concentrated on the bathwater. "The judgment of taste *is* aesthetic." The critique *is* the art form. Nietzsche wrote: "Kant's view betrays a lack of any firsthand experience of art which reposes in the shape of a fat worm of error…Kant has turned the realm of aesthetics into a barren desert stripped of an abundance of vivid authentic experiences, desires, surprises, and delights"(104). And so he has.

By the 1920s and 30s, philosophers had thoroughly worked the problem of aesthetics into the ground: formula, scientific methods of evaluating works of art, volumes dedicated to the latest criteria for determining what sorts of images would come to elevate our culture and inspire society, to do whatever societies are thought to do better. So many were doggedly determined to get to the bottom of this elusive thing called "Art." For some, George Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, for example (a duo of

lab-coated, science-minded aestheticians), there were charts and gauges and scales with which to accurately weigh why a painting should be famous or conversely why it should remain forever stored in your mother's attic. George Dickie attempts to help us understand Beardsley's account of critical reasoning with the following chart and explaination:

> There are eleven locations in the aesthetic experience as conceived by Beardsley at which it is possible to have experiential access. For each of these locations there is a corresponding scale on which to plot a measurement of what it is that one has access to in a given location. There is a twelfth location and a twelfth scale, but the access to this location is not experiential but inferential. Seven of the scales are magnitude-of-experience scales and five of them are magnitude-of- value scales. (70)

(Fig.6) Beardsley's scale of Aesthetic Experience Aesthetic Scale



Note: In all fairness, I am using Beardsley, and Dickie's explanation of him out of context to make light of science's exaggerated claims on aesthetics. The above is one example of many, many such inventions. I have personally never met anyone who carried such things into a museum, but there may be those who do, and if that is so, I wish them well; however, I do not claim, even after careful study, to understand these alleged helpful instruments of measurement.

Richard Rorty explains the difference between taking on a philosophical problem, or any problem as a Pragmatist, by first, "asking, on the one hand, 'What is its essence? To what ineffable depths, what limit of language, does it lead us? What does it show us about *being human?*...We see (problems) as deep rather than as *reductiones ad absurdum* of a vocabulary" (xxxiii). For Lionello Venturi, writing about the history of art criticism, the idea of treating art as a *science* was as repellent to him as fascism. He had been an esteemed professor in Italy when Mussolini demanded an "oath of loyalty." He promptly packed his bags and came to New York City to continue his lecturing and writing career at Johns Hopkins and Columbia Universities. It would have been interesting in 1931 to have heard a conversation between Venturi and his downtown neighbor, the young art critic Clement Greenberg, for even though Greenberg was wrapped up in the most modern of visual arts, his concepts were based on the eighteenth-century analytic German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. How odd that he would have applied the ideas of a philosopher from the Enlightenment to a contemporary painter like Jackson Pollock.

Venturi frequently lectured about the necessity of applying the *personality* (of both artist and viewer) and *subjectivism to* any aesthetic approach to painting, the opposite, as we shall see, of the Kant/Greenberg model of criticism. He wrote, "The

reason why, in spite of the great progress of aesthetics, present day art history has reached its critical level with such difficulty, lies not only in a defect of the philosophical culture but also in the defect of the intuitive experience of art" (Venturi 336). He also suggested *combining* the fields of art history, criticism, aesthetics and the creation of art. That collaboration has never been fully realized and has disintegrated even more in the twenty-first century. He wrote, "Because the history of art aims at the understanding of a work of art as art, the final step in the history of art must be and is art criticism and theory." And he states very clearly, "that to distinguish the disciplines succeeds in nothing but to empty them of all sense" (19).This thinking, though evident in the 1930s, did not become the "model" used by critics setting criteria for Abstract Expressionism, but it would have been remarkable if Venturi's lens, rather than the Kant/Greenberg model, had focused on modernism in New York City between 1930 and 1960.

Clement Greenberg:

By the 1940s, the New York art critic Clement Greenberg, armed with Kantian philosophy, presented his ideas and opinions about culture and art in fervent reviews and battles promoting Modernism and abstract painting. He tended to over-theorize, it's true. He "laid down the law," as Robert Hughes wrote of him (548). "He insisted (ridiculously) that American art did not exist before Jackson Pollock," and although Hughes did not directly write this about Greenberg, I quote: "Such utterances are the very definition of bullshit: empty depth" (494).*Unfortunately, that quotation could be applied to many of Greenberg's convictions.*

Clement Greenberg began writing essays about culture for *Partisan Review* in 1937 while working as a customs clerk in lower Manhattan. In 1937, "contemporary

culture" in America did not yet exist. It simply hadn't been conceived of yet, and perhaps even Greenberg detractors will thank him for conceiving of and playing the role of midwife for a modern art that made New York the center of the art world. Before the 1940s, before America emerged from WWII as an heroic world player, "high" culture was only *European*. Even though Robert Hughes accuses Greenberg of being responsible for "the *fiction* (italics mine) that American art only came of age, achieved international quality, with Abstract Expressionism," Hughes also writes of American culture as:

> Comic books and Cadillacs, bubblegum, Spam, Hollywood movies, and the mushroom cloud. Jazz, of course and some American writers were admired: Faulkner, Hemingway. But American painting, sculpture, theater, dance, orchestral music? America looked naïve, swollen with production and pleasure, in contrast to the pinched and traumatized life of a Europe flattened by bombs, a Europe, which (counting Russia) had lost forty million people, mostly civilians, in less than ten years. America had lost nobody except soldiers, sailors and airmen. No bomb had ever fallen on its mainland. It was a fictive paradise full of lies about how consumption produced social happiness. America was the place an artist escaped *from*, in order to mature in Europe. (466)

Clearly someone had to step forward and trend-set. Greenberg seemingly pulled a Jackson Pollock out of his hat and into the limelight, and the rest is history. The "rum" study of art is a messy affair, as I've stated earlier. Even if college instructors and the various art professionals work hard to gather it into tidy packets for undergraduate consumption, there is more juice flowing through the veins of the average unadorned

painter than any critical theory would allow one to know. Critics don't know what art is, and I've never been convinced that anyone really knows. While the public has come to require an interpretation of its world that can be sorted out and stored between the pages of a book to be leisurely examined over a glass of wine by the fire, creative people are at work stacking up more and more pieces of themselves to be shared or not in corners of their studios.

The writing about art, artists and culture is an act of "meta-creativity," several steps removed from an original work of art. I don't know if Clement Greenberg admitted to that, but being a devotee of Immanuel Kant, I believe he probably knew the faults and limitations of criticism, of self-criticism. He claimed to have been a painter before writing about painting; however, evidence of his visual art does not exist. *He alleged his parents destroyed all of the art of his student years.* He certainly knew formalism, and he played the part of the consummate art critic up to the end of his fifty year career. Certainly Kantian philosophy was fashionable in the 1940s, and Greenberg picked it up as a useful armature for his opinions about art and culture, as many others were doing.

John Dewey and his Pragmatist beliefs had been popular during the depression years, but had fallen from favor by the mid-1940s. Richard Rorty writes:

> By the end of the Second World War, the great days of Deweyan philosophy and social science were over. The strenuous reformist attitude which succeeded the genteel tradition was in turn succeeded by an urge to be scientific and rigorous….Philosophers' contact with colleagues in the social sciences became as minimal and incidental as their contacts with colleagues in literature. Dewey had predicted that philosophy would turn

> away from the seventeenth-century tension between mathematical physics and the world of common sense, and would take up new problems arising from the social sciences and the arts. But his prediction was completely off target. On the contrary, all the good old Cartesian problems which Dewey had thought he had disposed of were brought back, restated in a formal mode of speech and surrounded by the new difficulties generated by the formalism. (64).

Now, I can't help feeling bad about Clement Greenberg. I can't seem to avoid bumping into Greenberg detractors these days. He was someone whom I had championed for no other reason than that he established the *illusion* of the correct reading of modern art before I was born.

Greenberg made sense of senseless imagery; before I ever picked up a crayon, he was writing about art, defining what I would later build into my own rationale for painting. At fifteen, dreaming of being a painter, I wandered New York City streets often lost, dazed and homeless, and looked into gallery windows and sat on museum steps with illusions that had been partially fueled by imaginations like Greenberg's, in effect the ones he created for us provincial American teenagers from the suburbs. He gave us something of the kind of the "sublime" that had infested the dreams of Romantics like Blake and Keats, who elevated the artists to exalted Yeats-like towers, above the nastiness of American consumerism and T.V. Dinners and Chevrolets and *Gunsmoke*. I first smelled New York as burnt cinders: layered noise that rumbled up through my feet, up through my body and sailed off in the air for miles beyond where I stood on lines of

sidewalks in endless paths of strangers all moving, all weaving, all thinking. I stood, later recognizing it, in the web of a Pollock painting then. So what if Greenberg was bluffing?

He was there somehow for that fifteen year old painter, chain smoking with his copy of Kant under one arm and his other undoubtedly flailing in the air directing museum curators like some hysterical Delphic Oracle. In our 1950s consumer madness, he *sold* us Pollock, and I was grateful for that, grateful for his hyperbole apart from how I now regard a Pollock painting, or how I now understand the holes in Greenberg's essays. Introducing us to Pollock when he did served a formidable purpose. He did it, however he did it.

I have been trained by graduate schools to look at Abstract Expressionism through Greenberg's proscriptive lens, and even now the era cannot be completely distilled from his directives. What I had emphatically decided against doing was to take on Greenberg in my defense of Mueller's painting; it somehow felt like an unnecessary betrayal of my early art education. But I am also aware of the price paid for Greenberg's grandiloquent style of art criticism. Once again Robert Hughes underscores the basis of my thesis when he writes:

> Greenberg's version of modernism has long since had its day...because of the limitations of his positivistic world view, based on a truculent, anti-spiritual materialism which also rejected nature, 'There is nothing left in nature for plastic art to explore'[Greenberg had said]. This post script had never been true, and never will be; and it certainly wasn't true in America in the 1960s and the 1970s. It was just that artists who did feel nature was

> worth exploring were sidelined by the institutional and critical clout of purist abstraction. This happened to both realist painters and to artists who tried to keep a fluid balance in their work between abstraction and deliberate references to nature. (549)

The "cutting edge" in the art world isn't a physical thing of course; it is a wall built of words, created not by painters but by art critics. We have been informed by writers that the important canvases of the 1950s were created by an anxious lot of painter/intellectuals in New York City who lived in cold water flats downtown, drinking themselves toward premature Alzheimer's. They wore not very warm-looking leather jackets and smoked unfiltered cigarettes. They were real "guys." They sneered at art audiences and looked nervously into black and white Kodak cameras. "*There sits Motherwell biting his nails at the edge of a nuclear abyss"* (23).

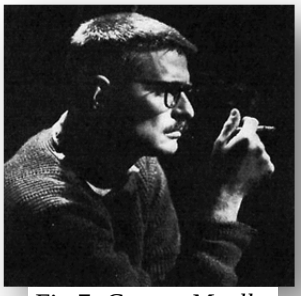


Fig.7. *George Mueller*

These artists had abandoned attempts of earlier painters to transform human values through *Art* for the enrichment of Western Culture because, in truth, the behemoth of post war, modern culture was not much impressed by paint on cloth until the artists of the 1940s and 50s attempted to circumvent it. But, after all, it hadn't been a Fauve painting that thrust us into the post modern age; it was Oppenheimer. And it was Greenberg, sitting in his customs house office, contemplating culture and in many instances misinterpreting Immanuel Kant, who launched an age of distinctive and exceptional painting in New York City. He also, perhaps unwittingly, encouraged a pact between artist and writer that elevated a few and extinguished the careers of many. He issued parameters that bound too many artists to

imagery that dead-ended or proved oppressive for the sake of being avant-garde. He took an expansive art movement and sharpened it to a fine but too brittle point.

Greenberg and Kant:

Greenberg identifies Immanuel Kant as the first "Modernist" because, he wrote, "Kant was the first to criticize the means itself of criticism" (Greenberg 85). Certainly Kant breaks down the process of "judgment." I'm not sure why this would make him a Modernist; Greenberg does not clarify how he is using the term "Modernism." He also wrote, "The essence of modernism lies in the methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline" (85). Greenberg might have been generalizing here, or he might have been specifically referring to an early controversial twentieth-century movement called "modernism" within the Roman Catholic Church. That movement sought to question traditional beliefs, thereby questioning Roman Catholicism, and received a good deal of press in the 1920s. He also wrote: "The self-criticism of Modernism grows out of the Enlightenment" (85). He suggests that the Enlightenment philosophers questioned and examined thoroughly and, therefore, to be modern in the age of Enlightenment required that self-criticism occur with the same scientific rigor that was applied to all beliefs in the eighteenth century. Yet this is baffling because Kant was known to be diametrically opposed to the foundations of the Enlightenment. The philosopher William Kreml wrote, "The Enlightenment was a product of an intellectual thrust that [made] a case for reason or a universal order within the physical world" (Kreml 12). And according to Kreml, Kant was not happy about the attention given to the French *philosophes* and actively set out to oppose their ideas with a conservative doctrine that supported empiricism, skepticism, and positivism; "Not unexpectedly, the intellectual counterpoise to the

enlightenment found its home in movements such as ...German Kantianism" (14). Again it appears that Greenberg may have misinterpreted Kant's intent even though he quotes him freely. However, in all fairness, Greenberg may not have been entirely to blame for misreading Kant. As Rorty has stated, "Kant had changed everything, but no one was sure just what Kant had said—no one was sure what in Kant to take seriously and what to put aside" (Rorty 20).

Greenberg pulls from Kantian theory the idea of pure art: art for arts' sake, an elevation of art beyond entertainment, sentimentality, or personal experience when he writes: "the arts save themselves from a leveling down only by demonstrating that the kind of experience they provide is valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity" (Greenberg 85). Purity means self-definition; in other words, viewers should not bring their own experiences, memories, and ideas, and apply them to modern art. These ideas hugely echo Kant's method of maintaining a state of "disinterestedness" or pure contemplation when viewing art. But he also made a move that Kant probably could not have made. Naturalistic art, Greenberg claimed, concealed art; it imitated the real world but held no truth of its own. However, abstract imagery in art did not exist in Kant's day, so there is no way of predicting how Kant would have perceived his own "aesthetics" applied to a Pollock painting.

Greenberg also wrote that "modernism used art to call attention to art." In other words, modern art proudly displays paint and canvas; it is not comprised of the real person or landscape; rather it is literally pigment on cloth. He writes, "The limitations that constitute the medium of painting--the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment…under modernism these same limitations came to be regarded

as positive factors, and were acknowledged openly" (86).This is true, but these "factors" came into play well after Kant's day. Would Kant have agreed that brushstrokes are preferable to smooth skin and that raw canvas is as effective as a carefully stippled field of poppies with dew gleaming on every perfect petal? One cannot help but speculate what Kant himself would have thought of Greenberg: slowing his judgment process as he would have through his monotonous "categories" and "moments" while standing before a Pollock! It would have been interesting to observe the two of them. Would his eighteenth-century scrutiny of judgment, no matter how organized his categories, have been able to digest Pollock's purpose or artistic intent? Would he have agreed with Greenberg's judgment and about using Kantian rationale to explain Pollock's canvases to a confused public, or would Kant have been confused right along with everyone else in 1945?

It was typical of Greenberg to casually dismiss the writing of his contemporaries. Instead of respectfully interpreting colleagues' ideas, he might summarily attack their academic credentials or fall upon a single word or phrase, diverting attention from their argument to focus on his own, often off-topic point of view. For example, he criticized one Dr. Freeberg, an eminent art historian who wrote exclusively about Renaissance art. In an essay, Greenberg takes furious issue with a seemingly innocent Freeberg statement: "The effort of intellectual apprehension is required for the appreciation of High Renaissance painting" (Greenberg 201). In Freeberg's essay, this sentence, written in passing, simply intimated that appreciating High Renaissance art required some active intelligence of the viewer. After all, what writer, passionate about any art form, would write: *"I believe that absolutely no intelligence or interest is needed to comprehend this*

painting"? But Greenberg ferrets out this insignificant sentence and spends an inordinate number of pages attacking it, using Freeberg's comment to make a point of his own, switching the subject to Jackson Pollack. He wrote: "'intellectual' means ratiocinative or it means nothing, and nobody has been yet able to show to my satisfaction anything of essential quality in any kind of art that called on one's reasoning powers for either its appreciation or its creation. I am not alone in maintaining this. Kant and Croce say the same in essence" (201). Here he takes issue with poor Freeberg's use of the word "intellect," angry that *intellect* play even a small part in the comprehension or the creation of art! But doesn't it? Greenberg had often written that intellect and reason are irrelevant in modernism; the essential piece is the "subconscious." However, earlier in the same volume, he attacked another critic, a Mr. Alloway, for referring to Pollock as an "Action Painter." Alloway had alluded to Pollock's spontaneity and unconsciousness. "It turns out," storms Greenberg, "in *fact*, that Pollock has an almost completely Cubist basis, and...it is the fruit of much learning and much discipline." Then he forgives Mr. Alloway because he sinned, "out of ignorance, or for lack of an elementary grounding in aesthetics" (143). So, in the same volume of essays, Greenberg both maintains that intellect and reason *are not* useful to either painter or viewer and that intellect and reason *are* useful to both painter and viewer. And in his day, no one challenged these severe mood swings.

Greenberg's assertions, which often appear initially strong and convincing, are just as often confused or even meaningless when unpacked. The common dictionary would tell us that the definition of "intellectual" means: "relating to thought process: relating to or involving the mental processes of abstract thinking and reasoning

rather than the emotions" ("intellectual," def. Random House 692). There seems nothing in this definition that would have shamed a painter by its use, except that in previous essays Greenberg had meticulously constructed the rationale for Pollock's painting as *subconscious/non-intellectual*, and Kant, too, would have approved of the separation of intellect and emotion from the "pure state of contemplation" needed for art. Greenberg compares the word "intellect" to the word "ratiocinative," but their definitions are subtly different. Ratiocinative means: "logical reasoning" and his focus on this word serves only to cloud or confuse his opponent's essay while providing a catalyst to propel his own off-topic ideas ("ratiocinactive," def. Random House 1096). Although he often contradicted himself, his assertions usually ran toward the premise that all great art (and especially Pollock's art) was spontaneous, pure, and transcendent of intellect. Much of Greenberg's appeal as a writer is his passion, his New Yorker-in-your-face declarations. Certainly, he was not guilty of precise language. Oddly, his writing is emotional and not "scientific" in any sense. And that Greenberg could base his own foundation of criticism in Kant (of all philosophers), claiming an *anti*-intellectualism for "Art" but obviously overlooking the intellectualism, precision, and science of Kantian analytic logic is typical of Greenberg's blindness. Much about Greenberg's writing misses the core of solid Kantian theory and seemingly attempts to misdirect his readers' attention. Yet, he so frequently and so delightfully manipulated language that now, as an adult reader, I find I applaud his zeal and angry posturing, even though much of it may have been smoke and mirrors.

Still, what lasting impact Abstract Expressionism would have had on art history, on culture, and aesthetics without Greenberg's consistent bombing in print is impossible to gauge. We do know that the industry of the New York School: how the work was

supported by galleries and presented to the public, and how it was later filed in its context within the sacred art canon was essentially created not by the painters themselves but by the critics and aestheticians. Again, I do not question Abstract Expressionism. However it got into the canon, I appreciate and am glad of it, but revolutions are harsh and leave many casualties in their wakes. Clement Greenberg and his self-proclaimed dependence on Kantian aesthetics had to overstate his case to win his point, but in his elitist trend lies the answer to why certain painters felt the need to work on their own, in essence to "open their own businesses" instead of courting the machine created by Greenberg and critics like him. In the next chapter we will briefly review the history leading up to this art revolution in New York and follow the path of one young painter, George Mueller, as he enters the city and art market to pursue a career. Undaunted by, and probably unaware of pure art, subconscious intention, Kant, Greenberg, or the fuss they managed to generate, Mueller steps into the stream of Modern Art.

Chapter 4

"Jack Lost"

Abstract Expressionism and the Early Career of George Mueller

In New York City, "Abstract Expressionism" in the 1940s followed in the wake of the European Modernist paradigm. The term Expressionism had been applied primarily in Germany to the "German Expressionists." The "New York, Abstract Expressionist Movement," though lacking a written manifesto, descended from the European pre-war Modernist movement but, having been born in America, gained the encouragement of Peggy Guggenheim's financial support and Clement Greenberg's pen.

Abstract Expressionism includes The New York School, Action Painting, Gestural Painting and Color Field Painting. The roots of these American movements began in Europe in the early twentieth century with Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Dadaism, Expressionism, Surrealism, and Cubism. These earlier movements had exploded the art world, particularly in France and Germany, and when the war shook Europe, many of those great modernist painters found their way to New York City: Hans Hoffman, John Graham, Arshile Gorky, Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, Piet Mondrian, and many others. The Futurists, all fascists who championed war, went willingly into battle and most met their demise there. Georges Braque went to war *against* Fascism and survived a severe head wound but remained in France. Picasso stayed on in Paris, his fame keeping him out of the army as well as the concentration camps.

Years before, the work of many of these artists had been introduced to America via the famous 1913 Armory Show in New York City. The European Modernists had been launched here, largely through the efforts of the New York photographer Alfred Stieglitz, who promoted the Europeans through his own gallery, *291,* and magazine, *Camera Work,* while tirelessly nurturing the American Modernist movement, comprised of several young American artists: Georgia O'Keefe, Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley and Stuart Davis, among others. His group became established in New York under his careful direction and, by the 1930s, largely relocated to New Mexico. The American group did not actively join or particularly welcome the post-war European Modernists when they arrived downtown but proudly remained isolationists:

> Along with their strong attachment to the countryside went a new attitude toward Europe. With the exception of Hartley, who in this climate was routinely criticized by his colleagues for living abroad and not sinking roots at home, everyone in the Stieglitz circle had stopped traveling to Europe by the early 1920s… 'We did not want to spend our lives living in the past,' wrote Anderson. (Korn 33)

Nevertheless, the European Modernist painters were making an impression in New York City. For one thing, unlike their distant Renaissance relations, they accepted that art probably did nothing to elevate the behavior of nations above being crassly human. Until World War I, Art assumed a cumulative authority; it was supposedly the didactic effect of high culture gathering force as it rolled through age after age spreading beauty and truth to all civilized people; only a matter of time before art and culture could solve every barbarity. The grand and classical notion that Art "civilized" was eventually

abandoned as modern warfare, economic collapse, disease, and inhumanity swept Europe clean of such naïve concepts. Paintings, sculpture, and music might elevate individuals within society, or they might give form to the propaganda that arouses nations to battle, but the sheer love of beauty, the creation of pure art has never been proven in the history of the world to eliminate political aggression. Instead, seizing the concepts of psychoanalysis and Carl Jung, they turned their attention away from church and state and toward personal inner expression. Specifically the Surrealists--their emphasis on improvisation, psychoanalysis and Jung's "collective unconscious"--were changing the course of art forever.

Another Renaissance concept had painters projecting the optical order of the world onto a flat surface using linear perspective. That same single perspective/one-point perspective metaphorically reflected the Renaissance belief in a unified world view: man is at the center and in control. Similarly, the artists of the Enlightenment never doubted that there were definitive solutions to all problems great and small. Their beautiful and precise imagery reflected the belief that a reasonable and balanced world was possible. Although, in the twenty-first century, we still sense the imprint of those Renaissance and Enlightenment artists, their science and technique, their clean and tidy platitudes regarding humanity were largely obliterated by the first generation of Modernists and their successive progeny in the early twentieth century. After all, given modernity's ability to end the world itself, depicting perfect bowls of ripening fruit that warned middle classes of the dangers of excess seemed a futile and tedious message. New forms were explored, ostensibly reflecting a new truth: the raw and ugly global circumstances after World War I.

Modern artists abandoned painting techniques that suggested illusionistic, three dimensional space for raw paint on flat supports. Their goal to reach a spiritual, profound, inner reality did not depend on the use of perspective. It was a radical move. The "new" artists claimed that the visible state of an object was a limited account of it. Reality had to be much more than that. The Modernist painter Paul Klee used an example of an apple tree, imagining it in various stages of growth, roots, sap rising, cross sections of the trunk with its annual rings, the blossom with its sexual functions, the fruit, its core and seeds. Klee stated that it was necessary to express the complexity as a whole and not, in effect, to represent merely the visible. In the early twentieth century, world war, mass starvation, and genocide had taught artists to look deeper at humanity than DaVinci's perfectly proportioned image of "man" suggested (Klee 11). Klee wrote:

> We used to represent things visible on earth. Now we reveal the reality of the visible. And thereby express the belief that visible reality is merely an isolated phenomenon, outnumbered by other realities. In the end a formal cosmos will be created out of purely abstract elements independent of their configurations as objects, beings, or things like letters or numbers. (8)

Surrealists like Max Ernst explored inner states of the mind and had been influential in Europe before his incarceration by the German Gestapo. His son, the painter James Ernst, came to America first, lived in New York, and worked for his father's release from a prison camp--his mother had died at Auschwitz. Yves Tanguy, André Masson, Salvador Dali, and Kurt Seligmann were among other early Modernist arrivals. John Graham, born in Poland, had come over in the 1920s. He became a mentor

particularly to a young Jackson Pollock. They settled in cold water flats and large industrial buildings in and around 9th Street on New York's Lower East Side because the spaces were large and inexpensive, and they befriended and influenced Robert Motherwell, Milton Avery and all of the young artists in the area.

Pollock/Greenberg & Abstract Expressionism

Jackson Pollock is pivotal as this segment of art history unfolds, perhaps more so than any other artist of his generation, because Greenberg and the media focused on this young painter who had come to New York City to study with Thomas Hart Benton at the Art Students League. He became the "poster-child" of Abstract Expressionism. His short but succinct epitaph could read something like:

> He painted riskily, just on the edge of control. He butted and shoved his way through blocks and indecision, without any protection. He drank like a fish, couldn't contain his internal violence and sexual insecurities, and died in 1956 at the age of forty-four like a puffy, mean James Dean, in a big American car with two girls in it, neither of them his long suffering wife, the painter, Lee Krasner. (Hughes 482)

That about sums up what the public generally knows about Pollock. But he was the natural extension of Willem DeKooning, Franz Kline, and many others: the obvious conclusion. His painting and his life took him down a path opened by earlier modernists but left him dead-ended with *Life Magazine* snapping at his back and very little room to turn himself around. Perhaps that is why he is likened to James Dean, another artist/victim of an overactive American media.

John Graham introduced Pollock to the ideas of Carl Jung because of Pollock's alcohol problem. Not only did Pollock then pursue psychoanalysis, but his subsequent exploration of automatism led him to the four-year period in his career, his "all-over paintings," or the "drip-paintings" that made him a "superstar." In 1949, Clement Greenberg proclaimed him the best living American artist, *Life Magazine* called him "Jack the Dripper," and the critic Harold Rosenberg coined the popular phrase: "action painter." Hollywood succumbed in 2000 and released a film that portrayed Pollock as a swollen raging inarticulate idiot. His character, portrayed by the actor Ed Harris, spills paint on the floor and his wife, Lee Krasner, played by Marcia Gay Hardin, breathlessly proclaims, "My God, Jack! You've done it, you've really done it!" in a scene better suited for the likes of Madame Curie or Joan of Arc. What he had really done, never expressed in the film, was to finally break down the entire Western tradition of art.

In 2001, I met an old friend of George Mueller's, an artist/dancer/musician, the late Maryette Charlton. She was then quite elderly but still in possession of a rich store of information about the artists she had known. She told me about her friend "Jack," whom she had known well in his Long Island days. He used to visit with her and talk about painting. They often baked blueberry pies in her kitchen. She described him as "soft-spoken, quiet Jack" who was extremely intelligent and very serious about his work. Ed Harris used Maryette Charlton as "research," and she was escorted by Harris to the film's opening night. She told me that she was very sad about that film; it bothered her that "people now saw Jack like that! That wasn't like Jack at all."

Yet, Pollock had been sewn up in the web of gallery owners and collectors and a voracious American media that had found a "bohemian" to play with. Pollock must have

looked like a gaudy circus act to the general public, thinking that he was working overtime. He imagined changing the very history of art by risking enormously crucial, aesthetic, and mind blowing stakes in the canons of western culture. Instead, the public was thinking: *phony painter, a drunk who knocks over a can of paint and makes a million dollars."* To some extent, some critics still express that view. At the time, Greenberg often added fuel to the fire, putting his words into the painter's mouth. It turned out, though, that Art History sided with Pollock. Ultimately, it didn't matter what the public thought or still thinks. Pollock has clearly emerged as a serious force in modern art and will forever remain so. His best all-over paintings are restrictive, delicate webs, spun on canvases so large that standing close, one feels about to fall into them. Stand very close and one can see his hand print, a boot print, his cigarette end. The *"soft-spoken, quiet Jack"* is still in there, in the huge canvases that read: deep space, but in-your-face, thread-like spines stop you from getting too far in with him. Deliberate or subconscious, no matter. I believe the vastness implied beneath the wiry woven strands of enamel paint that prevent us from breaking through was what Pollock was after and was at least one victory he honestly achieved, though his next move would have been difficult.

George Mueller in New York

By 1946 Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock, Pollock in particular, were established stars in the New York School's elite firmament, thanks in large part to Greenberg. They moved to Long Island and purchased a house in East Hampton. They threw parties and performed for the press. Pollock might have enjoyed the attention and the security of a one-man show every year but his drinking (depending on how one views such things)

continued to either interfere with or fuel his painting. That same year found a young man, George Mueller, just waking up to a life in the arts in Newark, New Jersey, a few miles away from the aesthetic revolution that Pollock and painters of his generation had triggered in America. But from the very start, Mueller stubbornly chose his own path. He neither shunned nor pursued fame; he simply painted. He had graduated from Arts High School in Newark in 1946. Like the other children of immigrants there, he had entered Newark's Barringer High School at the appropriate age but did not stay there long. It's unclear what problems Mueller encountered during his first six months of high school; "fucking up" is as much as Mueller ever admitted to, but it was established early on that Barringer High School was not the right environment for a young person who did little but draw and listen to jazz.

He transferred to Newark's Arts High School, one of the first public high schools in the United States specializing in the visual arts. Newark's Arts High had opened in 1931, but unlike its more famous counterpart, Music and Arts High School in Manhattan, Newark's Arts High featured very conventional training from instructors who had probably never been on the edge of any art revolution, instead believing unreservedly in concepts of western culture and classicism. It connected students more to the Pre-Raphaelites than it did to contemporary New York aesthetics. The curriculum focused on the fundamentals: basic design, watercolor painting, and drawing naturalistically. The instructors, steeped in nineteenth-century visual arts, discussed nothing concerning the changes in painting taking place just across the river.

For young Mueller, who drew accurately and was meticulous in his handling of materials, this type of education and training could have proved disastrous. In the days

prior to technology, so many young hopefuls were pulled into solid, well-paying careers in what were referred to as “the arts.” In reality, such professions were the drudge work of paste ups, mechanicals, and drafting supporting the graphic design of advertising before computers revolutionized that industry. These jobs often sucked young artists into uninspired but average paying “jobs,” diverting time and real creativity to a secure but meaningless end.

Throughout his early childhood Mueller exhibited qualities consistently proving a sophisticated visual acuity. He was deeply moved by his environment’s aesthetic, how natural forms fitted together, how colors relate, or shapes were able to transform one’s sense of well-being. While still a student at Arts High, Mueller was approached by an architect and asked to build models from drawings, but he had the good sense not to be “trapped” into a full-time job of model building that would take him away from his own drawing and painting, his true direction. However, whenever his parents asked what he was studying, he replied: “commercial art,” for his immigrant working-class parents were not amused by the prospect of a son’s career in fine art.

Mueller’s first painting instruction at Arts High came from two elderly women who never varied in their established curriculum, that of painting floral arrangements or studies of single blossoms in scrupulous detail, which bored the young Mueller and sent him out to the streets instead to look for imagery that was random/chance/ temporary but excited his imagination. Most children were acquainted with the beautiful winter patterns on glass window panes when Jack Frost painted magical scenes on cold mornings. Inspired by that idea, Mueller and his art-student friend Joel Vasey prowled the neighborhoods of Newark and lower Manhattan looking for “random art” that (without

their even being conscious of it) strangely resembled the large canvases of Pollock and Kline.

In the days when sign painters actually painted huge billboards, signs were "prepped" by splashing/smearing rapid large brushstrokes partially covering over the old advertisement. These were left for a day or two before the new ad was painted. Vasey and Mueller worked on these, signing them "Jack Lost" instead of Jack Frost. And for a day or two, these masterpieces of abstract expressionism would be exhibited for vast numbers of clueless pedestrians before the next advertisement for toothpaste covered them over. An occasional billboard might include an interesting image or series of shapes. Vasey and Mueller's revisions were signed "Hack-Lost."

The radical changes in art taking place in galleries and museums were still largely unknown to them, but both young painters were aware of "something" that needed to be voiced, a new freedom of expression that could be fugitive, exciting, and self reflective. In the face of the 1950s middle-class American, post war, settling down, suburban resolve was an undercurrent of action imagery that the boys were drawn towards without being fully conscious that it even existed. Abstract Expressionism consisted of an intense language that warned of nuclear explosions, uncontrollable technology, or even madness. Begun as a child's game, Mueller's ability to distinguish and appreciate imagery from random encounters with the ordinary world stayed with him throughout his career.

He and Vasey spent hours accumulating scraps of wood, metal, and trash to build freestanding temporary "public sculptures," abandoning them to construction sites, moving on to work on the "free" art surfaces of billboards. Considering that graffiti art

did not begin to emerge in urban areas until the late 1960s, Mueller and Vasey were creating wherever they were, with whatever they could lay their hands on. They were not making socio-political or territorial statements but fulfilling their need for self-expression. Their Dadaist artist-predecessors would have applauded the young men who once set up a tent and camped in an abandoned lot in Newark *"on vacation."* The joke: on vacation from what? Amid the rubble and trash, the act was ridiculous enough to make it worth their while. They lounged around a campfire, telling stories and gazing in mock contentment at the dubious stars over the city of Newark.

Both boys had already discovered jazz, and while still at Arts High they could easily slip out of classes and take the ferry to Manhattan to hear Woody Hermann at Carnegie Hall, chucking their homework into the river on the return trip home. Mueller was exceptionally bright and articulate; he was an excellent draftsman and could draw naturalistically. Not yet aware of the possibilities opened by Pollock and the "new" artists, he was resigned to the idea of being an illustrator, not so much like Norman Rockwell but rather like another *Saturday Evening Post* illustrator, Stevan Dohanos. Part of the Social Realist School, Dohanos had been influenced by both Edward Hopper and Grant Wood. Mueller, aside from his love of "random" shapes, appreciated that Dohanos worked compositional elements together naturalistically and abstractly. His drawings fit into the conventional illustrative framework (they told a story or relayed a message), but they were also constructed in interesting patterns that could be appreciated purely for their abstract qualities as well.

Significantly, Mueller won his first art competition before graduating from Arts High and leaving Newark. In fact, his first subject was Newark. This competition,

sponsored by The City Council, awarded cash for the creation of a book cover for the publication *Newark City of Progress,* a curious title for anyone acquainted with the city after the 1960s. Newark was a thriving urban center in the 1940s, although some government leaders were undoubtedly anticipating the city's eventual housing and economic crisis; yet, the strong immigrant neighborhoods of Irish, Polish, Germans, and Italians were still cohesive and stable. Newark held a special kind of inner city/ rural flavor that branded its natives for life.

There are any number of Newark enthusiasts who reminisce about its unique urban character in the 1940s and 50s. In 1948, its population was around half a million residents. However, safe, clean housing had always been difficult in the inner city, and after the war residents began to migrate to suburbs, leaving the core inner city to seek government funding, which resulted in monstrously large tracts of subsidized housing developments. Grace Ellen McCrann of The New Jersey Historical Society comments: "While other cities were skeptical about putting so many poor and socially dysfunctional individuals together, Newark avidly pursued federal dollars. Eventually, Newark would have a higher percentage of its residents in public housing than any other American city" (McCrann: NJ Historical Society).

In *American Pastoral*, Philip Roth, who grew up in Newark, puts these reflections into the mouth of his protagonist, Swede Levov:

> [Newark] used to be the city where they manufactured everything, now it's the car theft capital of the world...there was a factory where somebody was making something on every side street. Now there's a liquor store on

> every street--a liquor store, a pizza stand, and a seedy storefront church. Everything else is in ruins or boarded up. (Roth 24)

Although art and culture existed in Newark and continues today, the migration of "cutting edge" artists across the river took place in the 1940s. After graduating from Arts High, Mueller and his friends moved to lower Manhattan.

Nothing seems more preposterous than imagining George Mueller, even as a very young man, in suit and tie, brandishing a briefcase, racing with the rats, scurrying along Madison Avenue as one of advertising's "madmen," but he was hired as an apprentice in just such an environment, The Charles Dallas Reach Advertising Agency. The firm was a large three-storied affair, complete with the company's founder and president, with his personal secretary and chauffeur, haughtily ascending each morning in his private elevator to his private office to conduct the efforts of admen and lackeys below him who were fueling America's post war consumerism.

Fortunately for Mueller, before technology, before fax machines and e-mails, communication between two parties was, more often than not, face-to-face and took time. Mueller's primary job was to hand deliver drawings and sketches to illustrators working at their home/studios, often as far away as Connecticut, for revisions. Young Mueller was sent shuffling back and forth from artists' studios to art director via public transportation. Still, this afforded him the unique opportunity to come into direct contact with the illustrators he admired most.

He admits that at this point in his life he had no clear direction regarding the visual arts and only the vaguest idea that being an illustrator would be something he could "do." He felt he had to draw. Taking the advice of a family friend, he applied to

Cooper Union in 1947 to further his art education. Acceptance into the Art School had a dramatic effect on Mueller and his artistic direction. Since Cooper Union is an endowed, tuition-free institution to which access is very difficult, entrance involved a rigorous test of skill and a commitment to the field of fine art; acceptance to Cooper Union implied that one was an artist. It was here that Mueller's profession as a serious painter began to unfold. For the first time in his life he came into contact with painters, musicians, poets, writers, serious about their places in the contemporary art scene. He became friendly with the young poet Herbie Marceline, a native New Yorker from racially mixed parentage, who had been in the armed forces, smoked a pipe and dressed in army fatigues. They frequented jazz clubs together, heard Thelonius Monk and John Coltrane, read poetry, and looked up the Abstract Expressionist painter John Ferren, who was showing at the Eagan Gallery at the time.

Although born in America, Ferren had lived and worked in Paris in the 1930s. He was very much a part of the group of European modernist painters who impacted New York, opening doors to Abstract Expressionism. Greenberg applauded him for remaining "painterly," writing, "Ferren retains the 'Tenth Street touch'" (129). Ferren took Mueller under his wing, encouraging him to leave Cooper Union and "go out and paint." Ferren lived above Franz Kline on East 10thStreet, and Mueller was with him one day when he dropped into his friend's, Kline's studio. A record player continually blasted Wagner, and on the wall several large paintings were in progress. On the floor of the studio and along the hall outside were stacks of the *New York Yellow Pages,* each page depicting a different composition rejected by Kline. He did hundreds of these preliminary sketches until seizing one that he could transpose, then pasted the sketches onto cardboard to keep in front of him while painting the large gestural works he became known for. This was

perhaps the first time Mueller actually saw the new art up close, and it made immediate sense to him, just as Charlie Parker made sense to him. Even Ferren's work, following the earlier European modernists, was conventional by comparison. Kline, at that time, had become close with Willem DeKooning, and he abandoned his paintings of ragged, Fauve-like Pennsylvania landscapes to explore the large, black, gestural strokes on white grounds. Mueller connected with this art immediately. It seemed to him the visual equivalent of the improvisational musical forms of Be-Bop and the intricate structures of Charles Ives, Igor Stravinsky, or Alban Berg. The more he listened, the clearer he saw the work in the studios of New York in the late 1940s. With Ferren, Mueller became a frequent visitor to the Eagan Gallery, as well as to Sidney Janus, Sam Koots and Betty Parsens Galleries.

Mueller's friends, Joel Vasey and Hank Nisa, rented a loft on East 17th Street and Mueller shared space with them. The loft was enormous (they kept live chickens in the studio) and they painted very large, imitating Kline and DeKooning. Vasey and Nisa had persuaded Frederika Biermonti from The Artists Gallery to pay them a studio visit, which proved to be significant. Spotting Mueller's work in a corner of the studio, she immediately wanted his paintings for her next show. She arranged a show for Vasey and Mueller and sold most of them for what Mueller describes as "fancy New York prices." The show was favorably reviewed by Robert M. Coates in the *New Yorker Magazine* in 1951:

> In a combined first show, two youngsters, George Mueller, twenty two, and Joel Vasey, a year older, are exhibiting paintings based on musical compositions, each intended to convey an impression of a composer---at

> the *Artists' Gallery*, and though the idea of expressing music in paint is fairly commonplace, they bring a good deal of freshness and originality to it. Both are non-objectivists, and both reveal an approach that at first glance makes their styles appear interchangeable. But Mueller, one discovers, is the stronger of the two; his designs are more sweeping and more boldly outlined, and largely for these reasons his "Bach I" with its long sloping, contrapuntal forms, and the complex, yet still rhythmic "Bach III" and the pale spidery patterned "Darius Milhaud" are the best pieces in the show. I admired as well his "Vivaldi" with its effect of brittle animation. Both men obviously have much more sophistication and musical understanding than is usually expended in work of this specialized genre. (Coates:58-59)

Mueller's name was quickly picked up. Biermonti suggested that Mueller apply to the Guggenheim Museum to be included in an upcoming show, *Young American Painters.*

But it was a hot afternoon and Mueller had plans to leave the city for a weekend in the country with friends. He had tied two canvases to the top of his car to take with him and didn't want the bother of driving to the Guggenheim. Yet, as he traveled down East 17th Street, where one turn would have brought him to the FDR Drive to leave New York and the opposite turn would have taken him in the direction of the Guggenheim, he turned toward the Guggenheim, only because there was traffic on the FDR Drive. When he arrived and knocked on the service door, he was told that it was too late to request entry to the show. As he was about to leave, someone came out, looked over the paintings on the car's roof, and decided to take one of them, anyway. Within two weeks, Mueller

Fig.8. Mueller's mustashioed face appears in *Esquire Magazine.* His is the largest image: center/right.

received a letter from the Guggenheim Museum accepting the canvas for the upcoming show and a few days later, another letter arrived asking to purchase a painting for the Guggenheim's Permanent Collection. Being a successful painter in New York City seemed just that easy. His face was featured in an *Esquire Magazine* article, "In Their Twenties," with others his age: the actor, Brad Dillman; a young designer, Givenchy; and the Duke of Kent. The caption reads: "Mueller's semiabstract paintings bring him fat prizes" (Lerman-*Esquire Magazine*).

Mueller's mentor, John Ferren, had ties to both New York and California and was spending more time on the west coast; he would eventually collaborate with Alfred Hitchcock there, but early in his career, Ferren had built himself a painting culture the true way Bohemians do:

> through listening with a sharp ear to the animated conversations in the cafes of Montparnasse and the Latin Quarter; through dropping in to paint and sketch at the open academies, and through seeking out the artists whose work intrigued him. (Cooper. Online)

He was an advocate of learning as much as possible from ateliers and professional painters but felt that large institutions and formal academies were a trap. Still, in 1950,

when Mueller left Cooper Union following Ferren's advice and began to "live like an artist," he had no idea that success would come so quickly.

Most of Mueller's time was spent painting. He shared studio space with other young bohemian painters and a flock of chickens in a downtown loft while frequenting clubs, drinking up quantities of alcohol and jazz, and reading the latest philosophers and critics. He continued to freelance part-time for the ad agency and fell in love with the boss's daughter, Rivoli Roth. Rivoli, also working part-time for the family business, and her brother Frank were the only children of the agency's owner. Although she was not particularly interested in painting, her younger brother Frank was an aspiring painter swept up in the new wave of Abstract Expressionists. He and Mueller became and remained lifelong friends, while Mueller's relationship with Rivoli did not survive, their marriage lasting only a year or so. He claims not to remember her very well, other than that they seldom agreed about anything. Art seemed to be his only real consideration at that time, and he was working hard to develop his painting skills; it was a very prolific time. His personal life was filled with friends, discussion, pranks, and drinking, while his early painting reflects an eerie quiet, an inward focus, a longing to create boundaries out of chaos.

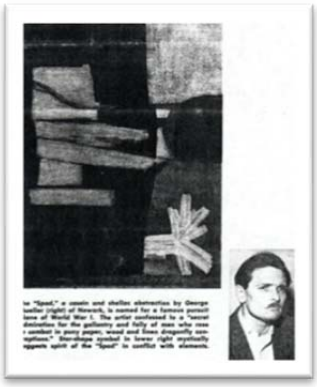


Fig.9.Newsclipping of Mueller with his painting: *Spad, 1955.*

By 1955, at the age of 24, his work was showing at the Guggenheim Museum. The paintings were large, bundled forms alternating with open spaces, taking up the entire surface of the canvas. *Spad* (a title pertaining to a WWII fighter plane) and *Noumena I* and *II* and the series that followed were stunning canvases: quiet, dark and

elegant, distinctly his own but influenced by Motherwell and the Modernists. After meeting the art dealer Grace Borgenicht of Borgenicht Gallery during the opening of his first Guggenheim show, he signed a contract with her in 1955. He was given two one-man shows by Borgenicht and the work sold out. Yet, the stormy but lucrative association lasted for only five years, despite the success of Mueller's paintings.

The chief complaint from Mueller was that Borgenicht pressured him *not* to change his work in any way. The Guggenheim had given him a fellowship for a substantial amount of money in 1956, affording him the opportunity to slow down, concentrate on painting, and explore his gifts; this led to a change in his work with which Grace Borgenicht took issue. His life was changing rapidly as he found himself absorbed in painting, seeing, and thinking, all of which was reflected in his new imagery. An association with Borgenicht that had always been difficult became impossible as he moved to a completely different palette and frame of reference. The new compositions were no less abstract, but painted in expressionistic, loose, large brush strokes of greens and blues, so different from the somber Noumena series.

An excited Grace Borgenicht phoned Mueller, telling him that the renowned painter Joseph Albers had just been in the gallery to see Mueller's work; he wanted Mueller to call him because he wanted Mueller to teach for him at Yale University. Even before the war, Albers was famous for his association with the legendary Bauhaus movement in Europe before coming to America. Once here, he took charge of the art department at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. He was generally, as Robert Hughes said, "held in awe as a theorist and disciplinarian…the old maestro of the painted square" (Hughes 516). Mueller was not interested. He paid no attention to the offer. He

later said, “Well, it’s been my experience that people are always either soft-soaping you or ignoring you…It’s better not to get sidetracked from painting. I suppose, I should have called him, at least to explain that I just don’t have the personality for that sort of thing” (Mueller Interview # 3). It was also precisely the sort of “bad behavior” that infuriated Grace Borgenicht. By 1959, his relationship with her was over, even though his last show in her gallery was in 1960. On one occasion, it took him less than an hour to pull all of his newer canvases out of Borgenicht’s space at 1018 Madison Avenue, tie them to the top of his car and drive away, never speaking with her again.

Borgenicht’s concerns about the profitability of Mueller’s latest paintings proved unfounded, for there were already signs from “the market” that the newer series would be as successful as the first. Mueller showed at the Whitney, his work featured in 1956, 1957, and 1958, and both styles were disseminated by dealers from New York into smaller markets throughout the United States and Europe. His face appeared in *Esquire Magazine,* and the reviews from critics were very positive. Smaller museums and institutions were also interested in him. In 1957 The Dallas Museum granted him a fellowship and collected several pieces for their permanent collection. In 1957 the Carnegie Institute and in 1959 the Detroit Institute of Arts were also supportive. His work began to infiltrate the European markets as well, being shown in the Venice Biennale in 1958, and in Rome at the New York Art Foundation there. A large canvas even found its way into the Brussels World’s Fair of 1959.

Between the years 1955 and 1959, George Mueller’s “coming of age” seemed a storybook affair. His “career” was clearly one thing (a thing he claims not to have been very aware of at the time), and his paintings, the act of working, the discipline, his reach

for inner clarity was actively carried forward each day into the studio, clearly cultivated by him alone. He was most concerned with the integrity of his canvases and finding a solid platform from which to explore his ideas. He approached music, philosophy, art, and literature to inform his own aesthetic and cared little whether an audience was prepared to follow him in his pursuits. He was very young in 1955, but unlike Pollock, he was mature enough to understand that his veracity had to underscore the work; to follow popular trends would be his personal ruination. At the time, he cared little for selling his work or building an audience. He had studied “theory,” and while the favorite philosopher of the day via Greenberg was Immanuel Kant, by 1960 Mueller had begun to settle into his life’s work, on his own terms. His sense of order, discipline, and purpose constituted his daily working schedule and remained so for the next sixty some odd years.

Chapter 5

"Reformed Experience"

The Early Paintings:
Dewey's Lens Applied to Noumena and Vivisection Series

> "Art is the living and concrete proof that man is capable of restoring consciously, the union of sense, need, impulse and action characteristic of the live creature."(*John Dewey 25)*

Mueller's first series of paintings (I refer to them as the Noumena Paintings) that so quickly sold from the Borgenicht Gallery were influenced by Robert Motherwell, William Baziotes, Franz Kline and the ideas of Immanuel Kant. "Noumena" is derived from Kantianism, meaning a thing in itself, a structure beyond all possible experience. Kant wrote that noumena are: "things we can only think" (xxxviii). Phenomena are facts or observable occurrences while noumena are their opposites.

Mueller remembers applying these philosophical concepts to his imagery:

> Kant was in the air in those days. I was reading a lot of philosophy, Berkley, Wittgenstein…and I had been reading Kant, his distinctions between phenomena and noumena, a shadow version of phenomenon. You know, when you flirt with ideas that don't really correspond to what you're doing but you *almost* think they do. Kant had written about the thing in itself that you never see. We only see our version of things

> because that's the way we're put together. But there is a real thing behind each thing…the Noumena paintings implied that these were real things that you could now see, even though they are not recognizable things. (Mueller Interview #3)

The canvases were relatively large (larger than easel paintings); most were 5'x 6' or 4'x 5', and they appear to be "of" something but the objects are not recognizable as specific things. Many consist of a central large, dark, velvety shape, with touches of glowing red, surrounded by lacquered gold, suggesting precious materials. In some of the paintings the solidly constructed, sooty black objects appear as ovens or safes in the center of the composition, immovable, while other areas seem void and sink back into space. The canvases themselves are sturdily built onto squarish, heavy-duty stretchers; the physical canvas appears as a solid block.

Fig.10. *Noumena II*, 1950s, Oil on canvas. Philip Johnson Collection, New York.

The varnished surface invites us to explore the softer areas underneath but also obstructs our view. The outside is glassy, and softer objects seem just there, looming and large under the icy surface, which invites our touch but discourages entrance. It's as though we are looking through a shop window into a warm but possibly mysterious or even dangerous place. The glazes and subtle changes of color pick up and reflect surrounding light, diverting our attention. The canvas seems alive; it moves and changes even while we are watching it, like a screen with life going on beneath the exterior. The forms inside are never human. The areas surrounding the principle forms are solid and compressed, like crushed gold. Lines and crevices are squeezed into tight hermetic areas

suggesting warmth but not necessarily friendliness. The interior is rich but closed off, hypnotic and severe. The complexity and quality of the materials are reminiscent of reliquary boxes without saintly reference, but of something special. As Katherine Kuh wrote, “Mueller’s paintings have one thing in common--the problem of coping with the unbounded turbulence of their surroundings” (Kuh 9). However, this work also possessed a polish that could be misunderstood as the stuff of decorators and interior designers. One might imagine them someday, like a Rothko, in an executive’s office, a trophy, looking impressive but uncertain above an expensive Italian leather couch: not at all what was intended by the artist. But for the twenty-one year old Mueller, drinking and smoking his way through jazz clubs in New York City in the 1950s, to have painted such grave and humorless work must give us pause. This work might well be the work of an older monk living in isolation: still and soundless. It is reminiscent of Kant, of thinking perhaps more than living, and it does not suit Mueller for very long. “Artists have for their subject matter the qualities of things of direct experience, but the ‘intellectual’ inquirers deal with these qualities at one remove, through the medium of symbols that stand for qualities but are not significant in their immediate presence” (Dewey 73).

The *Noumena Series* is as weighty as any painted by the older painters, Rothko or Motherwell, and they are similar in that they reference European Modernism. Motherwell’s career had taken off well before Mueller began to exhibit, but the younger painter was quick to adjust to new directions. Motherwell had been influenced by the Surrealists, particularly by Picasso and Matta, the latter serving as his mentor in the 1940s. Gaugh comments:

> In 1948 Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko founded a new school they called *The Subjects of the Artist*: the name reflected their belief that the future of modern art lay neither in traditional figuration nor in pure abstraction but in a new kind of abstract symbolism that could communicate the passion and profundity of human experience. (160)

Although contemporary critics continued to write of Motherwell with the utmost respect, pulling away from *pure* abstraction severed his complicity with Clement Greenberg's ideas about where the new painting should go. John O'Brian wrote about Greenberg, "His spontaneous predilections were above all for an avant-garde art that was ordered, cool, and detached" (Greenberg vol 3. xxiii). Although Greenberg wrote many complimentary essays about Motherwell's contributions to Abstract Expressionism, he also wrote: "Motherwell has…painted some of the feeblest pictures done by a leading abstract expressionist, and an accumulation of these over time has obscured his real worth" (Greenberg 224). He was unforgiving of Motherwell's interest in combining abstraction and figuration, being so completely caught up in the Kantian philosophy supporting abstraction. John Dewey, on the other hand, always critical of the underlying metaphysics being applied to the arts, wrote more forgivingly, "We live in the same world. There are impulsions and needs that are common to all humanity. The universal is not something metaphysically anterior to all experience but is a way in which things function *in* experience as a bond of union among particular events and scenes" (286).

Mueller began his career with his Noumena Series, which initially aligned him with Kantian aesthetics. He was also aware of Motherwell's "abstract symbolism." Mueller's direction began to change in 1956, when he adapted large diamond shaped

canvases, forceful brushstrokes, and vibrant color, echoing yet another new style: action painting. By the mid-fifties his work resembled Willem de Kooning's without referencing figures. Unlike Jackson Pollock, Mueller's work did not end with the accidental; rather he worked to adjust abstract form and color, one to another. Like Franz Kline, initial gestures were isolated and re-worked. He opened space, rather than crowding the surface with "all over" drips and, more importantly, he remained conscious of the aesthetic, the aesthetic and the abstract meanings of forms being of equal value to him, like Motherwell.

At the time, Greenberg's writing encouraged "action painting," the intuitive, subliminal outpourings of the subconscious, even though he did not coin the phrase. In fact, he vehemently criticized Harold Rosenberg's doing so. Rosenberg had written about Jackson Pollock long before Greenberg took Pollock up as a cause célèbre. His anger at Rosenberg for coining the phrase "Action Painting," which became so popular with the press, also became a familiar Greenberg "sour grapes" diatribe (v 4. 136). He wrote about "pure art," a Kantian ideal, an art without reference to experience and especially one that "divested itself of everything it might share with sculpture; its literal two–dimensionality being the guarantee of paintings' independence as an art" (Greenberg 88). He meant that painting should emphasize two-dimensional, non-representational, non-Renaissance-perspective, which he preferred to call "Painterly Abstraction" rather than "Action Painting." He deliberately used his own alternative phrase, though it did not catch on as "Action Painting" had (178).

Whatever it was called by the critics, it was a style imitated widely in those days by artists exploring the possibilities opened by Pollock and De Kooning. Yet, no sooner

had DeKooning discovered that neighborhood than he moved away from it, from "pure art" to embark on his "Woman" series, clearly making reference to the human form and life "experience." Many critics, including Greenberg, felt this departure from pure art to be a mistake.

> Greenberg is said to have told de Kooning that at this point in history *(meaning in 1950)* you couldn't paint a human face. 'Sure,' said the artist, 'and you can't not paint one either'—meaning, by this laconic koan, that no matter how abstract your paintings get, people will always read images into it, like seeing faces in the fire. So why not come right out with the figure? (Hughes 477)

Mueller was in touch with the "action" that Hughes describes as "man creating his identity from moment to moment in the act of painting, staking everything on the risky outcome of a series of unmediated gestures. A picture being not a picture but an act" (481). Mueller too, was aware that behind this "act" was the truth of DeKooning's observation. For even though this form of creative "action" is supposed to *not* represent a person, place, or thing, the fact remains that the two dimensional picture is a tangible result, a thing, later to be given a name and a price, to live on after the particular identity crisis of the painter has died away. Greenberg also noted this much:"The covered canvas is not left over as the unmeaning aftermath of an 'event' belonging to the same reality that breathing and thumbprints do…but not works of art"(Greenberg 136). DeKooning made a very valid and obvious point in maintaining that experience, place, and people are in nearly *every work of art on some level*. In Mueller's case, titles such as *Vivisection* and *Pleasant Street* clearly suggest places and memories that require explanation by the artist

or conjecture by the viewer, pulling imagery, even abstract imagery, out of the metaphysical realm and back to earth.

Mueller's early success with the Noumena Series reflects an awareness of the theories and over-intellectualization seeping into the arts at that time, but by the mid-1950s he had begun to rely on personal experience. If we listen to Kant, whose message is that the object cannot be aesthetic, we pass the responsibility of interpretation onto the critic or the philosopher to explain the painting; however, Dewey understands that the object cannot be separated from the artist's experience and further, that the viewer, seeing the painting, cannot be separated from either the artist or his/her own inner nature. Looking at art becomes an equal exchange that cannot be separated from experience or life. Dewey writes: "conceit looks through the wrong end of the telescope and minimizes the significance possessed by objects"(104). He emphasizes the importance of recognizing objects defined by lines and shape as entities consisting of relationships to each other in the composition and to the artist in memory. Images, then, "are deeply embedded…they are the resonances of a multitude of experiences in which our concern with objects… are…subconsciously charged with all the values that result from what they have done in our experience in our every contact with the world about us" (101). Mueller makes a break with dry philosophical concepts in his next series of paintings, and Kant and his attendant Greenberg appear to be asked by Mueller to: "sit down." As Richard Rorty correctly proposed, it would be well if "philosophers would engage in edifying conversations with those in disciplines that know what they are doing" (Danto 141).

The Vivisection Paintings:

While the Noumena Series suggested quiet interiors and warm shapes existing beyond what we may know, the Vivisection paintings are open and spacious and angry, even violent. They suggest plein-air paintings and are meant to remind us of spaces with which we are familiar. They are the *opposite* of the cramped hot places Mueller had previously visited, and they exude a great deal of energy rather than meditative calm. In some, small blue and white patches peeking from behind mountainous forms suggest a frenetic landscape. At this time Mueller was pulling away from theory while still experimenting with new ways of composing. I refer to this series of paintings as "the Vivisection Series" because one of the first canvases done in this style was given that title, which means: cutting into a living body. However, the title in no way references the human form directly. The "cutting" refers to the way in which paint is violently applied to the support.

Fig.11.*Vivsection.*1950s. Oil on canvas.

For the first and only time, Mueller wasn't drawing or planning prior to the act. The series is "unconscious" in that sense, but in no way so spontaneous as to be put down and left alone; rather each canvas was later worked and reworked after the initial forms and colors were aesthetically balanced with his abstract content. He forged careful relationships between color and form and developed a dialogue between elements that may have been initially haphazard but that he brought into existence. Dewey writes of the necessity to temper spontaneity with observation and work: "Otherwise the art is more like one of frenzy in which the sense of orderly production is subjective and

hallucinatory…Creating art implies a transformation of original raw materials. 'Spontaneity' is the result of long periods of activity, or else it is so empty as not to be an act of expression" (Dewey 72).

Lines emerge from chaos and forms gain strength. Indeed his process begins to look as if a lens is being adjusted and focused. The supports themselves are experimental: the diamond shape, the larger sizes. The black diamond borders suggest a pinhole camera focusing our attention on a convulsive landscape in the distance. We are looking out of a window into foreground, background, suggesting that we are in one place but moving into another. These canvases are the complete antithesis of the Noumena series, "the thing you never see," as we were then in a hermetic, spiritual space, yet one that we could never quite enter due to the impenetrably hard, protective shell; it was beautiful to look at but not to touch. By contrast, the Vivisection paintings take us to a stadium's tunnel; we are invited to walk though and out into the open, and there's nothing prohibiting us now from getting to that wild landscape as it stretches before us. False starts and stops into spaces suggest we will be taken in one direction but are turned back by overlapping, scarred paint that has been reworked, that is hesitant, that cannot reassure us in our direction. If we enter this landscape, our path is uncertain, and we stumble with the painter.

His palette has become chilly, with blues and only an occasional warm accent. Uncertain spaces are held together by a few insistent lines which over time become more and more confident until, years later, as we shall see, the forms are completely strong and self-possessed, poised and solid. After the first few canvases in this series he begins to quickly take control of space. Straight lines, not yet masked, but strong, hold back fizzing

blotches of white in sections from coming forward. They are not real spaces in any sense, but they invite us to traverse this place with the artist, even though it appears a little cold and deceptive.

Mueller's Noumena Series explored space created by the Modernists, specifically the Cubists as they rejected the Renaissance use of linear perspective. Cubists prevented the viewer from entering the picture plane and walking around. The Vivisection paintings make use of conventional Renaissance space while using contemporary colors and brushstrokes. Even though the *Newark Sunday News* reported, " Mueller's moody and evocative abstract paintings at the Borgenicht Gallery were greeted with immediate critical acclaim" (Lenson "The Realm of Art"), little wonder that Grace Borgenicht questioned his new work as these canvases were so dissimilar from his first. Mueller was joined in his ambivalence by many other contemporary painters at the time.

Leaving New York

Mueller describes the attraction between himself and his second wife, Juliana, in 1959 as "immediate and all-consuming." He doesn't remember at whose house he was introduced to her, but they were both married to others and both knew instantly that they were going to be together. Juliana (Jo) Mickel was the daughter of Russian immigrants from East Orange, New Jersey. She was a stunning beauty *(friends claimed she resembled the actress, Sophia Loren).* When she met George she was studying painting at Hunter College with Robert Motherwell. She was not so much interested in being a professional painter herself; she wanted to work with children. She was already a part of

Mueller's circle of friends and, unlike his relationship with his first wife, his link to "Jo" was solid and real from its inception. As quickly as possible, they obtained divorces from respective spouses and moved in together. When Mueller accepted a teaching position for a summer at Oklahoma University, Juliana traveled with him, and they married at the end of that summer in Oklahoma City, opening up another and important chapter in his life and work. Returning from Oklahoma, his life had changed: he was deeply in love, seriously married; he had broken ties with Borgenicht Gallery, and his painting was changing yet again. He and Juliana moved to East Orange, to a rambling house with a wide front porch, nostalgic for the nineteenth century. It was dwarfed by commonplace red brick apartment complexes. The homey image of a roomy house juxtaposed with the threatening outer modernity would prove to be the creative fodder for his next series of paintings. The American "porch" would return to Mueller's vocabulary repeatedly throughout his life.

He called one of the last Vivisection-style paintings *To Pleasant Street,* and it is the only one from this period in which he uses a warm palette. He describes the painting as "sad, strange." In East Orange, Juliana taught third grade when one of her young students died suddenly. The child had lived on Pleasant Street and George was struck by the loss to Juliana, certainly, but also understood the grief of the child's parents and the importance of children generally within their small community. Though they had no children of their own, it was being discussed. Juliana came from a large family, but George had not had contact with

Fig. 12. *Pleasant Street,*1950s. Oil on canvas.

small children other than Juliana's students. His mentor John Ferren had recently suffered the loss of his own five year old daughter--she had fallen out of an apartment window in Manhattan--and George was shaken by Ferren's grief and complete loss of direction during that time. The days of Mueller's teen-aged loft-living, and with it the over-intellectualized practice of art theory, seemed far away at this stage in his adult life. As Dewey writes, "Expression is the clarification of turbid emotion…as we know that, emotion is transfigured. Emotion that is distinctively esthetic then occurs. It is not a form of sentiment that exists independently" (77). In *To Pleasant Street*, the space returns to what the Modernists called "all-over" painting, meaning that the primary shapes are right up front; there is no way into the composition in the conventional sense. The form of this painting is more like the Noumena Series, but the palette is essentially warm red with cold blues and encroaching white. Solid disturbing shapes crowd in front; they appear to be in motion, but we cannot make out what they are. Black in the upper right hand corner suggests a deep space behind the action, and the areas of white and warm red appear out of focus, like a camera that is being jarred. We are unable to focus on anything clearly, seeing pieces of memory that are not cohesive. This is the last "all-over" painting that Muller would do, moving on to other styles that became his own: the micro-tonal paintings and his "porch" series, both reflecting his new environment and his new artistic maturity.

When asked to reflect upon his abrupt change of style, though the Noumena paintings were so profitable, Mueller will tell you that he "can't remember." He only recalls that he just "felt like doing something else" and that he couldn't continue to do what he had been doing only the week before. Some shift, maturity, understanding had taken place. Although the Noumena paintings were handsome, restrained and decorative,

they were also steeped in an unreality, in philosophy and theory rather than daily life. Dewey writes: “Science states meanings; art expresses them…*expression is distinct from statement*” (84). Dewey felt it essential to continually differentiate between theory and experience. Expression of experience is also deeper and more familiar; it can be the extension of scientific “statement” but not a satisfactory replacement. Mueller’s Vivisection paintings were the first of his to reflect unaffected real life, the daily encounters, and they are reflections of “matter that has been vitally taken up into a present experience” (70).

Mueller was coming to understand art as a catalyst that might synthesize experience, simultaneously creating new directions in thinking and empowering him to forge a unique path in his own life and work. Dewey correctly observed that art is a result of experience, but artists themselves know that it is also a rehearsal for knowledge and for future practice, opening directions and possibilities that can *generate* life. In a 1903 lecture by the philosophical genius Charles Sanders Peirce, Peirce specified “three normative disciplines--logic, ethics, and aesthetics (what is right in thought, in action, and in feeling, respectively)--of which aesthetics was the most fundamental. Peirce believed that logic is founded on ethics…and surprisingly ethics rests in the same manner on *aesthetics*” (Danto 152). In other words, “feeling/experience” anticipates theory, not the other way round; creating from theory rings false. Using real life to build a solid bridge to art enabled Mueller to progress through layers of personal and human experience towards a consciousness fertile with fresh and relatable artistic intentions that sprang from himself rather than any one philosopher. He developed into an honest, shrewd, sensitive and courageous painter. In the end it is the true artist who has the courage to take action

against the forces of fashion, nature, will, wrong, age, as true poets/artists have always been willing to do; to put their own lives in their art and on the line. Isn't that what good art is supposed to do, after all? In return, the viewer sees through the artist, and if one really sees, one can really feel: experience, expression, integration, and feeling, a self-perpetuating cycle of renewal and actualization through the arts. Writers have, through the ages, espoused the analogy of art and truth, choosing the right path, ennobling the world. That can only occur when the artist is acting as a spinner, weaving his/her own experiences into objects that in their turn pull the experiences of others back into the matrix. The Vivisection paintings became popular as well, but that didn't stop Mueller from abandoning them and exploring other imagery. If he had listened only to critics in his early career, he might have developed a solid name but his art would have drowned in stagnant waters.

Without being overly concerned with art critics or theory in the 1950s and 60s, Mueller moved, in these early paintings, from Kant's theory and an analytic, scientific view of the visual arts into what John Dewey would have called: "re-formed life experience." His work went from being beautiful, careful, remote to true, unaffected, existent. Dewey would also have agreed with Mueller in that "communicability has nothing to do with popularity…Artists are animated by a deep conviction that since they can only say what they have to say, the trouble is not with their work but those who, having eyes, see not " (104).

Chapter 6

"Slowing Down"

-Life on Summit Street and the Microtonal Paintings

When Mueller left Cooper Union in 1949, his work was intelligent, skillful, and successful. He moved from the pure art of analytical philosophy to an expressive painterly style. He also remained within the genre of Abstract Expressionism, popular throughout the 1950s. As Danto noted, "1956 was the high watermark of Abstract Expressionism. But everything changed in the next decade, when, in Pop Art, Minimalism, and Conceptual Art, works of art appeared which were unlike anything seen before" (34). Mueller shifted aesthetics easily, sometimes painting in two styles during the same year. The early paintings were impressive, but he had an ability to pick up new artistic languages and apply them at will, a blessing or perhaps a curse, depending on the personality of the artist. In his twenties he was undoubtedly a player, "sitting at the table," invited by the critics, and with a very good hand, at that. But he quickly dropped away from the game, losing his appetite, if indeed he ever had one, for recognition. He developed instead a focus for working itself, allowing the work to dictate his direction.

Encouraged by an inner voice, his memories, and his own unique sense of organization, he worked independently of critics or dealers, considering himself "self-employed." While the center of the art world shifted from Jackson Pollock to Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, Mueller followed a private aesthetic that eventually led him away from popular culture. At Summit Street in East Orange, he began to paint a

standard American motif: his front porch. His work was steeped in the daily life experiences of friends and family surrounding him, as if to demonstrate Dewey's strong emphasis on the significance of environment. He writes, "An individual's desires take shape under the influence of the human environment. The materials of his thought and belief come to him from others with whom he lives" (270). Muller said,

> If you're a painter you're working for yourself. You're self-employed; you're responsible for what you do. I never cared what was going on in the art world, about what so and so wrote about which painter, I only cared about what was going on in my own head and what pleased me. I wasn't afraid to switch to realistic painting and I always admired realistic painting, like I love and admire *abstract* painting. What's the difference, really? That sort of distinction appeals to critics but not to painters. I think it was Charles Ives who said that if a man likes the ocean and mountains; can't he live somewhere where he can see both? Eventually painting the porch realistically began to bore me so I played with the same motif in other ways until the verticals became horizontal stripes and I was painting those "microtonal" paintings and I had worked my way back to abstraction again. (Mueller Interview #4)

Being fluent in both abstraction and realism meant that he could move easily from one to the other and back again, picking up whichever phrase or imagery inspired him. He has continued to do so throughout his career, unrestrained by expectations of dealers or by trends in the art market. Although it's seldom used by critics in today's climate of

Conceptual Art, *where anything can be Art*, the word "inconsistency" had a vicious ring in those days, a disparaging word used to describe younger artists who hadn't fully "found themselves." What that really meant was that art dealers found it easier to sell predictable work. After all, a Van Gogh should look like a Van Gogh and not a Braque, but, it is a ridiculous label for the artist. How does one find a "self" ultimately? What does it look like? How would one know? Does one stumble over it on the floor? To expect a painter to arrive at some "end" is not a reasonable expectation. Being multi-lingual in imagery and comfortable with transition should be a desirable advantage for any artist of any age.

Fig.13. Waddell Gallery with Mueller's paintings 1960.

In 1960 George Mueller and his second wife Juliana moved into a roomy house with a wide porch surrounded by dull city brick apartment buildings at #9 Summit Street in East Orange, New Jersey, a suburb of Mueller's childhood in Newark. He recalls,

> I was also painting the Vivisection paintings but I naturally began to drift into something else. We had rented this house with big rooms, nothing much in them because we couldn't afford nice things. The house was probably built before World War I, the workmanship was beautiful, curved leaded glass in wide windows with window seats looking out onto a porch, a huge marble fireplace. The marble was a soft sort of orange

color that went up to the ceiling and the living room was sunken, I could sit on the floor of the living room and look out onto the floor of this wide porch. On every side were parking lots and square brick red apartment buildings. So there was nothing really made up about those paintings. They began as realistic portrayals of what I actually saw every day: a kind of understanding of the way people had lived compared with the stark and ugly way people were living. There was one tree. (Mueller Interview #4)

Fig.14. *Summit Street*, 1960s Acrylic on canvas. Collection of H. Wachtel

He began to experiment with these familiar architectural shapes of everyday life. He picked up the sharp vertical lines and deep shadows on his porch, created fewer and fewer of the large painterly canvases of the Vivisection paintings that artists in New York and, by then, California were making popular, and instead used the tight edged, visual patterns of nineteenth-century houses familiar from his childhood. He drew and then painted the nostalgic sunny American porch with its encroaching urban decay in photorealistic accuracy and, like everything Mueller turned his attention to, he found a way to do it with originality and intelligence. He began with accurate renderings and developed them into abstract compositions by repeating patterns and doubling forms, adding forms or extreme bright colors. In February 1964 he had a one-man show of these "Summit Street-Porch Paintings" at Grippi Gallery. The paintings were extremely large, some the size of

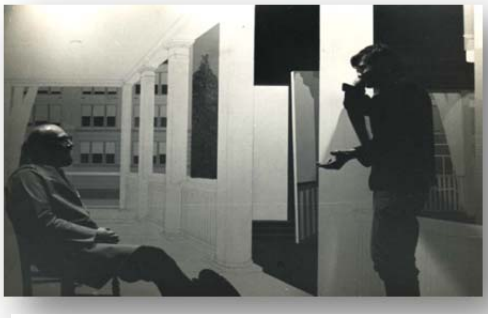


Fig.15. Mueller (r) and friend (l) in front of unfinished *Summit Street* painting. 1960s.

an actual porch. These architectural renderings in scale took on the quality of a stage set, as can be seen in a photo taken of Mueller standing in front of a painting in progress with his friend seated. Donald Judd reviewed the show for *Arts Magazine,* writing:

> A drawing of the length of a porch is the basis of most of these paintings. The pillars run along the left, the front windows are along the right and the balustrade, a tree trunk and the windows and wall of an adjacent house are at the end, the center of the picture---the view is fairly symmetrical. The main portion, the end of the porch, is square with the picture plane. Mueller paints this view several ways. He simplifies it so as to retain a minimal naturalism. Most are simplified to geometric patterns, except for the tree. In some, the left side has been cut off and the strip of the house front has been placed in the center and this has been repeated in reverse on the right. Some of the paintings use only the strip of the house front and are mostly vertical bands. The paintings are large and the patterned ones are brightly colored. All of them are very well done." (126)

Fig. 16. Drawing. *Summit Street*. 1960s

Judd seems somewhat cautious in his first review of Mueller, admitting that the paintings are "well done" but giving the impression that these paintings could be a tad too traditional for Judd's taste. A celebrated minimalist, his own sculpture was considered radical. They were brushed aluminum and stainless steel boxes, and he was applauded by Clement Greenberg for ridding his work of any human qualities. Likewise he was an advocate of Greenberg. Judd wrote that DeKooning was "trivial" and Hans Hoffman was "puzzling"

(120), so any positive feedback given to modernist or realistic imagery would have been rare. Judd usually wrote negative reviews, admitting that he disliked having to earn money in this way: “I wrote criticism as a mercenary and would never have written it otherwise” (vii). Mueller, then, fared comparatively well, considering Judd’s usual bitter reviewing style. In fact, a year later Judd was even more positive toward Mueller, who had taken the porches further into abstraction, a “good thing” according to Judd. “The paintings in this show are based on the same subject but have become more abstract” (162).

Fig. 17. *Summit Street* 1960s, Acrylic.Whitney Museum of Am. Art, New York.

Judd claimed his criteria relied on Roger Frye’s “Formalism,” and his critiques usually began with a formal leaden description followed by a final dismissive blow. He seldom bothered to tease out content based on the formal description as Frye would have done. Often his reviews read as if he had been late for another appointment. Still, Judd applauded Mueller’s geometric patterns, even though he fails to spend much time with them. Both Greenberg and Judd were fixed on the cause of abstraction and its importance to all modern works of art. In so doing, they often ignored content as coming too close to unnecessary sentiment.

For Mueller, the porch series did suggest sentiment. It was connected to his childhood memories, to an “older, quieter time.” He said,

> The architecture represented the same kind of mood that Ives’ music represented for me…American, reflective, regretful, in a way…homesick against this unrelenting machine outside. I identified with people like Ives, who worked for an insurance company and Wallace Stevens, also

> insurance or William Carlos Williams*, a doctor, but they were working people who were in the world dealing with the machinery every day. And I was too in those days. (Mueller Interview #4)

Mueller and his new wife both worked, even though he was still represented by a series of galleries. They taught and, to supplement their income, Mueller often worked in construction, painting houses, designing sound systems, modifying sound equipment for audio dealers. He recalled, “I spent 30 years as a laborer in addition to being an “artist” with “colleagues” who had no idea what I really did for a living or who I was, much of the time” (Mueller Interview #4). He continued to paint regardless of the long hours spent earning money.

Fig.18. Summit Street Series.1960s. acrylic on canvas. Collection of Dr. M. Gruber.

Mueller’s use of light in the Summit Street paintings is sometimes natural but often harsh and incisive, intrusive, forceful. It defines the architectural spaces with the accuracy of a camera but originates from outside--pushing in towards the house. The source of light is never man-made, such as from the warm glow of a lamp within, but rather the kind of extreme brightness of dusk or dawn that forces itself into a home. It is reminiscent of Edward Hopper’s use of light/dark extremes, without Hopper’s usual cast of characters. In fact, with one or two exceptions, there are never any human beings

* Mueller had met and become friendly with William Carlos Williams while living on Summit Street , near where Williams had his medical practice. He frequently visited with Williams to talk about painting and literature.

in Mueller's paintings. As in the Chinese landscape, it is not the human that is important to him; it is the stage where acts have taken place or are about to take place that is of concern. The light defines the buildings and emphasizes the loneliness of empty domestic spaces. They are vacant, full scale stages, full of potential psychological drama. It is as if the light has replaced the human being with the light as the subject; humans are not needed.

Unlike the soft chiascuro values in Renaissance paintings, the sort proceeding slowly by controlled gradations illuminating an object, Mueller's light becomes a solid mass, cutting into the space, wiping everything clean. The architecture is spare and homey but with no signs of life. The house is deserted. These forms suggest nostalgia, peace, safety, serenity, summer vacations, warm winds, and clear sight. They are dreamlike. The shapes are rhythmic and stable, horizontals and verticals creating a consoling pattern. The only organic shapes appear as occasional trees or clouds. Beyond the safety of the porch lurks silence, sterility, and modernity, so it is on the porch we want to stay. Clearly, leaving could be dangerous or unpleasant. In 1967 Brian O'Doherty of the *New York Times* wrote:

Fig.19.*Summit Street with Musical Score*. 1960s. Collection of G. Davis.

> Whether a show is good or bad is one point. Whether it is interesting or not is another. They don't always correlate exactly. George Mueller is unusual in that he applies aggressive color not to pure abstraction but to a subject from real life—nothing more nor less than a porch, with verandas, windows, railings, trees—a motif he uses over and over again

> immaculately, like someone distilling and re-distilling an essence. Then having defined the scene (in black and white) he starts playing on it with color like a musician, a comparison he invites with titles like *'Four Random Variations in 15 tones'* and *'Anton Webern, Op5, No 3'.*
>
> The latter presumably refers to the third movement of *Webern's Five Pieces for String Quartet,* and Mr. Mueller's pictorial coding of it looks like a hip Mondrian. He then superimposes this schema over *his* theme, the old front porch, so that it looks like what *"Home on the Range"* in 12-tone would sound like (which is very exciting).
>
> In his purification of the porch, an old *Saturday Evening Post* cover cliché, and his turning of this commonplace motif to uncommon purposes, Mr. Mueller is unique. His show is one of the most exciting in town.
> (O'Doherty-Three Younger Artists)

In 1961 Mueller and Juliana moved away from Summit Street to a farm even further from urban culture. Mueller was represented by Grippi Gallery at that time, later known as Grippi-Waddell Gallery, eventually becoming Waddell Gallery. His association with both Joe Grippi and Dick Waddell was fruitful and very friendly and, for the first time in his professional career, he felt satisfied with the working relationship until Waddell's untimely death from choking, alone in his Manhattan apartment. George was deeply disturbed by this loss and did not seek new gallery representation for some time. Eventually he was approached by the Straley Gallery. That association did not last long, though he continued to show successfully in New Jersey, in both Madison and Summit. His work always came directly from his life, not from trends, fashion or suggestions by

others, and he was unconcerned about representation. "My work always sold…the porch paintings sold well. The Whitney has one, there is another one, the largest one (18 feet long) in the town hall in Trenton" (Mueller Interview #4).

When he, Juliana, and three cats moved to Drakestown Road in Northern New Jersey, he saw only dairy farms, rolling fields, mountains and very little else. He continued to paint "porch-paintings." The Vivisection paintings were also part of the repertoire, and he began small, very articulate, landscape drawings. Once again in a country environment, he was overwhelmed by the detail and beauty of nature and was unconcerned that realism was out of fashion in New York circles. He used drawing as a way to explore the natural world:

> I was just bowled over by the land when I first moved to Long Valley. I had this almost compulsive need to draw scenes, carefully, to record, to caress, and slow everything down. I was so awed by the land, and those drawings very nearly all sold and I made many, many of them. I would go out walking at night and wander around by myself until daybreak. When we rented a house on a farm on Schooley's Mountain, a huge farm, 350 acres, I would clear brush and create paths and hike for miles at all hours. I would wander around in the dark with a full moon, come home and draw. Most of the drawings, although from memory, were of real places. I think it established a sort of balance with abstract painting. (Mueller Interview #4)

He was dazzled by the elegant proportions of nature and began painstaking renditions of the areas surrounding his studio in Long Valley. Unlike his abstract paintings, his drawings reveal careful observation of natural landscapes using skillful tones to articulate ambiguous light/ dark, edge/space, and fixed/vague objects. These landscapes, like his paintings, rarely depict humans or animal life. Scenes are remote, quiet, poignant and often melancholy depictions of fields or dirt roads. Non-human forms such as houses, chairs or telephone poles often appear alone as reserved subjects, withholding information from the viewer. Time seems both obscured and sacred.

Fig.20. *Pencil Drawing*. 1960s

Most of these landscapes are unpretentious pencil renditions, some mixed with acrylic wash, but the technique is calculated and painstaking. Mueller applied stippled graphite, tapping a pencil lightly against the surface of un-giving cold pressed watercolor paper, meticulously building up small dots which create fine detail and an elegant surface. His self-imposed rules prescribed *no erasure of any kind* and no use of photographs. This means that the marks he put down would need to be very carefully planned in advance to relate to the entire composition. He usually began a drawing in one corner and continued across the page. Erasing, he felt, would destroy the surface of the paper. The drawings are not done from photographs but from memory.

Unlike a true photorealist, he does not overkill his viewers with superficial details; rather, his depictions are represented as abstract, contemplative statements. In a

Fig. 21.*Pencil Drawing,* 1960s
Collection of Keith Jarrett

sense, he is a landscape calligrapher; one can either read his compositions or simply see them.

Mueller's working technique of contemplating nature, returning to his studio, and retrieving the snow drift, the meadow, a darkened highway leaves room for fantasy and imagination to envelop compositions that might otherwise become pure exercises in photorealism. These drawings are moving because they are not literal tree-by tree translations of a familiar forest, nor are they snap shots of someone's backyard; they are inventions of the artist's memory, of his past fused with his present. They are reminders of the transience of our nature, our human connections, and ephemeral stability; human and material. Michael Lenson of the *Newark Sunday News* wrote:

> [Mueller's drawings indicate] a more buoyant approach to life and nature and (the drawings) are not to be confused with academic reproduction. Mood still predominates, but line, mass, tone and color appear in subtle and more graphic ways than his paintings…The fluid color harmonies extracted from Japanese oil pastels and nature are nothing short of wonderful. Mueller's is a bold and imaginative return to drawing--line, tint, and tone--as a more direct way of sharing his own strange and inexhaustible fancies. (The Realm of Art. 1961)

People are not present in the drawings; the houses and gardens which will change into developments and shopping centers are, momentarily, extant as empty stage sets awaiting the next round of human activity. In this sense the drawings are quite like his Summit Street paintings.

Fig. 22. *Drawing*, ink and wash, 1960s.

To the casual observer Mueller's drawings could be representational scenes of the countryside or clever naturalistic depictions of backyards and orchards. A second look holds something more profound: an openness to sensation and premonition, a sensitive use of materials coming from a place of grace and humility. His vision grabs and holds the viewer to the work. His ability to memorialize without sentimentality, to document without resorting to prosaic illustration allows for concise and elegant composition. It is difficult to walk the line of the representational without stumbling into the bland, but Mueller manages to create work which strikes a profound and meaningful balance.

Reviewing Mueller's work in Madison, New Jersey, featuring his abstract paintings and the new drawings, Michael Lenson of the *Newark Sunday News* wrote:

> For years the Newark born artist has built a national reputation on the subtle and introspective depth of his abstractions that were exhibited at Guggenheim, Whitney and Carnegie and culminated in his being chosen one of 17 to represent America at the Brussels' World Fair. Winner of numerous other distinctions, and sought after by collectors, Mueller rode

the crest in enviable style…That he chooses at this precise point and in advance of the reversing trend (and at the price of losing his New York gallery) to re-examine and redirect his painting toward more communicative ends, bespeaks an integrity that is often overlooked. What exactly is he after? Judging by his show at Madison it is perhaps a search for a creative synthesis between realism and the freedom of abstraction---a dilemma confronting many leading artists today…Has Mueller achieved his purpose---is there a gain in communicating power as against the muted harmonies past? In any obvious sense, no. What does communicate is Mueller's restless talent propelling him along new paths to somewhere beyond and, at a wider orbit, back to himself again. With Mueller, as elsewhere, the creative life is more, far more, than a struggle for the market place." (The Realm of Art. 1969)

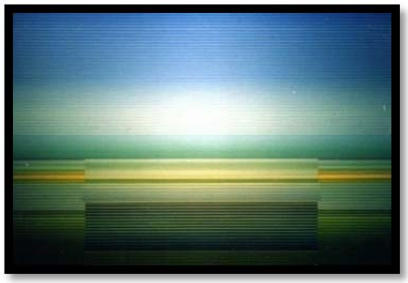


Fig. 23.Microtonal Painting. 1960s

Moving from Action Painting, the Vivisection series to the Porch paintings slowed his creative process considerably and deliberately. This slowing-down was something Mueller felt he needed in order to continue. His next aesthetic move proved to be perhaps his most beautiful and original. Describing Mueller's "stripe" paintings as Microtonal was something Mueller himself did with respect to this phase of his work, and it is obvious that these paintings are significant for him. Not only was the work itself demanding, but the form, the quality of each canvas, and his working techniques were completely his own.

While the early Noumena series could have been inspired by Modernism or the Vivisection series by Action Painters, the Microtonal canvases evolved from his own work, from the Summit Street Porch series. At first, after moving to Drakestown Road in the country, he continued to paint in the splashy Vivisection style while also drawing the landscape naturalistically. The porch motif was still part of his repertoire, but soon the porch paintings began to morph into abstract, geometric, hard-edged compositions. The vertical stripes of porch railings and the shadows they projected became solid colorful masses. At one point he turned the verticals into horizontal strips and from that point on, he began investigating the aesthetics of applying thinner and thinner bands of carefully mixed color laid down one next to another, much as Seurat did with tiny dots. The bands created an open, airy, consistency that gave areas on the canvas an ethereal quality. Certainly there were painters in the 1960s busy with hard edges and stripes (Kenneth Noland most notably), but no one was painting canvases that looked anything like Mueller's Microtonal series. The following piece appeared in *Artforum Magazine* in 1968:

> As it happens so often and unhappily in art, the man with the name gets the big spread in the art chronicles and an artist who has already done it better is not even mentioned. In the article on Kenneth Noland (November 1967) Jane Harrison Cone says 'Morris Louis and Noland are the only artists in memory who use vast stretches of canvas'. Well, last March at the Grippi-Waddell Gallery, George Mueller exhibited great pulsating paintings done with long bands of color, and he did them better than Noland. Mueller's paintings are *there* and as you look you find your emotions lifting without help until he lets you rest on a pinnacle of pure

> color chords that seem to sing among themselves. The anonymity of the execution of the one-eighth-inch bands sit next to one another in wonderful complication. Mueller's paintings move out of themselves onto the wall and each painting should have a room to itself...Noland's paintings need each other for help--Mueller's don't. (Gaff. Vast Stretches of Canvas. 1968)

Mueller jokes about how little of the past stays with him. Although he is full of stories to be told over a drink or two, he doesn't live at all in the past. He casually throws sixty years of press clippings, photos and reviews into plastic bags, never quite sure of their whereabouts, many lost forever. Nor is he overly concerned with which museum or person owns which of his paintings, but he does seem uncharacteristically aware of articles referring to this particular series of paintings. He still owns a few of the later microtonal paintings; he knows precisely how many he painted and when they were sold. Although Mueller is never reticent about his worth as a painter--he knows perfectly well how good he is--still there is something touchingly proprietary in the way he discusses his Microtonal series. In an interview he said:

Fig.24. Microtonal Painting 1960s

> I began those stripe paintings: *Cape Cod, Grand Canyon, the Photographist*… I had a definite goal; I had a sense of what they would look like. I didn't want areas to be harsh...And the objects: I wanted them to gleam, like objects you could meditate on. I felt that by placing (like notes) one small stripe next to another…like Seurat, that the paint would have life, it would glow, it would move on the canvas and I think I was

> right in doing that. I felt it was right. It was successful. I have never seen anyone do anything like those paintings before; I felt it was completely mine. They were "microtonal color," that was *mine*. (Mueller Interview #1)

Fig.25.*The Corner*, 1980s Collection of the Artist.

Indeed, these paintings were different: 1/8th inch bands of color set meticulously and carefully next to one another. They are unlike the black and white pulsating pop art of Bridgett Rileys, or the sharp primary colors of Ellsworth Kelly. Mueller's paintings appear to be in motion as the viewer stands before them, but they do more than amuse one's senses. They are not the type of painting one "gets," then moves on to the next novelty. They are full of Zen-like content, similar to the early Noumena paintings, in that the content is reaching for something behind the obvious. The canvases are mesmerizing and strangely full of *sound*. Of all the reviews and comments, there isn't a single reaction that doesn't mention this relationship to musical intonation.

After a hiatus in the country, Mueller's Microtonal paintings appeared again in New York in 1967. Michael Lenson of the *Newark Sunday News* saw the new work like this:

> George Mueller re-appears out of a two-year seclusion with a series of geometrically ordered canvases that are chromatically evocative and awesome in scale and execution. Mueller's hard-edged interpretations of "The Porch" now converges his immense resources on what appears to be the phenomena of the poetry of light. Devolving on thin bands of

> horizontally striated color that results (unlike Seurat), reaching beyond the bounds of visual perception. While the resultant harmonies may have nature as a source, Kandinsky-fashion Mueller concentrates on the only mood induced by the experience.
>
> Thus a horizontal sweep of color may speak of day descending into twilight, evoke a memory of "Long Valley" or pass musically from shimmering upper register to bass crescendo in the "Trio." The work is an incredible example of pure prismatic painting—or a self imposed prison. The heaven on earth that Mueller synthesizes becomes the more enchanting for the chromatic bars of that confinement. Regardless, with this show he takes another giant step towards a strangely personal horizon. (The Realm of Art.1967)

Lenson was perhaps the first in print, later Gaff of *Art Forum* the following year, to notice the musical association of the paintings. Mueller's titles often allude to musical pieces and it becomes evident, spending time with him, that music is central to his life. Lenson also mentions a "self imposed prison; "a fundamental element of Mueller's personality. Although the Microtonal series was very physically demanding and time consuming, he labored through each canvas excited by what he sensed would be the resulting masterpiece. To arrive at the image he wanted, he needed to invent his own methods of working on stretched canvas. In reference to both music and the difficult technical aspects, Mueller said:

Fig.26.*The Photographist*, 1970s. Collection of Dr. M. Gruber

> It was like breaking down an octave into more than eight notes. And you can't get color like that in any other way. The stripe paintings were torture but I could work on subtleties then. And each had to be carefully planned because those striped areas fight with each other and ruin the whole composition…they have to be resolved before putting the paint down...or the canvas is left too scarred. (Mueller Interview #1)

His "process" was completely different from the action painting he had been doing, and even though a great deal of drawing and planning went into his porch series, the labor was nothing compared to these microtonal works. Was Mueller deliberately creating difficulty for himself ? A "self-imposed prison?" He often discusses how unsure it feels being an artist in this culture. "Slowing the process down" was something he referred to in an early interview. One might even surmise that he was paying self-imposed dues for the recognition he had received, for the life he had, validating his existence as a professional painter. His initial plan seemed simple enough: mix paint and place bands of color next to one another but, as in most projects embarked upon by Mueller, the process itself becomes an ordeal that must be endured in order to be enjoyed. In doing so, he recognized a unique possibility which spoke directly to him and which today no one would attempt without the aid of a computer and printer.

By juxtaposing thousands of thin strips of pure vacillating color placed in horizontal bands on the canvas, always using nature as a point of departure, he transcended natural forms into a kind of handmade technology. Nature looks like stainless steel or chromium metal waving into dreamy atmosphere. If Seurat created light using his subtractive and additive "dots," Mueller created sound by using bands of

relative color constructing solid but breathable forms. The results are more onerous than Seurat's, a beauty that is both quiet and full of responsibility, because each little band of color, relative to the one next to it, must play its role in determining the larger areas which swell with a fine gravity. They are simultaneously weightless and burdensome, transparent and dense, uniform but diverse. Mueller said:

> You can move from one color to another in a painting...like going from blue to tan in a graded way…a gradient...that idea repelled me…the *soupy* look…so I knew I just had to grit my teeth and rule 1/8th inch lines and tape them and work with them and the results were like colored gas…Enormous amount of work! (Mueller Interview #1)

After three large canvases toying with this new method, he took off into his familiar geometric patterns and compositions or landscape/seascape abstractions that required careful preparation and drawing. Each painting began with an initial sketch, then formal drawing, layered over with multiple sheets of tracing paper to make changes on the drawing, at times only slightly varying a form or line or one or two bands of color. He felt that each painting needed to be completely designed before gridding-up the drawing to a large scale. Most of the changes took place on paper before ever applying the paint, so that minimal changes afterward did not mar the clear and perfect surface of a canvas that looks machine made. At times Mueller's application of paint takes on the appearance of the color woven into the fibers of the material. Gone was the improvisationally worked paint directly on canvas. Now Mueller often used a soft rubber brayer to spread mixed hues that took much deliberation beforehand. Nearly all of the canvases in this series are

quite large, the largest being 9 feet long, and all of them were done one inch at a time. He remembers:

> There were problems with working on an 8 or 9 foot canvas that spanned a stretcher. Just getting the bands of color uniform and precise was hard to do on cloth, on stretched canvas. I made a large H shape that I could clamp onto either end of the frame, the horizontal girder in the middle spanned the 8 feet, supported in the middle with supports so that the girder, even though it was metal couldn't sag anywhere. A friend of mine, a painter devised an A shaped plexi-glass shape that could sit on top of the girder and slide horizontally back and forth and he had someone drill very precise holes at 1/8th inch intervals down the middle of the A-frame so that I could make tiny marks with a pencil on the canvas.
>
> I developed the colors and mixed them before hand. These colors were never right out of a tube. The colors I used, I mixed and then stored in small plastic film canisters to keep them moist until I was ready for them (I would get batches of canisters from a photography store). I would have to have charts and plans for each color that was numbered and arranged before I began to apply paint, then I could go back in sometimes and change this or that one, but not too many. I had it figured out before beginning the painting and I didn't like that look of correcting things after the fact.

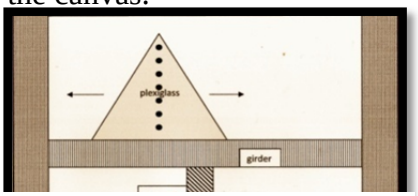


Fig.27. Mueller's drawing aids: girder and plexi-glass over canvas. (Diagram: J.McWilliams)

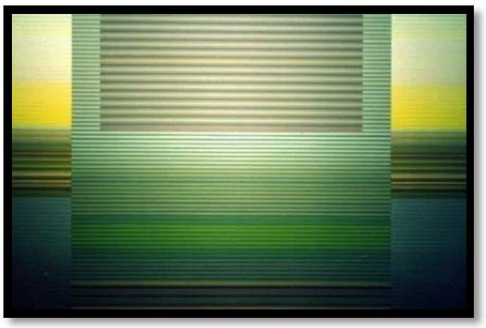


Fig.28. *Kansas*, 1980s
Collection of the Artist.

> Masking became problematic because no matter how much you burnish masking tape, paint *will* seep under and leave jagged little edges and I really wanted a clean edge. I didn't like the look of going back to correct mistakes. So I developed a way of masking, then putting two coats of mat medium over the tape so that no seepage would occur, but it took a great deal of time. The tape also needed to be specially cut. I found a man who owned a tape factory. He had special machines that could slice off rolls of tape that were no more than 1/8th of an inch or even thinner.
>
> And then I would work, but it was so tedious and very difficult physically. It was like waking up and thinking that you had a job in a factory that you hated. 'I don't want to go back to that place today' but I did and managed to complete about 1 to 3 inches of the painting in one day, sometimes an inch in one day, then maybe have to go back and redo a stripe or two. (Mueller Interview #5)

His choices of color and sensitivity to tone also evolved from music. Even his drawings began in the world of sound rather than sight:

> I always begin a drawing sensing like a musician, what key this is going to be in. What does this key say? This is going to have a certain look about it. There is always the adjustment of one color to another, keying up certain colors, drowning others...I sometimes imagine colors while I'm drawing,

> I'm trying to get a sense of what "key" it's in, what is the tonality? Is this going to be an eye-bender or is it going to make me grit my teeth? (Mueller Interview #1)

Fig. 29.*Where to Live,* Acrylic, Microtonal painting, 9'x 6' on stretched canvas. Collection of the Artist.

Mueller's art has always been the result of interacting with his own world rather than the art world, and in the 1960s, that consisted primarily in his ability to construct imagery from his immediate surroundings, his intense investigations into science, biography and history and his deep and lifelong connection to music. He admits an interest in science. Being an avid reader, he is continuously affected by ideas shaped by history often unrelated to the arts. His reading about physics and the properties of light affected his decision to separate color, to contain the personalities of each hue within its own parameters, and in doing so, turn them collectively into an alternative substance. This tendency to both contain and blend characteristics is so much a part of Mueller's personal constitution that the microtonal paintings particularly reflect him. He recently said:

> I liked comparing what I did (the Microtonal paintings) to the way I thought about light after reading some things about quantum physics. Before they had figured it out, it was just "ether" which was just a word that meant no one really understood how light traveled: it traveled in "the ether" whatever that was. But then came the concepts of waves, and then particles/packets. And then wave/packets---how could it be both things? Now, I didn't really care much about the science of seeing, I just enjoyed

> being able to but having read about quantum physics, it was fun to think about wave/particles and how they could be so different and the same simultaneously...The values are so close (in some of the stripe paintings) that you almost can't determine a difference in value from light to dark. So the values are separate, like particles but they are also blended like waves.
>
> I liked the idea that if I could make stripes 1/8 of an inch wide or even thinner than that, that I could do things with color that I couldn't do with a brush, because if you blend seven or eight separate hues you end up with one hue. But if you keep each hue contained within itself, slightly suspended, you end up with an entirely different quality...like Seurat, who wanted the human eye to do the mixing of color on the canvas, that's what everyone's eyes do anyway, the result is like a colored gas. (Mueller Interview #5)

As interesting as it is to think of Mueller being motivated by physics, it is really his metaphysical relationship to music which holds the key to his sense of aesthetic purpose. It applies to his art certainly, but to his life and surroundings in general. He is not a musician, has never attempted to play an instrument, but owns musical scores, spends many hours each day listening to classical and/or Be-Bop music, reads incessantly about both musical theory and music biography and is a most knowledgeable source to speak with about the subject. He understands music not only from an emotional center, but an intellectual and theoretical perspective as well. He is a musical scholar who has never written about the subject but is constantly inspired to draw images from his great love. For Mueller the truest, the greatest form of art is music. It is the most abstract and,

therefore, the home of all intelligence, dreams, thinking, and organization of aesthetic experience. He said:

> A composer; when he listens to music, I suppose he is hearing a lot more than the average person, a lot more than me, I'm sure. But emotionally, I don't know about that. I doubt that's the case. I can squeeze just about all there is emotionally from music that I love and the same should happen with painting. I wanted to paint music, music is the art that all other art forms imitate, it is the queen of art forms, intangible, performed in time, gone the second it's made, not made up of anything you can actually see, yet about as profound a thing as is possible in this life. (Mueller Interview #5)

Never a fan of Synchromism, he flatly denies any validity in the work of painters like Stanton MacDonald or Morgan Russell who had developed a machine in the early twentieth century that translated musical notes into color values. The results were rather less than interesting. The movement proved an obscure and rather inane concept that faded nearly as quickly as it surfaced. Yet when asked about the relationship between color and sound and the microtonal paintings, Mueller had this to say:

> The wrong or the right in music is very similar to painting. Music either makes sense or not, feelings arise: unsettling, exciting, by the placement of sounds in relation to one another, is completely an abstraction. Shopenhauer said, 'music takes over when philosophy leaves off.' And that's true. I never learned to play an instrument, never wanted to. For me, it was enough to listen. Beecham once said about the English, 'they don't

> really like music, they only like the noise it makes.' Maybe that's how I am. Notes in relation to one another are exactly like color. Like color put together and they make sense or not. The first time I heard Debussy live, not a recording, it was a revelation to me! I actually heard the individual notes coming out to the audience in separate spaces, they floated, suspended separately. For the first time, I truly understood Impressionism. It was transparent. I *heard* Impressionism. Sounds are like color. (Mueller Interview #1)

As Leonard B. Meyer wrote about music:

> Understanding music is not merely a matter of perceiving separate sounds. It involves relating sounds to one another in such a way that they form patterns (musical events). Smaller patterns combine with one another to form larger, more extensive ones--patterns on a higher architectonic level. Implications of patterns on the several architectonic levels exist simultaneously and interact with one another. (46)

This is precisely what occurs in Mueller's microtonal paintings; there are building blocks of small bands of color which combine and interact in higher levels of patterns that create a solid form here or a gaseous mixture there, or non-colors or colors that are difficult, if not impossible to ascertain. Mueller is careful to explain that he wasn't consciously trying to employ a scheme or plan to translate music literally onto a painting, but he was listening daily, constantly, being influenced by composers like Charles Ives, Anton Webern, Bach, Wagner, so many others. He appears to hear the harmonic relationships used by his favorite composers as intervals in color. He said:

> Music modulates from one key to another and I found I could do that with color; from bright to somber. Each modulation means something different to the listener or to the viewer. If sounds or tones are blended, that has another kind of feeling altogether. The look of blended colors is just as opaque as if you're sliding notes together. Neither is clean. If you're playing an ascending scale quickly on the piano the ear can distinguish each note even though they are played one close to the other and even though the harmonics are overlapping…*glissando*…but a blended group of colors or notes is more like *portamento*...or one of those sliding whistle things…it's an entirely different feeling. (In) separating bands of color, I could place a completely different color in the middle of everything...I couldn't do that if I blended paint together... It's almost as though I could find other colors that didn't exist before in a traditional sense. For me, it had a lighter, clarifying feel. (Mueller Interview #5)

So much preparation went into the microtonal paintings; so much effort and time that eventually he abandoned these large canvases. He did a series of twenty-five beautifully executed pieces, sold them and later was convinced by one of his loyal patrons to paint another series. He painted five more. He is still in possession of a few of them. He admits that the work itself simply became too arduous to continue. He now uses the stripe technique in select areas on canvases, feeling that he cannot reach a certain hue unless the colors are separated. When asked, he replied:

> Is it worth all this trouble, just to go from here to there? Well, that's my business, isn't it? I guess it was worth it to me. These weren't of nothing

> or a part of nothing. They almost always evoked the landscape in me, or its sensation or an experience or a combination of many experiences that were important to me. I felt I had, that I wanted (for lack of a better term) to *capture* something, like a photographer. The photographer takes a picture and rushes back to the darkroom to find out if they "got it." I always felt afterward or near the end that I had "got it,"--then I could change it. I could manage it. (Mueller Interview #5)

Perhaps one way of describing Mueller's work, his career and, for that matter, the man himself and the choices he has made with respect to everything in his life is to remember his words about color and turn them back on him. He said that it is important to "keep each thing contained within itself, slightly suspended" (Mueller Interview #5).

When he left New York behind he left behind the path that would have kept him tied to fashion and trends, that may have ultimately interfered with his individuated progress. In the 1960s, although his contact with New York galleries was diminishing, his best work was flowing freely. He and Juliana were thriving, soon to be parents, in an environment that they both shared and loved. Their beautiful daughter, baby Nina (named after Nikita Khrushchev's wife) was born shortly after their move to the country, beginning yet another phase of what Dewey would call "having an experience" (35).

Fig. 30. Mueller working on a Microtonal painting.

Chapter 7
"Having an Experience"

The Sixties

In his biography of Franz Kline, *The Vital Gesture*, Harry F. Gaugh describes the work of the Abstract Expressionists as offering "an encyclopedic range of concentrated expression based on human emotion and realized through muscular articulation of abstract form" (11). By the 1960s however, this same "Vital Gesture" had been replaced by hard edges, day glow paint, and advertising slogans. Thorough readings in art theory and aesthetics, formerly a prerequisite to art-making, had been cast off by a generation denying the necessity of prerequisites of any kind. Fine art/pure art was not at all what they were after.

Fig.31. Mueller outside farmhouse at Schooley's Mountain 1960s.

In the wake of Modernists like Marcel Duchamp, painterly expressions rooted in the history of art and the philosophy of aesthetics were summarily discarded for *concepts* or *process* rather than completed art objects. Popular media driven by commercial advertising came to dominate American art just as it had come to govern American taste and behavior. Younger artists like Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Robert Rauschenberg turned to the powerful shining America, triumphant from World War II, and mimicked the easy consumer glitz of its prosperity. The pre-war anxiety inflicted by Nuclear science in the 1940s and expressed by the slashing violent artistic "acts" on

canvas by artists like Pollock and Kline were abandoned for prints that mirrored the idiocy of customer satisfaction: clean lines, primary colors and the manipulative bold print on the box of Brillo pads, symbolic of our clean American kitchens. In them, one might imagine the whine of portable mixers whipping up *Duncan Hines* cake mixes from cardboard packages, the Jacque Tatian clack of housewives in high heels, and the hiss of sprinklers on suburban summer lawns.

Furthermore, the new art was funny and easy, and art students found it could be reproduced without bothering to acquire too many skills at all. The young world seemed tired of parental angst and memories of war and depression. Even if museum goers "got" what Rothko was trying to say, they were reluctant now to dwell on his dark message. Television made everyone's life potentially successful because if one bought the required products, the trials and difficulties of life would soon resolve happily, just as they did at the end of every sitcom. Teenaged Baby Boomers, who sardonically identified with Campbell Soup Cans and silk screened images of the dollar bill, knowing nothing about eighteenth century aesthetics, could finally participate in "Modern Art."

In the late 1950s and early 60s America had tuned in to convenience. Cars ran smoothly on fresh asphalt, houses were air conditioned, synthetic foods filled bellies, *things* replaced family and technology replaced effort; the emphasis was on the power of Democracy. Behind the scenes, Viet Nam was bubbling. Cuba, nuclear power, and civil rights were pressure cooking, and the baby boomers, spoiled white kids from suburbia, were poised to misbehave on the White House lawn, challenging a government that projected security but ran on "high-test" exploitation. In retrospect, some of the "easy" "funny" art was acerbic commentary from artists like Jasper Johns, who kicked off the

era in 1954 with a series of large images of the American Flag, painted roughly, repeated over and over. His repetitive Flag Series seemed insistent on stating what was so obviously being fought for in the streets of America: peace in Viet Nam, equal rights for minorities, homosexuals, and women. Roy Lichtenstein's comic-book reproductions parody the vacuous and superficial twaddle of TV/movie heroes; Claes Oldenburg built huge, two-story household kitchen implements; Wayne Thiebald paraded rows and rows of gooey fast food on cafeteria plates, resembling the grave markers piling up in Washington; and, James Rosenquist air-brushed slick images of air-force jet engines next to little blonde girls under hairdryers. Warhol, of course: movie stars, money, and Brillo, all imagery that used America's post war way of life as its primary subject matter. Hughes scolds, "Pop Art was the first accessible style of international modernism; it was art about consumption that sat up and begged to be consumed. It also fed back with incredible speed, into the domain of popular culture--because it was so easily and at times misleadingly, reproducible…There were no problems about difficult art anymore " (525).

But not all "Pop Artists" came to the table lacking basic aesthetic fundamentals. In fact, most of the artists in the early 1960s came from the lineage, as did George Mueller, of Abstract Expressionism, dragging with them a long and tired art history. Although he criticized Pop Art in general, Clement Greenberg recognized the value of several new forms in the 1960s. Regarding the new geometric abstract painting, he wrote,

> Design of layout is almost always clear and explicit, drawing sharp and clean, shape of area geometrically simplified or at least faired and trued, color flat and bright or at least undifferentiated in value and texture within a given hue--canons that Wolfflin would call *linear*. (vol 4 294)

Greenberg seemed at peace with any art that he could connect with concrete art history, in this case referring to Heinrich Wofflin's discussion of linear versus painterly in art. Although Greenberg continued into the sixties as a strong voice for Minimalism, Color Field Painting, and "linear" Abstract Geometric styles, he was very clear about Pop Art in general:

> We come up against the questions that philosophers of aesthetics have broken their teeth on ever since the discipline of aesthetics was born, back in the middle of the 18th century. The answers, or lack of them, are there for anyone who's interested in finding out about them, in Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*…I do not find Pop Art particularly exciting because it's all too familiar--second hand--as illustration and at the same time trite in terms of "pure" painting….Pop Art's too agreeable, too readily pleasing; it doesn't challenge our taste enough. (vol 4 307-308)

He was absolutely on target. However, Greenberg's Kantian basis of criticism had helped create this baby Frankenstein monster of Pop Art that continued to gain strength and stature as the years rolled into the 1990s by introducing the trend of wordy mediation to explain away the failures of mediocre Pop artists. He taught public and artists alike to respond to clever explanations rather than looking at art for themselves, and he gave license to inferior artists to act out in public. By the 1960s, in spite of his endorsements of younger artists like Noland, Clement Greenberg seemed unsure of himself for the first time in his fifty year career of art criticism. He was confused by the proliferation of crazy objects like Brillo Boxes at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Furthermore, there

was a marked increase in gallery and museum space given over to the "new" art as it never had been before in the history of museum curating. In 1969 Greenberg wrote:

> Just who and what will remain from the sixties, just which of the competing sub styles will prove out as lasting value--this remains uncertain. Or at least it does for most critics, museum people, collectors, art buffs, and artists themselves--for most, I say, if not exactly for all. *This uncertainty may help explain why critics have lately begun to pay so much more attention to one another than they used to. And why even artists pay them more attention* [italics mine]. (vol 4. 299)

Here Greenberg admits that critics are unsure about where art is going, but that they look to their own profession for direction, informing themselves and artists as well in spite of the confusion for which he fails to take responsibility. Further, with the "new" artists came a generation of critics who did not feel the same need to connect anything to art history. Instead, there developed a dependence on hyperbole and non-sense speak, which has continued into the twenty-first century.

George Mueller and the 1960s painter Kenneth Noland were compared because both eventually settled down with the labels: hard-edged, geometric, abstract painting, after having explored a number of other avenues. Like Mueller, Noland had begun as an Abstract Expressionist in the 1950s and gleaned a great deal from that movement. After developing his skill, Noland's direction led him into compositions of pure color and clean edges. Although both Noland and Mueller seemed to be living in the same creative neighborhood, and neither could be categorized as "Pop-Artists, their paintings were

poles apart. Greenberg promoted Noland not because of his geometric precision but because he "recoiled from content of any kind," and Hughes wrote of Noland, "No representation…No drawing…a sensuousness of color... [Because Pollock had begun the trend of] "getting away from drawing" (548). Mueller, conversely, though seldom representational, still held onto spatial relationships and forms that related directly to life, and his planning and drawing became more exact rather than less. Noland, who was interested in pure color, used Magna, a dye-like synthetic substance to sink the thin pigment deeply into canvas threads. Mueller used ordinary acrylic paint but applied so meticulously that the color is in the canvas fibers rather than on the surface and creates a seemingly woven image. Mueller's edges are flawless, and compositional details are as important as color; small over-lapping areas trick the viewers' sense of balance while large areas of color pull at each other. One needs to spend time with his paintings to appreciate the subtleties and carefully planned relationships. Jean Gaff, of *Artforum,* wrote of Mueller's painting: "*Long Valley; 66,* is a great work which has none of the decorative intrusion of white that Noland uses and never once did I think of awnings or umbrellas" (March 1968).

Noland, comparing his work of the 1960s to Abstract Expressionism, said, "I think we realized that you didn't have to assert yourself as a personality in order to be personally expressive. We felt that we could deal solely with esthetic issues, with the meaning of abstraction, without sacrificing individuality or quality" (Stiles and Selz 94). His statement applies to Mueller, as well. Unlike most of the Pop artists, who seemed overly concerned with publicity, Mueller instead developed a style firmly tied to nature

and architecture. His paintings and drawings capture, control, or make sense of relationships between edges, color, and space. He said:

> When I begin a painting, I begin with the drawing, always. I'm not concerned about representation or abstraction or making a statement about something. I'm just constructing something that feels secure to me, things that are not recognizable things but that sit well on the page and suggest something real. I never wanted to lose the connection with emotion. I've always believed that abstraction can be about something and still be abstraction. Music does that, certainly why not painting? (Mueller Interview #6)

Fig.32. Mueller in the 1960s

By the time Mueller had moved his family further into the country and out of the mainstream, he had developed a very strong, hard-edged, flat, geometric style that was neither overly intellectual (also unlike Noland) nor gestural (unlike DeKooning's), but expressive of his own peculiar sense of order. It was highly aesthetic but not at all steeped in the drama or personality of the "Vital Gesture." The small Mueller family: George, Juliana and daughter Nina founded their own art scene atop Schooley's Mountain in Long Valley, Northern New Jersey. Mueller met and invited people to the old working farm they rented on 350 acres. The farm was still being run by the owners, leaving Juliana time to teach, George the freedom to paint and little Nina an idyllic

Fig.33. Paintings outside at *Idle Hour Farm.*

childhood, roaming the land on horseback with her dog. The landscape was vast and secluded, opening up unique avenues of color and feeling that the city could not have offered Mueller. The sweet haunted drawings of the country at night continued, encouraged by the isolated, panoramic backdrop of tumbled farmhouses that remembered hardworking ancestors from another era, the wildlife, the quiet, the open sky.


Fig.34. Mueller painting outdoors.

"Idle Hour Farm," a joke since no one on the farm was ever idle, provided space for Mueller to paint very openly in several barns and outbuildings simultaneously. In the summer, weather permitting, he would set up makeshift studios out of doors. The large geometric hard edged shapes, the precision stripes contrasted with the soft rolling hills of tall grasses. The bold geometry seemed somehow to fit nicely in the country landscape, like the barns and outbuildings themselves. He produced a prodigious number of large canvases during this period; many were sold through Grippi and later Straley Galleries.

At night, after painting, the farm hummed with characters, ideas, music, art, quantities of food and alcohol and a certain amount of drug use. The area became home to local hippies, urban artists, and musicians. Those included serious jazz musicians, writers, artists, dancers, and older bohemians such as Maryette Charlton and Lillian Olinsey Kiesler, Frederick Kiesler's second wife. The late Frederick Kiesler had been an avant-guard architect and theater designer, perhaps the last of the true breed of Greenwich Village bohemians from the 1920s and 30s. Kiesler had passed away in 1965, leaving his wife and her companion Maryette Charlton in the United States. Both women were assiduous in passing on an appreciation of Modernism to everyone, especially

younger artists. They were not only from a different generation but from a different world altogether. They were unconventional, full of inspiration and always supportive of new art and arrived in Mueller's life carrying missionary-like messages for their bohemian progeny.

Just as Frederick Kiesler had had enormous influence over many artists both here and in Europe, Maryette and Lillian felt obligated to pass the torch.

> Frederick Kiesler was born in1890 in Romania, studied art and design in Vienna with the leader of the Secessionist movement…and worked with Adolf Loos…In 1923 he was invited to join the De Stijl group as its youngest member and worked closely with Jean Arp, Theo van Doesburg, and Piet Mondrian…He arrived in America in 1926…and his Greenwich Village apartment hosted the Blue Book of artists in New York. It was a haven for visiting and émigré Europeans. Among his many guests were Marcel Duchamp, Fernand Leger, Mie Vander Rohe, Hans Richter, Jean Arp, and Piet Mondrian. (Phillips 27)

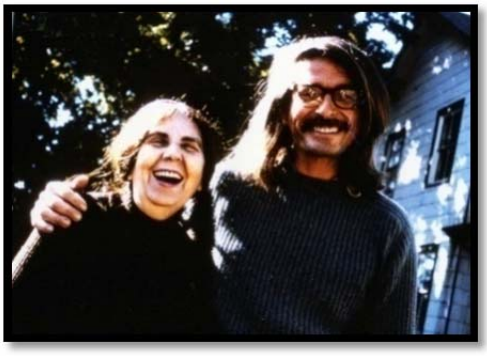


Fig.35. Mueller with Lillian Kiesler.

Kiesler had been associated with every important artist and theater name during those ripe creative years in Europe and New York. Lillian Kiesler had been involved with Martha Graham's dance group and was a good friend of Kiesler's first wife Steffi. When Steffi died of cancer in 1961, Lillian and Frederick married. In 1965 when Frederick passed away, Lillian and her long-time friend Maryette bought a small house in the country on

the edge of a 350 acre farm shortly after George Mueller had moved there. Lillian and Maryette were drawn to the door of the "young painter down the road," and the two "elderly" women became a welcomed addition to the entourage at "Idle Hour Farm." Lillian and Maryette were still in close association with the art markets' heavy-hitters: Merce Cunningham and Phillip Glass, and the late composer Edgar Varese whose widow, Louise, frequently visited the farm to hear improvisational jazz played by young musicians stopping at *Idle Hour Farm.* More importantly, the two women provided an order and an appreciation of history that the younger group had not yet come to value.

Fig. 36. Mueller talking with Edgar Varese's widow, Louise at *Idle Hour Farm.*

Mueller's days were spent painting or exploring the country with Nina; nights were spent in conversation with other artists. Although he created incessantly, he seldom bothered to promote his work or document ideas or drawings. Kiesler and Charlton cherished posterity and were somewhat fanatic in efforts to document their lives and the lives of artists they had known. They collected information about Mueller's career and paintings, and they avidly supported his work. Both acquired choice pieces over the years. They were appalled that Mueller did not organize clippings, make notes or save drawings or reviews, nor had he any idea about where his sold paintings were. The fact that Mueller worked so hard to create beautiful work but lacked any interest in his own "career" frustrated Charlton, especially. She

Fig.37. Mueller with daughter Nina, and a painting in background

lectured him prodigiously, made an attempt to compile the first seeds of a biography, organized stored paintings and took quantities of photographs of his work, of him working, or of him playing with Nina.

Boundaries

Fig.38.Summit Street painting

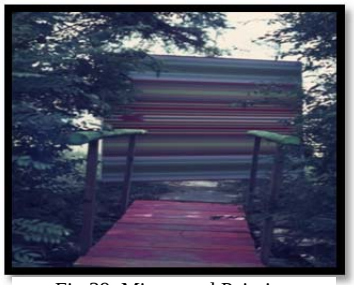


Fig.39. Microtonal Painting

Fig.40. Geometric painting

Mueller's three latter styles, shown here outdoors at the farm--one each from the Summit Street Series, the Microtonal Series, and a hard-edged painting--all have one thing in common: true edges with definite boundaries. That says a good deal about the personality of Mueller himself and how he played his life and relationships with people as well as with the world of art. Beyond that observation, obvious commonalities occur; they often reflect a man-made, architectural world, creating its own security. The compositions reach beyond construction or design of space and color to invent unique places in familiar distances. They often rely on intervals that are shared with the language of music or they suggest a world that either no longer exists or never has existed. They are all pure constructions, meaning *constructs* of Mueller's thinking about abstract places. They are as unreal as his early Noumena paintings but, unlike them, they are linked to real experiences, which Greenberg would have discounted as too representative

but Dewey would have applauded as the conduit to a live human mind. Dewey wrote, "Works of art have their source in past experience, and are means by which the particular organization that marks a given picture is effected" (118). Boisvert wrote of Dewey:

> Philosophy transforms art works into 'specimens of fine art and nothing else.' But for Dewey such a transformation is not to be celebrated. Indeed, it helps identify the problem: 'that of recovering the continuity of aesthetic experience with normal processes of living.' Asking for such a recovery undermines the separations of Art from life and reason from emotion that underlie the various interpretations of art. Recovering the 'continuity of aesthetic experience with the normal processes of living' is not an easy task and it has been obstructed by eighteenth-century aesthetics. (120)

During the mid 1960s through the late 70s, Mueller's canvases were nearly all 6 x 6 feet--perfect large squares. We associate the rectangular shape used by artists with portraits, landscapes, and still lifes. For this reason, square-shaped paintings should not be confused with traditional horizontal windows framing views to a landscape, for example, or a vertical rectangle signaling a portrait. These should be read as boxes. The perfect square suggests a man-made box, a human presence even though people are not included in the composition. Inside the specimen-like boxes are chunky blocks that fit into one another in various ways, squeezing or holding themselves together. In his painting *"T" for Texas*, Mueller connects two yellow "T's" with the outside edges of a pink block held precariously in place by two large dark forms against an evening sky.

Fig. 41. *"T" for Texas*
Collection of the Artist.

The blocks are masculine and dominant but the pink holds our attention as the point of focus, the hot spot. There is a suggestion of an urban building with lights on inside, but that doesn't make sense because the pink box is tipped up and there is no floor. The light is strong inside the pink box while the two black boxes are in darkness. What we are looking at is not clear. Perhaps we are seeing a small detail of a much larger construction, a facet of a larger brooding building against the sky. Angles tilt up when there is no reason to. The blocks are in front of us and lean away from us. The weighty black forms hold everything in place. As Mueller intended, we transfer feelings, sensations, onto simple geometric shapes that take on human qualities. He admits that when he began painting in this way, he felt unsure. Perhaps such simple compositions wouldn't be "enough" but the work seemed "right" to him. The geometric shapes take on personalities or human qualities. He made this series of canvases large enough to draw the viewer into the frame of the work.

Here again are Mueller's strong edges and clear boundaries; his formidable sense of orderliness keeps us wondering where we are without doubting that it is a secure place to be. The ethereal qualities of the microtonal places in the earlier paintings have been replaced with solid blocks of heavy matter that seem to escort the feminine pink structure. We might make these observations but still not understand where we are or why, and that is one reason why Mueller's work holds the interest of the viewer: we must ask for more complex interaction and develop our own answers.

Untitled from the 1970s is also a peculiar place, secured by beefy architectural structures like futuristic housing, geometric window seats from which we might survey the landscape outside that stretches into early dawn or early evening. Wherever we are, there are no others with us. Again we are impressed by the size of the canvas and forms and our own comparative insignificance. The massive structure is everything, the landscape is held back, there are no organic shapes. This place has been made *not* to conform to natural surroundings, but sits against nature in an adversarial attitude. At first the shapes appear symmetrical, but we find they are not and too, they appear to be shapes that will be around for a good long while against storm and age. In a review written for Mueller's one-man show in 1966, Peter Schjeldahl of *Art News* wrote:

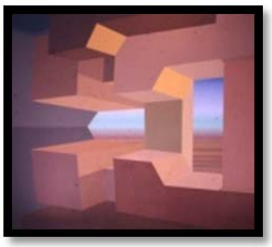


Fig.42. *Untitled.* 6'x6' 1970s, Collection of H. Wachtel

> George Mueller's work constitutes a serious and very impressive emulsion of representation, geometric Hard Edge and "color-painting," with symbolic overtones. Immaculate architectures emerge from hundreds of stripes and rectangles, in flat, vibrant colors, rigidly symmetrical on either side of a central axis that is thrust forward or back by violent perspective. Not a trace of the Herculean craftsmanship remains, lending the works a sort of apparitional grandeur, like H.G. Wells plus LSD. The triumphant idiosyncrasy of the artist's image, in relief against his obvious stylistic sophistication, is a little breathtaking. ("Reviews and Previews)

The work *Multi-Universe* is both breathtaking and intimidating. Painted about the same time as *Untitled*, the forms loom over us as though we are bugs at the bottom of a parking garage. A span of darker forms cross the lower half, suggesting a stairwell or ramp closer to us but just as inaccessible as the rest of the giant enclosure; yet just beyond our grasp are glimpses of a clear blue sky suggesting a way out. Nothing reads as familiar in this vast cathedral space. Again, no humans or traces of them can be found on Mueller's quiet porches or in these imposing abstract forms.

Fig.43. *Multi-Universe*, 6'x 6', 1970s

Fig. 44. *Untitled*

An odd shaped canvas, also *Untitled* and painted in the 1970s, provides us with another interior/exterior view, part mouse maze and part Egyptian landscape. It has a fanciful dreamlike quality and gives the eye many paths to follow, many places to rest. The canvas is 6 feet wide at the bottom edge and 5 feet high on the left edge; it doesn't make a direct cut diagonally but awkwardly cuts away nearly half our view as though someone were closing a door on our vision. Yet, this is not an ominous or intimidating situation; rather, it is charming. We find ourselves in a colorful maze, a small segmented box with a pyramidal shape that hovers weightlessly, inside thin yellow walls while outside pyramids in the desert are lit by a sliver of romantic moon. The truly intriguing area is the desert in the background that we notice last. It is painted as a children's illustrated fairytale might be. (See detail) A slice of daytime sky is held in place by the yellow partition as if to

Fig. 45. Detail

remind us of what will be or has been. We are given numerous clues about the situation we are in but our assumptions are pure conjecture, never solid conclusion. The post-modern office-like partitions are what we first notice but

beyond suggests history filled with magic, spiritualism, and the everlasting on Earth.

When asked which paintings from this era he would save from a burning house, Mueller chose examples of the flat geometric paintings without the pictorial space, the perspective, the three-dimensional qualities, claiming that he likes the look of them. "I wouldn't want to do a thing more to those, they sit in a way that is anchored, they're just right" (Mueller Interview #6). Also *Untitled*, also painted in the 1970s, the painting might be varied pieces of construction paper on a desktop. It is 6 x 6 feet and the areas of suede-like softness contrasting with subtle shifts in color have a powerfully calming effect. Mueller said,

Fig. 46. *Untitled*. 6'x 6', 1970s. Collection of the Artist.

> I find more satisfaction looking at the flat paintings rather than those three dimensional looking ones. I find them more intriguing, more ambiguous…It's like listening to Liszt or listening to Bach. The bombastic ones are busy, more dimensional, those deep portentous spaces; they make suggestions. Listening to Bach is sparser, more scholarly. (Interview #6)

Mueller's process begins with the drawing and ends with a carefully transferred image onto the canvas. The forms and edges lie comfortably on one another, a slice of

deep blue here or a small chunk of mass revealing a day-glow yellow interior. The surface of each shape seems woven into a single flawless, coherent cloth.

Fig.47. *The Package*. 6'x6', 1965.

While Kenneth Noland concentrates on color, separating that element to reveal purity, Mueller uses color to hold onto the real world. His forms are confident, and, as he claims, "they sit...they are anchored…they're just *right*" (Mueller Interview #6). Spending time with the painting, we find unpretentious shapes take on complex attitudes. As our eye travels through what initially appears as design, a corner lifts up or slips under, or makes an impossible turn and we must begin to question what these shapes are actually doing. The Zen-like practice of following a simple thread begins to weave a mystery. We soon realize that the simple objects aren't so simple nor do they make complete sense in the world, but they promise to teach us something about the way we navigate through our own lives as we steer through his minimal areas or ungainly masses. The simple flat areas are painted with precision, carefully fastened together; they are like puzzle pieces, sometimes fitting and other times impossible to reconcile. The aesthetic is elegant, fragile, the relationships of color and edge suggestive of human behavior. They can remind us of how we stand, each different but each dependent and connected in relation to others and the space around us. Dewey discussed the relationship of form, design, and representation. He emphasized the importance of the interconnectedness of design principles as reflective of our thought processes, and he warns that abandoning the underlying process of thought, experience, and art will destroy

Fig. 48. *Untitled*. 6'x6' 1970s

true meaning in artistic expression. Form is color, is matter, is content. Attempting, as many pop and geometric artists did, to *separate* components eradicates form:

> It is significant that the word "design" has a double meaning. It signifies purpose and it signifies arrangement, mode of composition. The design of a house is a plan upon which it is constructed to serve the purposes of those who live in it. The design of a painting or novel is the arrangement of its elements by means of which it becomes an expressive unity in direct perception. In both cases, there is an ordered relation of many constituent elements. The characteristic of artistic design is the intimacy of the relations that hold the parts together. Only when the constituent parts of a whole have the unique end of contributing to the consummation of a conscious experience, do design and shape lose superimposed character and become form. (117)

The farm and the parties and the discussions couldn't last forever, and after seven years at *Idle Hour Farm*, George, Juliana, and Nina moved to Flanders, New Jersey. Mueller found a one room school house with a coal burning stove nearby as a studio. He and Juliana were having difficulty with their marriage. When it finally dissolved, Mueller moved in with friends and faced a devastating emotional breakdown.

Fig. 49. Mueller 1980s

His marriage to a third wife, Kathleen Mc Quaid, proved difficult as well, and through most of the 1980s his painting took second place to earning a living. The better part of ten years were spent

painting houses, working in construction, installing audio systems. Painting was often set aside. Between the years 1980 and 1999 he completed only eleven paintings, although he still had many connections with former patrons and continued to draw a good deal. He was commissioned to paint more Microtonal paintings by a former patron and these, unlike the first series, were properly photographed and prove excellent examples of the beautiful though tedious technique he had perfected earlier in the 1960s. Eventually, his marriage to Kathleen Mc Quaid dissolved and he moved again, this time to Sussex County, New Jersey, converting a barn on the property of a friend into a large studio.

By the 1990s "Art" in New York had devolved into a novel and precarious occupation, and Mueller had little in common with the fashionable, politically-correct art being shown in New York galleries. Art of the 1990s carried a guaranteed acceptance factor. After all, who would openly criticize work that targeted poverty, violence and abuse? Unfortunately, most of it failed to reveal anything that its audience couldn't see on the evening news. It was put onto gallery walls without concern for aesthetics, form, subject matter, intelligence, or quality. Robert Hughes wrote in the 1990s:

> Identity politics have made for narrow, preachy, single issue art, in which victim credentials come first and aesthetic achievement a very late second—all positioned on an unrealistically schematic division of the world into oppressors and victims. Its mood is didactic, sometimes irritably so, but it teaches little. Who needs art to tell them that racism and child abuse are wrong? (612)

The gift of intuition thought bestowed upon the shamanistic artists throughout history; their ability to sort out zeitgeists, as vague to the average person as tissue paper,

and from them to forecast cultural paradigms of universal magnitude; these certainly seemed forgotten by the 1990s. Societies like Ancient Greece had relied on artists and poets to reorganize and recalibrate daily events, making it possible to interpret the past against the present and against the future. They learned how to conduct their lives from the Chorus, after all. The messages rumbling beneath society which had historically been discerned by a sensitive few could now to be seen daily on CNN. By the end of the twentieth century, critics, Clement Greenberg among them, who claimed their authority from philosophers, had inadvertently created a "feed-back loop" encouraging culture to rely on critics rather than artists, and it suggested that artists listen for cultural cues from advertising.

The critic Peter Schjedahl wrote:

> End-of-the-line thinking can give a macabre pleasure, lending a satisfying melodramatic air to work and to existence itself. But such thinking doesn't seem supportable anymore. What makes this all so eerie is the sneaking conviction we have that this decade wasn't supposed to happen. In a civilization living as if there was no tomorrow, we are the tomorrow. We are inhabiting, in effect, the no-future of the fifties and sixties; and what did those no-past decades leave us with? Rituals of the instantaneous flashing present and protocols of 'The End.' We are doubly, triply bereft—no idea of the past to push off against, no vision of the future to reject, no sense of the present as a moment unique in history. 'What history?' (2)

Mueller remained intent on work, his own work, his own mastery of materials, his interpretation of experience. His interest in the easy popular culture movement or the bland, literal, political messages beginning in the 1960s and collapsing into the conceptual grab bag of the twenty-first century had no meaning for him. In many ways, his isolation from the art movement was self-imposed, a way to protect what he wanted to create, a distance that needed to be kept for independence and originality. "I've always had the feeling in this culture that to most people, creating art was almost like being a thief or an idiot," Mueller said. "The paintings are viewed like crimes that you don't want anyone to know about" (Mueller Interview #6).

Much professional art-criticism by the 1990s had become meaningless gibberish, "hypnotizing the collector with a sense of intellectual mystery that the bland and shallow objects themselves did not possess" (Hughes 603). Further, with the 1990s came a parade of sensational kitsch that intended to shock viewers but mostly bored everyone. It relied on appropriation and "bad taste"; much wasn't original or meaningful. Turning the tables by claiming that the art was *intended to be unoriginal and meaningless* was certainly one way to validate what should have been and often was an embarrassment to creative artists. Before the art-market collapse in 1980s, collectors with money seemed anxious to buy anything that could be explained in language that made no sense to them or anyone else. The no-sense part of the game seemed to validate the art for them. Buyers realized they were investing in the "emperor's new clothes"; it became the vogue to say, "I know, that you know, that I know that the world knows, that all of this is meaningless." But

there were always those who questioned the trendy vacuousness, Mueller among them; he quietly continued to make art.

Chapter 8

"Art as Experience"

The Paintings of George Mueller 1990-2013
Through Dewey's Lens

Relocating his studio to a barn in rural Sussex County in the summer of 1999 proved to be a significant move for Mueller. By age 70, after three failed marriages and the death of his daughter, Nina, he needed to concentrate on work. He was living modestly and able to spend every day in the studio. Without the distractions of one crumbling marriage or another, or the exhausting need to earn a living on construction sites, he settled down to create a large body of work, forty-nine canvases, from 2000 to 2013. He taught painting part-time in Summit, New Jersey at the Arts Center there and also at a local college in Sussex County. He agreed to a drawing show and appeared in several faculty group shows, but his focus at this time in his life, just as it had been, was not on selling but on working. Many of the canvases are about "place": *Beast in Fredon, Lakeland, This Isn't Kansas, Another Winter, Morning, Hall Light, (see Appendix B)* suggest a desire to be connected with his surroundings. These canvases are solid work, pulling from every area of his past and using his expertise to develop strong color relationships and rock-hard compositions.

Throughout his career, Mueller had resisted associating himself with an art movement or philosophy; nevertheless, he fulfills in every way the criteria described by John Dewey to explain the act of art-making and the principles of aesthetics. Mueller's

trained focus, his careful work and emotional content achieve Dewey's concepts of what an artist should be and what art must do. His paintings illustrate Dewey and conditions of unity, quality, interaction and art as experience/experience as art.

The analytic aesthetic criteria practiced by Greenberg in the 1940s established a comfortable pedestal for critics and encouraged the proliferation of meaningless imagery permeating today's galleries. It created a barrier between the public and its own culture. Conversely, Dewey's Pragmatism in the 1930s had in it the seeds to grow an inclusive appreciation of culture and art particularly within the American population. Instead, commercialism took over the need for visual literacy and art appreciation was relegated to the textbook and classroom. In 1992, Richard Schustermann wrote, "Pragmatist aesthetics has virtually disappeared…the passionate power of Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934) has been totally eclipsed by the analytic philosophy of art, which has ever since constituted the only mainstream tradition in Anglo-American aesthetics" (3).

Experience and Aesthetics

John Dewey begins his series of lectures on Art with the concept of "*an* experience" which has specific form and qualities that make it "an experience" as opposed to an ordinary event or situation in one's life. Make no mistake, not all conditions, activities, or dramas meet Dewey's criteria for "having an experience," though having them, he claims, is an essential aspect of being alive, being human, and recognizing them is built into our genetic make-up, as much an instinctual part of being human as self-preservation, fear, or sexual attraction. Correspondingly, works of art are re-enactments of this human tendency towards experience.

What constitutes an experience in Deweyan terms? The simple act of driving one's car to work could be; it occurs in time and over space. Too often though, for many of us, driving becomes a mechanical sequence of actions. However, if one were cognizant of events and integrated them during the journey, i.e., if one were to remain conscious of every facet of a journey arriving at work transformed in some way, the drive to work each day could be an experience that informs who we are as sentient beings. Conversely, it is possible to live and work effectively without ever having an experience. Events must have consciousness and completion to qualify as experience.

In 1934, Dewey was concerned that the modern age was losing touch with the introspection needed to recognize experience. He sensed that the stresses and pressures of contemporary society might result in a loss of sensitivity. For him, perception is a decisive action that takes time and effort and requires a deliberate examination of events. Such qualities of experience are understood universally, and Dewey argues they are an innate human response to the world. Everyone, then, is capable of experience in any situation. Certainly, some people do not use it in a way that is profound, but we are all born capable of recognizing certain aspects of what Dewey calls experience as we are born with the *capacity* to elevate experience into art, either as artists ourselves or as audience.

Learning is essential for elevating ordinary experience into art or recognizing art when it has been done by another; although the capacity to create and interact is always present, it doesn't necessarily happen. We learn how to do it, as we have learned how to cross the street safely. It is a navigational tool that implies visual literacy. Dewey begins his lectures rambling amiably, using examples from life to illustrate his points, but a

careful reading of his texts reveals a clear and concise outline which I will attempt to paraphrase here. He insists that his definition of experience can be anything, an event large or insignificant, but that it must adhere to specific criteria or miss the mark as "an experience." All true experiences have form, meaning that there is a pattern consisting of 1). an interaction between a human being and the environment, followed by 2). a processing or ordering of materials, 3). a manipulation or work of some kind, 4). a transformation of the individual involved and, lastly, 5). a definite resolution or conclusion of the event. Every significant experience has these *qualities* which, combined, create *unity* that ultimately characterize it.

In Chapter Three of *Art as Experience,* "Having an Experience," he deals directly with his criteria, his definition, aesthetics, and art. His lecture can be taken in two parts, the first of which deals with experience and the aesthetic and the second with art and the aesthetic. He differentiates between the ordinary mechanical occurrences of daily life and the contrast of having a real experience. An experience is a cohesive thing, consisting of a beginning, middle, and an end: "Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individual quality and self" (38). It could be a relationship, a meal, a game, the Holocaust, the Civil War, a perfect storm. It could be a musical piece or a philosophical conclusion as both have "satisfying emotional qualities. Both possess integration and fulfillment reached through an ordered and organized movement" (38). Thinking takes place most of the day for most of us, that is, if we are lucky, but when it is specifically organized into philosophical thought and reaches a conclusion, "an integrated event," it is an experience and carries with it, its own aesthetic quality. Each experience has a particular identity, a character or nature that Dewey identifies as its "own aesthetic" (38).

He uses the term aesthetics differently from most philosophers. He does not

connect the word to the concept of beauty; instead, *unity* is the aesthetics. The experience may be harmful to the world, its consummation undesirable, but it has an aesthetic quality if it is all of a piece. He describes any activity as aesthetic "provided that it is integrated and moves by its own urge to fulfillment" (39). That might be a birth or it might be a rape, mindful that he is not attempting to judge any action, only the significance of its impact on the perceiver:

> The non-esthetic lies within two limits. At one pole is the loose succession that does not begin at any particular place and that ends—in the sense of ceasing—at no particular place. At the other pole is arrest, constriction, proceeding from parts having only a mechanical connection with one another. There exists so much of one and the other of these two kinds of experience that unconsciously they come to be taken as norms of all experience. Then when the esthetic appears, it so sharply contrasts with the picture that has been formed of experience, that it is impossible to combine its special qualities with the features of the picture and the esthetic is given an outside place and status. (40)

Additionally, an experience needs to ultimately "transform" all involved: "There is an element of undergoing, of suffering in its large sense, in every experience. Otherwise, there would be no taking in of that preceded. Not that experience can't be pleasurable but, there are few intense esthetic experiences that are wholly gleeful" (41).

An entire childhood can be an experience, and/or a single occurrence within that same childhood can also be an experience. We are universally aware when that has happened. It gives us our stories, the ones we tell ourselves and others about who we are and how

we think. It gives us the reasons we think and feel about other experiences in our future, it shades how we feel about the past and it gives us our rationale for being who we think we are. We may define our experience, but ultimately it defines us.

All the parts making up the experience are different, though they have a unifying character which identifies them as part of the same situation. It creates a complete story; the pieces may vary but there is a unity and flow to the nature of this entity: "An experience has a unity that gives it its name, *that* meal, *that* storm, *that* rupture of friendship. The existence of this unity is constituted by a single quality that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts" (37). A simple example: A man lifts a stone, he suffers: "the process continues until a mutual adaptation of the self and the object emerges and that particular experience comes to a close" (44).

We are reminded of Mueller's analogy of selecting a major or minor chord with which to begin his paintings in Dewey's discussion of the "dominant property" of experiences. Like Mueller, unlike Greenberg, Dewey places emotion at the center of experience and art. In fact, emotion can be thought of as the tool used by creative minds to pick out and select pieces within experience to create a unified experience, and it is that same tool that pulls, shapes, and colors experience in life and on canvas: "Emotion can select dissimilar materials and unite materials into a unified whole. Emotion provides the unity throughout the experience" (41). Analytic philosophy had dismissed emotion in art, needlessly linking feeling to representational or over sentimentalized art. As Dennis Dutton wrote:

> Kant rejected as proper constituents of aesthetic form such values as color and emotion. His philosophical followers—through Clive Bell and

> Clement Greenberg up to the present—may not have gone that far, but they have continued to regard pure form as what counts in art and anything else as a mere cultural excrescence to be scraped off with the intellectual equivalent of a wire brush. (Dutton 159.)

And in writing of Dewey's sensitivity, Rorty realizes the importance of keeping art human, playful, inquisitive. He writes that:

> Dewey's greatness lies in the sheer provocativeness of his suggestions about how to slough off our intellectual past, and about how to treat that past as material for playful experimentation rather than as imposing tasks and responsibilities upon us. Dewey's work helps us to put aside that spirit of seriousness which artists traditionally lack and philosophers are traditionally supposed to maintain. For the spirit of seriousness can only exist in an intellectual world in which human life is an attempt to attain an end beyond life, an escape from freedom into the atemporal. (Rorty 87)

Mueller said recently about his own work: "I never wanted to lose the connection with emotion." (Mueller Interview #6).This seems a simple observation, one that analytic philosophers may have thrown away along with common sense.

Art and Aesthetics

Dewey wishes us to understand experience as a process of human activity. Experience mimics life itself: beginning, middle, and end as it follows our Western concepts of time and religion, based on an innate recognition of our birth, life, and death

pattern, a universal pattern. Consequently, for Dewey, "Art" is what happens when an experience is made into a tangible object or when an object and the process of "doing," mimic a complete life experience. Re-enacting, organizing materials in the same way that experience is constructed is what art is: "Art …unites the very same relation of doing and undergoing, outgoing and incoming energy, that makes an experience to be *an* experience" (48).

Additionally, he insists on specific criteria for the art activity, specific yet inclusive. Dewey allows for both abstract and representational work, unlike Greenberg in his analytic framework. Those sorts of artistic distinctions do not enter into Dewey's thinking. They are again echoed by Mueller:

> I'm not concerned about representation or abstraction. I'm just constructing something that feels secure to me, things that are not recognizable things but that *sit* well on the page and suggest something real. Now, I recognize the look of something and that tells me if it's right. Some paintings I know are finished because I wouldn't want to do a thing more to those, they sit in a way that is anchored, that is just right. (Mueller Interview #6)

For Mueller, there is never a question of painting anything that is not firmly rooted, if not always in reality, then in his inner experience. Simply, "Art" must follow the same course that an experience follows in order for it to have unity and integrity. Without that, it is purposeless. Yet constraints regarding subject matter and content imposed by modern criticism interfere with honest creativity rather than promoting it as Greenberg might have assumed. Today's art criticism has bloomed into a destructive force for serious

artists, as the critic Robert Morgan points out. The concern of contemporary artists lacks aesthetic direction and focuses instead on career.

> There are inner-directed artists and there are outer-directed artists. Inner-directed artists deal purposefully with what they have to say as artists. Outer-directed artists pay a lot of attention to what is in the mainstream and to what is acceptable, before they show. We are talking about careerism: making the right moves in the right places. Art simply becomes the vehicle for one's career, rather than the other way around. (Morgan 178)

Dewey seemed unaware of what Morgan refers to as "careerism," for that idea was still an infant in Greenberg's nursery in the 1940s. He wrote, instead, only for those "inner-directed" artists and insisted on a process of engagement, work, or "struggle" that he felt necessary to lead the artist toward transformation. Certainly, he would have disagreed with any method of simply throwing paint randomly, as some might think Jackson Pollock did, yet he would have thought that Pollock's method of throwing paint while *controlling* his arm and its rhythm, staying conscious of his behavior, and being transformed by the experience, as Pollock claimed he was, is without a doubt, Art. Greenberg vacillated about Pollock's intent, sometimes claiming the painter was in complete control and at others claiming Pollock was driven by the unconscious. Dewey would have agreed that the experience of actually throwing the paint could have been a real one for Pollock. Still, Dewey is clear that for art to become art in Deweyan terms, it needs to be controlled and directed:

> A painter must consciously undergo the effect of his every brushstroke or he will not be aware of what he is doing and where his work is going. Moreover, he has to see each particular connection of doing and undergoing in relation to the whole that he desires to produce. To apprehend such relations is to think, and is one of the most exacting modes of thought. The difference between the pictures of different painters is due quite as much to differences of capacity to carry on this thought as it is to differences of sensitivity to bare color and to differences in dexterity of execution. (Dewey 45)

He also qualifies, "Craftsmanship to be artistic in the final sense must be 'loving'; it must care deeply for the subject matter upon which skill is exercised" (47). And he insists that *artistic intent* is a requirement for any work to be considered aesthetic: "The act of producing that which is directed by intent to produce something that is enjoyed in the immediate experience of perceiving has qualities that a spontaneous or uncontrolled activity does not have" (48).

Mueller frequently discusses his working process, the arduous methods of masking and planning and his personal intention to make something that someone wants to look at, including himself: "Everything (history, experience, emotion, politics) up until now ends up in my painting, an emotional response to being alive in this nuthouse world and my intent is to make something pleasing to look at, even if the subject is not a pleasing one" (Mueller Interview #6).

Physically working on what one knows must be done in order to find one's "handprint" in a painting, as Mueller claims, can be a tedious business.

> A basic handprint is like your handwriting that will be with you your entire life. You must re-work your own material over and over. I don't think I'm ever aware of that while I'm actually working, I just work, but at some point I realize that in order to continue I may need to resort to some special kind of factory-like technique if I'm going to realize *that* handprint. (Mueller Interview #6)

Accident is a fine thing, but recognizing when to hone a form that may have appeared subconsciously is a large part of making effective artistic decisions.

In Summary:

Experience: We are born with the capacity to recognize and emulate patterns that mimic life's own patterns of birth, life, death. We are born with the innate need to create experiences that will build our own life. We use emotion to pick up pieces of events and weave them together for *an experience,* and when we have enough of them, they define us, they teach us and tell others who we are by what and how we have manipulated events around us.

Art: Re-working this experience activity of ours on a smaller scale is precisely what an artist does with physical materials: picking them up, pushing them together until there is some recognizable quality that mimics a personal experience. Perhaps it is one that only he will recognize, but if others recognize it as well, so much the better.

Experiencing Art: Along comes a patron to the gallery, who, if fortunate, is able to recreate the same pattern of making and thinking and transformation as the artist had. He

recreates the artwork in his own frame of experience, thus establishing the gift of communication between artist and viewer.

Dewey tells us what art is capable of, what viewers are capable of. Art is not an intellectual or political exercise prescribed by culture, politicians, art markets, or ambitious writers, or if it is, it shouldn't be. Real art is a re-enactment of real experience, and that has nothing to do with abstract or representational imagery, philosophical pondering, or the making of careers. It does afford viewers the ability to relate and build an aesthetic of their own from experience: aesthetic life, as the pragmatist philosopher, Richard Rorty would have us create for ourselves. "Rorty urges the conclusion that we must create ourselves and must do so by self-enriching aesthetic re-description" (Schustermann 246), as artists are supposed to do on every canvas. Dewey forged this path when he developed pragmatism and applied it to art, as having the power to encourage viewers to create their own experience:

> A beholder must create his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent. The perceiver, as with the artist, must order the elements of the whole that is in the form, although not in details, the same as the process of organization the creator of the work consciously experienced. Without the act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art. (Dewey 54)

The relationship of people to experience is an essential human quality. That Art has been infiltrated by commercial interests and manipulated away from public participation is more than sad: it destroys our comprehension and creation of self, and it kills creative thinking.

George Mueller's paintings of the last thirteen years provide us with a unified body of work that is best explained in Deweyan language. Mueller's artistic intent, his drive and mania for perfection are best explained by him, but the experience to be gained by entering his world is best explained by "doing," by sitting and spending time with the paintings themselves. It would be preferable to do so for as long as he did in creating them, though that is not entirely practical. But the longer one stays in touch with the imagery, the clearer the artist's vision becomes and the more connected that vision becomes to one's individual construction of experience. Understanding Mueller's work is precisely what Dewey had hoped for in this process of an "ingoing, outgoing, exchange of energy." Looking at the canvases in person provides all of the raw material for willing perceivers to participate in a process of creating and building experience from aesthetics.

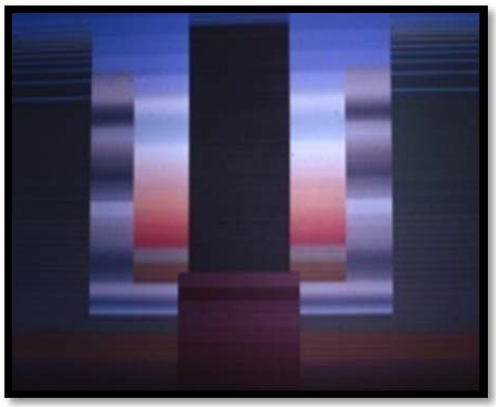


Fig. 50. *Summer*, 9'x 6', 1981 Collection of H. Wachtel

For the most part, the work is not so esoteric or out of our intellectual boundaries that we need feel intimated. It stems from one man's experience, which has been and still is, fortunately, somewhat unorthodox: a man who spends all day, every day, reading literature, listening to music, watching his world, sorting emotions, and painting. Few people in contemporary society, even working artists spend that much time and effort in the pursuit of aesthetics that Mueller insists he must have. In *Summer*, painted in 1981, a 6 foot by 9 foot canvas, Mueller creates a panoramic view which incorporates specific personal history but allows us to enter a place we have never been before, and yet we have. The environments in all of his paintings are important to spend time *in* because they

are obviously environments that he has been in himself over extended time. They are not merely ideas or shapes to play with, nor are they intellectual patterns or designs for the sake of being abstract: they are real places. He once said, “Sometimes I almost have the feeling that something else is really leading the life I should be leading, a parallel universe, like something else is going on at the same time that I’m doing what I’m doing. I like painting places like that, I like to think there are these places somewhere, they do exist somewhere”(Mueller Interview #6).

Also important to him are specific color chords created for each canvas. They are carefully planned before the painting is begun, each painting determined by the “key” it will be in; a major or minor, as a composer would decide before beginning to write music. A wall sized mural, a perfect surface, the colors seemingly woven into the canvas, each edge clear, no drips, no smudges, no re-working or evidence of under painting, gives us the sensation of looking at something machine-made. No one, not even the artist’s own hand disturbs the serene surface. We are in a secure, cool interior facing the outdoors. The canvas is the ultimate interior. We are finally on the other side of the canvas.

His craftsmanship is significant, for it speaks as strongly of the refinement and the clarity with which he sees, as it does of his careful planning to realize this “handprint” as perfectly as he conceives it. The subject matter is simple but the impact is impressive. To make this abstraction read as believable, the surface needs to be perfectly executed. He is not suggesting, as Greenberg would have it, that art is not reality but merely paint on canvas; rather, Mueller is deliberately fooling our senses as Renaissance painters had. Whatever we are looking at is real even though it is also about as abstract as one can be,

for there is really nothing except a series of finely painted tiny bands of vacillating color, each about an 1/8th of an inch or thinner.

We are being asked to experience a heavy, hot, summer in blue cool tones, with waves of heat, air, and water. We watch from inside a cool, quiet space. Even so, we wonder why this all works because Mueller has flipped established color rules: his black is not really black and reads as cool, his blue is hot rather than cold and it's tinged with a raspberry color that somehow suggests ice cream and liquidity rather than searing heat. The heat is all in the white, just enough of it to strangle, but the cool darkness keeps us a safe distance from this furnace that wriggles in front of us.

Mueller has unusual ideas about seasons and has never fared well in hot weather. In fact his behavior regarding climate is rather eccentric. A beautiful summer day will drive him indoors to a dark room. The least heat depletes him and he rarely spends time out-doors in the summer. Playing in his yard as a small child of 4 or 5 years, he was rolled tightly into a heavy carpet by older boys as a joke, who then forgot about him in the hot sun. With both his arms overhead, and heat building inside the carpet, he was unable to move, unable to breathe. He would have suffocated to death had his mother not chanced upon him. Since then, he claims an unusually sensitive relationship to space and temperature! It shows up at times in his paintings, this mistrust of heat and constriction. Dewey would have said that this is a perfect example of an emotion being used and re-used to develop an experience, and that experience informs latter parts of life and work.

In the painting the graded blue atmosphere is multi-layered in what appears to be separate sheets of color that hang and move. Near the top of the painting the blues infuse into the room, at bottom the reds leak in, but again shouldn't the cold colors be at the

bottom and warm at the top? The black room is not black although it is initially perceived as black. Similar to being in a dark room, one's eyes adjust and we find that the black is really a combination of many different colors, primarily maroon and soft browns. That this is such a large canvas, 9 feet long by 6 feet tall, we are able to imagine ourselves in a true physical place. The perfect symmetry of the canvas does not bore us, because there are so many small rhythms and subtle color changes going on all over the surface. The symmetry is an interesting part of what Mueller does. He prefers proportion and equilibrium, square shapes, because "no side calls attention to itself. It ties in with the symmetry in nature," and he finds it stable, unifying rather than decorative, as some people might. He prefers balance, "sometimes" (Mueller Interview #6).

It is interesting to compare *Summer* 1981 to his painting *Another Winter* 2008.

Fig. 51. *Another Winter*. 2008, 5'x 3 1/2'. Collection of the Artist.

Mueller loves cold. The cold for most of us can be uncomfortable or possibly life threatening, but Mueller feels secure in snow. His painting *Another Winter*, a floaty diorama that advances two roofs levitating calmly in the night, suggests a winter evening. The background consists of vast indecipherable spaces that could be either interior or exterior. Two columns, bands of white, are not connected to anything, and the roof shapes are not supported but weightless. A carefully constructed foreground and background of muted values with light filtering down from the top of the composition creates softness, a nostalgic quality, quiet as if hushed by snow. Unlike *Summer*, we can participate in this space rather than crouch behind dark protective forms. We can wander

through the still shapes and cast shadows completely alone and still feel secure. It is a fantasy place, dreamlike, but non-threatening. Repeating roof tops in close proximity, one hovering protectively over another suggesting a community of houses, snuggled under the snow at night. The feeling is similar to the representational drawings of his long night-walks around *Idle Hour Farm* and to his boyhood experiences of country, of nights at Greenwood Lake, or his first encounters with snow and nature. A gentle quality prevails throughout the composition.

Mueller refers to his painting *Our Town* as one of the most serene paintings he has ever done. The play, *Our Town*, by Thorton Wilder, is about time passing, but it is also about the quality of life, its simplicity, and the comfort of family and community that evaporates with age. This canvas is very simple and very symbolic. As with most of the work, the perfect surfaces are best appreciated in person; they look as if a mechanical stamp has imprinted ink uniformly into the weave of the canvas. A soft, mole-brown-purple makes the outer border suede-like, a texture wanting to be touched. The thick border surrounds basic shapes, focusing our attention and restraining the still forms. It has, too, the fragile look of an antique photographic plate. Inside a small window are a few simple but characteristic geometric patterns that correspond to Mueller's vocabulary of rooms, architecture. This is a perfectly balanced, geometric painting and everything about it is in the same key: a minor key. The interior shapes are locked together, each one holding and supporting the one next to it physically. The color and shapes are different, yet here is another quality that Dewey refers to: the dissimilar pieces are obviously from the same

Fig. 52. *Our Town*. 2006, 4'x4'
Collection of the Artist

experience. It's not only that they are painted in the same values: they belong together; there is unity within that box which speaks "serenity" and a bittersweet quietude.

The symmetry that Mueller likes to use, he uses here, a perfect square within a perfect square, but this is not a balance found in nature: this is a carefully constructed puzzle. All is tranquil within the margins of the painting, yet because of strange muted tones there is a funereal quality implying that careful placement of forms is a human construct that cannot be maintained forever, after all. The colors are those of memory, not colors that one sees in nature, like looking at a dusty family photo. As usual there are no people in this place. This is a secure place certainly, but one that you would not be able to move through; rather you would be locked into.

Fig. 53.*Beast in Fredon* 2000
Collection of the Artist

Mueller's longing for place is repeated in later canvases. *Homeless Holiday,* painted in 2001, echoes *Beast in Fredon* 2000. The beasty figure is as close to a self-portrait as Mueller gets, a figure that he claims is a sort of "alter ego," and his placement of it in bright colors, popping out of a modern architecture is joyous compared to *Homeless Holiday*. He said," it's the way you feel when you've had to chew your way out of a situation and then there is this coming up for air; you can finally breathe again" (Mueller Interview #6). The room is in bright light and appears to be turned upside down, while this beast profile, outlined in neon red, pops out, electrified with a kind of spontaneous energy. Conversely, *Homeless Holiday* attempts to capture that "dingy, hopeless, scattered way a homeless person feels who has no place in the world." Here is

the same beast though slightly transformed, still outlined in neon but fading, losing definition in a similar environment.

Fig. 54. *Homeless Holiday*, 2001, 4'x5'
Collection of the Artist

Media, driven by profits, plays a significant role in breaking up the continuity and relevance of experience for the average person. The critics and writers who might have brought fine art closer to everyone's experience for the past forty years or so have instead jumped on the train driven by consumer interests. When the art of a culture is "out of order," an individual's sense of self is built of things rather than aesthetic experience, and the soul of a culture collapses from inside. Mueller recently discussed how people see art today.

> People don't know how to look at paintings anymore…I don't know if they were taught, but people were encouraged in the past to be moved by imagery. Now the imagery moves them to the Mall. Peasants during the Middle Ages must have appreciated those huge murals in cathedrals, they must have spent time really looking at them, yes, reading them literally but in doing that, they must have become sensitized to the formalistic qualities that the artist put there as well, and they must have applied that sensitivity to other areas in their lives. They were really *seeing.* Seeing is an intrinsic part of the human experience and I don't for a moment believe that it's going on in the same way that it used to. (Mueller Interview #6)

It is the task of the critic to direct an individual to his/her own internal experience and allow a connection between the work of art and the experience to occur, not to simply create another sycophantic art form disguised as criticism that doesn't relate honestly to the work of art or to society at large. Each person's understanding is an experience: it is an egg shaped form within an individual, and the material that really unites all of us as human beings is the recognition that each parcel of our experience is a lonely and internal affair. Schustermann wrote:

> Art's special function and value lie not in any specialized, particular end but in satisfying the live creature in a more global way, by serving a variety of ends, and above all by enhancing our immediate experience which invigorates and vitalizes us, aiding our achievement of whatever further ends we pursue. Art is thus instrumentally valuable. (9)

Would it have made much difference to the life and work of George Mueller had Dewey enjoyed the same public notoriety in the art world as Greenberg had? Probably not. If Dewey and his pragmatism had steered the ship of aesthetics, would the world be a happier place? Unlikely. I remember standing, as a student, too often, in front of one of my own canvases trying to explain what I might do with the mess in front of me to the painter, Leon Deleuw. He would always answer me in the same thick French accent: "Yes, well, you know, *'if'* and if my grandmother had wheels she would have been a baby-carriage." I did know. His point was that one's task is to work with what is there in front of you. And what is here in front of us in the year 2014 is a poorly constructed house, an uncomfortable residence, a house of art that doesn't make much sense to very many people, and for the most part, cannot aid anyone in Rorty's dream of constructing

an aesthetic life of one's own. Certainly we would not look to contemporary art galleries to build our own aesthetic experience based on the quality of work in many of them. The material simply isn't there.

Coming around to the reality that the world has not grown on the same footing that you as an artist have over a period of years is disconcerting. Just as one wakes from a long dream, there is sometimes disappointment, confusion with the harsh place of reality. *This isn't Kansas* references the astute observation made by Dorothy in *The Wizard of OZ*, as she steps from a spinning house into a Technicolor weirdness. She awakes in a place that is different from where she began. The sensation that, as Mueller said, as a small boy, "things were all wrong then" is an under-statement, experienced by him, daily. Perhaps this is the aging process. No one can step into the same stream twice, but a complete change of riverbed seems to have occurred in the arts over the past fifty years or so. It cannot be changed "back" but it can be changed. Awaking at various stages of our lives, not sure of where we are or how we came to be there, is just another possibility for having another kind of experience. In *This isn't Kansa*s, we are again in a room, but not the dark and isolated one of *Summer.* Instead, we awake in a control-room of sorts. A black horizontal band keeps us from entering fully into the room, but we have a clear view of it and the landscape outside, and it's definitely *not* Kansas.

Fig.55. *This Isn't Kansas*.2003, 5'x5' Collection of H. Wachtel

The control room consists of strange shapes, some box-like and coffin-shaped forms; some are open, others pack more forms inside. Not quite human but organic

shapes lurk about. A monitor with a blue screen is perched in the upper left, and we are either looking out into a landscape or we are looking at several canvases of landscapes. Our attention is drawn to the back of this room where a large grid hangs from the ceiling interrupted by a Mt. Fuji-looking shape on the horizon. A line runs on the grid conforming to the shape of the mountain. The most recognizable space is a Midwestern plain, wheat colored, sand-colored with a strange twister shape coming towards us. A middle space with microtonal bands either keeps us from leaving or offers a way out, but do we really want to go out there?

Interspersed throughout his later career are paintings which clearly confront some major turning points in history, the cataclysmic events that changed culture and life indelibly: World Wars, The Wright Brothers, The Lindberg Baby Kidnapping, Black Ops and the Atom Bomb. These are not overt political statements; content is there under the surface, and as it arrives, Mueller enhances it while holding on to enough ambiguity to keep the doors of perception open for himself and his audience. Titles come after the painting is finished but they are never arbitrary: titles are fitted to content that he recognizes: “Most of the paintings begin to talk to me as I am doing them. Certainly by the time I’ve finished, I recognize what I’ve been trying to do” (Mueller Interview #6) .

Fig.56. *Breakfast at Alamogordo.*2011, 4’x5’ Collection of the Artist

Breakfast at Alamogordo is one of those strange pictures acknowledging the events that have taken the world out of Mueller’s control and often leaves him in emotional territory that is not even in the neighborhood of Kansas.

Obviously the title tells us that the painting is about Alamogordo, New Mexico on the morning after the bomb has

been successfully tested. It doesn't go into dramatic detail or envisage the inevitable slaughter of civilians. In fact, it makes no judgment about the bomb or its creation and existence itself; it is not Mueller's personality to bring that onto the canvas. But it is a strong abstract painting with an element of ironic humor, given its title.

> I am influenced by history. I am influenced by what has gone into me. Everything up until now ends up in my painting, an emotional response to being alive in this nuthouse world…like the Wright Brothers (inventing the airplane)…It was beautiful wasn't it? When raw invention could take place in humble surroundings, not owned by anyone other than the inventor, done innocently to begin powerful surges that changed history, changed everything forever. Beginnings have an intensity and beauty that is powerful all on its own. (Mueller Interview #6)

Like Dewey, Mueller too, understands powerful events as aesthetic bundles, even the destructive ones. True aesthetic world experiences give birth to new directions for global change, sometimes positive, very often negative; yet Mueller seems to be saying with his work that nothing more nor less can be expected from the human race:

> I often think about Oppenheimer and Alamogordo and World War II, just knowing that there was a shift in collective consciousness then at that very moment that affects everything we do right now. It has to be in the painting too. I thought of how sinister it would have been to have breakfast at Alamogordo that morning after testing the bomb in the desert…perhaps there are tours of children now in school busses, brought

> to the spot in New Mexico to buy souvenirs and have breakfast and drink their chocolate milk at Alamogordo. (Mueller Interview #6)

Given the enormity of Oppenheimer's success in the desert that day, regardless of how one perceives the invention, the necessity or cruelty of it, the magnitude of our ability to destroy all life should dampen one's appetite: like having breakfast after committing murder. Crouched behind a dark shape in the foreground is Mueller's "alter ego" beast again. There he is, looking sinister this time. The horizon proves a beautiful sunny morning with blue sky and pristine white clouds, a stunning morning on Earth for enjoying a light brunch at the picnic tables.

Looking Forward

> By the mid-eighties, a popularized form of critical art theory began appearing in various art magazines. The rhetoric suggested a reduction of options when it came to which artists the magazines considered acceptable for publication. Another result of this rhetoric was the introduction of the artist as a kind of rock star. Some artists, so inspired by this new model, began hiring assistants and press agents in order to fashion their image, to re-create themselves. (Morgan 5)

It is pointless to speculate what has been lost, forgotten or ruined by well-meaning professional critics or what the outcome of a different critical model, developed back in the 1940s, would have meant for artists like Mueller or the world in general. It is unfortunate that Mueller's work has not made more of an impact on the art world,

although in order for that to have happened he would have needed be a different person with a different set of skills, a different voice, different experiences to pass on; in many ways Mueller has unwittingly protected what makes his art unique and most valuable. The New York art critic Robert Morgan goes on to write:

> Today, what is commonly called the art world is less a community of creative people than a detached network of subscribers whose existence depends on a set of precise taxonomical divisions….Artists are becoming insecure about their role in society and their direction in becoming a significant cultural force…putting themselves in a position of competition with advertising and the most superficial entertainment media. (Morgan 5)

When asked how he has perceived the last ten years or so of his life and work and what it has meant to him, Mueller replied:

> Am I running out of steam and would there be anything wrong with that anyway? Have I been wasting my life? Has it all been a big mistake? The only consolation is that I have never felt any need to substitute anything else for painting. I mean, I have never said, "Gee, I wish I had been the owner of a corporation." Or "I should have been a dictator." No inclination to do anything other than what I've done. (Mueller Interview #6)

John Dewey, a gentle intellectual giant, fatherly, and non-judgmental, was passionate about art and civilization, yet he could be critical when necessary. Philosopher Richard Rorty writes, "Dewey is one of the few philosophers of our century whose imagination was expansive enough to envisage a culture shaped along lines different from those we

have developed in the West during the last three hundred years" (Rorty 85). Dewey's views may seem naive in today's calloused culture of hard-edged, financially aggressive commercial art. But, when Dewey said: "Esthetic experience is a manifestation, a record and celebration of the life of civilization, a means of promoting its development and is also the ultimate judgment upon the quality of a civilization" (Dewey 326), he meant every word. He would not have hesitated to offer speculation as to how the quality of our civilization would have been improved if… After all, art would not have prevented war, assassinations, or the creation of the atom bomb, but it might have offered alternatives for many individuals to build unique aesthetic selves, building civilization, one person at a time. What else could we possibly hope to accomplish in what Mueller refers to as this "nuthouse world?"

Fig.56. George Mueller in his studio. 2013

Rorty in his book, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, describes the possibilities of a "post-philosophical world view," an "alternative conceptual framework" for arts and culture in the perfect pragmatist world. He describes how the professions of philosophy, science, and the arts might coexist as they had been unable to in past philosophical frameworks. For one thing, Pragmatists do not tend to "erect Science as an idol to fill the place once held by God. It views science as one more genre of literature--or, put the other way around, literature and the arts as inquiries, on the same footing as scientific inquiry. (xliii).What we could be facing is a burgeoning community of young artists and writers who question the decisions made so long ago that brought us to a thin and pallid art. There is always the possibility of those willing to challenge the current market, to educate as much as possible, and to create honestly. Thanks to neo-pragmatist philosophers, Dewey may be undergoing a little cosmetic surgery and resuscitation in his future. Perhaps we cannot go "back," but we might be entering an exciting period in the history of art when the arts take on responsibility once again and the significance of aesthetic experience is understood by a frustrated and exploited society who must, at some point, come to recognize the emptiness and futility of living on technology and consumerism alone. That is, "If, " as Rorty writes, " history allows us the leisure to decide such issues, (and then) only by a slow and painful choice between alternative self-images" (xliv).

Appendix A

Contents

Interviews with George Mueller

The following interviews were recorded throughout 2012 and 2013 in George Mueller's studio. I asked questions that, as a painter, I was interested in having answered. His thoughts were honest and articulate about his work, life, and feelings and I then used the transcribed interviews to weave his own words into my ideas about Dewey, Pragmatism, and Art in a way that I feel honestly reflects both our ideas on the subjects.

#1: Methods of Working

Interview with George Mueller 2/13/12

J. McWilliams: I would like to begin by asking you something about how you develop a painting, your process. Earlier you mentioned something about Pragmatism. Do you consider yourself a pragmatist?

Mueller : Well, I don't know what I would call myself. I am a painter. I don't generally apply words to the painting, I just do them. I have read Dewey and Wittgenstein and I like to read philosophy, but I don't get bogged down in all that. I guess what I mean by pragmatism is that I put in whatever works best in a painting. Whatever works best is what I use. That has nothing to do with formal rules established by aestheticians.

JMcW: Then how do you know what works best?

Mueller: I can sometimes see it, especially lately, even while I'm doing it, making a change, before I even stand back to take a look, I know I've done the right thing. And you might well ask, how can it be right if there isn't anything real? It is an inner knowledge that applies to any act of creativity and especially to pictures with parts of a whole that do not appear to fit...throw it away and put something else in that does fit. Roosevelt said about the U.S., "I don't believe it is finished, we're still inventing it." Making a picture is a process that needs to be fluid. You can't be stubborn about sticking in things that don't work.

JMcW: Yes, but how do you know what works best?

Mueller: A student once asked me what it was like for me to see something that I really found fault with and the nearest that I can describe it is that it makes me feel slightly sea-sick. Joyce said that a great work of art had to have "harmony, wholeness, and radiance." Whatever *that* meant, but you're making decisions in the outer world based on your inner knowledge of how space, color, line, "fit"… should fit. And Greenberg said something like "the difference between traditional painting and modern painting is the difference between painting what's on the outside and painting what's on the inside."

JMcW: This inside, is that based on memory?

Mueller: The visual world--inside--could be memory. My mother once told a story about when I was a very small boy, after an enormous snowstorm in Newark where I grew up, she lifted me up to the window. I vaguely remember that scene, looking out over these fantastic white hulking forms that enclosed our street. She said that while we were watching, our neighbor came out to shovel his walk and I became inconsolable...I threw a tantrum. She said that I kept saying: "He's ruining it." Ruining what? Well, ruining the organization, the what: aesthetic?? The way it fit together in my eye--certainly not the neighbor's… It was my first memory that the world could be beautiful and perfect or truly wrong and ugly. We lived on 5th street then, in Newark, and the street was made of soft red brick, covered with a canopy of green tall trees. One day the WPA workers came and covered the entire street with black tar! Same thing, I was distraught for a long while. Life was all wrong on that street. Something that had been so perfect was now lost, changed, *wrong*. On another day the same crew came back and scraped the tar off again! I have no idea why, but it made all the difference to my well-being as a little kid. No one else really noticed, I believe.

JMcW: Do you remember anything else that held that sense of aesthetic for you as a young boy?

Mueller: Music. Music most certainly even before I became aware of art. Music was on the radio, and I was immediately enthralled by music but also to skip around the dial and hear Stravinsky, Berg, and so on...the sound was a revelation and later film certainly and books, buildings, architecture, almost everything.

The wrong or the right in music is very similar to painting. Music either makes sense or not, feelings arise: unsettling, exciting, by the placement of sounds in relation to one another, is completely an abstraction. Shopenhauer said, “Music takes over when philosophy leaves off.” And that’s true. I never learned to play an instrument, never wanted to. For me, it was enough to listen. Beecham once said about the English, “They don’t really like music, they only like the noise it makes.” Maybe that’s how I am. Notes in relation to one another are exactly like color, like color put together. They make sense or not. The first time I heard Debussy live, not a recording, it was a revelation to me! I actually heard the individual notes coming out to the audience in separate spaces, they floated, suspended separately. For the first time, I truly understood Impressionism. It was transparent. I heard Impressionism. Sounds are like color.

JMcW: Do you know the artist Stanton MacDonald?

Mueller: Oh, Christ no! I never in my life wanted to do anything like that! What was it?

JMcW: Synchromism? I think?

Mueller: What horseshit…no, I mean what does a Mozart piano sonata say to you? because the sounds are nothing, they are not any things--they are an abstraction--abstract forms, collected in the same space. I like abstraction in painting because I do not have the urge to spell it out, actually an aversion to spelling it out.

JMcW: Not spelling it out?

Mueller: Well, you're back to the old warhorse: form and content, not spelling it out opens greater possibilities for the listener/viewer. If you paint recognizable objects in a picture, they could be magnificent but they pose a limitation, they confine you to what they're portraying, you can appreciate how it's done technically but you can't get around it. In an abstraction you're engaging my dream and yours, my memory and yours. The content can be broadened; can reverberate in an almost limitless way, can't it? Well, ambiguity in painting is for another day.

JMcW: And people? People in paintings?

Mueller: No. I've never had any real interest in painting or drawing people. I have done. I know that I can draw; I can draw accurately, logically, realistically, but, it was always about space, color, organizing those elements for me. Organization still seems to be what interests me. Braque said that he welcomed Cubism because he could finally do something really well. In other words, he couldn't have "done" Delacroix, but he could do Cubism. He was able to speak a certain dialect, and I feel that way about drawing figures. Beethoven struggled to make melodies while Mozart's melodies flowed like water. So for me, I wouldn't have been considered an artist at all in the sixteenth century.

JMcW: For you and the generation of painters when you first began, were you intimidated by the Renaissance?

Mueller: Painters are still intimidated by the Renaissance. If they're not they certainly should be, which is right. If you can't do what Raphael did in the Renaissance then you can't be a Renaissance painter. Fortunately I wasn't born in the sixteenth century. I can be a twentieth century painter.

JMcW: So, let's get back to your process. How do you begin a painting? Is there one process? Does it differ from one painting to another?

Mueller: Sure it differs. It differs even while I'm working on the same painting.

JMcW: Well, OK. I know that you begin with careful drawings that are then transferred to a canvas by a whole method of string and rules and craziness that gives me a headache, so I won't go there now, but then, you have the drawing on the canvas, and then what?

Mueller: Beats me!

JMcW: Do you begin with, say, the "juiciest" form? And then work on one piece at a time? Is it an overall process?

Mueller: Honestly it varies each time I begin a painting. It's never the same. It's always a problem and I'm always working for ways to solve the problem. It always has to do with space and color. In the old days when I worked that early painterly style there was no drawing, I just started with paint on the canvas. I felt it was too easy in some ways. I needed to slow it down. Then I decided to draw. I began those stripe paintings: *Cape*

Cod, *Grand Canyon*, the *Photographist*, etc. I had a definite goal; I had a sense of what they would look like. I didn't want areas to be harsh, and the objects: I wanted them to gleam, like objects you could meditate on. I felt that by placing (like notes) one small stripe next to another, like Seurat, that the paint would have life, it would glow, it would move on the canvas, and I think I was right in doing that, I felt it was right. It was successful. I have never seen anyone do anything like those paintings before; I felt it was completely mine. They were "microtonal color": that was mine. It was like breaking down an octave into more than eight notes. And you can't get color like that in any other way. The stripe paintings were torture, but I could work on subtleties then. And each had to be carefully planned because those striped areas fight with each other and can ruin the whole composition. They have to be resolved before putting the paint down or the canvas is left too scarred.

You can move from one color to another in a painting, like going from blue to tan in a graded way, a gradient; that idea repelled me: the *soupy* look. So, I knew I just had to grit my teeth and rule 1/8th inch lines and tape them and work with them, and the results were like colored gas. Enormous amount of work! I painted a lot of those, I can't even remember how many and most sold, because I have only a few left. I became tired of the labor involved.

I always begin a drawing sensing like a musician, what key this is going to be in. What does this key say? This is going to have a certain look about it. There is always the adjustment of one color to another, keying up certain colors; drowning others. What to do first? Where to start? Maybe I should start with an area because I know it's going to be

the most difficult, then, if I can get through that, I know I can handle the rest of this thing. That's technical stuff but, it's what I remember.

I sometimes imagine colors while I'm drawing. I'm trying to get a sense of what "key" it's in, what is the tonality? A-tonal or tonal? Is this going to be an eye-bender? Or is it going to make me grit my teeth?

After the porch paintings, the paintings based on architectural forms, old Newark buildings, I settled into the stripe paintings, then the large blocks of color pictures that I have been doing for the past ten years or so. I guess they are now a sort of ragged series, not like the party line, but they are connected somehow, digressions/excursions, into something that hopefully doesn't look too much like the one before it.

It is…it is like Morandi…filtered experience, like poets who somehow filter their own lives, their own life experience into some form. The titles of paintings always come later after they are there; I can see them; I can recognize something, like the paintings: *Southern Redoubt*, or *Downeck Newark*, as soon as I saw them, I knew that I knew them, but I never have any intention or subject matter in mind when I begin. And of course, it would all be delightful if the whole thing weren't so fraught with doubt and suspicion.

JMcW: What? Suspicion?

Mueller: Yeah, the whole thing, the whole endeavor, the whole shift into modernity...when you're midway through a painting and think...Oh man, maybe we *all* went down the wrong road! You know maybe we never should have come this way! And how are we getting out? And even in this realm, maybe I'm not that good.

JMcW: Too late now. I had a teacher who used to say about "ifs," "Yes, and *if* my grandmother had wheels she'd be a baby carriage. So what?"

Mueller: That's right! Best to stay away from that thinking. I've done what I've done and I can't stop doing it now. Though I wonder sometimes what it would be like to have lived doing something without the cloud of doubt over my head my whole life.

JMcW: If your work had enjoyed more notoriety in your lifetime, would you feel differently about the "road" you're on now?

Mueller: It would have been nice to have had more notoriety, more money and all that, but I'm convinced that even if I had, it wouldn't have changed the doubt. I always felt connected to Kline, because it was seeing his work, in his studio, as a young man, that I first felt charged with this…what? Life? This need to paint this way? Whatever, it was life changing for me. Years ago, Catherine Kuh either wrote or said about Franz Kline that she was on the Cape one afternoon with friends, and they saw a car on the dunes, and someone said, "Hey, that looks like Franz Kline's car," and they went over; it was. Kline was sitting with his car door open watching the sea and he said, "I don't know, I don't know if what I'm doing has any meaning. I'm selling pictures, maybe this is all too easy. Everything I'm painting, I'm selling…what's this all about?" But you know, he died very young and then Rothko. Why did he commit suicide?

Anyway, I'm about to begin another painting: no idea why or what it will be about. These paintings aren't related like those in the earlier series, it's not as if I can't wait to begin

another, not an urge; more like a weird “need” to begin something, work on something, finish something…something.

JMcW: Begin, work, finish?

Mueller: Well, perhaps, that’s about it…

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 # 2: Childhood
Interview with George Mueller: 4/4/12

J.McWilliams: Let's begin with where were you born, or with any circumstances that you can tell me about your childhood.

Mueller: I was born in a Catholic hospital: St. Barnabas Hospital, a redbrick building on the corner of High Street. My mother had been a Catholic and gave up her religion when she married my father who was a Lutheran, although neither of them ever practiced any religion that I can recall.

JMcW: I remember your telling me about your early childhood; you were confined to a very small backyard, never allowed to go out on the street because you lived in what your parents believed to be a dangerous neighborhood.

Mueller: The entire space in the back was surrounded by very tall boards--solid--no one could see in and we couldn't see out. There was a dog that barked somewhere. Who knows what went on beyond those high board fences in the back yard? We weren't allowed in the store (whenever we went there we would cause some problem), and my grandmother would chase us upstairs or out to the back yard, which consisted of intricate flower beds with small walks between the beds and as children, well there just wasn't much room to do anything. The store was great because there was candy in there, but we weren't given any. My sister and I would carefully open the bubblegum packets to steal the baseball cards when no one was looking. My grandmother was not a particularly warm person; in fact she was a drag; we didn't like her and I'm guessing she didn't care much for us either. She would scold us constantly in the yard, there was nowhere else to

play and clearly her flowers were more important than her grandchildren. The yard was small, the space was confined, controlled and the outside world, we were led to believe, was a very dangerous place! Why? We were never told.

JMcW: A little like being in a space station on Mars. You can probably guess where I'm going with this interview. I'm reading a biography just now about Dorothea Lange and was struck by the fact that she had polio as a child; one of her legs was withered and she always walked with a limp. Her biographers and her son refer to her disability, which haunted her entire life, as the force that drove her subject matter later as a photographer. She always referred to her favorite subjects as "walking wounded."

I suppose I'm looking to identify what forces drove your artistic preferences later in life. "Space" then was definitely something that your early experiences must have been shaped by…or is that too much of a stretch?

Mueller: I don't know. I wasn't aware that I was being contained while I was contained; it was all I knew, how much space does a three or four year old need to develop? I was definitely confined to interiors though, and when my sister took us out for a walk around the block, I felt something very like panic. My parents had moved us into our own apartment on 5th Street. I was five years old by then and the day we moved, my older sister said, "Come on, let's go for a walk." And I remember that at the time I was convinced I would never again see my parents alive. The world was flat, we'd be lost forever, fall off, but the world turned out to be round after all and it opened a whole new life for me. At the new neighborhood, I made friends. The street was very pleasant: tree

lined, red brick street. I had friends then and there was stick ball, stoop ball, ring olivieo, a sort of a tag/ball game, lots of physical freedom, games on the front porches of those old buildings. We played marbles, built model planes, but I don't recall anything traumatic that made me pick up a brush and need to paint.

JMcW: Well, what did make you first pick up a brush and want to paint?

Mueller: Greenwood Lake. Part of every summer, perhaps a month, my mother, aunts, cousins (the men stayed behind to work) left the city for Greenwood Lake in New Jersey: cabins without electricity or plumbing. It was fantastic being there. The air was cool; we played games/read by kerosene lamp, slept on the porch. At first it was just a kind of exhilarated freedom but later I began to love that strangeness of night, of dew falling, of darkness, of the blackness outside, the look of early light. There was a boy's camp somewhere nearby and at every dusk someone would play taps. It was like a movie set. I used to think about perhaps writing something down, writing something about the feelings the scene evoked: an essay or story. Like it wasn't enough to be there, you had to do something about it. Already you're in trouble.

And when I was riding my bike past this one barn, maybe I was ten or eleven, I made a plan to come back the next day with some paper and pencils and sketch that barn. I loved the way it sat there, it looked so *perfect.* So I made some pencil drawings, and when I went back to the city I tried to paint them with watercolor. Then sketching became something that I liked to do. When my buddy and I were maybe 14 or 15 we would hop on the backs of trucks in Newark and ride anywhere with our sketching-stuff, we were looking for things to sketch.

But in my life, no one dies, there is no polio, it's uneventful, no trauma, violence. I didn't question anything. My parents didn't talk a great deal of their past but I never asked. I don't think I cared. Everything looked fine to me.

#3: The Webern Painting and the Early Paintings

Interview with George Mueller : 1/15/13

JMcWilliams: When you looked at one of your paintings from the 1950s, you called it your "Motherwell Period." What did you mean by that? How well did you know Robert Motherwell?

Mueller: I met him, I didn't know him all that well, but his work influenced me immediately. My wife Juliana had studied with him. My close friends, Carmen (*Cicero*), Bud Sandal, Babe Shapiro were all students of his; Carmen had become good friends with him. I knew his work from years before I met him. I was immediately attracted to that style of painting, the instant that I saw it. It was like seeing Klein's work for the first time, it was like recognizing something. It opened up patterns, ways of seeing and thinking that had not been open to me before, like Charlie Parker's playing, no one had ever done anything like it before. It's like finding friends you didn't know you had. You didn't know they were there but then you were glad they were, and sad when they weren't there.

I was already showing in galleries and selling when I finally met Motherwell; he was older than us. Not surprisingly, I liked him immediately. Carmen introduced me to him at the Cape. We were having drinks; mostly trying to get Motherwell's boat started that day. It was one of those wooden Kris-Krafts? Very labor intensive. I liked him very much as a person, but I felt as if we had already been introduced through his work long before I met him. His kind of painting spoke very clearly to me. I felt very bad when he died. I was at

The Cape with Carmen. We were on Carmen's porch when the call came; he had had a stroke and died in the ambulance before they could get him to the hospital. It was a very sad day. I remember asking him about the "new" painting, the "Pop Art" stuff going on, and he said that he had been standing on Madison and 57th Street one day when he was struck by an overwhelming feeling that he was very "old and in the way." Not long after that, he had the stroke. I felt very sad about what he had felt, the end of that era giving way especially to the mediocre stuff that followed. My first paintings, my first serious paintings were influenced by both Klein and Motherwell: Noumena I and II, Spad, etc. and Baziotes, early Baziotes. Frank Roth was mad about Baziotes and got me interested in him. All of my early paintings were from that period in time when I was most excited by those older painters. Motherwell said he had helped Baziotes hang a show and Baziotes wanted to take the whole thing down, you know, he wasn't so sure of himself. Motherwell said that he had to talk Baziotes into leaving his show up. It impressed me at the time that these guys had been unsure of what they were onto and I suppose that insecurity stays with you no matter what you're doing or how successful you become. I guess it should be that way.

Those Noumena paintings and the early paintings came before the spontaneous Vivisection, diamond shapes I was doing. I had been reading a lot of Kant, his distinctions between phenomena and noumena, a shadow version of phenomenon. You know, when you flirt with ideas that don't really correspond to what you're doing but you *almost* think they do. Kant had written about the thing in itself that you never see. We only see our version of things because that's the way we're put together. But there is a real thing behind each thing. The painting implied that this was a real thing that you

could never see before, even though it's not a recognizable thing. Kant was in the air in those days. I was reading a lot of philosophy: Berkley, etc. and, sometimes fragments or phrases would turn up in the titles of my paintings. I'm not sure how much they were really related. I remember one painting: *Stage Fragment-Faust.*

JMcW: Where is that painting now?

Mueller: Oh, that painting sold; I have no idea where it is now. I would love to see that one again.

JMcW: And those early paintings in the 50s were successful?

Mueller: Oh yes, they were almost all sold, in fact, I have only a few slides left and they were a large body of work in the mid to late 50s. They began my relationship with the Guggenheim and the dealer, Grace Borgenicht [*Borgenicht Gallery*]. In 1956 I began the series that were wild looking--painterly-- *Vivisection*, mid-late 50s. Grace wanted me to continue painting what had been selling so well. I had several shows with her and she sold everything right away for high prices; that was good, but she was not happy when I showed up with something new and untried. So, I just walked out. I never thought of my paintings as "periods" or anything like that, I would just think, "I've had enough of this" and I would have another idea. I was looking for a spontaneous response, no drawing at that time, and color. I didn't plan anything. I think one of the best pieces of that period was *Pleasant Street*. Juliana taught 3rd grade at that time and a child in her class had died, a little boy. He lived on Pleasant Street and it really seemed significant to me. I had no reason for changing styles that I was aware of. It was an urge to do something with an idea that I had had. Something in my head gets tired and I try something else.

JMcW: And you left Borgenicht Gallery after doing so well there?

Mueller: It seemed to me that it was Grace Borgenicht's job to sell my paintings; they weren't *her* paintings, her ideas. It was my work. I wasn't going to hang around painting stuff that she thought I should paint. So I took my canvases out of there the same day. I went to Oklahoma in 1959, I was asked to teach out there. Jo [*Juliana*] and I were married out there in Oklahoma City. When I came back I signed with Grippi Gallery; then Waddell after that.

JMcW: Did you ever do anything to deliberately enhance your "career"? Did you never feel the need to chase fame?

Mueller: Waddell was always trying to get me to go to these parties. I went to a few, got drunk. What? What was I supposed to do? I painted the pictures, tied them to the roof of my car, got them to the gallery; was I supposed to wear a clown hat too? I tried. I went to a few parties. I remember one very loud party… Rothko was there. The music was so loud, the floor was moving. Rothko was in the corner, he was convinced the building was going to collapse on us. Once I threw up on John Ferren's shoes. These were stupid parties that had nothing to do with liking art or seeing paintings.

JMcW: Tell me about this latest painting that you've done: *Homage to Anton Webern*. I know that it was very difficult to do and that's it's a smaller version of a large painting of yours that had been destroyed in a fire. Why the need to "re-do" that painting?

Mueller: I felt very sad about that painting. It had been bought by Harold Wachtel. Harold has collected a lot of my work over the years; a lot of the pieces are on walls in his homes and in his office buildings. That particular one was rolled and stored in a basement, the original painting was 18 feet long and it was very labor intensive piece of work. I doubt that I could, at this point in my life, have the physical strength to reproduce that. But I always loved that painting, it was worth the work, it was a good painting. And it couldn't be salvaged after that fire, it was so badly damaged. It made me sick to think about it. It stayed in my mind that it was lost forever.

I had drawings and pictures of it. Every time I came across some reference to it, I felt upset about it. So I decided to re-do it but on a smaller scale. There was no way I could do another 18 foot piece and I don't have the studio space now to do that. So, it was a way to review that lost one. I felt I had a job that was hanging over my head.

JMcW: If only you could do that with people or life… just go back, do it over.

Mueller: Some things might be worth doing over.

JMcW: The original one was from the *Summit Street,* the "Porch Paintings" series, that you did in the 1960s. It had musical notation over the composition?

Mueller: After I had done a number of the porch series, I began to do weird things with the compositions, bending things, folding them in, doubling the porches. They were still architectural but they were changing. I did a few with music that I was particularly interested in at the time, the first was the painting that Glen (*Davis*) has: It's a porch, with the first movement of a Webern String Quartet on the front porch.

JMcW: What is this latest one?

Mueller: Obviously it's a piece by Anton Webern. It's a favorite piece of mine. *OPUS 10 no.3* and I liked the idea and the challenge of combining two things that are meaningful to me. But how do you put a piece of music on a porch? How do you put someone's music in one of your paintings and stay in the abstract realm? I wanted to stay away from literalness, but I had this initial taste from something I had read by Wilhelm Reich, about being in a Russian town, snow, being in an attic, with old furniture and frosted light, and I wanted to get that feeling in the painting of a place of nostalgia with sound. So I gave myself this problem. First: re-create this painting that was forever lost, but I felt needed to be in the world, and then, layer music over the painting so that you're hearing a piece of music over the visual.

JMcW: Why do you give yourself problems?

Mueller: When you're used to working in a state of wondering: how this is going to work, it is an anxious way to be, but it's better than not working. When I'm not working I feel useless. I've become used to the cycle, the cyclic way that I sometimes make for myself: what comes next?

JMcW: So what are you actually experiencing when working on a painting that has to do with music?

Mueller: Well, I'm hearing the music. I know it well. I am attempting to lay down sound over painting. The result is this painting with visually competing things, like hole punch cards from those old IBM punch cards, or player piano rolls because, I don't want to paint "notes." It's my own transcription, my own notation that is very true to the music,

but also stands out from the surface of the painting. From a distance it seems as if these little notations are actually floating in front of the grays. The grays, the quality of grays, were very important to this painting. It took me a long while just to figure out how to mix those to be just the way I wanted them to be and, I think it works. Standing back, these musical notations are just hanging there in front of the painting, they seem almost to be casting little shadows, but of course, they're not.

I worked out a big background with a blizzard of little specks, even though the piece is a short piece of music. Webern's music is A B music... a distillation of brief tones, like homeopathic medicine, a tone poem that lasts. "A whole novel in a sigh," Schoenberg said. A life that is very brief. And of course the porch provides a nice geometric backdrop for contrapuntal activity. It was not brief to paint though, six months of very tedious, intense labor. I don't want to do that again.

JMcW: But you said something before, about that original painting *needing* to be in the world?

Mueller: Yes, well, you want to hear--craving to hear something--you're glad it's in the world. I hear this piece as almost a collaborative effort with Webern now, not just like wearing headphones, it's woven into my own painting. Music is the most abstract. Being with the painting now is like thinking like you do in a nature walk, something inexpressibly beautiful, not using words but instead the dimension of black and white with color notation.

JMcW: Do you feel that you need to have your work around you? You put it out there and you seem to miss not having pieces at your disposal; are they like pieces of yourself?

Mueller: Well, look. The paintings are for sale because I'm a painter and I'm supposed to make paintings that are for sale. But if I could keep everything I've ever done, yes, I like to know where these things are and it would be great to be able to see some of the paintings that I feel were important to me…to see them again. There are a couple of paintings that Wachtel has that I would love to look at again and I should have kept better records of things, but I lost track.

JMcW: Some paintings are "important" in what way?

Mueller: They help to pinpoint who I am, where I am and come from and all that, in the same way that one's own progeny does, I think. Your children give you a point of reference for yourself and your life, don't they? They are *of* you, reflect you, define you, in a sense and you've had a history with your children that is unique, that involves an entire set of thinking and behavior and actions that in a much smaller sense one has with one's work. Your life, work, children…they are all what you make of them and leave behind, no?

#4: The Summit Street Paintings

Interview with George Mueller: 6/4/13

JMcW: You left the New York metropolitan area in 1959, after marrying Juliana. You had already gone through two phases of painting by that time: what I call the Noumena Series and then the Vivisection Paintings, when you began to suddenly paint porches realistically.

Mueller: We moved to #9 Summit Street in East Orange, New Jersey when I began the Porch Paintings. I was also painting the Vivisection paintings, but I naturally began to drift into something else. I don't know why. We had rented this house with big rooms, nothing much in them because we couldn't afford nice things; furniture. The house was probably built before World War I; the workmanship was beautiful, curved leaded glass in wide windows, with window seats looking out onto a porch, a huge marble fireplace. The marble was a soft sort of orange color that went up to the ceiling and the living room was sunken; I could sit on the floor of the living room and look out on the floor of this wide porch. On every side were parking lots and square brick red apartment buildings. So there was nothing really made up about those paintings. They began as realistic portrayals of what I actually saw everyday: a kind of understanding of the way people had lived compared with the stark and ugly way people were living. There was one tree.

I just got the feeling one day to draw the razor sharp light that was coming onto the porch. I hadn't drawn in a while and I drew the porch very carefully. When I showed the

drawing to Carmen Cicero[1], he seemed kind of impressed by it, so I decided to make a painting of the drawing. The first painting was very difficult and took forever because I was still working in oils then. I knew that if I painted this realistic image of a plain ordinary porch, it couldn't be a little dinky kind of easel painting, it had to be meticulous and big…to get the sharp edges I had to mask and the drying took forever. Frank Roth[2] came by one day and told me about this new stuff: acrylic paint, and it was amazing. The stuff dried in minutes and I could get quite a lot done in one day! Using acrylics also changed slightly the quality of color and chiascuro so the overall effect was very sharp, crackly. And then I just went for that theme. I did a few, then began to fool around with rhythm of the verticals, doubling over porches, adding musical scores, changing colors, they eventually became abstract, hard edged, geometric paintings but I hadn't started out to paint porches, it just happened.

JMcW: Were you not concerned at all with your "career," with the fact that you had already built an audience and buyers and were favorably impressing galleries and critics? Didn't you think at all about continuing the work that appealed to them, or that you might be jeopardizing your future by changing directions so often?

Mueller: No. I mean who are you working for anyway? If you're a painter you're working for yourself. You're self-employed, you're responsible for what you do. I did paint a "commission" for Harold Wachtel because he asked me to but also because what

[1] Carmen Cicero, painter and close friend
[2] Frank Roth, painter, close friend, and former brother-in-law

he wanted was something that I wanted to do anyway. I don't think I would have been willing to paint something out of character, just for the money.

I never cared what was going on in the art world, about what so and so wrote about which gallery show, I only cared about what was going on in my own head and what pleased me. I wasn't afraid to switch to realistic painting and I always admired realistic painting, like I love and admire abstract painting. What's the difference, really? That sort of thing appeals to critics but not to painters. I think it was Charles Ives who said that if a man likes the ocean and the mountains, can't he live somewhere where he can see both? Eventually painting the porch realistically began to bore me so I played with the same motif in other ways until eventually the verticals became horizontal stripes and I was painting those "microtonal" paintings and I had worked my way back to abstraction again. I suppose they suggested landscapes to me, but most people don't see that in them. I never wanted to annoy people with painting. My work was never political. It didn't have a statement or agenda. It wasn't about bugging the bourgeoisie. I wanted to make things that looked good to me, like a movie that I might want to see again. When I go back now, a painting of mine turns up that I haven't seen in years, I never cringe and think, "Man, I would like to be able to change that, or I wish I hadn't done that." No, it holds up pretty well for me and I feel good about that.

JMcW: Didn't Joseph Albers once offer you a job teaching at Yale??

Mueller: According to Grace Borgenicht, he was very excited about my work, came into the gallery to see it and had her call me up. He wanted me to go up there with him and teach. Well, you know, it's been my experience that people are always either soft-soaping you or ignoring you. When they have a reason for complimenting you that's fine, but then they forget your existence. It's better not to get side tracked from painting. I suppose I should have called him, at least to explain that I just don't have the personality for that sort of thing.

JMcW: What did the paintings of a porch represent for you? Did they bring up nostalgia for your childhood? Was it only about the geometric possibilities?

Mueller: Nostalgia. There can be nostalgia there, warm light, suffused light. I wasn't thinking that at the time. I wasn't trying to make a statement. I'm always working for something that makes me feel good, feelings that don't unsettle me. I wanted peace in my life... I always have.

I suppose the porch represents an older, quieter time. The architecture represented the same kind of mood that Ives' music represented for me…American, reflective, regretful, in a way…homesick against this unrelenting machine outside…This was the stuff that I listened to all the time. The music was abstract but it was also clearly something about an earlier time in our history. Ives was constantly on my mind, and I was in a state of feeling things like they used to be and I identified with people like Ives, who worked for an insurance company, and Wallace Stevens, also insurance or William Carlos Williams, a doctor, but they were working people who were in the world dealing with the machinery every day. And I was too in those days. From the time I married Juliana, she and I both worked, we both taught. I taught a lot and all over the place: Summit, Morristown,

Englewood, Bloomfield, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, East Orange, but I also worked in the audio business, modifying audio equipment, designing sound systems and speakers. Those were the easy ways of making money; the hard way was painting houses or crawling around on rooftops and through attics, but we both wanted to live in the country, we had to pay rent.

JMcW: But you were still represented by a gallery?

Mueller: Yes, and selling work, but that needed to be supplemented. I went from Borgenicht Gallery to Grippi Gallery. I really liked Joe Grippi very much. His gallery merged with Wadell and I was represented by Grippi-Wadell until Wadell formed his own gallery, and after that I was with him and then with Straley briefly. I had shows regularly. My work always sold…the porch paintings sold well. The Whitney has one, there is another one, the largest one was for the town hall in Trenton, but I also spent thirty years as a laborer in addition to being an "artist" with "colleagues" who had no idea what I really did for a living or who I was much of the time.

I was still doing the porch paintings when we moved out of the city altogether in 1961. We moved to Drakestown Road in Long Valley, New Jersey, really out in farmland. I had always wanted to live in the country from the time I was a child spending summers at Greenwood Lake. All of those images were soaked in and I always knew that I wanted to get back to them on some level. I've managed to remain out of the city for the rest of my life. Never wanted to live in Rome/Paris/ New York, now I hate even going into the city. It doesn't feel right. I spend hours watching leaves, makes me feel good.

JMcW: You also began to draw small landscape drawings when you moved out of the city. You were still painting abstract, geometric shapes based on the porch, but you began to draw wonderfully romantic, carefully rendered landscapes.

Mueller: Balance. I was drawing landscapes at the same time that I was painting geometric porch paintings. I was just bowled over by the land when I first moved to Long Valley. I had this almost compulsive need to draw scenes, carefully, to record, to caress, and slow everything down. I was so awed by the land and those drawings very nearly all sold and I made many, many of them. I continued to want to draw like that for years. I was so in love with doing them. I never wanted to paint like that, but I loved doing small-scale articulate drawings of the land. I would go out walking at night and wander around by myself until daybreak. We rented a house on a farm on Schooley's Mountain, a huge farm, 350 acres, *Idle Hour Farm* which was a joke because there were precious few "idle hours" for the owner. I would clear brush and create paths and hike for miles at all hours. I would wander around in the dark with a full moon, come home and draw. Most of the drawings, although from memory, were of real places. I seldom just made those things up. I think it established a sort of balance with abstract painting that I was so involved in at the time. People from the city bought all of those drawings of the landscape.

JMcW: So, what is that about, this feeling "good" or balanced or the reason why city people would want those country drawings, or the reason why you want or feel the need to do them?

Mueller: It's always easier to talk about how than why. At a certain point I stopped doing those drawings. A friend asked me why I just didn't do more drawings for money. I

can't just turn them out. They're not table legs! It took a lot of time and I was seeing something at that time that I felt I had to do, not like taking snap shots. Why? I would feel excited by the thought that, "this is going to make a good drawing if I do it right."About grabbing a piece of something and holding it fast. All the writers, everyone has tried to penetrate the mystery of "why." It is a mystery because it is something more than just owning it in a way, knowing it, but of course there is that too.

JMcW: OK: How?

Mueller: Simplify, organize, find your way through it, to take down and keep it forever...keep it intact...like Kurt Schwitters…forever nailing things down so they wouldn't change. All other art moves: reading, continuum and film and music, but painting is a static art and allows the painter to hold onto something in an intimate way, stopping time and slowing the message up, so that anyone seeing it may hop on board and get it too.

The culture in this country makes you feel uncomfortable if you're a painter. "The business of America is business," whereas in other European countries perhaps, there was, perhaps still is, a tolerance and understanding on the part of the masses, people who think artists are like priests, they're advising you, giving you advice about what you look at, standing outside of life and observing, doing the business of observing for the business man. You've got a different kind of job if you're an artist, in a way...you point things out to people and you make them see something that they won't notice otherwise.

#5: Microtonal Paintings and Music

Interview with George Mueller: 6/9/13

JMcW: It seems looking through reviews that Michael Lenson of the *Newark News* was a particular fan of your work. He wrote the Sunday "Realm of Art" column and you're almost always featured there. He seems to have chronicled your career in a way. Was he a particularly good friend of yours?

Mueller: Michael Lenson, no. I think we probably met at one of my openings. He wrote for a Newark paper, I was from Newark. He may have come to a party or something like that, but no, he was just a really nice guy…kind of ebullient…and I think he genuinely liked my work. He was always very supportive of my painting.

JMcW: What would you care to tell me about your "Microtonal" paintings?

Mueller: I liked comparing what I did to the way I visualized light after reading about quantum physics. Before they had figured it out, it was just "ether," which was just a word that meant no one really understood how light traveled: it traveled in "the ether" whatever that was. But then came the concepts of waves, and then particles/packets, and then wave/packets; how could it be both things? Now, I didn't really care about the science of seeing. I just enjoyed being able to see but having read about quantum physics, it's fun to think about those kinds of things like waves/particles and how they could be so different and the same simultaneously. The values in a painting like the black and white painting that I sold to Mike Gruber,[3] the values are so close that you almost can't

[3] Dr. Michael Gruber, Patron of the Arts

determine a difference in value from light to dark. So the values are separate, like particles but they are also blended like waves.

I liked the idea that if I could make stripes 1/8 of an inch wide or even thinner than that, that I could do things with color that I couldn't do with a brush by blending or mixing two or more colors, because if you blend seven or eight separate hues you end up with one hue. But if you keep each hue contained within itself, slightly suspended, you end up with an entirely different quality. It's a little like paint manufacturers, keeping the pigment separated instead of blending them together, seeing each particle separately and yes, like Seurat, who wanted the human eye to do the mixing of color on the canvas; that's what everyone's eyes do anyway, the result is like a colored gas.

JMcW: How did you prepare for these kinds of paintings? Obviously you didn't paint them with the same improvisational technique that you painted the Vivisection paintings.

Mueller: No, not anything like that. It was really the opposite way of working. A lot of planning went into each painting. Initially I did three paintings of just stripes, completely abstract, gaseous looking, but beautiful, just reveling in the weird color changes I could get. I began with large fields of just stripes that moved from one color into another. I did about three of those. One of the first I ever did was just of stripes, but the combination of vivid colors became so strange because of this technique that from a distance you could not really identify or describe precisely what color you were seeing.

Then I began to work with forms in a composition which took even more planning. I would begin with literally dozens of drawings, sometimes shifting only one

strand of color or one small shape. I used layers and layers of tracing paper to rework an original drawing until I felt that I had gotten it just right. I didn't like the idea of having to work directly on the canvas anymore, it ruined the surface. I wanted these paintings to look machine made. I wanted a surface that looked untouched by human hands. Now Judd[4] would have approved of that. I had to develop specific tools for especially those very large canvases and most of them were large because I knew that this kind of technique would be very striking if they were worked large. There were problems with working on 8 foot canvas that spanned a stretcher. Just getting the bands of color uniform and precise was hard to do on cloth, on stretched canvas.

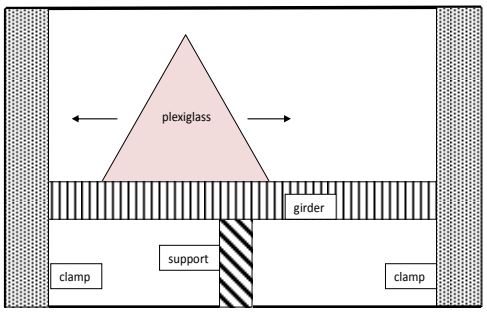


diagram by J.McWilliams

I made a large H shape that I could clamp onto either end of the frame; the horizontal girder in the middle spanned the 8 feet, supported in the middle with supports so that the girder, even though it was metal, couldn't sag anywhere. A friend of mine, a painter, devised an A-shaped plexi-glass shape that could sit on top of the girder and slide horizontally back and forth, and he had someone drill very precise holes at 1/8th intervals

[4] Donald Judd: Minimalist painter who reviewed Mueller's Summit Street paintings.

down the middle of the A-frame so that I could make tiny marks with a pencil on the canvas.

I developed the colors and mixed them before hand. These colors were never quite right out of a tube. The colors I used I mixed and then stored in small plastic film canisters to keep them moist until I was ready for them (I would get batches of canisters from a photography store). I would have to have charts and plans for each color that were numbered and arranged before I began to apply paint, then I could go back in sometimes and change this or that one, but not too many. I had it figured out before beginning the painting, and I didn't like that look of correcting things after the fact.

Masking became problematic because no matter how much you burnish masking tape, paint *will* seep under and leave jagged little edges and I really wanted a clean edge. I didn't like the look of going back to correct mistakes. So I developed a way of masking, then putting two coats of mat medium over the tape so that no seepage would occur, but it took a great deal of time. The tape also needed to be specially cut. I found I man who owned a tape factory. He had special machines that could slice off rolls of tape that were an $1/8^{th}$ of an inch or thinner. And then I would work, but it was so tedious and very difficult physically. It was like waking up and thinking that you had a job in a factory that you hated. 'I don't want to go back to that place today' but I did, and managed to complete about 1 to 3 inches of the painting in one day, sometimes an inch in one day, then maybe have to go back and redo a stripe to two, rearrange a color. I remember that I did a winter scene, it sold to someone, I can't remember who, and it was comparatively

small. I would love to see that painting again, it was very unique. A kind of abstract winter landscape, it was almost silver. But, even though it was hard to get through those paintings, it was like having a new paint box! If you used the paint box *just right*, it would yield something magical.

JMcW: So much planning, like building or construction or playing chess. And so completely different from what the Abstract Expressionists were doing. Was it always worth the effort? Eventually you changed direction again… why?

Mueller: I suppose some might question: 'is it worth all this trouble, just to go from here to there?' Well, that's my business, isn't it? I guess it was worth it to me or I wouldn't have done as many of them as I did. I did a series of about twenty-five of those beautiful microtonal paintings and then Harold Wachtel [5] talked me into another batch and I did perhaps 5-7 more. These weren't of nothing or a part of nothing. They almost always evoked the landscape in me, or its sensation or an experience or a combination of many experiences that were important to me. I felt I had, that I wanted (for lack of a better term) to *capture* something, like a photographer. The photographer takes a picture and rushes back to the darkroom to find out if they "got it." I always felt afterward or near the end that I had "got it," then I could change it, I could manage it.

JMcW: It's clear that everyone who reviewed your stripe paintings, the microtonal paintings, has referred to the paintings relative to music. What is the relationship that you have to music? Can you describe that?

[5] Harold Wachtel, Art Collector

Mueller: I don't know if I can describe that. A composer, when he listens to music, I suppose he is hearing a lot more than the average person, a lot more than me, I'm sure. But emotionally, I don't know about that. I doubt that's the case. I can squeeze just about all there is emotionally from music that I love and the same should happen with painting. I wanted to paint music, music is the art that all other art forms imitate, it is the queen of art forms: intangible, performed in time, gone the second it's made, not made up of anything you can actually see, yet about as profound as is possible in this life. I aspired to get that close to music without being stupidly literal about it. I wanted it to be that abstract. Malevich tried to do things like that, but that bored me. I wanted it to be more complex than that; for concrete things to exist in a completely intangible territory. Music modulates from one key to another, and I found I could do that with color, from bright to somber. Each modulation means something different to the listener or to the viewer. If sounds or tones are blended, that has another kind of feeling altogether. The look of blended colors is just as opaque as if you're sliding notes together. Neither is clean. If you're playing an ascending scale quickly on the piano, the ear can distinguish each note even though they are played one close to the other and even though the harmonics are overlapping, glissando. But a blended group of colors or notes is more like portamento, or one of those sliding whistle things. It's an entirely different feeling. Also separating bands of color, I could always place a completely different color in the middle of everything. I couldn't do that if I blended paint together. It's almost as though I could find other colors that didn't exist before in a traditional sense. For me, it has a lighter, clarifying feel.

#6: Later Paintings: Working

Interview with George Mueller: 7/29/13

JMcW: Tell me about the titles of your paintings? Are they arbitrary? Are they important for the viewer to know in order to better understand your work?

Mueller: No, they are not arbitrary, though I hope anyone could look at a painting and react to it without knowing its title. Some paintings I really don't know what they're about and I then call them: *Untitled*. Most of the paintings begin to talk to me as I am doing them. Certainly by the time I've finished, I recognize what I've been trying to do. Like the painting *Stokes*…it really is about the feel of that place, Stokes Forest, in dim light, having gone there and often seen the quiet pieces of the landscape there. I'm not a Regionalist painter but part of my physical environment, the "George Mueller environment" is usually right there in the painting. It's not as if I set up to "capture" a place the way the regionalists did, but it is just there. *Down Neck* is about Newark but it's the sense of the place not an actual address. *Homeless Holiday* was named by a friend of mine when he saw the painting and saw the same thing I was trying to get in there, the dingy, hopeless, scattered way a homeless person feels who has no place in the world. *Bennington Fire*, I saw in the sun setting in factory windows while strolling around Bennington, Vermont, and *Industrial Park* is about the look that those places have, the unreal, suburban look, not any one place in particular, nor did I ever sit down to "capture" that look, it was just there under the surface when I began.

JMcW: So, a person unaware of your trip to Bennington, Vermont could not draw much of a conclusion from the title, but hopefully they would sense, "fire" and pull it into their own experience?

Mueller: Exactly.

JMcW: When you begin a painting, do you begin with a subject in mind?

Mueller: When I begin a painting, I begin with the drawing, always. I begin with forms that fit together, or not. I sometimes use overlays of tissue paper so that I can push shapes together and try them out, what I call "legitimate cheating" because they are my forms but I can push two things together that I wouldn't have come up with on my own by thinking it out. Suggestions really come from the interaction of two or more forms in space. Someone, I can't remember who said, "Work your material," meaning that each of us has our own material. It's like a basic hand print, like your handwriting that will be with you your entire life. Picasso had said that you always paint the same picture your whole life; he was saying the same thing. So, you "re-work" your own material over and over. I don't think I'm ever aware of that while I'm actually working though. I just work and at some point I realize that in order to continue I may need to resort to some special kind of factory-like technique if I'm going to realize *that* handprint. It's hard to be cogent about this.

JMcW: So the drawings always come first and they are carefully worked out before you begin painting?

Mueller: Drawings come first. They interest me or inspire me to continue exploring places. They begin with large open forms with a look that I wouldn't want to do anything

to, they sit in a way that is anchored and they are just right. Sometimes it's about a place I want to be in and other times, a place I wouldn't feel secure in at all. Places are real or unreal but that doesn't concern me.

JMcW: Sometimes while drawing, you're in a place of your own making?

Mueller: Sometimes I almost have the feeling that something else is really leading the life I should be leading, a parallel universe, like something else is going on at the same time that I'm doing what I'm doing. I like painting places like that, I like to think there are these places somewhere; they do exist somewhere.

JMCW: Do you ever think that they do exist, but that they are filtered through your own imagination to look like the things you've just created that are original things?

Mueller: Of course it's like dream interpretation, it stands in real experience, what you've lived and seen. I never have placed much credibility in things I haven't seen and I don't really care what could be literal or not literal. I just know how things sit with one another.

JMcW: But while you're working, are you aware of general "rules?" Are you trying to stay within a larger framework, like abstraction or representation?

Mueller: I'm not concerned about representation or abstraction. I'm just constructing something that feels secure to me, things that are not recognizable things but that *sit* well on the page and suggest something real. And I like working with symmetry, a square canvas for example, no one side calls attention to itself. It ties in with the symmetry in

nature. I find it stable, unifying rather than decorative, as some people might. I like balance… sometimes.

Now, I recognize the look of something and that tells me if it's right. Some paintings I know are finished because I wouldn't want to do a thing more to those, they sit in a way that is anchored, it's just right. But I never wanted to lose the connection with emotion. I've always believed that abstraction can be about something and still be abstraction. Music does that, certainly; why not painting?

JMcW: You remind me of Morandi, in a way. He began with representational little bottles and jars, but the bottles became representative *not* of bottles but of people perhaps in situations. You begin with shapes that are nothing real but then they may acquire human qualities because of their relationships to one another.

Mueller: Yes, and Morandi was almost a magician when it came to being able to do that. He didn't do it all of the time, but some of those little insignificant pieces pack a big punch.

JMcW: You have favorite paintings, you must. Of the paintings that you did in the 1970s, which ones are closest to you?

Mueller: I find more satisfaction looking at the flat paintings rather than those three dimensional looking ones, I find them more intriguing, more ambiguous.

JMCW: More abstract?

Mueller: Yes. It's like listening to Liszt: more busy, more dimensional, deep portentous spaces that make suggestions, or listening to Bach, sparser, more intellectual. The flat paintings are all in the foreground, only suggestions of other space behind.

JMcW: And that makes you feel like…?

Mueller: Well, it gives you more to ponder…what's back there? Ambiguity again, the puzzle is a little more intriguing, that's all.

JMcW: You didn't paint very much in the 1980s and 90s.

Mueller: No.

JMCW: A lot of finished drawings though.

Mueller: I wasn't really keeping track. I suppose I did do a lot of drawings during those years. Now, I seldom draw, except of course in preparation for a painting. I don't know why.

JMcW: Conversely, you've painted approximately 50 paintings since the year 2000! Can we talk about some of the recent paintings? *Still Life with Africa,* 1990.

Mueller: I was getting back into painting again after a kind of dry season. I felt intimidated by art history. Everyone's got to do a still life, or still life is where everyone begins when they begin. So I began there. It seemed to be something to do. I was having difficulty with it at some point and nearly gave up; the pieces weren't coming together as they should. I think I would have given that one up but Carmen〔Cicero〕came over one night and said he thought I should keep going with it and I'm glad now that I took his

advice. I happen to like that one now, very much, a kind of Cubist still-life, using that microtonal thing that I did, and it's sitting in front of a widow or opening.

JMcW: *Loose Piece*?

Mueller: That's my bedroom again. And there are canvases in the painting, one with a loose piece, and *Beast in Fredon*, kind of my alter ego, the way you feel when you've had to chew your way out of a situation and then there is this coming up for air; you can finally breathe again. *Nacht und Nabel* (Night and Fog) I thought the German words sounded better. And *Missing Glenn Gould*; there are times when I truly *miss* Glenn Gould. I mean his music is always there, but I felt better knowing that he was in the world. Now he isn't, I don't really know what the shapes have to do with him; they just came of my missing the person.

JMcW: Some of your paintings describe huge historical events: *The Holocaust, OPs, Enron, Breakfast at Alamogordo, Southern Redoubt* or *Swiss ? Gold?* But you don't consider yourself a political painter or a historical one, do you?

Mueller: Well, I am influenced by history. I am influenced by what has gone into me. Everything up until now ends up in my painting, an emotional response to being alive in this nuthouse world and my intent is to make something pleasing to look at, even if the subject is not a pleasing one. The painting *Kitty Hawk* was like that. I was thinking a lot about the Wright Brothers. I painted *Kitty Hawk*; it's not a literal plane, but it is my concept of being inside the plane looking out over the dunes and the sea. I so admire the Wright Brothers as examples of simple and incorruptible mechanical genius. And the photographs taken of them and their work were so evocative that I wanted to make a

tribute to them, but not in any literal way; an abstract concept of their plane heading over the land out to sea. Braque and Picasso used to call each other Orville and Wilbur, they were all so pivotal in getting the twentieth century started, and the sense of poetry in their "taking off," changing paradigms, changing perceptions forever, from their beat-up old garage; Bell, Ford, all of them literally hatching out of that tin-type nineteenth century? It was beautiful wasn't it? When raw invention could take place in humble surroundings, not owned by anyone other than the inventor, done innocently to begin powerful surges that changed history, changed everything forever. Beginnings have an intensity and beauty that is powerful all on its own.

JMcW: Do you think that these shifting, powerful events are aesthetic?

Mueller: Oh, they are. I often think about Oppenheimer and Alamogordo and World War II…just knowing that there was a shift in collective consciousness then at that very moment that affects everything we do right now. It has to be in the painting too. I thought of how sinister it would have been to have breakfast at Alamogordo that morning after testing the bomb in the desert.

JMcW: Like having a meal after a murder, knowing that you had changed everything, irrevocably.

Mueller: Or perhaps there are tours of children now in school busses, brought to the spot in New Mexico to buy souvenirs and have breakfast and drink their chocolate milk at Alamogordo. I like to think of myself as an abstract impressionist, setting up an ambiance, and the minute I began to gravitate towards certain blues and yellows, I was mixing very specific colors for *Swiss? Gold*, I recognized the colors of a German

officer's uniform. Probably not the same colors literally, but I felt them as being very real.

JMcW: How do you see yourself in all of this? This life? The part you've played in it? Being an artist in this age?

Mueller: I've always had the feeling in this culture that to most people, creating art was almost like being a thief or an idiot. The paintings are viewed like crimes that you don't want anyone to know about. If you lived anywhere else, there might be a feeling of belonging. I'm not angry about it; this is just what it is here. Art and artists are marginal.

JMcW: And people who look at art?

GM: People don't know how to look at paintings anymore.

JMcW: And did they used to? Were they taught how to look at paintings?

Mueller: I don't know if they were taught, but people were encouraged in the past to be moved by imagery. Now the imagery moves them to the Mall. Peasants during the Middle Ages must have really appreciated those huge murals in cathedrals, they must have spent time really looking at them, yes, reading them literally, but in doing that, they must have become sensitized to the formalistic qualities that the artist put there as well, and they must have applied that sensitivity to other areas in their lives. They were really *seeing.* Seeing is an intrinsic part of the human experience and I don't for a moment believe that it's going on in the same way that it used to.

JMcW: You've completed a lot of paintings in the last ten years? What has the last ten years meant to you?

Mueller: Am I running out of steam and would there be anything wrong with that anyway? Have I been wasting my life? Has it all been a big mistake? The only consolation is that I have never felt any need to substitute anything else for painting. I mean, I have never said, “Gee, I wish I had been the owner of a corporation.” Or “I should have been a dictator.” No inclination to do anything other than what I’ve done. I like creating loudspeakers, sound systems because they reflect the music that I listen to, but I couldn’t have been a musician. I couldn’t have done both things well. Painting took over my life and I’ve never craved anything else. I’ve just always been grateful that there have been great people who were making music, music that I could listen to. Music can really send you off to somewhere else, and I’ve always thought that it would be an admirable thing for a painting to be able to do that same thing.

Appendix B

Contents

Catalogue of George Mueller's Paintings 1948-2013

Mueller's early paintings from the 1950s have been difficult to trace. All of them were sold and are now difficult to locate through auction records or private collections.

Paintings: 1950s

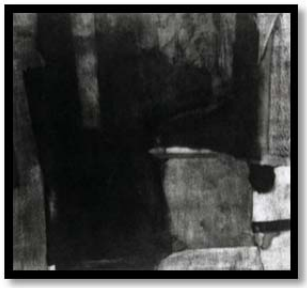
Noumena II 1950s
Egg Tempera
(Philip Johnson Corporation)

Night 1950s
Oil (B&W Zerox from Smithsonian Institute)

Noumena I 1950s
5'x 5' Egg tempera
(Whitney Museum)

Untitled 1950s
3'x 4'Oil

Title is not known, 1950s
Oil



Wayout…Side 1950s
Oil (B&W Zerox from Smithsonian Insititute)

Requiem Bird 1950s
61" x 48" Oil
(B&W Zerox from Smithsonian Institute/Collection Mrs. Patrick B. McGinnis)

*Landscape*1950s
8' x 7' Oil
(Art Institute of Chicago)

Romance at the Railing
1950s
4' x 3' Oil
(B&W Zerox from Smithsonian Institute/Collection Mr.& Mrs. George Mack)

Vivisection 1950s
12" x 12" Oil

Title is not known 1950s
3' x 4' Oil

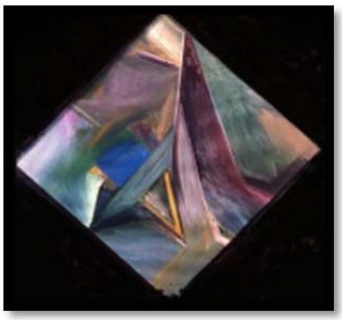
To Pleasant Street 1950s
4’ x 2 ½’ Oil

Title Unknown 1950s
4’x 6’Oil

Sanitarium 1950s
6’ x 6’ Oil
(Art Institute of Chicago)

Title is not known 1950s
4’ x 5’Oil

Title Unknown 1950s
5’x 7’Oil



1860s 1950s
5’ x 5’Oil

Untitled
6’ x 4’ Oil
(Art Institute of Chicago)

Title Unknown 1950s
4’ x 5’Oil

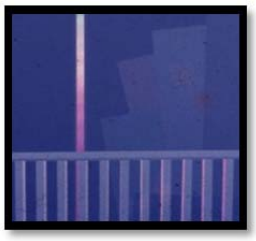
Untitled
5’ x 6’ Oil
(University of Michigan)

Tarpaper Blues 1950s
4’ x 6’Oil

Paintings:
1960s/1970s

Summit Street 1960s
Acrylic
(H. Wachtel)

Summit Street 1960s
5’ x 4’ Acrylic
(Glenn Davis)



Porch 1970s
6’ x 6’ Acrylic

Summit Street 1960s
7’ x 5’ Acrylic
(Dr. M. Gruber)

Bruno Hauptmann 1968
6’ x 6’ Acrylic

Summit Street 1960s
7’ x 5’ Acrylic

Summit Street 1960s
20”x 6’ Acrylic
(S. Longo)

Bruno Hauptmann 1970s
6’x 6’ Acrylic

Summit Street 1960s
12’x 9’ Acrylic
(Whitney Museum of American Art)

Summit Street 1970s
8’x 8’ Acrylic

Califon-Glen Gardner 1970s
4 ½’ x 6’ Acrylic
(Dr. J. Murray)

Untitled 1964
8’ x 8’ Acrylic
(Whitehall Gallery)

From the Photographist
1970s
5’x 4’ Acrylic Microtonal
(Dr. M. Gruber)

*Trio*1970s
6’ x 6’ Acrylic Microtonal
(H. Wachtel)

Kingston 1970s
4 1/2’ x 6’ Acrylic

Untitled 1969
3’x 3’ Acrylic

Untitled 1960s
5’ x 5’ Acrylic
(H. Wachtel)

Boarding House 1960s
6’x 6’ Acrylic

Multi-Universe 1970s
6’x 6’ Acrylic

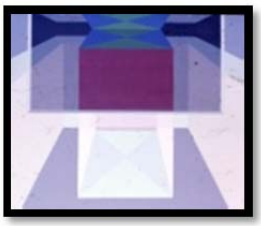
Cheerful but Violent 1970s
6’x 6’ Acrylic

Untitled 1970s
6’x 6’ Acrylic

Untitled 1970s
6’ x 6’ Acrylic

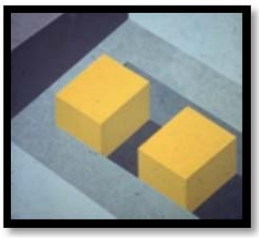
Solid Gold 1970s
6’x 6’ Acrylic

Studio 1970s
6’ x 6’ Acrylic

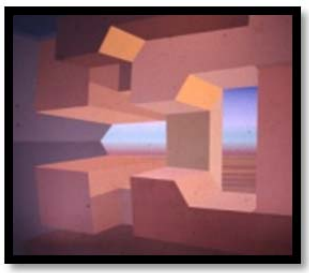


Untitled 1970s
5’ x 5’ Acrylic
(Prudential Insurance Company)

Untitled 1968
6’ x 6’ Acrylic



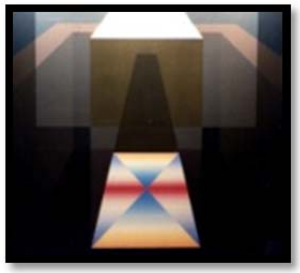
Dies 1970s
6’ x 6’ Acrylic



Untitled 1970s
6’ x 6’ Acrylic Microtonal
(H. Wachtel)

The Package 1965
6’ x 6’ Acrylic

Untitled 1970s
4’x 5 ½’ Acrylic



Untitled 1960s
6’ x 6’ Acrylic Microtonal
(L.Landes)

The Beach 1970s
6’ x 6’ Acrylic

Winter Newark 1970s
6’ x 6’ Acrylic
(Dr. M. Gruber)

Untitled 1969
6’ x 6’ Acrylic

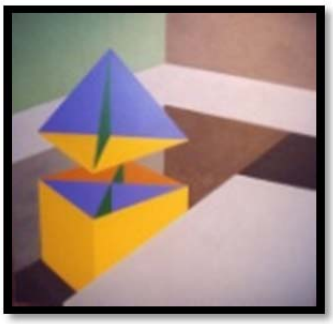
The Bagdad You’re In 1970s
6’ x 6’ Acrylic

T for Texas 1970s
6’ x 6’ Acrylic

Untitled 1970s
6’ x 6’ Acrylic

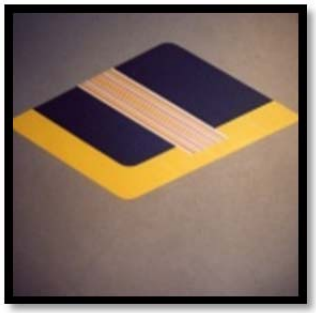
Untitled 1960s
3’ x 3’ Acrylic
(L. Landes)

Untitled 1970s
6’ x 6’ Acrylic



Untitled 1970s
6’ x 6’ Acrylic

Untitled 1970s
6’ x 5’x 2’ Acrylic
(Dr. J. Murray)



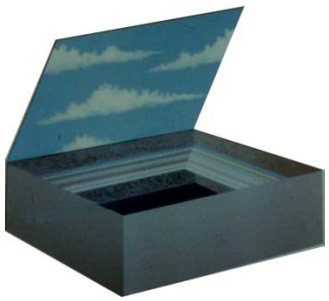
The BSOA 1970s
6’ x 6’ Acrylic

Untitled 1970s
6’ x 6’ Acrylic

Untitled 1970s
9’ x 6’ Acrylic
(in situ H. Wachtel)

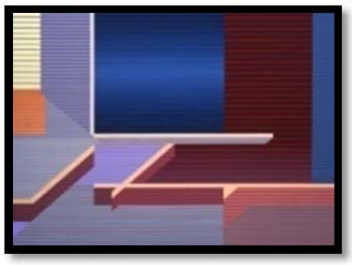
Untitled 1968
6’ x 6’ Acrylic

Fireman’s Funeral 1970s
6’ x 6’ Acrylic



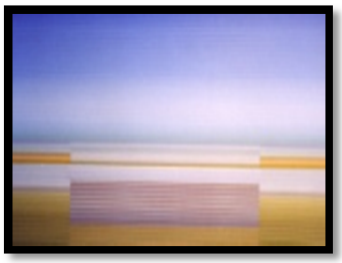
Painting for Nina 1970s
30” x 30” odd shaped
Acrylic on canvas

Paintings: 1980s/2013



Untitled 1970s
4’ x 3’ Acrylic Microtonal
(Dr. M. Gruber)

Interior with Dune 1980
7’ x 4’ Acrylic



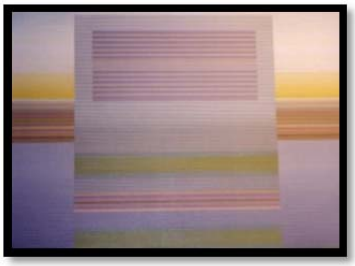
Cape Cod 1 1980
4’ x 3’ Acrylic

Where to Live 1970s
9’ x 6’ Acrylic
Microtonal

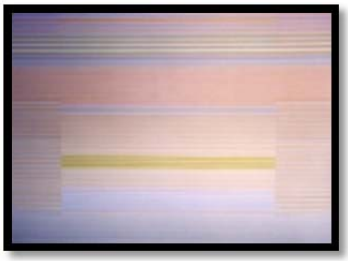
Still Life with Africa 1990
Acrylic

Hommage au Ravel 1983
4’ x 3’ Acrylic

Self Portrait 1980s
2 ½’ x 2 ½’ Acrylic



Kansas 1980s
4’ x 3’ Acrylic



In a Mist 1980s
4’ x 3’ Acrylic

The Corner 1980s
4’ x 4‘Acrylic

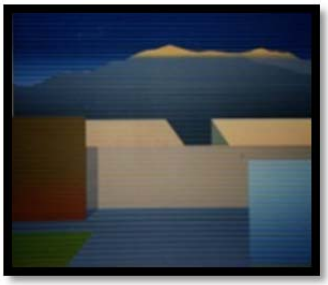
Summer 1981
9’ x 6’ Acrylic
(H. Wachtel)

Bedroom 1980s
4’ x 4‘ Acrylic

Missing Glenn Gould 2000
4’ x 4’ Acrylic

Enron 2000
5’ x 4’ Acrylic

Attica 1985
4’ x 3‘Acrylic



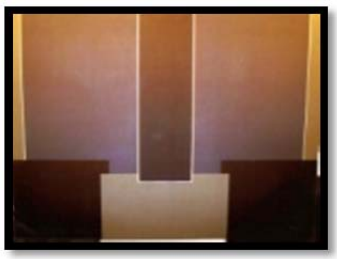
Industrial Park Affair 2000
2’ x 2’ Acrylic
(Dr. M. Gruber)

Beast in Fredon 2000
4’ x 5’ Acrylic

Microtonal Painting 1980s
4’x 3’ Acrylic

Loose Piece 2000
4’ x 4’ Acrylic

Fredon 2000
4’x 3’ Acrylic
(J. Weiskopf)



The Tan’s 2000
5’ x 4’ Acrylic

Untitled 2000
5’ x 4’ Acrylic

Interior with Bay 2000
7’ x 4’ Acrylic

"?" 2001
6' x 6' Acrylic

Stokes 2001
4' x 5' Acrylic

Drawing 1 2003
5' x 5' Acrylic Drawing on Canvas

Bennington Fire 2001
5' x 4' Acrylic

Main stem 2001
4' x 5' Acrylic

This Isn't Kansas 2003
5' x 5' Acrylic
(H. Wachtel)

Homeless Holiday 2001
4' x 5' Acrylic

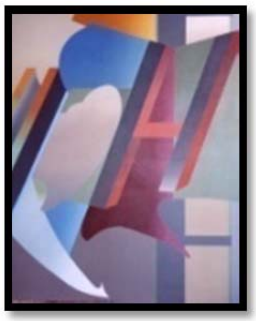
Big Bite 2002
5' x 4' Acrylic

An die Musik 2003
4' x 5' Acrylic

Nacht und Nabel 2001
4' x 4' Acrylic

Untitled 2002
4' x 6' Acrylic

Lakeland 2004
4' x 4' Acrylic
(Dr. M. Gruber)



Untitled 2004
4’ x 5’ Acrylic

The Passenger 2007
5’ x 4’ Acrylic

Morning 2007
2’ x 2’ Acrylic

Untitled 2005
4’ x 5’ Acrylic

33 1/3 2007
2’ x 2’ Acrylic

Moonrise 2007
2’ x 2’ Acrylic

Our Town 2006
4’ x 4’ Acrylic

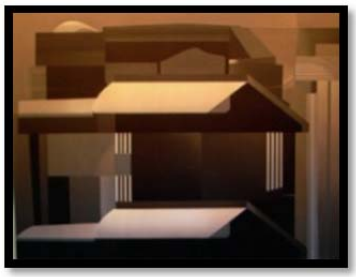
Walser’s Window 2007
2’ x 2’ Acrylic

Western Danger 2007
2’ x 2’ Acrylic

Kitty Hawk 2006
7’ x 4’ Acrylic

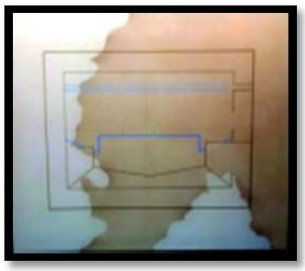
Sub optical 2007
2’ x 2’ Acrylic

Travelin’ NY State 2007
2’ x 2’ Acrylic

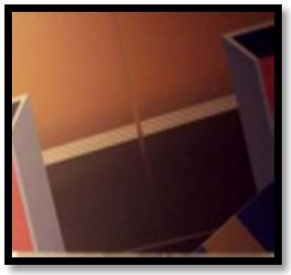


Another Winter 2008
5’ x 3 ½ Acrylic

Hall Light 2009
2’ x 2’ Acrylic



Scape with Blue Notes
2012
4’ x 4’Acrylic



Airport 2008
2’ x 2’ Acrylic

Down Neck 2010
5’ x 4’ Acrylic

Scape II 2012
4’ x 5’ Acrylic

Southern Redoubt 2008
4’ x 3’ Acrylic

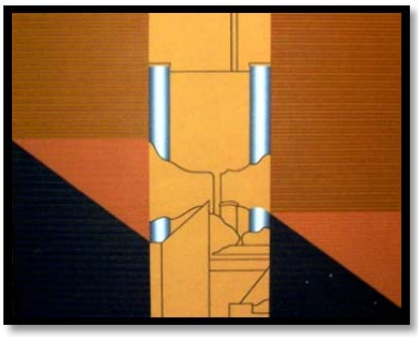
Hallway with Mountains
2010
4’ x 5’ Acrylic

Scape III Swiss? Gold 2012
3’ x 5’ Acrylic

Untitled 2009
5’ x 4’ Acrylic

Breakfast at Alamogordo
4’ x 5’ 2011
Acrylic

Humid Interior with Storm Front 2012
3’ x 4’ Acrylic



Untitled 2013
6’x5’ Acrylic

Opus 10, #3, Hommage au Anton Webern 2012
6’ x 5’ Acrylic

Durante Vita 2013
6’x 4’ Acrylic

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Stanley Chester McWilliams

Educational Institutions:

School	Place	Degree	Date
Collegiate:			
Brooklyn College	Brooklyn, NY	BA: Humanities	1978
William Paterson University	Wayne, NJ	Fine Art/Teaching Certification	1979
Graduate:			
Montclair University	Montclair, NJ	MAFA/Masters Fine Arts	1987
Rutgers University	New Brunswick, NJ	MLS/Masters Library Information Sciences	2000
Princeton University	Princeton, NJ	Fellowship	2006
Drew University	Madison, NJ	D.Litt./Doctor of Letters	2014