

JOHN FERREN AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ABSTRACTION

by

Marshall N. Price

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York

2011

© 2011

Marshall N. Price

All Rights Reserved

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction
of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Date

Dr. Katherine Manthorne
Chair of the Examining Committee

Date

Kevin Murphy
Executive Officer

Sally Webster

Mona Hadler

Joan Marter

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

JOHN FERREN AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ABSTRACTION

by

Marshall N. Price

Advisor: Professor Katherine Manthorne

This dissertation presents the first comprehensive examination of the life and work of John Ferren. Compiled using extensive primary materials, this study argues for a reassessment of Ferren's position within the modernist canon. Born on the West Coast in 1905, Ferren was raised in Los Angeles and spent his formative artistic years in San Francisco in the mid- to late-1920s. He first visited Europe in 1929, making his way through France, Italy, and Germany. He returned two years later, intending to remain permanently. During this period Ferren became an integral part of the Parisian avant-garde, one of the few Americans to do so, and helped codify the burgeoning language of geometric abstraction. He quickly gained an impressive international career, exhibiting on both sides of the Atlantic, but coming to the U.S. at the dawn of the War for one of his exhibitions, he was unable to return to Europe.

Following the War, Ferren became central to the development of Abstract Expressionism as a charter member of the Artist's Club, serving as its president for one year in 1956. He organized exhibitions of Abstract Expressionism and more importantly became a vocal advocate for the movement through a series of articles detailing its genesis and eventual demise. In many ways, Ferren countered the very image of a hard-living painter in the 1950s by cultivating an interest in ideas and the intellect, with a sophistication not often found among his peers. Despite his advocacy

for the movement and important exhibitions at the Stable Gallery and elsewhere, he remained outside the canonical figures of Abstract Expressionism.

In the early 1960s, as the aesthetic paradigm began to shift quite radically, Ferren returned to a geometric approach to painting that now incorporated his interest in advanced mathematics with visual perception. This late period was one of the artist's most creative and certainly most productive. It was, also, as I argue, one of his most significant contributions to the development of painting as he was one of many artists at the time who were truly re-defining the notion of what painting could be.

Acknowledgements

Countless people assisted me during the course of research and writing this dissertation. First, I would like to thank my dissertation committee. My advisor, Professor Katherine Manthorne has been completely supportive and encouraging throughout the entire process. Her insightful comments and feedback on every aspect of this study have been invaluable. The seeds of this study were planted in Professor Manthorne's seminars and further clarified during an independent study with her. I owe her a great debt of gratitude for everything she has done to see this project realized. I would also like to thank the other members of my dissertation committee. My second reader, Professor Mona Hadler has brought her particularly helpful knowledge of Abstract Expressionist and post-war art to this dissertation and her classes were often the catalyst for ideas that would otherwise have not come to pass here. Professor Sally Webster's comments on nearly every aspect of this study have been invaluable as have the insight given by my outside reader, Professor Joan Marter, whose particular interest in American abstract art of the 1930s dovetailed nicely with my subject.

Many other professors in the Art History department were instrumental in one way or another. My classes with Professors Rosemarie Bletter and Judy Sund were enlightening, while Professor William H. Gerds has provided humor, friendship and unwavering support since day one. Professors Kevin Murphy and Patricia Mainardi, who both served as Executive Officer during my time in the department, were both extremely helpful in navigating the sometimes-complex CUNY system. I am additionally grateful to the entire staff of the Art History program for their kindness

and continued assistance over the years, including Sandylene Wakefield, Andrea Appel, and former Assistant Program Officer, Lauren Frederick-Bowen. My infinite questions over the years no doubt tested their seemingly limitless patience.

There have been many classmates at the Graduate Center who have provided support, encouragement, and feedback. These include Hyewon Yi, Taína Caragol, Elizabeth Mangini, Anna Mecugni, Pete Mauro, Jillian Russo, Sarah Richardson, David Christie, Rosemary Ramsey, Peggy Morehead Seas, Jennifer Sachs Samet, Sarah Katie Gillespie, Celeste Donovan, Karen Lemmey, and others. An enormous thanks goes to my close friend and fellow curator Laurie Ann Farrell, Director of Exhibitions at the Savannah College of Art and Design, who was with me at the beginning of my graduate work in New York and has followed the entire process of this degree. She has been a steadfast friend and one of my most encouraging supporters.

Many of my professional colleagues have provided numerous suggestions and continual encouragement throughout the research and writing of this dissertation. These include Bruce Weber, Senior Curator of 19th and Early 20th Century Art at the National Academy Museum, Isabelle Dervaux, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Drawings at the Morgan Library, Robert Cozzolino, Curator of Modern Art at the Pennsylvania Academy, Melissa Wolfe, Curator of American Art at the Columbus Museum, Gail Stavitsky, Curator of American Art at the Montclair Art Museum, Mary-Kate O'Hare, Curator of American Art at the Newark Museum, Eric Lutz, Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs at the Saint Louis Art Museum, and others.

I am indebted to many artists who spent time speaking with me about Ferren and his work, some of whom knew Ferren personally. These include Melissa Meyer, Dorothea Rockburne, Stephen and Naomi Antonakos, Lawrence Fane, Ellen Lanyon, Robert Birmelin, Robert Berlind, Robert Kushner, Natalie Edgar, Philip Grausman, Will Barnet, Nicolas Carone, Pat Adams, Richard Kalina, Valerie Jaudon, and David Reed, with whom extended conversations regarding Ferren's relationship with Hitchcock and his service in the O.S.S. were particularly helpful. Art historians outside of the Graduate Center have also played an important role in shaping this study. Irving Sandler spent many hours speaking with me about his relationship with Ferren and the general zeitgeist of the Artist's Club and New York in the 1950s. I engaged with many other art historians over topics related to Ferren and his work and Professor Katy Siegel, Hunter College, Cynthia Navaretta, Midmarch Arts Press, Avis Berman, Helen Harrison, Director of the Pollock Krasner House, and Jason Andrew, and Sara Kay were all extremely helpful.

In addition to Bruce Weber and Isabelle Dervaux, other current and former colleagues of mine at the National Academy Museum deserve special mention. Without their support this dissertation would have been exponentially more difficult. Carmine Branagan, Director of the National Academy, Michael McKay, Director of Finance, Nancy Little, Director of the Academy's School, Diana Thompson, Curatorial Assistant, Sei Young Kim, Manager of Artist Membership and Public Programs, Linda Feaster, Director of Marketing and Communications, Amy Zaltzman, Communications Associate, Charles Biada, Director of Operations, Lucie

Kinsolving, Chief Conservator, and Athena LaTocha, Registrar, have all been curious to learn about my subject and encouraging throughout the process.

During the course of my research I visited numerous libraries and archives. The most useful and frequently visited of these was the Archives of American Art, New York office. The entire staff there was gracious and accommodating. The staffs at the New York Public Library, Arts and Architecture Division and the Print Division, E. S. Bird Special Collections, Syracuse University, the Morgan Library, The Houghton Library, Harvard University, and the library at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Museum of Modern Art Library were all instrumental in providing important bits and pieces to the mosaic that became this dissertation.

My parents have provided extraordinary support over the last eight-plus years of my graduate study. My mother, Barbara Price, has remained interested and inquisitive to the life and work of John Ferren and been steadfastly encouraging. My father Richard Price and stepmother Adele Seeff have given me essential advice and continual encouragement along the way. I have benefited tremendously from their familiarity with the academic world and the general process of writing a dissertation. All of them have been inspirational to me and I owe them an enormous debt of gratitude.

While all of these people above have been helpful and supportive in one way or another, there are a few individuals who deserve special mention, as without their assistance this dissertation simply could not have been realized. Katharina Rich Perlow, whose gallery has represented the estate of John Ferren for nearly thirty

years, has been my biggest cheerleader from day one. Katharina's research files and images of Ferren's work saved me countless hours in the library and eased many aspects of establishing the artist's chronology. I spent many hours in her gallery, which was at the time appropriately located in the Fuller Building where Ferren had his two solo exhibitions at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in 1936 and 1938. Katharina has been unbelievably supportive and accommodating throughout the course of my research and writing. It has been a pleasure to work with her over the course of the last six years or so.

Finally, my deepest gratitude is extended to the Ferren family. I have been touched by their unwavering support and their belief in me to represent John Ferren in a fair and accurate light. Rae Ferren, John Ferren's widow, has shared countless stories with me and opened her home to me on many occasions, welcoming me with open arms. It has been through Rae's recounting of John Ferren's life that has been an unending source of knowledge and inspiration to me. Rae's preservation and organization of diaries, sketchbooks, correspondence, and various other ephemera relating to John Ferren's life and work were instrumental to my research. Rae and John Ferren's son, Bran Ferren, has also gone above and beyond in his support for this project. While he lives primarily on the West Coast, Bran, has provided lodging in his house on numerous visits to East Hampton and through the diligent help of his assistant, Susan Coursey, they have supplied me with anything and everything I might have needed during my stays. The Ferren family's indefatigable enthusiasm for the project was immediate and has been unwavering. I have truly been touch with their generosity and my gratitude to them extends beyond words.

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations.....	xii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: The Early Years: Los Angeles, San Francisco, and a first trip to Europe 1905–1929.....	18
Chapter Two: Europe, 1931–1938.....	55
Chapter Three: Return to America and the War Years: 1938–1945.....	105
Chapter Four: 1945–1959: Return to New York, A Series of Teaching Positions, Abstract Expressionism.....	148
Chapter Five: An Art Ambassador, Dynamic Symmetry, and Radiosity, 1960–1970.....	208
Chapter Six: Conclusion.....	260
Bibliography.....	264
Illustrations.....	281

Illustrations

Chapter One

- 1.1 John Ferren, *The Kiss*, ca. 1924, white gypsum cast from plaster original, 6 3/4 x 11 3/4 x 8 in., Estate of John Ferren
- 1.2 Yun Gee, *San Francisco, Chinatown*, 1927, oil on paperboard, 11 x 16
Oakland Museum of California, Gift of Mrs. Frederick G. Novy, Jr.
- 1.3 John Ferren, *Untitled*, ca. 1927, medium unknown, dimensions unknown
- 1.4 John Ferren, *Untitled (Woman's Head)*, ca. 1928–9
- 1.5 Vaclav Vytlacil, *Still Life with Guitar and Cactus*, 1929
- 1.6 John Ferren, *Untitled (Sketch of an Italian Town)*, 1929, ink and wash,
dimensions unknown
- 1.7 John Ferren, *Untitled*, 1933, gouache, 8 1/2 x 11 1/2, Estate of John Ferren
- 1.8 John Ferren, *St. Tropez*, 1931, oil on canvas, 25 1/4 x 21 1/4 in.

Chapter Two

- 2.1 John Ferren, *Untitled (No. 18)*, 1932, oil on canvas, 28 3/4 x 23 1/2 in.
- 2.2 John Ferren, *Untitled*, ca. 1931, oil on canvas, 24 1/8 x 19 3/4 in.
- 2.3 Joaquin Torres-García, *Bateau Constructif*, 1930, oil on wood, 20 1/2 x 15 3/4
in., courtesy Jan Krugier Gallery
- 2.4 John Ferren, *Le Cheuve Souris*, 1932, oil on canvas, 28 1/8 x 23 1/2 in.
- 2.5 John Ferren, *Mallorca*, 1934, watercolor, 9 x 11 in., Katharina Rich Perlow
Gallery
- 2.6 John Ferren, *Green Abstraction*, 1933, oil on canvas, 25 1/2 x 35 1/2 in.
- 2.7 John Ferren, *Mallorca*, 1934, oil on canvas, 24 x 29 in.
- 2.8 Wassily Kandinsky, *Dominant Curve*, 1936, Oil on canvas, 50 7/8 x 76 1/2
inches. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
- 2.9 John Ferren, *Untitled*, ADD AMON CARTER *Untitled* (p 78)

- 2.10 John Ferren, *Composition aux Leones Roses*, 1931, oil on canvas, 24 x 20 in.
- 2.11 John Ferren, *Form Composition*, ca. 1933, oil and sand on burlap, 21 ¼ x 25 ¾ in.
- 2.12 John Ferren, *Composition*, 1934, oil on canvas, 18 ¼ x 21 5/8 in., Berkshire Museum
- 2.13 Stanley William Hayter, *Pavane*, 1935, engraving with soft-ground etching and drypoint, ed. 30, 11 ½ x 7 ¾ in.
- 2.14 Stanley William Hayter, *Oedipus*, 1934, engraving and etching with roulette, ed. 30, image: 5 7/8 x 6 5/16 in.; sheet: 9 x 12 5/16 in.
- 2.15 John Ferren, *Abstraction*, 1934, 11 x 13 ¾ in. , engraving, edition unknown
- 2.16 John Ferren, *The Hunt*, 1935, engraving, engraving, edition unknown, 13 ½ x 10 ¾ in.
- 2.17 John Buckland-Wright, *Jeune Fille au Mirroir*, 1936, etching, ed, 30, 4 ¼ x 7 in.
- 2.18 John Ferren, *Composition*, 1934, painted plaster relief, 11 x 8 5/8 in., Albright-Knox Gallery of Art, Gift of A. Conger Goodyear
- 2.19 John Ferren, *Composition*, 1936, etched and painted plaster with intaglio, 13 ½ x 14 in.
- 2.20 John Ferren, *Untitled Abstraction with Orange*, 1934, oil on canvas, 22 x 36 ½ in., Nora Eccles Museum of Art, Utah State University
- 2.21 “Chart 14—G_{m2} and cH_{m2} at critical frequency” from Arthur Crotch, *The Elements of Automatic Telephony*, 1924
- 2.22 John Ferren, *Untitled*, 1937, painted plaster relief, 10 7/8 x 15 3/8 in.
- 2.23 John Ferren, Model for a ballet, Act 1, ca. 1935, medium and dimensions unknown

Chapter Three

- 3.1 John Ferren, *Untitled (No. 15)*, 1937, painted plaster relief, 15 ½ x 13 in.
- 3.2 John Ferren, *Untitled 9*, 1938, pastel on paper, 18 ½ x 25 in., Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

- 3.3 John Ferren, *Untitled (Female Head)*, ca. 1938, oil on canvas, 18 x 15 in., Aaron Payne Fine Art
- 3.4 John Ferren, *Untitled (Male Head)*, ca. 1938, oil on canvas, 18 x 15 in., Aaron Payne Fine Art
- 3.5 Unknown photographer, “Artists in Exile” with Peggy Guggenheim, 1942 (John Ferren third row center)
- 3.6 John Ferren, *Abstract Design/For a Child’s Room*, ca. 1942, medium and dimensions unknown, Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery
- 3.7 John Ferren, *Untitled (Rug Design)*, ca. 1942, gouache on paper, 9 x 12 in., Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery
- 3.8 John Ferren, *Untitled (Rug Design)*, ca. 1942, gouache on paper, 14 x 11 in., Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery
- 3.9 John Ferren, *Composition*, 1937, Peggy Guggenheim Collection
- 3.10 Unknown Photographer, “Artists in Exile” at Peggy Guggenheim’s townhouse, ca. 1942
- 3.11 John Ferren, *Composition in Green*, 1936, oil on canvas, 28 ¾ x 39 in.
- 3.12 Pablo Picasso, *John Ferren*, 1944 ink on paper, dimensions unknown, Private Collection
- 3.13 *Untitled (Sketch of a Woman’s Head)*, ca. 1945, colored pencil on paper, dimensions unknown, E. S. Bird Library, Syracuse University
- 3.14 Pablo Picasso, *Woman Seated in an Armchair*, 1945

Chapter Four

- 4.1 Robert Motherwell, *Untitled (diagram detailing the chronology of Abstract Expressionism)*, ca. 1983
- 4.2 John Ferren, *Figure*, 1947, oil on canvas, 30 x 25 in.
- 4.3 Rufino Tamayo, *Hombre Contemplando la Luna (Man Contemplating the Moon)*, 1947, etching and aquatint, 7 7/8 x 5 ¾ in.

- 4.4 Rufino Tamayo, *Girl Attacked by a Strange Bird*, 1947, oil on canvas, 70 x 50 1/8 in. Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Zadok
- 4.5 John Ferren, *Desert Landscape*, 1951, oil on canvas, 50 x 65 in., Spanierman Modern
- 4.6 Unknown photographer, John Ferren Exhibition, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1952
- 4.7 John Ferren, *Color Abstract IV*, 1952, gouache and watercolor on paper, 20 x 26 in., Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery
- 4.8 John Ferren, *Contemplations of Geraniums*, 1952, oil on canvas, 47 3/4 x 36 in.
- 4.9 John Ferren, *New York Summer Landscape*, 1953, oil on orlon, 20 x 29 in. Parrish Art Museum, South Hampton, NY
- 4.10 John Ferren, *Sierra*, 1952, oil on canvas, 50 x 72 in.
- 4.11 John Ferren, *The Conquest of Mexico*, 1954, oil on canvas, 81 x 61 1/2 in.
- 4.12 John Ferren, *Red and Blue*, 1954, oil on canvas, 48 x 38 in. Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, Lincoln, Nebraska
- 4.13 Movie still from Alfred Hitchcock's *The Trouble with Harry*
- 4.14 John Ferren, *Branches*, 1955, oil on canvas, 73 x 51 in.
- 4.15 John Ferren, *The Vase*, 1956, oil on canvas, 73 x 64 in.
- 4.16 Movie still from Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*
- 4.17 Movie still from Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*
- 4.18 John Ferren, *The Garden*, 1954, oil on canvas, 82 x 65, Whitney Museum of American Art
- 4.19 John Ferren, *The Birches*, medium and dimensions unknown

Chapter Five

- 5.1 Installation shot of John Ferren Exhibition, American Embassy, London, 1964
- 5.2 John Ferren, *The Yellow Season*, 1961, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown

- 5.3 John Ferren, *Blue Border*, 1961, oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in.
- 5.4 John Ferren, *Beit Eddin*, 1963, oil on canvas, 55 7/8 x 47 1/4 in.
- 5.5 John Ferren, *Untitled (JF#31)*, 1961, oil on canvas, 47 1/2 x 47 3/4 in., Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY
- 5.6 Illustration of a Root 2 Rectangle
- 5.7 Diagram of diagonals and root rectangles within a square from John Ferren's sketchbook, ca. 1965
- 5.8 Illustration from Catherine Herter, *Dynamic Symmetry: A Primer*
- 5.9 John Ferren, Study for *Sala Nar*, 1965, pencil on paper, dimensions unknown
- 5.10 John Ferren, *Sala Nar*, 1965, oil on canvas, 72 x 60 in., Whitney Museum of American Art
- 5.11 Photograph showing three maquettes, ca. 1968
- 5.12 John Ferren, *Faharjo*, 1968, oil on canvas, 36 x 40 in.
- 5.13 John Ferren, *Double Star*, 1969, oil on canvas, 58 x 72 in., Oueens College, CUNY

Introduction

Few artists are fortunate enough to participate in one avant-garde movement during their lifetimes, let alone two. John Ferren was, in some ways, one of the lucky ones. Ferren's life spanned the first three quarters of the twentieth century during which time he witnessed and contributed to profound change in artistic thinking and production. Born in Oregon and raised in Southern California, Ferren left home after high school to live in San Francisco for a few years before departing for Europe. He shed his American identity, quickly became fluent in French, and made an entirely new life for himself. He consciously established a transnational identity, which was aided by his participation as one of an extremely small number of Americans accepted into the Parisian avant-garde of the 1930s. Toward the end of the decade, Ferren returned to America for an exhibition of his work and was forced to stay on because of the looming war, effectively stranding him in his home country.

By the time America entered World War II in 1941, Ferren was too old to serve in a combat role, and instead spent the remaining war years working for the Office of Wartime Information division of the O.S.S. in North Africa, Italy, and France. After the war, he became an important part of the post-war movement of American painting and a long-time art educator in New York City. In the 1950s he befriended director Alfred Hitchcock and worked on two of his films and in 1963 had the opportunity to serve his country once again as the State Department's first "artist-in-residence" in Beirut, Lebanon. Tragically, Ferren died prematurely in 1970 at the age of 64, during a period when he was creating some of his most experimental work.

Despite numerous revisionist studies over the last couple decades, there are still many artists who are in need of being excavated and examined for their contributions to modern art. John Ferren is one of those artists, and this dissertation charts a fairly straight chronological path through his career. Certain themes have emerged in the process of this study that relate not only to Ferren's life and art, but also to many larger and important issues in the formation of modern art during the middle part of the twentieth century. Over the course of a long transcontinental, transatlantic, and, for many years, transnational career, Ferren contributed to the development of modern art in America by helping to bring a strain of European abstraction to the U.S. in the 1930s, detailing the genesis and crisis of Abstract Expressionism through a series of well known articles in the 1950s, and during the final decade of his life pushing beyond a conventional paradigm of painting with an experimental practice that engaged in perception, light, color, and three dimensions.

Ferren's greatest artistic achievements have almost always been understood solely within the context of his geometric abstractions from the 1930s. These early works were indeed influential as part of the quickly maturing American abstraction between the wars, and this dissertation underscores Ferren's critical contributions to its development. In addition to a detailed analysis of Ferren's seminal role as a purveyor of geometric abstraction in the 1930s, I also argue for a reassessment of the artist's equally significant contributions to modern art during the subsequent years of his long career. His life was one that intersected with some of the most influential artists from the 1930s to the 1960s and this dissertation is a comprehensive examination of his accomplishments.

Ferren was one of the few Americans at the forefront of the Parisian avant-garde in the 1930s and an integral part of the development of a new language of abstraction. Along with friends and fellow artists working in Paris such as Stanley William Hayter, Jean Hélion, and many others who comprised an international cast of painters and sculptors, Ferren not only helped to codify this language but also brought the burgeoning European abstract vernacular to the U.S. through solo exhibitions in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and elsewhere. As one of the few Americans in this milieu showing on both sides of the Atlantic he was on the brink of a significant international career that was curtailed by the onset of World War II and a series of unfortunate personal circumstances. It would take him years to regain artistic direction.

Beyond his painting, Ferren was also an assiduous writer, and contributed numerous essays on some of the most important issues during the 1950s including the slow genesis and quick demise of Abstract Expressionism by the late 1950s. These writings were not criticism or scholarly inquiry, but some of the most illuminating historical anecdotes on the aesthetic and cultural shifts that occurred with the rise of Abstract Expressionism. Ferren's take was particularly illuminating and unique as it was filtered through his European experience before the War. In addition, he had a brief stint in film production working with director Alfred Hitchcock in the mid-1950s, and also was a committed teacher with more than twenty years experience.

By the mid-1960s he was painting with renewed vigor and began to make some of his most experimental work in thirty years. This dissertation includes the first study of Ferren's late abstractions within in the context of the changing aesthetic and

practice of painting in the mid-1960s. It examines the artist's incorporation of mathematics or mathematical theory in his work from this period. While concurrent artists, such as Donald Judd, disavowed the incorporation of mathematics in their work (despite its rigorous exactitude), Ferren freely used dynamic symmetry, the golden section, and superellipses to create his compositions. In some ways this places him closer to spirit to other artists often considered under a "post-minimal" rubric, such as Mel Bochner, Ruth Vollmer, and Dorothea Rockburne, who embraced mathematics toward the end of the decade and used the theories it provided to create their works. Successive conversations with Rockburne about geometry and dynamic symmetry have been illuminating and extremely helpful in thinking about these ideas and gave me an entirely new and fresh take on Ferren's work from this period.¹

A recurring theme throughout this study is Ferren's hybrid identity that, as I argue, has relegated him to a position on the cusp of the historical canon. Expatriating from the U.S. early in his career, Ferren consciously adopted a French persona, which was instrumental in his early critical success. By the onset of the War, however, with shifting cultural attitudes and the subsequent formation of a new aesthetic paradigm, this hybridity became something of a liability for him. Now, however, in the time of a global art world with diasporic artists engaging complex and hybrid practices, Ferren's art assumes new significance. In addition, a monographic study of a marginalized figure such as this framed within the larger context of historical reassessment is an opportunity to reexamine and expand the canon. There is a great deal to be learned *about* the canon, the figures contained within it, and its

¹ For an insightful investigation of set theory and Dorothea Rockburne's *Intersection*, see Anna Lovatt, "Dorothea Rockburne: Intersection," *October* 122 (Fall 2007): 31 et passim.

construction through a closer reading of those who have been excluded from it. This dissertation will hopefully remind those of the continual necessity of reckoning with how the history of modern art has been constructed. Ferren's career continued on for more than thirty fruitful years beyond the 1930s, and his contributions to painting in the 1950s and 1960s deserve to be examined in depth.

Ferren was a central figure in New York art circles of the 1950s and a founding member of the Artist's Club who lived and worked at the epicenter of Abstract Expressionism, yet he has remained relatively absent from much of the literature on this period. Beyond merely pointing out the missing references to Ferren's name among studies on abstract art of the twentieth century, this dissertation lays out a framework upon which to reevaluate Ferren and recover (and rediscover) his contributions to modern art. The artist's life can be divided into five fairly distinct chronological periods, which have subsequently been broken down into the chapters that comprise this volume. It begins with his formative years in Los Angeles and examines his subsequent but limited exposure to the burgeoning ideas of modernism in San Francisco, continuing with the eight critical years he spent in Europe—primarily in Paris among some of the most progressive artists of the day. After a brief description of his wartime service, the story picks up again when Ferren returned to New York and became a central participant among the Abstract Expressionists in New York in the 1950s. The final chapter reveals the last decade of his life to be one of his most experimental and productive.

As the first truly comprehensive study of the artist's life and work, this dissertation has relied on a wide array of primary and secondary source material.

Archival documentation and ephemera, interviews with artists and art historians who knew Ferren personally have been indispensable. The Archives of American Art and the holdings of the family of the artist together comprise an immense amount of archival material, which provided detailed biographical information on nearly all aspects of the artist's life. John Ferren's widow, Rae Ferren and his son Bran Ferren, have allowed me unrestricted access to all of their materials. I found these to be in relatively good condition and order, which facilitated an easy and systematic examination. There are a plethora of diaries, sketchbooks, correspondence, photographs, as well as many other ephemeral items that document Ferren's numerous gallery exhibitions. Without the family's generous and continued assistance, this dissertation could not have been written.

Among these materials are a series of diaries that provide detailed narration of the artist's life, often with moving candor and sensitivity. These have been the most helpful component in reconstructing the artist's early life: in establishing an accurate chronological timeline, providing a first-person articulation of the artist's impressions of his own work and those of his peers, reflections on personal relations, as well as invaluable insight into his psyche. During his early years in San Francisco and his first trip to Europe, between 1926 and 1932, Ferren wrote assiduously on nearly all aspects of his life, including, and most importantly for my purposes, his development as a young artist and his responses to other art. These diaries were where he began to record his ideas on art as loosely structured essays offering explanations, or, perhaps even justifications for abstract art. They later became more fully formulated and laid the foundation for his important essays on Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s.

Ironically, he was initially an ardent realist, who by chance came into contact with some of the more progressive artists and thinkers in an otherwise conservative San Francisco at that time. After World War II he wrote with a more mature voice in a number of published articles and public speaking engagements. By that time he felt compelled to tell the story of Abstract Expressionism and was well positioned to do so.

In addition to papers in the Ferren Estate, other holdings of primary materials have proven valuable. These include the Pierre Matisse Gallery Papers at the Morgan Library and a large cache of letters between the artist and his journalist friend, Sherry Mangan, as part of the Sherry Mangan Papers at Houghton Library, Harvard University. The Pierre Matisse Gallery papers provided a revealing look inside the transatlantic artist-dealer relationship that provided Ferren with a much-needed source of income and of even greater importance, exposure in his home country. As the son of Henri Matisse, Pierre Matisse was extremely well connected in the art world and made important introductions for Ferren on both sides of the Atlantic. The correspondence between the two men continued even after Ferren's final show at the gallery in 1938. Ferren's relationship with Mangan, on the other hand, was purely one of friendship. The extended correspondence between the two men provide an intimate look into Ferren's personal life and help contextualize the artistic and political milieu in Paris and the United States on the eve of and during the Second World War.

The archival holdings of the Special Collections Department of the E. S. Bird Library at Syracuse University have also proven useful. These materials include three sketchbooks, two dating from the late 1920s and early 1930s and the third dating

from 1945. The earlier two revealed numerous studies of which I had been unaware, while the later sketchbook clearly illustrates Ferren's renewed interest in Picasso, albeit a brief one, at the end of the War. The Bird Library holdings also contain the manuscript of a lengthy address by Ferren to students in the Advanced Painting Class at the Brooklyn Museum School in 1949 and gives insight at this early stage of his teaching career of his educational pedagogy. Other visual materials among the holdings at Syracuse University include photos of Ferren's paintings installed in the window displays of Lord & Taylor in 1951, as well as numerous color slides of Ferren's work and a selection of photographs of the artist dating from the late 1920s to the mid-1960s.

Katharina Rich Perlow, who has handled the John Ferren Estate since the closing of the A. M. Sachs Gallery in 1984, has kept extensive files on Ferren including clippings of reviews, notices, as well as numerous slides of the artist's work. Perlow gave me unlimited access to her files. Organized chronologically, these files saved me countless hours that would have been spent hunting down many otherwise difficult-to-find reviews. Frequent discussions with Perlow about aspects of Ferren's work, especially at the early stages of my research, often resulted in valuable insights into the work. It would not be an understatement to say that this dissertation could not have been written without her gracious and frequent assistance.

Following his service in World War II Ferren embarked on a career as an art educator, first at the Brooklyn Museum School and later at The Cooper Union for Advancement in Science and Art, and eventually at Queens College, City University of New York. He also lectured and wrote widely on the topic of abstract art during

this time, acting in many instances as something of an ambassador for abstraction. He frequently contributed to journals such as Philip Pavia's *It Is* and *Art News*, as well as others. His writings, both published and unpublished from the 1950s, are not only essential for understanding Ferren's ideas on abstract art, but they also illuminate the work of his contemporaries. As an early member of the Artist's Club, an early forum for Abstract Expressionism, and serving as its president for one year, Ferren was at the center of the movement during the early to mid-1950s. He was also an unusual figure within the movement as he had participated in the development of modern art in Europe and was eager to articulate its genesis and development within the larger context of Abstract Expressionism.

Following the artist's premature death in 1970 the A. M. Sachs Gallery, New York, who had recently taken him on, continued to show works from the estate, occasionally including a brochure with a brief essay. In 1979 Craig Bailey, a Ph.D. student under the direction of professor Robert Pincus-Witten at the Graduate Center, CUNY, organized *John Ferren, A Retrospective*, which included the most complete biographical essay to date.² This dissertation expands considerably upon the foundation he laid down thirty years earlier. Bailey, like others who have written on Ferren's work, focused primarily on the earlier years of his career, thus treating superficially the post-1938 years, when many of the most interesting aspects of the artist's life and work occurred.

The last decade of the Ferren's life was one of his most productive and most experimental periods, especially during the years 1965–1970. It was at this time that

² Craig Bailey, *Ferren, A Retrospective* (New York: The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 1979).

Ferren began to incorporate advanced mathematics into his work by exploring the subjects of superellipses and, more importantly, the golden section and dynamic symmetry. And, while there is circumstantial evidence that he engaged with dynamic symmetry on a superficial level as early as the early 1930s, it was not until late in life that he incorporated it into his work in a regularized and sophisticated way. In addition, his life-long interest in color evolved into a greater interest in the visual perception of light and color in the form of radiosity.³ These endeavors took the form of three-dimensional works that reside somewhere between painting and sculpture and relate closely to other recent developments in experimental painting in the late 1960s. It has been this last period of the artist's life that has proved most exciting. Ferren had always been interested in working with experimental materials but this reached its apogee in the mid- to late-1960s with his investigations into the perception of light and color.

Many earlier monographic dissertations on other twentieth-century artists, some of whom were the same generation as Ferren, helped provide examples on which to base my study both for the organization of voluminous materials and for methodological inquiry. The most helpful include recent dissertations from the Graduate Center such as Deborah Cullen, *Robert Blackburn: American Printmaker* and Thalia Vrachopoulos, *Jean Xceron: Rediscovered Modernist Pioneer: Life and Works: 1912–1949*.⁴ Vrachopoulos's dissertation was particularly helpful in widening the context of American artists in Paris in the 1930s. Xceron and Ferren were

³ See Chapter 5, p. 259 et passim.

⁴ Deborah T. Cullen, "Robert Blackburn: American Printmaker" (Ph.D. diss., Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, 2002); Thalia Trezos Vrachopoulos, "Jean Xceron: Rediscovered Modernist Pioneer: Life and Works: 1912–1949" (Ph.D. diss., Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, 1999).

acquaintances and exhibited together on a number of occasions while both were in Paris.

It has been nearly twenty years since the last museum exhibition of Ferren's work. Organized as a three-part exhibition in 1993, the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center exhibited Ferren's work from the 1930s, while the artist's mid-career abstractions of the 1950s were exhibited at the University Art Gallery, State University of New York at Stony Brook. The late paintings from the 1960s were shown at The Godwin-Ternbach Museum, Queens College of the City University of New York. The exhibition included a catalogue containing a personal recollection of the artist by Irving Sandler and a cursory outline of his life by Ann Gibson.⁵ Since then there have been a number of subsequent gallery exhibitions at the Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery that have continued to bring to light focused aspects of the artist's life. The most recent of these was in 2007 and included a retrospective look at the artist's work. The catalogue included a brief biographical essay as well as brief notations relating to the works reproduced in the catalogue.⁶

In the 1970s there was increasing scholarly interest in American geometric abstraction of the 1930s and 1940s by emerging art historians and three dissertations were produced on the subject, all within a matter of a few years. These continue to provide insight into the period, and the most useful for my purposes has been Susan C. Larsen's exhaustive study on the American Abstract Artists group (AAA).⁷ Ferren

⁵ Irving Sandler and Ann Gibson, *The Abstract Spirit: John Ferren (1905-1970)* (East Hampton: The Stony Brook Foundation, 1993).

⁶ Katharina Rich Perlow, *John Ferren: Journey of an American Modernist* (New York: Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, 2007).

⁷ Susan Carol Larsen, *The American Abstract Artists Group: A History and Evaluation of its Impact Upon American Art*. Ph.D. diss. Northwestern University, 1974. Less useful for my purposes were Thomas Candor Tristschler, *The American Abstract Artists, 1937-1941*. Ph.D. diss. University of

was not a participant in the group, but many of its founding members were his contemporaries and exhibited with him on more than one occasion. Ferren has often been misidentified as a member of the AAA and this dissertation should definitively correct that persistent historical inaccuracy.

While Ferren took great pains to distance himself from his American colleagues once he returned to America in 1938, it has nevertheless been helpful to examine him in relation to them. There are many important and useful studies in this area that have provided a necessary contextual backdrop. These include Deborah Bricker Balken's seminal 2003 exhibition and catalogue, *The Park Avenue Cubists: Gallatin, Morris, Frelinghuysen, and Shaw* was instrumental in bringing these artists back into the spotlight after years of general neglect and illuminating their contributions to American modernism.⁸ Most recently, Mary-Kate O'Hare's comprehensive exhibition at the Newark Museum, *Constructive Spirit: Abstract Art in South and North America, 1920s–1950s*, and its accompanying catalogue provides an even wider historical lens by examining abstraction from this period in an inter-continental context.

A number of published diaries, memoirs, and writings by some of Ferren's contemporaries who were intimately involved with the development of Abstract Expressionism have also been extremely helpful to my research. These have provided numerous candid, first-hand accounts of the development of Abstract Expressionism. While generally filled with anecdotal material rather than illuminating critical

Pennsylvania, 1974; and Richard William Lizza, *The American Abstract Artists: Thirties Geometric Abstraction as Precursor to Forties Expressive Abstraction*. Ph.D. diss. Florida State University, 1985.
⁸ Deborah Bricker Balken and Robert S. Lubar, *The Park Avenue Cubists: Gallatin, Frelinghuysen, Morris, and Shaw*. Exh. cat. (New York: Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 2002).

analysis, these have been indispensable for establishing the zeitgeist of the period. Without question the three most important of these publications are *Club Without Walls: Selections from the Journals of Philip Pavia*, edited by the Pavia's widow, Natalie Edgar, *Out of the Picture: Milton Resnick and the New York School*, edited by Geoffrey Dorfman, Resnick's former studio assistant, and Irving Sandler's *A Sweeper-Up After Artists: A Memoir*.⁹ Pavia (1912–2005) and Ferren were close friends in the 1950s and 60s and after Pavia left his post as president of the Club in 1956 to begin the publication of *It Is*, a magazine dedicated to the promotion of abstract art and to which Ferren would contribute articles, Ferren took over as the Club's president for one year, with Sandler assuming the role in 1957 for the remaining years of its existence.

Conversations with Edgar about Ferren and his relationship to her husband, Pavia, have clarified his role amongst members of the Club. My conversations with Doris Aach, widow of abstract painter Herb Aach (1923–1985), who had been a student and close friend of Ferren's, and with whom Ferren later taught at Queens College have also been extremely helpful in establishing the artist as a teacher and also provided me with a greater sense of his personality and character. Aach helped develop intricate color theories and was one of Ferren's most ardent followers. My visit to the Aach home and viewing of Herb Aach's paintings made Ferren's color legacy more accessible. The first-hand accounts of Ferren from Edgar, Doris Aach, and others, have also been invaluable for gaining clearer insight into the character and

⁹ Natalie Edgar, ed., *Club Without Walls: Selections from the Journals of Philip Pavia* (New York: Midmarch Press, 2007); Geoffrey Dorfman, ed., *Out of the Picture: Milton Resnick and the New York School* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2003); Irving Sandler, *A Sweeper-Up After Artists: A Memoir* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003).

disposition of the artist. In addition, artist Pat Adams, a former student of Ferren's from the Brooklyn Museum School, provided some ephemera from her time as a student there and through our conversations, further insight into Ferren's teaching methodology and color emphasis.

Sandler was also quite close with Ferren and while the artist does not feature as prominently as some of the other cast members in his memoir, Ferren's contributions to the Abstract Expressionist milieu are fairly well detailed. Sandler's writings on the period of the 1950s, often derived from his own first-hand experience and interviews with the artists, remain invaluable for any student of the period.

Sandler generously gave me a couple hours of his time during which we discussed Ferren's role amongst his peers of the New York School, and his most recent publication, *Abstract Expressionism and the American Experience: A Reevaluation*, provided validation of Ferren's stature among artists of his generation by re-drawing the otherwise circumscribed lines of the Abstract Expressionist canon. In it, Sandler acknowledges the limitations of his earlier focus on fifteen artists, and allows for the addition of six more to this core group: John Ferren, Lee Krasner (1908–1984), Jack Tworkov (1900–1983), George McNeil (1908–1995), Richard Pousette-Dart (1916–1992), and Esteban Vicente (1903–2001).¹⁰

Today there are fewer and fewer people who knew the artist personally. Those who did, some of whom have been previously mentioned, have been instrumental in helping to provide a well-rounded image of the artist's personality and character, as well as providing many informative anecdotes. Critic, writer, and husband of painter

¹⁰ Irving Sandler, *Abstract Expressionism and the American Experience: A Reevaluation*. (Lenox, MA and New York: Hard Press Editions and School of Visual Arts in association with Hudson Hills Press, 2009).

Jane Wilson, John Gruen's *The Party's Over Now: Reminiscences of the Fifties—New York's Artists, Writers, Musicians, and their Friends* provided additional anecdotal stories and revealing contextual material.¹¹ I have encountered many other verbal stories throughout the course of my research by many artists who knew or had contact with Ferren, brief though it may have been in some cases. These include the late sculptor Lawrence Fane (1933–2008), and painter Robert Birmelin (b. 1933), both of whom taught with Ferren as young men at Queens College, Will Barnet (b. 1911), and many others who helped fill in the picture. While many conversations with these artists were not necessarily formal interviews, the recollections of Ferren's associates and colleagues were invaluable in helping to establish a more complete image of him as a person, his position within the New York art world, and a wider understanding of how artists perceived and received his work. Cynthia Navaretta, whose late husband was the poet Emmanuel Navaretta, has also been helpful in providing stories of John Ferren and his association with the Club. Both Cynthia and her husband were intimately involved with the organization of the Club and close friends with the artist.

Toward the end of my writing I discovered two art historians who were exploring different and specific aspects of Ferren's career. Susan Felleman, Professor of Film at Southern Illinois University, is particularly interested in Ferren's brief but seemingly close relationship with director Alfred Hitchcock. Ferren worked with Hitchcock on two films, *Vertigo* and *The Trouble with Harry* but it seems that their relationship dissipated around the late 1950s after the completion of *The Trouble with Harry*. Coinciding closely with the time that the Ferren family sold their house in

¹¹ John Gruen, *The Party's Over Now: Reminiscences of the Fifties—New York's Artists, Writers, Musicians, and their Friends* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972).

Brentwood and stopped traveling to Los Angeles during the summer months, this break in their relationship may have simply been a matter of circumstance.

Felleman's unpublished paper on Ferren and Hitchcock was helpful in illuminating the artist's work within the context of film history.

The second scholar researching a specific aspect of Ferren's career is Sarah Rogers, who, as a Post-doctoral Fellow at the Smithsonian Institution, is interested in Ferren's work specifically within the context of contemporary American artists in Lebanon and their legacy. Even though his stay in Lebanon was less than one year, Ferren nevertheless played a significant role in bringing contemporary abstract painting to Beirut and other parts of the region through his lectures in Tehran, Lahore, and elsewhere. While Rogers' interest in this topic is specific to Beirut and generally directed toward more recent contemporary art and artists who were in the area, there has been some crossover among our research. We have both benefited from an ongoing dialogue and shared discoveries with one another during the course of our work.

My hope is that this study will not only encourage further research into the artist's life and career and help to place him among the landscape of American abstract painting in the twentieth century, but that it will help illuminate some of the changing cultural attitudes of the 1930s to the 1960s through the lens of Ferren's art. The diversity of Ferren's artistic practice should be understood not only within the art historical context of the twentieth century, but also how his work was a reflection of changing cultural values. While it is the most exhaustive study of Ferren's work to date, and will correct a number of inaccuracies that have been previously perpetuated

about the artist's life, it is by no means absolutely complete. There are still many crevasses of the Ferren's life that remain to be examined and will hopefully come to light through future and more specialized studies. Ferren's life intersected with so many influential artists, writers, and thinkers, that his role in the development of abstraction in America before and after World War II deserves to be thoroughly examined. In the end, this dissertation is more than simply recovering a "lost" figure who contributed significantly to the development of modern art. It also serves as an expanding study of the greater context of the development of abstraction during the middle of the twentieth century.

Chapter One
The Early Years:
Los Angeles, San Francisco, and a first trip to Europe 1905–1929

John Millard Ferren (1905–1970) was often reluctant to go into great detail about the developmental years of his life on the west coast during interviews, and preferred instead to recount his years in Paris during the 1930s or his stay in Beirut as artist-in-residence for the U.S. State Department. His childhood and teenage years in Los Angeles and the subsequent five years that Ferren spent in San Francisco from 1926 to 1931, however, were understandably transformative for the young artist. The years Ferren spent in San Francisco are especially illuminating and are meticulously, and sometimes poetically, recorded in his diary that reveals a man with an omnivorous desire for knowledge and an acute sensitivity to the world around him. His decision to leave his family in Los Angeles following high school and move to San Francisco—a difficult one for him at the time, according to his diary—would ultimately introduce him to what nascent modernism existed in the otherwise sleepy Bay Area of the 1920s and cement his desire to become an artist.

Early Life and Los Angeles

Millard James Ferren was born somewhere outside of Pendleton Oregon, October 17, 1905, his father, James W. Ferren, worked as a traveling salesman and sold upholstery as well as specialty horseshoes.¹ Ferren’s mother, Verna Westfall, had married James Ferren at the young age of 16 and during the early years of their

¹ Audio tape of Roy Ferren, undated, John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate. It has been suggested that Ferren was born on an Indian Resveration in Oregon, but I have not been able to definitively confirm this.

marriage, the family moved around the Pacific Northwest because of James Ferren's occupation, spending time in Oregon and Northern California, living for a time in Oakland, where John Ferren's younger brother, Roy Ferren, was born. The family eventually settled in Los Angeles sometime around the mid-nineteen-teens, where Ferren attended high school.² One of Ferren's earliest passions was music and he was able to secure a job as an usher for the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra during his last two years in high school, attending every performance at the orchestra's home at Clune's Pavilion and fostering what would become a life-long love of music. As a young man Ferren even considered a career in music, but following high school he quickly became interested in the visual arts instead.³ The Ferren household was not one in which artistic endeavors were particularly encouraged, however, and as Ferren recalled it was almost on a lark that he began to work as a sculptor:

In my lifetime there was nothing in the way of background or encouragement of art. My father thought I was crazy. It was almost beyond the ken. It wasn't just making a living, it was something entirely unheard of in Western life...Upon getting out of high school I took a job in the telephone company and going to work I passed an art store that had plasticene in the windows. I bought some and started to model. Literally that was the beginning of my interest.⁴

Ferren attended high school at John H. Francis Polytechnic High School in the Sunset Park neighborhood of Los Angeles. He was involved in a number of extra-curricular activities, but his grades were only average. Ironically, for an artist who

² There are some factual inconsistencies regarding the early years of Ferren's life. The most reliable sources are John Ferren interview with Paul Cummings, June 7, 1968, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C. (hereafter AAA). Used with the permission of Rae Ferren. Also, John Ferren, interview with Dorothy Seckler, June 12, 1965, transcript, AAA. Used with the permission of Rae Ferren; and the description of his brother's life by Roy Ferren, Audio tape, John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

³ Ferren interview with Cummings, AAA.

⁴ Ibid.

would spend two long and productive periods of his life working with a complex geometric-based abstraction (the 1930s and 1960s), his grades in subjects such as mechanical drawing, algebra, geometry, physics, and solid geometry—all subjects that might be considered endemic to such an artist—were poor.

His dissatisfaction with the provinciality of Los Angeles and San Francisco combined with a desire to leave an apparently unhappy home life led to two themes that recur during Ferren's life. He deliberately adopted a long-standing transnationalism and his persona became fluid as he continually reinvented himself, especially during the first half of his life. He expatriated to Paris in the 1930s and freely admitted that he felt much more comfortable among the European set than his American compatriots. He re-invented himself after moves to San Francisco, Paris, and New York, and only after several decades was he able to adjust to life back in his home country. Ferren participated on a fundamental level in the development of Abstract Expressionism in New York during the late 1940s and early 1950s, yet he has been positioned outside of the “inner circle” of painters that included de Kooning, Newman, Rothko, Kline, and others, characterized as merely a peripheral figure.

Why this is so is revealed in two particularly candid and revealing documents the artist shares some early experiences that shaped his character.

I am ashamed and afraid of my social self. I believe that I am too distinguished too handsome and dashing when properly dressed. . . .
[I] Remember one incident around 6 yrs skhool [*sic*] children gathered around me taunting, saying poor Millard. My reactions other than pain and resentment where puzzlement in to why I was called “poor Millard.”⁵

⁵ Untitled Manuscript, October 12, 1946. John Ferren Papers, AAA.

Some years after that childhood encounter the artist had an equally traumatic experience that he recounted in another autobiographical manuscript. He tells the story of how he was never allowed to play sports as a child and was involved with extracurricular activities such as the Glee Club and the theatre. In high school he was blindfolded and abducted by some members of the football team and taken to a remote location where he was stripped of his clothes and interrogated over an alleged mistreatment of a female student. Ferren disavowed any knowledge of this supposed mistreatment and was left with his clothes and had to find his own way home.⁶ The earliest example of his reinventing himself was after high school when he moved to San Francisco and took the name John, indicating that he resented the name Millard. In the artist's own words, he chose John partly because of the banality of it and also because he had been told he resembled the popular actor John Barrymore.⁷

What exposure Ferren had to the art community in Los Angeles we can only surmise and many years later he seemed to dismiss it altogether, recalling that "in Los Angeles there was very little in the way of art of any sort. There was a museum with dinosaurs in it which they have now replaced."⁸ While modernism was beginning to blossom there, the scene continued to be dominated by an aesthetic that blended Tonalist, Impressionist, and Barbizon styles. Indeed, the region's conservatism with regard to progressive art is epitomized in the controversy provoked by the exhibition of a nude by Childe Hassam at the Los Angeles Museum in 1913.⁹

⁶ Untitled and undated manuscript, AAA.

⁷ Untitled Manuscript, October 12, 1946. AAA.

⁸ Ferren interview with Seckler.

⁹ For a brief but informative treatment of the art scene in early twentieth-century Los Angeles and the role of the conservative but influential California Art Club, see Victoria Dailey, Natalie Shivers, Michael Dawson, and William Deversell, *LA's Early Moderns: Art, Architecture, Photography* (Los Angeles: Balcony Press, 2003): 25 et passim.

Two of the most prominent artists to work in the region at that time were Elmer Wachtel (1864–1929) and his wife, watercolor painter Marion Cavanaugh Wachtel (1876–1954). Elmer Wachtel had moved to Los Angeles in the early 1880s and developed a highly personal style of landscape painting that suited the pastoral environment of the region and reflected the intense sunlight and pastel colors of the area. California art historian Nancy Moure has described Elmer Wachtel as “among the first to develop compositions that later became stereotypes in the hands of the ubiquitous landscapists of the 1920s,”¹⁰ while art historian Victoria Dailey has added “Most of these landscape artists valued simplicity and preferred the natural pleasures of the outdoors rather than the artificial environment of the expanding city. . . . preferring to record the beauties of nature unspoiled by man.”¹¹ Ferren's knowledge of these landscape painters and the art in general in Los Angeles at the time was certainly limited and it would be speculation to suggest how extensive it was. One clue indicates, however, at least a superficial knowledge and appreciation for Wachtel, the foremost landscape painter of the time. Ferren composed a poetic ode to the artist, “On a Wachtel Landscape”:

The lone, wide desert is still
As night winds sweep by unheard,
And distant shadows deepen
In cool, enfolding haze.
No bird, no man, no moving thing
Disturbs this gray blue quiet.
And the mountain juts to sacred height.
And a touch of fire breaths [*sic*] there.
A place where the soul flows free
From worlds, and men, e'en loves.
Where one stands erect, deep breathing,

¹⁰ Nancy Dustin Wall Moure, *California Art: 450 Years of Painting & Other Media* (Los Angeles: Dustin Publications, 1998): 91.

¹¹ Victoria Dailey, et al., *LA's Early Moderns*, 29.

In intimate, instinctive commune.
Where beauty is strength and actuality,
As night winds sweep o'er this immensity.¹²

The poem is an epistemological appreciation of Wachtel's interpretation of the California landscape.

Los Angeles to San Francisco

It was after high school that Ferren began working for the telephone company in Los Angeles. However, it seems he had a falling out with his father and moved to San Francisco with his close friend, Frank Triest. Roy Ferren, the artist's brother, recounted that the move seemed sudden, the reasons for which were unclear, but as he recalled they were "dark and mysterious."¹³ Ironically, while San Francisco was a larger and more sophisticated city, it lacked Los Angeles' small but burgeoning modernist art scene that must have either been unknown or perhaps anathema to Ferren, as his homage to the anachronistic Wachtel suggests. Modernism came to Los Angeles primarily through the paintings and teachings of one artist, Stanton MacDonald-Wright (1890–1973), who worked in a style he called Synchronism, which was based on Cubism. MacDonald-Wright, who along with Morgan Russell in Paris had absorbed, synthesized, and personalized the lessons of Cubism, returned to California in the fall of 1918 and began teaching at the Art Students League of Los Angeles the following year. Indeed, as art historian Will South characterized it, once Macdonald-Wright came to Southern California, he "almost immediately...undertook a wide variety of projects designed to stimulate, illuminate, and rearrange the

¹² John Ferren Papers, AAA. Preserved at the Archives are a number of poems by the artist from the mid-1920s. This particular one, however, is the only one related to the visual arts.

¹³ Roy Ferren, undated Audio recording, John Ferren Estate.

Southland's art community and to establish himself within that fast-growing city as a guiding force."¹⁴

It was at the Art Students League that MacDonald-Wright inspired an entire generation of California modernists including Edouard Vysekal (1890–1939), Lorser Feitelson (1898–1978), and others.¹⁵ MacDonald-Wright's commanding presence in Los Angeles furthered modernist causes with much more alacrity than in San Francisco during the 1920s and 1930s. San Francisco had a few early proponents of modernism, such as Yun Gee, who would exert an influence on Ferren and later with the German artist Hans Hofmann (1880–1966) in the early 1930s. It would not be until the mid-1940s, however, long after Ferren had already lived in Europe and subsequently settled in New York, when modernism would appear with any lasting force in the Bay Area.¹⁶

Determined to follow a career in art, Ferren's approach was entirely pragmatic. As he recalled to Paul Cummings in 1968,

After working a year or two on my own I went to San Francisco and gave a brief try at the art schools. I didn't like them very much and took a studio and then apprenticed myself as a stone carver in an Italian stone yard, Usto Keenan Stone Yard in San Francisco, figuring that if I could learn how to carve stone directly it would be worth knowing.¹⁷

The first few entries of his earliest extant diary often read as stream of consciousness documents whose sole purpose was merely to record his fleeting thoughts and

¹⁴ Will South, et al., *Color, Myth, and Music: Stanton Macdonald-Wright and Synchronism*. Exh. cat. (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Museum of Art, 2001): 68.

¹⁵ Sara Vure, *Circles of Influence: Impressionism to Modernism in Southern California, 1910–1930* (Newport Beach, CA: Orange County Museum of Art, 2000): 84 and passim.

¹⁶ Moure, *California Art: 450 Years of Painting & Other Media*, 227. Also see, Thomas Albright, *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945–1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); and Susan Landauer, *The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism*. Exh. cat. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).

¹⁷ Ferren interview with Cummings.

feelings, and occasionally his initial attempts at sketching or modeling in clay. Prior to his departure for San Francisco, he recorded some of these thoughts: "Sketches for sculpture. Unposed portrait studies as in a street car – clothes ____ – Fleeting, absent moods. The unconscious abstraction of tired people in a big city - the spontaneous flash occurring in the most trivial. Simple yet complex."¹⁸ While very little of Ferren's early work survives, one of the earliest works completed before Ferren moved to San Francisco is *The Kiss*, ca. 1924 (fig. 1.1). Its rough modeling yet inventive composition show an artist who was after the emotive effects of the work rather than technical brilliance and finding his way stylistically. The work recalls Auguste Rodin's sculpture, which Ferren may have seen in reproduction.

Ferren moved to San Francisco during the month of October 1926, settling in the Telegraph Hill neighborhood and during these first few months in the city he essentially kept to himself. There are a few brief mentions of his sculpture during this period, but it is not until May 1927 that Ferren begins to detail his engagement with the San Francisco art community. His first recounting was not favorable:

As a last resort I turn to this [diary] and moan. I have spent the day supported in the air without a point of contact—physical, mental, or moral. A trip to a small art gallery – the work there and the chatter. No hope of anything there – by that I mean the whole art world that I ever come in contact with. I despise it more than any other division of society. I came away feeling a stranger to myself.¹⁹

It is unknown what Ferren saw at this gallery, but clearly his experience was unpleasant and can be understood as another brick in the foundation that provided him with the feeling of an outsider looking in.

¹⁸ John Ferren Diary entry, September 9, 1926. AAA.

¹⁹ John Ferren Diary entry, May 8, 1927. AAA.

By May 1927, even though he had been in San Francisco less than one year, Ferren already showed inclinations toward leaving for Europe. His diary reflects a man who was initially struggling to find himself and his work, but soon after his first disagreeable experience in the art gallery and months of despair as recorded in the diary, Ferren's fortune began to change. He rented a studio from one of the few progressive Bay Area painters, Rinaldo Cuneo (1877–1939), and although he still was itching to travel to Europe, his tone became noticeably more optimistic. Only a week after his despondent entry, he wrote

For two days I have been crazy. Came extremely near going to Europe – Happening on a suitable studio – rented it – had a talk with [Rinaldo] Cuneo – a well known painter who owns it – finished child's head for casting – have revived somewhat. . . . In Cuneo – I found sympathy with my ideas – in he with mine. I can hardly blame myself but perhaps I talked too much. I want no intimacy and I can't talk art and not be intimate.²⁰

His neighbor in the new studio was Icelandic sculptor, Magnus Arnesen (1879–1970), whom the younger Ferren assisted from time to time and learned some casting techniques.²¹ In his diary Ferren described Arnesen in halting sentences that betray something of a competitive spirit and posits that he himself will turn out better work by the time he reaches Arnesen's age:

He is a peculiar fellow. First I thought him sterile. He gives nothing personally. His quietness is almost embarrassing. Still waters, etc. I suppose laughs a peculiar childish laugh now and then. His apathy is his stronghold it is unpenetrable [sic.]. 32 years old doesn't look it. In 10 years I can turn out better work than he. In a year even – although his work is not bad.²²

²⁰ John Ferren Diaries, May 16, 1927.

²¹ Arnesen was born in Iceland and while in San Francisco in the 1920s taught at the Berkeley League of Fine Arts. He moved to Claremont, NH in the 1940s, where he spent the remaining part of his life. See Edan Milton Hughes, *Artists in California* Third Ed. (Sacramento, CA: Crocker Art Museum, 2002): 48.

²² John Ferren Diaries, May 23, 1927, AAA.

It was through Arnesen, who was already ensconced within the artistic community in the city, that Ferren met a number of the more progressive artists in San Francisco.

Early Modernist Influences: Yun Gee and Kenneth Rexroth

In June 1927 Ferren had dinner with and visited the studio of one of the only true modernists in San Francisco at that time, the radical Chinese painter, Yun Gee (1906–1963). Gee had learned traditional Chinese watercolor techniques in China before coming to San Francisco in 1921. By 1924 he was enrolled in the California School of Fine Arts studying under Otis Oldfield and within two years had renounced traditional methods of art practice and destroyed all of his earlier, more conventional work.²³ Gee did not intend to rid his work of its Chinese qualities, instead he sought a more modern way to incorporate Chinese methods of painting into modern work. He founded the Chinese Revolutionary Artists' Club in 1926, a group that melded Chinese and modernist painting with radical politics. It became a nexus of politics and art for the Chinese community in San Francisco and also served as an incubator for Communist ideas. As art historian Anthony Lee noted, “The art [of Gee] itself was a strangely hybridized, modernized variety, but it was meant to articulate a vocabulary and visualize the signs—the commodities-as-signs—of a republican culture.”²⁴ Gee worked in a style that combined Cubism and Synchronism with the Chinese tradition into what he called “Diamondism.” One of the region's most

²³ Joyce Brodsky, *The Paintings of Yun Gee* (Storrs, CT: The William Benton Museum of Art, 1979): 16.

²⁴ Anthony W. Lee, "Another View of Chinatown: Yun Gee and the Chinese Revolutionary Artists' Club." in Brook, James, Chris Carlsson and Nancy J. Peters, eds. *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture*. (San Francisco: City Lights, 1998): 172.

progressive artists, Gee's *San Francisco, Chinatown* (1927, fig. 1.2) illustrates his adoption of elements of European modernism, in particular the saturated hues and faceted shapes of Fauvism and Cubism.²⁵

In addition, not only was Gee's *art* hybridized, as Lee points out in his writings on the artist, but perhaps even more importantly Gee *himself* was hybridized as art historian Joyce Brodsky has identified. Brodsky draws heavily on the notion of hybridization that was developed by the post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha in defining Gee as a transnational figure who struggled with nearly continual hostility against him because of his transnationality. In identifying a "third space" that develops from hybridization of two or more cultures combining, Brodsky writes,

What may emerge from the struggle [between acceptance of the artist's hybrid nature and hostility against it] is constitutive of the stronger notion of the hybrid embedded in a different kind of vision that forges coherence from the cultural parts. This may materialize from what Homi Bhabha labels being in "the third, or in-between, or transitional space."²⁶

While Ferren did not have the same obstacles that Gee encountered as a Chinese immigrant, his experience as a transnational whose hybrid identity led to a marginalization would be similar in the future. Bhabha's ideas on cultural hybridity are helpful in understanding why Ferren's role within the Abstract Expressionist canon has been marginalized despite his extensive involvement in that movement.²⁷

²⁵ Moure, *California Art*, 304.

²⁶ Brodsky, Joyce. *Experiences of Passage: The Paintings of Yun Gee & Li-Lan*. (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2008): 4.

²⁷ Bhabha primarily addresses notions of identity and hybridization in the context of minority or socio-economically marginalized groups, often through a post-colonial lens. For his discussion on cultural translation see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London and New York, 1994, 212.

Ferren's diary entry of his encounter with Gee indicates that he was intrigued by the slightly younger, but much more radical painter who was soon to depart for Paris.

From what I gather his work is all emotion and the search for pure colors. He occasionally gets good form. I find Chi[nese] modern art a case of adjusting yourself to it. Glanced three books on modern art in Yun's studio – Alarming until I realize my individuality. What a turbulent disturbing mess. Came across a sentence, “Modern artists wanted to portray things deeper since their disregard for surface values. But what must not depth have a surface. The ocean.”²⁸

Additionally, there was a connection between Gee and poet and essayist Kenneth Rexroth (1905–1982), who would become one of Ferren’s closest friends during this period. Anthony Lee has noted that Rexroth was a frequent guest at the Chinese Revolutionary Artists’ Club in the late 1920s and it was he who helped formulate the Club’s Communist ideas.²⁹ It would be presumptuous and misleading to place too much of an emphasis on Ferren's limited contact with Gee, but a few specific things should be kept in mind regarding their contact and the Chinese painter's influence. First, it was through Gee that Ferren had his earliest documented encounter with modern art. It was not, as some have noted, with the work of Wassily Kandinsky, which would not occur until the artist traveled to Paris. Art historian Melinda Lorenz incorrectly notes in *Theme & Improvisation: Kandinsky & the American Avant-Garde, 1912–1950*, “It is entirely possible that he [Ferren] was aware of exhibitions [in the 1920s] organized by Galka Scheyer (which included Kandinsky) in San Francisco and Los Angeles during this period, although there is no record of him

²⁸ John Ferren Diary, June 12, 1927. AAA.

²⁹ Anthony W. Lee, *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco’s Public Murals*. (Berkeley: University of California Press): 196. Interestingly, there is no mention of Gee or the Chinese Revolutionary Artists’ Club in Rexroth’s autobiography, his biography written by Linda Hamalian, or the Rexroth Papers, held at the UCLA library.

seeing these shows.”³⁰ While there would be a rapid succession of stylistic influences on Ferren once he arrived in Europe in 1931—and indeed, Kandinsky’s work would play a major role—there is no documentation to support this and it is unlikely that Ferren had been aware of this work during his years in Los Angeles or San Francisco.

Gee's work was a colorful array of faceted shapes seen in *San Francisco, Chinatown*, which may have helped inspire Ferren's first mature style that he would develop in Paris in the mid-1930s. Moreover, soon after their meeting, Gee would leave San Francisco for Paris, which may have provided further inspiration for Ferren, who had already considered leaving for Europe and would himself depart on his first trip there within two years. Ferren’s close friend Frank Triest, came from a wealthy German Jewish family that had settled in Los Angeles. They traveled annually to Europe and would also likely provide inspiration for the young Ferren to go there as well.³¹

In Lee’s study on radical politics in San Francisco, *Painting on the Left*, he states that it was Rexroth who carried the Communist torch in San Francisco after Gee’s departure for Europe, and it can be assumed, even though there seems to be no reference to politics in his diaries, that Ferren had been exposed to Communist doctrine through his contact with the poet. As Lee notes, until his belief in the Party lapse, “Rexroth helped to sustain the agenda of the local Communist Party in the Chinese-American art circle.”³² There is no mention of communism anywhere in the literature on Ferren. He did, however, take away one idea particularly Eastern idea

³⁰ Gail Levin and Melinda Lorenz, *Theme & Improvisation: Kandinsky and the American Avant-Garde, 1912–1950*. Exh. cat. (Boston, Toronto and London: Bullfinch Press, 1992): 186.

³¹ Roy Ferren, undated audio tape, John Ferren Estate. Also, John Ferren Diary, May 15, 1927, John Ferren Papers, AAA.

³² Lee, *Painting on the Left*, 197.

from Gee, which was also likely a partial effect of the large Asian community in San Francisco.

Ferren's contact with Gee stimulated his interest in Zen Buddhism, to which he referred many years later during his interview with Paul Cummings. Ferren noted that his "first contact . . . with Zen Buddhism was in San Francisco in the twenties where I knew a number of Chinese painters. I wrote a preface for a show of a young painter there, who was doing remarkable work in the twenties."³³ Some of Gee's interests were shared by Ferren and as art historian Craig Bailey has noted, through Gee and other Chinese artists "he [Ferren] came to know of Taoism and share its fundamental beliefs. . . . Taoist tenets contributed to Ferren's growing philosophic and aesthetic position with an emphasis on universal principles, integration of human action with natural law, and nurturing of individual virtue."³⁴ It's unclear just how familiar Ferren was with the tenets of Buddhism, and as Rexroth noted, "He [Ferren] had started work on a large stature of Tara. He didn't know anything about Tantric Buddhism or even Mahayana Buddhism, but he knew that there was a female emanation, a double of Sakyamuni. He did a life-size sculpture and the model was Shelby Grove, one of the most beautiful girls I have ever known."³⁵ This figure that Rexroth is referring to must have been the large Indian-inspired figure in an early

³³ Ferren interview with Cummings. Many years later in 1968 Ferren wrote a preface for a brochure for a Yun Gee exhibition at the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery. He wrote:

The first sign of an emerging artist is that he recognizes the ground current of his time. From Paris came the ground swell and Yun's 20s production grasped the color-structure implicit in the painting being done there *at that time*. They were not done after the fact. This is remarkable. He had no direct contact. De la Fresnay, Lhote, etc., did it no better nor with more mastery. He began full fledged. . . . MacDonald-Wright was somewhere about, but he was painting sexy Orientalia.

Quoted in Brodsky, *Experiences of Passage*, 58.

³⁴ Craig Bailey, *Ferren, A Retrospective* (New York: The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 1979): 7.

³⁵ Linda Hamalian, ed., *Kenneth Rexroth: An Autobiographical Novel* Revised edition. (New York: New Directions Books, 1991): 425.

photograph (fig. 1.3). Sakyamuni is one of the many names of Buddha and Ferren has depicted the seated figure with signature features of a cross-legged pose, arms at rest, and stylized hair done in a bun on top of the figure's head.

Gee and Rexroth were interlocking influences on the impressionable Ferren during this period and after Gee left San Francisco, it seems that the writer and poet was instrumental in exposing Ferren to new ideas, both artistic and political. An exact contemporary of Ferren, Rexroth was born in South Bend, Indiana, and by the time the two met he had already led a colorful life. He had studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and become involved with radical politics in the 1920s as a young man. He traveled extensively around the country in the mid-1920s and eventually moved to San Francisco after meeting his first wife in 1927. Rexroth was also interested in spiritualism and mysticism and his charisma and tales of travel must have been too much for Ferren to resist. Rexroth recounted meeting Ferren:

On the eve of the Depression, early in 1929, we had met the painter John Ferren. He was extremely handsome and bore a remarkable resemblance to the actor William Powell and was a great lad for the ladies. He lived down the street from us in the studio building above the old Victorian red-brick shop, the backyard of which was Ralph Stackpole's studio. The back rooms immediately above were John Ferren's studio. He had two rooms, one a living room and one a workroom. In those days he was more a sculptor than a painter.³⁶

Rexroth recalled that Ferren suffered tremendously from a crisis of confidence during these early years in San Francisco, a disposition confirmed by his diary, that reveals a man who felt alone in the city, reluctant to engage with the community, and one who struggled with religious notions of good and bad. Ferren was a voracious reader and

³⁶ Ibid.

cultural spectator who frequented the symphony, but an artist who disliked and/or perhaps misunderstood, contemporary painting. "The majority of contemporary painting cannot touch me. Although I deeply appreciate a few of the old masters Rembrandt, Velasquez, El Greco, Leonardo."³⁷ In June of 1927 he spent two days camping in Yosemite with Arnesen and recounted, "Greatly enjoyed first night under stars. Yosemite extremely beautiful – spectacular, powerful – and polluted with people. On wrong foot – hardly enjoyed myself. . . . I am sensitive, troubled, lonely, afloat, jumping from Christ to the Devil – unable to forget one whole with the other."³⁸

Throughout the fall of 1927 there are brief mentions scattered throughout Ferren's diary of his navigating a path toward fully realized work. In August of that year he noted "I at times see clear glimpses of my future work. Personal, compact, representative, not abstract. Composed focus Vehicles of emotion and personal being. No story telling drama."³⁹ This early avoidance of any reference to narrative elements would already suggest an inclination toward abstraction, despite what he wrote in his diary. By October, however, he refers to one of his works as "startlingly modern looking."⁴⁰ In late December of that year, Ferren returned to Los Angeles to visit with his family for the Christmas holiday. It would be the first time that he would show them his work and his diary entry from that day reveals parents who were at least moderately supportive of their son's efforts. He was, however, extremely hard on himself and dissatisfied with much of the work. "Argument with myself – that only a

³⁷ John Ferren Diary, June 21, 1927. AAA.

³⁸ Ibid. June 30, 1927. AAA.

³⁹ Ibid. August 14, 1927. AAA.

⁴⁰ John Ferren Diary, October 17, 1927. AAA.

creator or one endowed with creative faculties can understand an emotionally vast work of art – arising from showing my work to my family – my father's surface comprehending. God bless him- and my mother's rather unwilling comprehension."⁴¹

The year 1928 would be an auspicious one for Ferren as he expanded his circle of friends in the San Francisco art community. It was also the first time that he would show his work in public, and he seems to have become much more self-confident. In February 1928 Ferren met the sculptor Adaline Kent (1900–1957). Best known as a Surrealist-inspired sculptor who had studied with Bay Area artist Ralph Stackpole (1885–1973) and worked in a heavy and stylized figurative style during this time that included subjects of animals and portrait busts.⁴² Ferren, not seemingly impressed by Kent's work, reserved only a few words for her in recording the encounter: “Adeline Kent – sculptures – small masculine – whimsical – agonized mouth – hungry blue eyes her work is very feminine. Probably unloved – wealthy family.”⁴³ Much different than Ferren’s work at the time, it would be his first exposure to a surrealist-inclined strain of modern art.

Early Exhibitions

A few images of additional earlier works survive and they show that Ferren had yet to solidify his style, noted in the review of his first exhibition in the Ninth Annual Exhibition at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor held in April 1928.

⁴¹ Ibid., December 24, 1927. AAA.

⁴² See Edan Milton Hughes, *Artists in California*, 620. Also see, Adaline Kent, *Autobiography: From the Notebooks and Sculpture of Adaline Kent* (Houston, TX: The Gulf Printing Co., 1958): 5 et passim; Susan Ehrlich, ed., *Pacific Dreams: Currents of Surrealism and Fantasy in California Art, 1934–1957* Exh. cat. (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles at the Armand Hamer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, 1995): 130-133.

⁴³ Ibid., February 26, 1928. AAA. The gendered language is interesting and, as we shall see, appears again in Ferren’s writings about abstract art while he was in Paris.

It was Ferren's debut yet solicited only a passing mention by *Los Angeles Times* critic, the etcher and painter, Arthur Millier.⁴⁴ The critic for the *San Francisco Examiner* identified Ferren as a "new name" in the catalogue and asserted that he "is a sculptor who works behind closed doors and has steadily refused to exhibit what he considers as experiments."⁴⁵ Ferren's apparent reluctance to show his work early on is perplexing given the attention he was beginning to receive in the press. Indeed, *The Argus* reproduced his drawing *Head of a Woman* and noted that it was "A very fine contribution. . . . [with] maturity both in inspiration and draughtsmanship. It augurs well for the sculpture which the artist has been doing behind closed doors for the past two years."⁴⁶ Curiously, there is no mention of Ferren's inclusion in the Museum exhibition in his diary. Just a few months later, in June, Ferren exhibited his work again, this time in his first solo show at the Braun Art Gallery and it is in the brief words recording this in his diary that show a renewed sense of confidence. "Tomorrow – my work is to be viewed for purpose of exhibition at Braun Arts Galerie. I have new faith in my past work."⁴⁷

Ferren's early diary ends in August, 1928 and within eight months he would travel to Europe for the first time. Before his departure, however, Ferren had what can perhaps best be described as a synesthetic, and certainly a life-altering experience. Synesthesia is a condition that produces a cross-cognitive understanding of sensory experiences (i.e. a sound that may be perceived as a color or vice versa). The episode occurred while he was walking with Rexroth in Golden Gate Park.

⁴⁴ Arthur Millier, "Museum Show: Sculpture in Ninth Annual is Varied and Promising," *LA Times* April 29, 1928, C10.

⁴⁵ Salinger, *San Francisco Examiner* April 29, 1928, newspaper clipping, John Ferren Papers, AAA.

⁴⁶ Anon., *The Argus* May 1928, newspaper clipping, John Ferren Papers, AAA.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* June 7, 1928. AAA.

I asked my friend if he felt anything peculiar and he answered, no. I placed my hand on a tree trunk. I instantaneously felt that every element of the landscape was alive, the light, air, ground and trees. All were interrelated, living the same life, and (this is important to my art), their forms were all interchangeable. The forms of things were only the particular expression of an energy, or substance, which they all shared in common.⁴⁸

This experience provided Ferren with the coherence he most desperately sought in his work. Many years later the artist wrote: “I had found in this experience of the reality in and behind appearances a coherent philosophy for my art. I concluded that the artist's concern was to reproduce in the spectator the sense of unity which I had felt and knew to be present.”⁴⁹ He posited that the artist's

true function was not the praise of nature but the establishing of an identity with nature wherein he functioned with and like nature. Art was the remaking of the inner reality within the restrictions of the artist's medium. Therefore, the medium was in itself, as full of meanings, interchangeable, varied, and expressive as any particularized growth in nature.⁵⁰

Europe

The exact details leading up to and the early days of Ferren's first stay in Europe are somewhat fragmented and must be reconstructed with only a few documented details. His diaries from this period and the artist's own interviews given decades later in the 1960s are unfortunately only moderately helpful. Ferren ended up staying in Europe approximately five months before returning, with mixed feelings about doing so, to San Francisco. It was a critically important period in the artist's life

⁴⁸ James Fitzsimmons, “A John Ferren Profile,” *Art Digest* February 15, 1953, 11.

⁴⁹ John Ferren, “An Artist Pursues the Reality Beneath the Surface,” in R. M. MacIver, ed., *The Hour of Insight: A Sequel to Moments of Personal Discovery*. (New York & London: Harper & Brothers for the Institute for Religious and Social Studies, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1954): 54.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

for many reasons and ultimately changed his life. For one, his supposed formal education following his move to San Francisco was undocumented and scattershot. Ferren later claimed to have studied in various places such as the Sorbonne and elsewhere, but ultimately he was essentially an autodidact, who learned the lessons of art history and modernism almost entirely through his travel, reading, and contact with his peers. This “education” occurred in stages, the earliest one being his initial contact with Magnus Arnesen and Yun Gee in San Francisco, the second coming during this stay in Europe, and the third as his participation in Abstract Expressionism in the early 1950s. The second life-changing event that transpired on this European trip was the introduction to his future first wife, Laure Ortiz de Zárate. It would be primarily because of her that Ferren would return to Europe in 1931.

By early October 1928 Ferren’s feelings of insecurity about his work had not dissipated despite the fact that he had shown at the California Palace Legion of Honor and had a solo gallery show with some critical praise. It was clear that he was having trouble realizing his work on a deeper level. He wrote: “I felt an utter stranger sitting here, my own work and studio all around. Someone would have to convince me I have anything to do with them.”⁵¹ Furthermore, despite some favorable press he suffered from a lack of collegial support. The only mention of such support in his diary is from his close friend Frank Triest.⁵² In late October the artist traveled back to Los Angeles to see his family for approximately three weeks, returning to San

⁵¹ John Ferren Diary, October 8, 1928, John Ferren Estate.

⁵² Ibid, October 18, 1928.

San Francisco by mid-November with renewed confidence and vigor: “My work, I am more reconnected to it. The mechanical part.”⁵³

In the spring of 1929 Ferren was again included in the Annual Exhibition at the California Palace Legion of Honor. This time Arthur Millier was more effusive in his praise and singled out Ferren in his review:

John Ferron [sic.] boasts two periods: One gives us a head a la [Jacob] Epstein, the other a head a la Sphinx. The first is compellingly ugly, the second arrestingly formal in design. There is something in this man who can claim our interest with such simplicities. If he had cheated the chilling nature of plaster by coloring such as others here have used, one might feel more sure of his actual achievement.⁵⁴

The two works to which Millier refers are likely similar to *Untitled (Man's Head)* (fig. 1.4). The work has the expressionistic qualities of Jacob Epstein, to which Millier refers. The remaining part of his diary from the following year, 1929, has only a few entries in it and almost no further mention of his work. Nor does the journal mention his coming trip to Europe. The final entry in this journal dates from June 7, 1929, indicating that he was still in America.

In the summer of 1929 Ferren left San Francisco by boat that reached the Atlantic Ocean via the Panama Canal. It is unclear exactly where the boat landed when it arrived in Europe, but it was not long until he made his way via bicycle to the south of France, ending up in the Mediterranean resort town of St. Tropez. It was there that he had the good fortune of hearing English spoken amongst a group of men on the beach who turned out to be American artists traveling as a group. It was a fortuitous meeting as these fellow Americans were students of German artist Hans

⁵³ Ibid, November 12, 1928.

⁵⁴ Arthur Millier, “Southern California Art,” *LA Times* April 21, 1929, C9.

Hofmann (1880–1966), and included Vaclav Vytlacil (1892–1984), Fred Hauck (1905–1960), Glenn Wessels (1895–1982), and other students of Hofmann.⁵⁵

Hofmann had been teaching in Munich since 1915, having established a school there and eventually attracting a number of American students.⁵⁶

In 1929, Hofmann spent a portion of the year teaching in St. Tropez, with a number of students in tow, and it was essentially by pure chance that Ferren ended up befriending his countrymen there. In addition, it's possible that Ferren may have met the German artist in person, but there is no mention of meeting at that time him in Ferren's diaries or interviews. He nevertheless must have felt a connection with the Americans, Wessels was South African born, but raised in California. He had studied at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland and the University of California, Berkeley and would ultimately return to the States as Hofmann's interpreter in 1930.⁵⁷ Vytlacil's also had a connection to California. While he had been born in New York, he taught at UC, Berkeley in 1928–29 and then again at the California College of Arts and Crafts in 1935–36.⁵⁸

The St. Tropez experience was a transformative one on both an artistic and a personal level. His exposure to the ideas of Cézanne through Hofmann and his students further illuminated modernist tendencies. Cézanne's spatial explorations that Hofmann was transmitting to his students are best illustrated in works such as

⁵⁵ Ferren interview with Seckler.

⁵⁶ Vaclav Vytlacil, Cameron Booth, and Worth Ryder were some of the first American artists to study with Hans Hofmann at his school in Munich. See Vaclav Vytlacil interview with Bruce Hooton, March 2, 1966, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁵⁷ Edan Milton Hughes, *Artists in California*, 1179.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 1150.

Vytlačil's *Still Life with Guitar and Cactus* (fig. 1.5) from 1929.⁵⁹ Furthermore, it was also in St. Tropez that Ferren met his future first wife, Laure Ortiz de Zárate. Daughter of Chilean artist, Manuel Ortiz de Zárate (1887–1946), who would himself be an important contact for the young American once he returned to Europe in 1931, Laure Ortiz de Zárate caused Ferren much heartache prior to and during their marriage. For Ferren, however, this first European trip was intended in large part to be an educational experience, and by the end of the summer he (and presumably his friends) had left the resort of St. Tropez to make his way through Italy and eventually to Munich.

It does not appear that Ferren had a planned itinerary at any time during this trip and he arrived in Italy sometime around September. Like an abbreviated version of a Grand Tour, he made his way from town to town to see each of the sights. Florence was his first stop in Italy and like any Grand Tour traveler, he sought out numerous Renaissance and Baroque masterpieces, recording some of his encounters with them in his diary. And, while he did have encounters with Italian painting, it is not surprising that his primary interest at this time seems to have been directed toward sculpture. His earliest description of an encounter with art in Florence was at the Basilica of San Lorenzo, where he commented Michelangelo's Medici Tombs. His reaction to the landmark sculptures is lukewarm: "Medici Tombs – mingled feeling of admiration and dislike. No architectural or formal sense. Powerful fragments, but very uneven in value—no feeling of stimulation."⁶⁰ Instead, Ferren was moved much more by Donatello than he was by Michelangelo among the works he saw in the

⁵⁹ Susan C. Larsen, *An American Modernist: Paintings from the '20s and '30s by Vaclav Vytlačil*. Exh. cat. (New York: Graham Gallery, 1988): 5.

⁶⁰ John Ferren Diary, September 27, 1929. John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

Basilica. He fails to mention the well known sarcophagus of the Martelli family by Donatello, but he was decidedly moved by the two bronze pulpits, which he described as containing “energy overflowing its bounds.”⁶¹

He stayed in Florence for approximately two weeks and his entries in his diary reveal that he was struggling with the notion of marriage to Ortiz de Zárate. She was pressuring him into marriage, but he was clearly against the idea. In addition, he notes no desire to work on sculpture despite the fact that he was staying just below a fully equipped sculpture studio. Unfortunately, very few sketches survive from his time in Italy. Among his Italian diary there is one townscape sketch that shows a small unidentified, but clearly Italian, town in a monochromatic wash of burnt sienna (fig. 1.6).

On October 10, Ferren left Florence and arrived in Sienna, where he stayed for five days. He continued to express concern over his relationship with Laure in his diary and on his day of departure from Florence he wrote to update her on his progress and future travel plans:

I will stay here tomorrow and then go to Rome. I may go further to Naples since there is a good collection of sculpture there. I enjoyed by stay in Florence. The Dennett sisters (Molly and her 2 sisters) and Elinore left a week past for Venice and Munich. Nearly all the Americans you knew in St. Tropez are in Munich continuing their studies with Mr. [Hans] Hoffman [sic.]. Do you remember St. Tropez?⁶²

Arriving in Sienna, and while there is no mention of it in his diary, he undoubtedly visited the Duomo and given his earlier enthusiasm for Donatello, and must have surely seen the Italian’s masterpiece there, *St. John the Baptist*. He moved on to

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² John Ferren to Laure Ortiz de Zárate, October 10, 1929. John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

Rome from Sienna, where a bas relief of the *Birth of the Venus*, one of the few additional sculptures he mentions, made an impression on him as did his visit to the Sistine Chapel and Raphael's *School of Athens*.

I look at everything also the Sistine will stick in my mind. I presume in amount of affect. I believe the Raphael School of Athens was equal if not more. I cannot say which was deeper. All that has been said of the Sistine is true. Perhaps I have had enough. I begin to be a little confused. . . . I continue to have a poorer opinion of myself. I have been creatively inactive for a long time.⁶³

Ferren continued to make his way around Rome visiting various galleries and seeking out some of the iconic artists of the Renaissance and Baroque periods. He saw Poussin's *Triumph of Ovid* at the Borghese Gallery, writing: "Poussin, French restraint, Corsini gallery, Italian seriousness, wonderful infusion of the spirit of his subject matter."⁶⁴

He must have seen additional works by Bernini, Carravaggio, Reni, Titian, and others at the Borghese Gallery, none of which were noted however. It was El Greco, for whom he saved some of his most glowing praise for and referred to as "all fine, startling but solid forms infused with potent . . . dramatic light, stirs me much. A shattering intensity that makes your heart skip a beat."⁶⁵ He also saw additional Renaissance painting, sculptural, and architectural masterpieces including Titan's *Venus and Adonis* at the Palazzo Corsini and the Villa d'Este, Tivoli, where he saw the impressive water garden as well as the vast sculptural program by artists such as Bernini and others. By the end of October he had visited the Villa Guilia, the former residence of Pope Julius III that became the National Etruscan Museum in the early

⁶³ John Ferren Diary, October 15, 1929, John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

twentieth century with its extensive collection of Etruscan artifacts, which made an impression on the young American and he noted in his diary:

The eclectic pagan energy in the Etruscans is very close to me. I am much like them. My big figure is similar in root. The terracotta figurines – Always silences and a woman, making whoopie and how. You can hear the clash of cymbals. Good 2 dimensional design. Damn fine.⁶⁶

Ferren would soon make his way to Naples, before returning to Munich by the first of November.

Arriving in Munich, Ferren's earlier melancholic disposition returned. He was concerned about his relationship not only with Laure Ortiz de Zárate, but also with his American colleagues in Munich and he was anxious about being with them as well as returning to his home country. He was entirely out-of-sorts and wrote:

4 dreary days in a dreary place. I hate it and am uncomfortable with my former friends, with whom before I was on a somewhat false basis. I have felt morbidly lonely. Italy was not like this. A letter to "Chaddy" in Florence this evening. I dread Paris, I dread home, even N.Y. what has happened to me?⁶⁷

He had apparently reconnected with Wessels and Vytlačil, and perhaps others such as Hauck, in Munich, but he had for some unknown reason fallen out of favor with them and seems to have terminated his relationship with them. Given the burgeoning art scene in Munich at the time it is possible that during this brief stay he could have seen work by the Blue Rider group or work by the Neue Sachlichkeit artists, but no mention of these appears in his diary.

After a few days in Munich, Ferren found his way to Paris still dejected. It was there that he would be exposed to modernism for the first time on a truly grand

⁶⁶ Ibid, Oct. 22, 1929.

⁶⁷ Ibid, Nov. 1, 1929.

scale, with viewings of works by Picasso and Matisse and the burgeoning geometric abstract work of groups such as *Cercle et Carré* and *Art Concret*. It was a propitious time for an artist to arrive in Paris as it had emerged as the international center of the avant-garde with artists coming from all over the world.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, his attitude was one of near abandonment and marginalization as he wrote soon after his arrival:

Paris begins to disappear and I find myself seeking the shelter of my room. The modern art I see around is all ridden with _____. A group exhibition of sculpture at [Galerie] Zak struck me as another addition of the Rome directly bearing on it and undivorceable from it. I am sick of art. I think of Fred Hauck's term – all easel painting is masturbation. All I see in the galleries all masturbated to a fresh white.⁶⁹

He soon made a discovery that would be his earliest significant influence, and the one most likely to have caused him to become an abstract painter, and provided the inspiration for his lifelong pursuit of color and color theory.

Cercle et Carré were soon to publish their first and only publication in March of the following year and would hold their only exhibition from April 18 to May 1. The exhibition included 130 works by Kandinsky, Le Corbusier (1887–1965), Fernand Léger (1881–1955), Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948), and others. Much more influential on Ferren, but only after his relocation to Paris in 1931, would be *Abstraction-Création*, a group formed from the ashes of the soon defunct *Cercle et Carré* and *Art Concret* groups. In 1930 there were a number of smaller exhibitions of avant-garde work that Ferren could have seen. Galerie Zak was a venue for some of the more progressive work in Paris (and where Ferren would exhibit in a group show in 1932) and two important group exhibitions of avant-garde

⁶⁸ Gladys Fabre and Ryszard Stanislawski. *Paris: Arte Abstracto Arte Concreto, Cercle et Carré, 1930*. Exh. cat. (Valencia: Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, 1990): 379.

⁶⁹ John Ferren Diary, Nov. 5, 1929, John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

work were shown during this time at the Editions Bonaparte. The first one opened in mid-July and included work by John Graham (1886–1961), Joaquin Torres-Garcia (1874–1949), and Georges Vantongerloo (1886–1965), among others. The second exhibition opened in late August and included Felix De Boeck (1898–1995), Pierre Louis Flouquet (1900–1967), Otto Freundlich (1878–1943), Edouard-Marcel Sandoz (1881–1971), and others.⁷⁰

Not only did this initial European trip introduce Ferren to the more advanced painters of his generation, it also introduced him to two of the great living masters, Henri Matisse (1869–1954) and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), both of whom would have a great impact on the young American. Ferren was first swayed by the color of Matisse and some of his earliest works show this clear influence. He would later fall under the influence of Picasso, whom he would come to know personally, and many of the other artists previously mentioned during his second and much longer stay in Paris, but this time it was Matisse who was the most inspirational for him. Ferren attended a Matisse exhibition in Munich and around this time and it may very well have been Matisse's influence that led Ferren to give up sculpture altogether and focus solely on painting. The artist noted decades later, "It was on my first trip to Europe that I was in Munich and went into one of the more modern galleries there and saw a Matisse and it was an absolute revelation to me at that time. . . . I think that stayed in my mind. It was no accident that when I went back I gave up sculpture and started to paint."⁷¹ With the exception of working with incised plaster in the mid-1930s, he would not return to working in three dimensions until the 1960s.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 380.

⁷¹ Seckler interview with Ferren.

Indeed, just one day prior to his return to the U.S. Ferren wandered into the Musée Luxembourg and promptly fell under the spell of Henri Matisse. Not that Ferren had been unaware, or even unfamiliar with Matisse's work prior to this encounter. However, this time, this encounter with Matisse's *Still Life with Green Sideboard*, was revelatory. It was with the French painter's first painting to enter the Musée Luxembourg.⁷²

I entered the Luxembourg Musée and found a great admiration and understanding for Matisse. What I formerly disliked him for I now dislike. His utter absence of romanticism, his absolute self-consciousness. Here in pitiful times, is the survival of an artist. His purity may be exclusive but it lives with its own light. Here is painting. Here is sensitivity to an n'th degree. Perhaps it is akin to what I before had labeled it aestheticism, but it is _____ not puerile and give me the gift to pursue it.⁷³

The following day Ferren boarded the S.S. Leviathan steamship and made his way back across the Atlantic Ocean, arriving in New York. In his diary he notes that he immediately regretted leaving Europe, declared his love for Ortiz de Zárate, and pledged that he would return. He arrived in New York by November 25th and by December 14th had once again traversed the continent and found himself back home in San Francisco.

Return to San Francisco

Ferren returned to San Francisco under Matisse's spell, and the penchant for the bright colors of Fauvism can be seen as late as 1933 in the work new such as

⁷² Matisse had given the painting to the Friends of New Painting, a group of collectors and curators who hoped to infiltrate the state collection with modern paintings. Despite the fact that the painting was hung extremely high in the gallery, it still made an impression on Ferren. For information on the painting's provenance, see Hillary Spurling, *Matisse the Master, A Life of Henri Matisse: Volume II, 1909–1954* (London: The Penguin Group, 2005): 300.

⁷³ John Ferren Diary, Nov. 10, 1929. John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

Untitled, 1933 (fig. 1.7). While Ferren never wrote explicitly of his admiration for Fauvism or Matisse (aside from the aforementioned passing comment), his adoption of Matisse's palette is obvious and the landscape's composition clearly recalls the French artist's works from the early twentieth century. Ferren's rapid absorption of Matisse was the American's first step toward his own eventual development of a modern style. And, while Matisse was front and center in his work at this moment, he would soon advance beyond it, as we shall see.

In the spring of 1930 Ferren had a solo exhibition at the San Francisco Art Center Galleries where he showed five sculptures and a large group of watercolors made during his stay in Europe. Previously known in San Francisco as a sculptor, he now illustrated his ability to work in two-dimensional media as well. As one reviewer recalled,

The firm hand of the sculptor . . . was seen in the painting and drawings which comprised a large part of the show. The paintings fall sharply into two classes. The first was a group of fifteen landscapes done on Mr. Ferren's recent bicycle tour through Southern France, St. Tropez . . . furnished the inspiration for much of this work.⁷⁴

It announced an auspicious beginning to Ferren's professional career as an artist and even marked the first acquisition of one of his works by a public collection:

His [Ferren's] work has been much admired and highly commended by the many visitors to the gallery during the exhibition and a number of sales have been made to art lovers of this district as well as from a distance. One charming piece of sculpture has been selected by the League directors for their permanent collection for the League galleries.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Anon., "Hand of Sculptor Seen in Paintings" *San Francisco Call Bulletin* April 12, 1930, newspaper clipping, John Ferren Papers, AAA.

⁷⁵ Anon. *Berkeley Gazette* April 13, 1930, newspaper clipping, John Ferren Papers, AAA.

Ferren's return to the Bay Area closely coincided with Hans Hofmann's arrival at the University of California, Berkeley in the summer of 1930. Hofmann had come to teach at Berkeley at the invitation of one of his students, Worth Ryder (1884–1960), and it initiated a period of three years when the German artist would teach in both Los Angeles at Chouinard School of Art and at UC, Berkeley. Ferren must have sought out Hofmann, perhaps at the encouragement of Vytlačil and Wessels, and recalled to Paul Cummings that he provided a great deal of encouragement for the direction that Ferren's work was taking. “In the second year after I came back [from Europe] Hofmann was at the University of California . . . I began to paint then and he came to the studio and spoke very highly of what I was doing to everyone. That was encouraging.”⁷⁶ This is the only mention of direct contact with Hofmann and while it is possible that the two artists had met previously in St. Tropez or Munich, this remains to be determined.⁷⁷

Ferren had a second solo exhibition over the course of the next nine months—probably sometime around November, 1930—as a number of reviews appear in the local newspapers. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be any indication among the archival material about what specifically was included in this show and the artist did not refer to them in his later interviews. I suspect that in retrospect Ferren saw this early work not only as transitional in terms of his development into an abstract artist, but also simplistic in nature and for the most part not related to his mature work.

⁷⁶ Ferren interview with Cummings.

⁷⁷ There is a surprising lack of scholarship on Hofmann's early years with much of the attention focused on his post-war oeuvre. See Karen Wilkin, *Hans Hofmann: A Retrospective*. Exh. cat. (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 2003); also Helmut Friedel and Tina Dickey, *Hans Hofmann*. Exh. cat. English edition. (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998).

Despite the presence of Hofmann, much of the Bay Area during the 1930s was under the influence of Diego Rivera (1886–1957), who had been commissioned in November 1930 to paint a mural for the Stock Exchange and the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute). “At that time, most of the Bay Area painters were under the influence of the Mexicans and busy with social significance. Ferren's exhibition did not excite much comment except from the painter-critic Garritty [sic], a pupil of S. Macdonald-Wright, who gave it a favorable review, and from Hans Hofmann, who had just arrived on his first trip to this country and who encouraged Ferren to continue with his painting.”⁷⁸ Ferren himself recalled, “He [Rivera] was doing a mural there [in San Francisco] and everybody was working as his assistant and I met him at that time. Everybody was going to Mexico, all the San Francisco boys were all over Mexico at that time. This somehow never appealed to me. And I was never struck by that at all.”⁷⁹

As a student of MacDonald-Wright, Gerrity (1895–1980) would have instantly recognized Ferren's adoption of modernist forms, even if they were something of a watered-down version of European modernism. In Gerrity's first review, which was a group show at the Berkeley Art Center, he mentioned the artist only in passing, "John Ferren . . . presents "Still Life," a water color with strong color, in which we find a poise and fine color balance."⁸⁰ An anonymous reviewer, writing for the *San Francisco Call Bulletin* had much greater praise for the artist when he wrote,

⁷⁸ Fitzsimmons, "A John Ferren Profile," *Art Digest*, 25.

⁷⁹ Ferren interview with Seckler.

⁸⁰ John Emmett Gerrity, "Art Center Exhibit Opens," *San Francisco Call Bulletin* November ?, 1930, newspaper clipping, John Ferren Papers, AAA.

Watercolors by John Ferren are shown for the first time in the Berkeley League of Fine Arts. Ferren is a young San Franciscan who has worked here for a number of years, chiefly in sculpture. Last year he spent six months traveling in Europe and during that time he did many of the water colors shown in this first one-man show. The colors are brilliant and the painting spontaneous, the result of self-directed effort.⁸¹

Gerrity's second review, perhaps of a second exhibition, was much more effusive in its praise of Ferren's work. Indeed, he articulated Ferren's modernism more vocally than any reviewer to date.

In the paintings of John Ferren . . . we find a highly original approach, untrammelled by the limiting formulas of schools. A consistent growth, driving always at this fundamental use of color, marks his development as a painter. This subtle differentiation of sculpture and painting is clearly felt, principally due to the fact that Ferren is also a sculptor.⁸²

Recreating exactly what Ferren exhibited at this time is impossible, but we may assume that he showed works such as *Untitled (Abstraction)* (1930) and perhaps even works similar to *St. Tropez* (1931, fig. 1.8). Both paintings show a strong geometric composition that relies heavily on sculptural intersecting planes, particularly the later work. *Untitled (Abstraction)* is a heavily impastoed surface on which the pigment is unevenly distributed, allowing for much of the underpainting to show through. This may have been the impressionistic effect to which the reviewer referred in his review and unlike the later *St. Tropez*, which comes closer to his style of the mid-1930s, it is imbued with a freneticism that will soon give way to an ordered rationality. "Ferren's color is emotional rather than harmonic, impressionistic in the sense of not being

⁸¹ Anon., "Ferren Watercolors Shown in Berkeley" *San Francisco Call Bulletin* November 15, 1930, newspaper clipping, John Ferren Papers, AAA.

⁸² John Emmett Gerrity, "John Ferren," *San Francisco Call Bulletin*, Jan. 24, 1931, newspaper clipping, John Ferren Papers, AAA.

submitted to synchronic order, and on the whole, delicately plastic and austere.”⁸³

These works are extremely advanced compared to the predominant artistic mode of San Francisco at the time. Indeed, as Rexroth noted in his autobiography, other than a few progressive painters such as Bernard Zakheim and Fred Hochs,

The rest of the painting in the city was conventional, provincial, and homeopathically diluted Post-Impressionism. It resembled nothing so much as Russian painting that would proliferate under Stalin, except for the work of one man, a tall, thin, somber individual, with a deep voice and a face like an ascetic Medieval monk—Edward Hagedorn.⁸⁴

This exhibition would be Ferren's last in the United States until his inclusion in the seminal *Five American Concretionists* exhibition at the Paul Reinhardt Gallery, New York, in March, 1936. Ferren left for Europe in 1931—intending to stay there permanently. It would be, however, an eight year sojourn that would change the direction of his life tremendously. That is not to say that his time in San Francisco did not have a significant impact on him. To the contrary, it was where Ferren first encountered modernism through his contact with Gee and ultimately laid the foundation that served as a primer to the European modernism that he would soon encounter. It could have also been Gee who encouraged Ferren's first trip to Europe. In any case, his exposure, limited though it was to avant-garde tendencies helped Ferren reconstitute his work from a highly conventional representational approach to sculpture to an abstract approach to painting—one that is informed equally by the artist's limited knowledge of Cubism and other modernist movements. During these formative years Ferren embarked on a very rapid transformation beginning with his

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Linda Hamalian, ed., *Kenneth Rexroth: An Autobiographical Novel*. Revsd. Ed. (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1991): 429-30. Edward Hagedorn (1902–1982) was an early Bay Area modernist painter.

admiration for and appreciation of the Barbizon-inspired landscapes of Elmer Wachtel as a man in his late-teens to a burgeoning modernist by 1930 familiar with if not conversant in a European-based language of abstraction.

In 1931, Ferren hitchhiked across the country on his way back to Europe. Kenneth Rexroth joined him on his journey, and according to the poet, suggested that his friend was severely uninformed about his own country, describing it in colorful language. Rexroth notes that they hitchhiked through Arizona and New Mexico visiting Hopi pueblos and Window Rock on the Navajo Reservation. The two artists also went to Taos, Santa Fe, across Texas and up through the deep South into Tennessee and Virginia. Apparently, Ferren was the one who funded this cross-country jaunt, during which time the two men (Ferren only had enough money for the two of them and Rexroth's wife Andrée could not accompany them) saw much of the Southwest and the South and drew on some of the poet's earlier acquaintances. As Rexroth recalled:

We managed to get along with the crackers and hillbillies and Ku Kluxers and everybody else. We kept our noses clean, didn't volunteer. Ferren learned a considerable amount about American Evil. In a museum in the Southwest, we studied and sketched Indian art and artifacts, always disassociating material from the actual object. We acquired an elaborate new vocabulary of forms. We met people I had known as all the old [D. H.] Lawrence crowd—Frieda, Spud Johnson, Brett, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Andrew Dasberg, Willard Nash.⁸⁵

Rexroth notes that in addition to meeting modernists in New Mexico, they also met Native American artists Ma Pe Wi (Velino Shije Herrera, 1902-1973) as well as Tonita Vigil Peña (1893–1949) and others.⁸⁶ While Rexroth suggests in his description of the trip that both artists expanded their visual vocabulary, it seems that

⁸⁵ Hamalian, *Kenneth Rexroth: An Autobiographical Novel*, 428-9.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 429.

very little, if any of these new forms were incorporated into Ferren's work. Neither any work nor a diary seems to have survived (if one existed at all), and no Native motifs or themes appear in any of Ferren's subsequent works.

On May 3, 1931, after arriving on the East Coast, the two visited poet William Carlos Williams, at his home in Rutherford, New Jersey, partially so that Rexroth could pay homage to him. Ferren, however, had reservations about the elder poet's work, and "did not share Rexroth's enthusiasm for Williams, and wrote later that he hoped no evidence of William Carlos Williams would contaminate Rexroth's poetry."⁸⁷ Departing from New York via steamship, Ferren arrived in the port of Le Havre and made his way to Paris.

It has been suggested that his complete absence from New York in the 1930s prior to the rise of Abstract Expressionism was a reason for Ferren's later marginalization from members of the group. Issues of identity would continue to plague the artist for much of his life. His feeling of estrangement in his home country was reinforced by his first trip to Europe. Ferren *wanted* to eschew his American identity, even at this early stage in his career because he felt that he belonged in Europe much more than in the U.S. It was the beginning of long struggle to come to terms with his transnationalism.

⁸⁷ Linda Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth* (New York & London: W. W. Norton, 1991): 67.

Chapter Two Europe, 1931–1938

There is no indication that Ferren arrived in Europe for the second time with any letters of introduction. No documentation of his arrival survives, leaving only speculation about his living arrangements and his entrée into the Parisian art world. Presumably, he sought out the American artists that he had met during his first trip who were still residing in Europe, such as Vytlačil and Holty as well as Ortiz de Zárate, to whom he remained devoted. Ferren noted in a later interview that unlike his first trip to Europe in 1929, this journey across the Atlantic did not include a stopover in New York. Ferren's departure from America just a few years before the commencement of the government-funded Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) and the Federal Art Project (FAP), and his resultant absence from these programs, has been noted by art historian Ann Gibson.¹ Gibson positions the significance of this fact within the context of the development of Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s and 1950s.

Here is where Ferren really parted company with his future colleagues, including other abstract expressionists like Clyfford Still, Jackson Pollock, Reuben Kadish, and Philip Guston, who had also grown up in the West. Not only was Ferren unaware of the plastic arts until after high school, but he also went directly from California to Paris. Until the late thirties, New York was for him only a way-station.²

Indeed, Gibson reminds us in her essay that the artist himself asserted “that [the fact that] he hadn't gone through the initiation rites common to most abstract expressionists [i.e. participating in the Works Progress Administration]—was

¹ Sandler and Gibson, *The Abstract Spirit*, 4.

² *Ibid.*

germane.”³ The WPA would become a forum in which many future members of the New York School met for the first time, and play an important role in encouraging them to experiment in their formative years.⁴ Nevertheless, while Ferren may have missed out on the burgeoning domestic art scene, he soon joined the flourishing Parisian avant-garde, as his arrival in the City of Light could not have been timed more advantageously. Ferren absorbed French culture at an accelerated rate and within a year after his arrival he was writing in French in his diary and speaking the language with fluency.

Paris circa 1930

Ferren’s arrival in Paris in early 1931 coincided with the recent dissolution of two groups of abstract artists, *Cercle et Carré* and *Art Concret*, as well as the subsequent recombination of many artists from these groups into the longer-lived and more ideologically solid *Abstraction-Création*. Artistically speaking, it was a moment of tumult as these collectives had been formed in reaction to the rhetoric espoused by the Surrealists and their leader, André Breton. And, while they were essentially unified in their distaste toward Surrealism, each of these abstract-based groups had formulated varying ideological stances with regard to abstract art. Not surprisingly, it was these differences that lead to internal disagreements between their members and, ultimately, the short lives of *Cercle et Carré* and *Art Concret* (each was active only in

³ Ibid.

⁴ Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting* (New York and Washington: Praeger Publishers, 1970): 7. This issue will be addressed later in chapter 4. Ferren’s absence from participation in the WPA has been noted by other scholars and contributed to his later marginalization among members of the New York School.

1930).⁵ Among the members of *Cercle et Carré*, the earliest of these groups, there were those artists who came out of Cubism, Purism, and Futurism who continued to work in a quasi-representational style, which was accepted by the group. The Dutch artist, abstract ideologue, and founder of *Cercle et Carré*, Theo Van Doesburg (1883–1931), soon splintered away from his colleagues to form *Art Concret*. *Art Concret* was committed to *complete* abstraction and became more ideologically rigorous; essentially rejecting all symbolism and extra-pictorial elements to affirm that pictorial significance was entirely self-referential.⁶ While the artists working non-representationally within these two groups were divided stylistically (geometric vs. biomorphic abstraction), they were collective in their distaste for and debate against Surrealism’s perceived literalism.

Abstraction-Création was able to survive much longer than *Cercle et Carré* and *Art Concret* (1931–1936) because it synthesized many of the ideas of both organizations, and declared that its’ members’ work was rooted in universal truths such as mathematics and science that could be used to help build a better future.⁷ Art historian Gladys Fabre has noted that the year 1930 “was a turning point [with the formation of *Abstraction-Création*] which marked the passage of abstraction to *art concret* and to Unism based on science and on pure formalism. The title of the

⁵ See Michael Farrell, *Collaborative Circles: Friendship Dynamics and Creative Work* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001): 25–26. Farrell has articulated seven stages of development among collaborative artistic circles. While he does not specifically discuss the avant-garde movements in Paris circa 1930, his description of stage number six, “The Separation Stage,” is useful in contextualizing the short lives of *Cercle et Carré* and *Art Concret*.

⁶ Gladys C. Fabre, and Norbert Nobis, *Abstraction Création 1931-1936*. Exh. cat. (Münster: Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte Landschaftverband Westfalen-Lippe): 10.

⁷ Fabre, Gladys and Ryszard Stanislawsky, *Paris 1930, Cercle et Carré: Arte Abstracto Arte Concreto*. Exh. cat. (Valencia: Institut Valencia d’Art Modern, 1990): 380. Fabre provides a detailed account of the primary figures involved with each of the groups.

group—debated at length (and adopted as the lesser of other evils)—covered two different ways to attain non-figuration.”⁸ Thus, by the time *Abstraction-Création* was formed, a strict stylistic program had been eliminated as a prerequisite for membership but the group was ideologically unified.

The notion that abstract art could be used for the greater good of society was a binding ideological force among the members of *Abstraction-Création* above and beyond any differences (stylistic or otherwise) the artists may have had between them. In the five *cahiers* of *Abstraction-Création*, titled *Abstraction*, *Création*, *Art Non-figuratif*, Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), Jean Gorin (1899–1981), and Georges Vantongerloo (1886–1965) essentially declared that *because* their art was rooted in universal truths of mathematics and science, it could help to build a better future.⁹ The ideas of these artists were transmitted through their art and publications during the 1930s and were championed in many other European countries as well as in America by the mid-1930s (by which time Ferren had already been in Europe several years). Fabre has identified “a worldwide growth of Synthetic Art, which had attempted up until that point to homogenize all the different ‘isms’ into an overall non-figurative expression.”¹⁰

After his arrival in Paris, Ferren quickly began to engage with both his American and European peers and the concepts and discourse surrounding the avant-garde and the development of abstraction at that time. He did not immediately

⁸ Fabre, Gladys and Ryszard Stanislawsky, *Paris 1930*, 386.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 406. One specific example of this in America was the creation of the Williamsburg Housing Project murals by Albert Swinden, Paul Kelpo, Ilya Bolotowsky, and Balcomb Greene. These were some of the very few abstract public works of art created under the PWAP and were intended to serve the working class as a relief from their quotidian lives. See William H. Honan, “Long-Lost Brooklyn Murals are Being Restored,” *New York Times* July 20, 1988, C15.

become associated with *Abstraction-Création* (he would peripherally be involved toward the end of the group's existence but was never included in its publication), but it did not take him long to become part of Parisian artistic circles. This was most likely through Zárate's father, Chilean artist Manuel Ortiz de Zárate (1887–1946), who had come to France in 1904 and along with other Chilean artists in Paris, founded the *Grupo Montparnasse*, a small band of countrymen who had assembled in the Montparnasse neighborhood of Paris in the 1920s. Ferren's artistic connection with the Chilean artist is tenuous, but it is reasonable to assume that it was through him that Ferren was able to expand his network and gain valuable exposure to other progressive Hispanophone artists such as Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and Joaquin Torres-García (1874–1949).

Within an extremely short period of time, Ferren's visual landscape expanded exponentially. He had experienced a taste of advanced concepts in art previously through his brief encounters with Yun Gee in San Francisco and Hans Hofmann and his early American disciples in Germany. As indicated in his diary entries from the late 1920s, however, Ferren lacked the artistic maturity to be able to quantify them. Moving from San Francisco to Paris at this moment in his life was as if he had been taken from a provincial outpost to the most sophisticated artistic center in the western world. Most impressive is Ferren's seemingly instantaneous grasp of some of the concepts championed by *Abstraction-Création*. The artist had an inherent interest in mathematics (stemming, perhaps in part, from his time as a telephone engineer) and he felt an affinity with *Abstraction-Création's* use of mathematical concepts. He does

not mention the group by name, but in early December of 1931 he wrote in his journal:

Of a rationale for my painting which (the art of painting) often strikes me as no occupation for me – the only gleam of light is an assiduous reseeing of instance from the mondial viewpoint of the astronomical physicists and mathematicians – the creation of painting as literally – speculatively – and abstractly – as is the play of higher mathematics.

Painting unfortunately is not as free as mathematics (But still as an intermediary between the realm of pure thought and the visual world of the senses it ought [to] have value.) Of the senses, sight suggests most – of the other senses. Although thinking of music – I am not sure.¹¹

The result of these and other theoretical musings by the artist would translate into an accelerated development of a refined style and a solid kinship with many of the abstract artists working in Paris. His personal life was undergoing significant changes as well and in January 1932 he and Laure Ortiz de Zárate were married.

The Progression of an Early Style and an Ideological Foundation

Ferren's paintings progressed quickly through a variety of styles during these early years in Europe and reflect a distinct appropriation and integration of imagery used by some of his contemporaries. This was for him a period of rapid maturation and over the next few years he absorbed, adopted, and synthesized the lessons of each of these artists ultimately arriving at a highly nuanced style circa 1935 that, while similar to that of his friend Jean Hélion (1904–1987), was extremely personal.

Ferren's earliest paintings from this period beginning in 1931 and 1932 reflect an artist who is working within the context of both biomorphic forms in works such as *Untitled (No. 18)* (1932, fig. 2.1), as well as a more rigorous geometrically-based

¹¹ John Ferren Diary, December 18, 1931. John Ferren Papers, AAA.

abstraction as seen in *Untitled* (ca. 1931, fig. 2.2). The two initial influences on him at the time were Piet Mondrian and to a greater degree, Joaquín Torres-García, and for the first two years of his stay in Europe he adopted elements of each artist's practice concurrently. While Ferren's palette is much different than that of the Dutch artist, the earlier painting *Untitled* exhibits a Mondrian-like tendency of dividing the space using perpendicular rectangles. Ferren's reverence for the older Dutch artist was revealed in an interview when he noted, "I was greatly impressed by Mondrian at the time [while he was in Paris] and actually at the time did a number of things in the Mondrian manner. I explored that side a good deal."¹² In fact, Mondrian's stylistic influence was actually quite limited and he soon moved beyond the rectangular compositions of these early works.

Torres-García played a critical role in the stylistic development of the young American. The Uruguayan artist had arrived in Paris in 1926 via Barcelona and after working in a quasi-fauvist style, rapidly progressed into a more modern idiom that employed elements of both cubism and constructivism. Since arriving in Paris, Torres-García had become intimately involved in the development of abstract art and was a catalyst for and a vocal champion of abstraction. In 1930 and 1931 Torres-García was beginning to develop the irregular grid-like structures for which he is best known, and many of the works from this period show a tendency to deconstruct and expand the subject into a larger faceted shape (fig. 2.3). One particularly compelling example of Ferren's adoption of Torres-García's style can be seen in his 1932 painting *Le Cheuve Souri* (fig. 2.4). In *Le Cheuve Souri* the uneven grid pattern of white lines that covers most of the composition sits over an earthtone ground that

¹² Ferren interview with Seckler, AAA.

contains a biomorphic pear shape. In 1930, it had been Torres-García, with the assistance of Belgian artist Michel Seuphor (1901–1999), who founded *Cercle et Carré*, the first of the aforementioned groups of abstract artists who would fight against the doctrine of Surrealism.

The predominant avant-garde tendencies in Paris that arose during the late-twenties have been characterized as a struggle between diametrically opposed ideologies and stylistic inclinations. The Surrealists, on one side, were comprised of mostly French writers and poets and foreign painters and sculptors. On the other side of this “partition” were mostly foreign artists, such as Seuphor and Torres-García, whose allegiances were toward abstract and so-called “non-objective” art.¹³ Among the abstractionists there was a great deal of stylistic exchange, which explains Ferren’s adoption of multiple styles during this period. This assimilation and tendency for artists to synthesize is perhaps best illustrated in works such as Torres-García’s Mondrian-like *Bateau constructif* (1930; Jan Krugier Gallery), in which the strict perpendicular divisions are colored in areas of white, yellow, red, and blue.

In addition to certain stylistic developments evolving through direct contact with other artists, they were also transmitted much more widely through various publications. While the publication *Abstraction, Création, Art Non-figuratif* was one of the more visible champions of abstract art, it was by no means the only one, and by the mid-1930s publications in other languages were taking up the cause. In France, the Greek art historian Christian Zervos published the *Cahiers d’Art*, which occasionally ran articles about abstraction, while the primary English language organ for abstract art was the British publication *Axis*. *Axis* was started in London in

¹³ Gladys C. Fabre, and Norbert Nobis, *Abstraction Création 1931-1936*, 380.

January 1935 by the artist and critic Myfanwy Evans (1911–1997), who also served as the quarterly publication's editor. Evans was an Oxford graduate with an interest in modern art and through family friends had met the artist John Piper (1903–1992), whom she would soon marry. Piper and his first wife had visited Paris in June 1934 where he met Jean Hélion for the first time through an introduction by their countryman, Ben Nicholson.¹⁴ In Paris, Piper was particularly taken with the work of Alexander Calder (1898–1976) and César Domela (1900–1992) and he returned not long thereafter working now in an abstract manner. He met Evans soon after he returned and encouraged her to visit that city.¹⁵

In late July or early August of that year Evans made her first trip to Paris. Piper had written her with Hélion's address and instructed her to visit the *Cahiers d'Art* as well as Alexander Calder.¹⁶ Upon arriving in Paris, Evans immediately sought out Hélion, who subsequently introduced her to other artists working in the city at that time. Art historian Frances Spaulding noted that for Hélion, Evans arrived in Paris at just the right time. It was at that moment when divisions among members of *Abstraction-Création* caused him, along with Arp and others, to resign from the group. Hélion subsequently persuaded Evans, with a deaf ear to her protestations—primarily about lack of both money and knowledge on the subject—to establish an English language publication to further the cause of abstract art. *Axis* was born.

Evans envisioned the new publication, as Spaulding notes, to have a focus on English art with an emphasis on abstraction. "It should not be too dependant on a

¹⁴ Frances Spaulding, *John Piper, Myfanwy Piper: Lives in Art*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 58. This is the primary source of information on John and Myfanwy Piper (née Evans) and contextualizes the British role in the development of abstraction at that time. In 1937 Evans edited *The Painter's Object* (London: G. Howe, 1937), in which she included a series of essays by various artists.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

small group, yet needed to keep its direction in the hands of the few; it should neither give too much space to the well known, not seek to imitate *Cahiers d'Art*.”¹⁷ The first issue of *Axis: A Quarterly Review of Contemporary 'Abstract' Painting and Sculpture* appeared in January 1935. It is a testament to the environment of exchange across that it included Héliion’s article, “From Reduction to Growth,” in which he attempted to clarify the misperceptions of and solidify the possibilities of abstract art.¹⁸

In a 1936 article in *Axis*, Kenneth Walsh echoed many of the same ideas espoused by his French-speaking counterpart as well as those of *Abstraction-Création* by articulating the notion that abstract art was best suited to combat the ills plaguing modern society. “Look to your *weapons*, furbish them. Select the best. What is the best weapon to counter the Underground station, to counter the stress of modern life? The best weapon to hand is *Abstraction*.”¹⁹ The notion that the progress of modern society was a double-edged sword and carried with it inherent problems was certainly not a new concept, but for the first time in the mid-1930s abstract art was being put forth as a solution to the problem. This was an idea that Ferren believed wholeheartedly.

It seems reasonable to assume that Ferren knew of and surely read *Axis* given not only that his close friend Héliion was a regular contributor to the publication, but also because it was the only English-language publication on the subject. Further evidence lies in the artist’s understanding and adoption of ideas articulated in the magazine (which, to be sure, were not dissimilar to those articulate in the *Cahiers* or

¹⁷ Ibid, 64.

¹⁸ Jean Héliion, “From Reduction to Growth” 1 *Axis* (January 1935): 19-24.

¹⁹ Kenneth R. Walsh, “Abstraction as Weapon,” *Axis* 5 (Spring 1936): 25. Empahsis mine.

any of the other French-language publications), which was thorough and unwavering.

In an undated manuscript from circa 1934–1936, an essay distinct from that of his diary, titled “To the Critics of Abstract Art,” Ferren wrote,

Abstract art, rather than being an escape from reality is the result of a reevaluation of contemporary reality It [abstract art] postulates and is the result of a contact with reality more intimate than the mechanical objective reality of the past several decades. The addition of time to the three terrestrial dimensions has produced innumerable penetrations into the nature of reality. The addition of time as a valid element in visual expression of the three dimensions gives the artist an unparalleled richness of vision.²⁰

Ferren’s commitment to the belief that abstract art could serve a beneficial social function was steadfast and referring to specific artists (including himself) and their use of stylistic elements in this service he continued,

In abstract painting from the simple geometric . . . square forms of Kandinsky and Mondrian to the complex organic form in the p[aintings of] Hélión and Ferren, the material used are the simple communal forms apparent in everyday life. The carpenter or mechanic or bookkeeper could grasp and understand these forms and thus be rendered sensitive to the . . . tension etc. between them and thus experience “art” were it not for the residual dialectic forced of him by exemplary bourgeois (and shall we say communist) education.²¹

As the passages above indicate, Ferren was developing a strong theoretical foundation for abstract art and like many of his colleagues in Paris, other parts of Europe, and select areas of the U.S., he was deeply committed to working in an abstract mode. Furthermore, these two excerpts support two important developments for the artist. The first is that Ferren was at least aware of and likely influenced by the idea of fourth-dimensional geometry, which would not fully manifest itself in his

²⁰ John Ferren, “To the Critics of Abstract Art,” undated manuscript, John Ferren Papers, AAA.

²¹ Ibid.

work until the development of the plaster engraving technique in the mid-1930s. The second development was that Ferren, like his *Abstraction-Création* colleagues, believed strongly that abstract art could be employed for the greater good of society.²²

Ferren later recalled that he met Torres-García through his participation in the *Surindépendants* exhibition, but it may have actually been through their joint participation in a group exhibition at the Galerie Zak in June–July of 1932.²³ James Fitzsimmons, publisher of *Art International*, in a 1953 profile on Ferren, claimed that it was Torres-García who invited Ferren to exhibit in the Galerie Zak exhibition of 1932, and he began exhibiting with the *Surindépendants* only after 1932.²⁴ However this acquaintance was made, Ferren’s contact with Torres-García would be brief, as the South American artist returned to Madrid, Spain, late in 1932 before moving permanently back to Uruguay after two years. By this time Ferren had been in Paris for approximately one year, and noted his displeasure with the lack of progress in his work, while recognizing the importance of showing it within the context of an exhibition.

Have painted considerably – but to no great advantage or great improvement over my work in America – Outside of wondering as to intent – a chief fault in lack of energy. . . . However several artists have seen something [in my work]. I was asked to exhibit with a group at galerie Zak – this is my debut. I find Paris very dead and apathetic.²⁵

²² Fourth dimensional geometry and its use in art was not a new concept at the time. As Linda Dalrymple Henderson has proven, its incorporation in the visual arts begins with Cubism in the early twentieth century and continues through the 1920s and into the 1930s. In 1936 Hungarian poet Karoly Sirato published *Dimensionist Manifesto* in which he calls for painting to leave the plane and occupy space. See Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in the Modern Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983): 342.

²³ Ferren interview with Seckler. Ferren recalled that he met Torres-García through the *Surindépendants* and that it was Torres-García (with Vasarely) who organized the exhibition at Galerie Zak.

²⁴ James Fitzsimmons, “A John Ferren Profile,” *Art Digest* February 15, 1953, 25.

²⁵ John Ferren Diary, June 6, 1932. AAA.

Not long after Torres-García left Paris for Spain, Ferren too left Paris, perhaps at the urging of his wife or his Uruguayan friend, or even more likely his own dissatisfaction with his work and Parisian life as noted above. The young American and his new wife moved to the island of Mallorca in the summer of 1932, the exact impetus for which remains unclear, but it was suggested by Fitzsimmons that it was due to the dollar's drop in value at the time.²⁶ During this period he would travel periodically back to Paris and his work was undergoing a transformation away from the Torres-García-inspired abstractions and toward those that pointed more toward the Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944).

Kandinsky

The transformation in his work that occurred between 1933 and 1935 was both stylistic and ideological as Ferren continued to formulate his ideas on the value of abstract art. In a watercolor from 1934 titled *Mallorca* (fig. 2.5) (a title the artist used for numerous works during this period), the painting is composed with two predominant looping biomorphic forms, one red-blue and the other green-blue with much of the paper left white. The two forms are interspersed with smaller biomorphic shapes rendered in thin ink lines and four amorphous areas: two yellow, one blue, and one red. *Mallorca* is most closely allied aesthetically and exhibits similar expressionist tendencies with the earliest abstract works that Kandinsky produced around 1910. Ferren's flirtation with the early abstract paintings of Kandinsky was brief, however, as he soon moved on to become inspired more by the Russian artist's hard-edge geometric abstractions of the 1930s.

²⁶ James Fitzsimmons, "A John Ferren Profile," 25.

As art historian Gail Levin has noted, Wassily Kandinsky played an enormous role in shaping Ferren's conception of abstract art and within a year of Ferren's arrival in Europe he was reading the Russian artist in the pages of the influential art publication *Cahiers d'Art*. Ferren noted in his diary:

Reading recent *Cahiers d'Art*—the upholder of abstract art. *Kandinsky*—and the Director of the Musée de Hanover, A. Doerner. The two of them expressing perfectly my hitherto original opinion. . . Voilà!—Je ne suis pas seul! [I am not alone!]
—I am reconvinced that my vague gropings are correct.²⁷

In his interview with Seckler, Ferren suggested that there were many different influences on him during the time in Paris, but he specifically acknowledged his debt to Kandinsky:

It was too intense a working period to isolate any particular influence. I think all in all one of the major influences in my own painting was the man who was only in Paris the latter part of his life, the latter part of my time there also. And that was Kandinsky. I find many elements of my own work coming very much out of Kandinsky. And actually I saw Kandinsky here [in New York] first at the old Guggenheim.²⁸

Even though Ferren indicated that it was in New York that he first saw the work of Kandinsky (unlikely given that Solomon Guggenheim did not begin collecting Kandinsky until 1929), it is possible that he may have been exposed to the Russian's work even earlier in one of the exhibitions organized by the German expatriate art dealer and collector, Galka Scheyer.²⁹ Scheyer had organized a seminal exhibition of "The Blue Four" for the Oakland Museum while Ferren was living in the Bay Area in 1926, and from the 1920s to the 1940s, she was a vociferous champion of Kandinsky,

²⁷ Quoted in Gail Levin and Melinda Lorenz, *Theme & Improvisation: Kandinsky and the American Avant-Garde, 1912–1950*. Exh. cat. (Boston, Toronto and London: Bullfinch Press, 1992): 186.

²⁸ Ferren interview with Seckler.

²⁹ For Guggenheim's collecting of Kandinsky's works see www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/on-view-now/2985. Accessed January 13, 2010.

Paul Klee (1879–1940), Lyonel Feininger (1871–1956), and Alexej von Jawlensky (1864–1941).

Kandinsky was enormously influential on the American and as early as 1933 Ferren adopts stylistic elements of hardedge circles, triangles, and trapezoidal shapes distinctly similar to the Russian artist's work. A comparison of two of Ferren's works from this period clearly illustrates his debt to the Russian artist. *Green Abstraction*, 1933 (fig. 2.6) and *Mallorca* 1934 (fig. 2.7), as different from (and earlier than) *Mallorca* noted above, both exhibit late-period Kandinsky-like characteristics. On a purely formal level, *Mallorca* incorporates a yellow circle as a central motif akin to that of Kandinsky's *Dominant Curve* 1936 (fig. 2.8). While the Kandinsky painting is punctuated by a curving form, Ferren uses a similar device, but pierces the yellow circle, which is much larger here, with three pairs of angular needle-like shapes. *Green Abstraction* employs a similar geometric approach with two red circles, both with yellow coronas, a black trapezoidal shape, and various straight, curved, and serpentine lines, all superimposed over a green background. As we shall see, Kandinsky's influence went far beyond mere formal inspiration, as Ferren began to absorb some of the Russian artist's theoretical ideas on abstraction as well.

Formulating his own beliefs on abstract art, Ferren was convinced that abstraction was part of an important visual and larger societal evolution. In opposition to the critics of abstract art, who decried the removal of recognizable subjects from a composition as a *disaffirmation* of life, Ferren (and his colleagues) understood an abstract vocabulary as a more sympathetic language for *affirming* life. He understood this period as a type of latter-day Renaissance and wrote:

Abstract art is not a negation of life. It is an acceptance of the profound aspects of life. It could be said that we are in an age similar to that of the fifteenth century in Italy. [It is a] transition between two periods [the Middle Ages and the Renaissance]. The economic, moral, and religious system created from the ruins of the Middle Ages have continued on their course until today. All of our efforts will appear political and artistic [and] managed only on a logical development, the basis of which was postulated in fifteenth-century Florence.³⁰

In this manuscript from circa 1933–34 Ferren demonstrates a command of art history by detailing important contributions of various figures from the early Renaissance to the present including Masaccio, Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso, and others. And, while he learned from all of these artists, it was Kandinsky who, at that moment exerted the greatest influence on him. Ferren never mentioned in his writings or interviews whether he read Kandinsky’s immensely influential publication *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, which had been translated into English as early as 1912.³¹ But as Levin has correctly observed, the two artists “shared a variety of ideas concerning painting, including the conviction that the separation of color from the description of objects releases its power to affect the viewer psychologically.”³² Many more ideological parallels exist between Kandinsky and Ferren as they both address the value of abstract art. When their writings are compared, it’s clear that *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* formed the basis for much of Ferren’s early theoretical writing:

³⁰ John Ferren, undated manuscript, AAA.

L’art d’abstrait n’est pas une negation de la vie. C’est un acceptance de la vie dans ses aspects profonds. On peut dire nous sommes dans une époque pareille à la cinquecento à Florence. La transition entre deux époque. Le systeme économique, morale, religieuse crée des ruines de la Moyenne Age ont continue leur affluence jusque a aujourd’hui. Tout notre efforts seraient figures, politiques, artistique, même la conduite d’affaires n’est que une développement logique des bases postulé a Florence pendant le 15ème siècle.

³¹ Ferren knew Kandinsky well enough by the mid-1930s for the Russian to write a letter of recommendation for his Guggenheim Fellowship application in 1936. See Levin and Lorenz, *Theme and Improvisation*, 187.

³² *Ibid.*

Abstract painting is the internal vision. The internal vision is neither abstract nor musical it is a visual synthesis of internal experience whose mature power is personal. It posits a belief that the objective vision has been already explored and has other more logical vehicles than painting (cinema, photography). The internal vision feeds on the external vision, but the mature power (the verb) which produces the work of art is of a personal source (an impersonal source in the sense that it is in no way subject to the commentaries of the personal bias.[])

The marriage of the internal and the external vision is in Cézanne. The internal vision in its artistic employment has not been fully realized. Painting freed of its social encumbrances is devoted to that realization. The object in painting has been the creating of a concrete object or what is impinged a sentiment or emotion. The object of abstract painting is to create a concrete object which produces the sentiment or emotion.³³

Just as Ferren detailed an “internal vision” so too had Kandinsky declared an artist’s responsibility to strive for an articulation of an “inner knowledge” or “feeling.” In the introduction to *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* Kandinsky establishes a dialectical relationship between an “internal” and “external” feeling that provided a foundation for Ferren:

There is, however, in art, another kind of external similarity which is founded on a fundamental truth. When there is a similarity of inner tendency in the whole moral and spiritual atmosphere, a similarity of ideals, at first closely pursued but later lost to sight, a similarity in the inner feeling of any one period to that of another, the logical result will be a revival of the external forms which served to express those inner feelings in an earlier age.³⁴

Furthermore, by writing that *at that time* “purely abstract forms are beyond the reach of the artist at present,” Kandinsky indirectly suggested that it was not ultimately

³³ John Ferren, undated manuscript ca. 1933–34, John Ferren Papers, AAA.

³⁴ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* translated and with an introd. by M. T. H. Sadler (New York: Dover Publications, 1977): 1.

beyond the artist's reach.³⁵ By the time Ferren had (presumably) read Kandinsky's text, he believed his work to be part of the evolution of abstract art and that purely abstract forms were no longer beyond his reach. Inspiration for the American undoubtedly came from passages such as:

The revolt from dependence on nature is only just beginning....
Construction on a purely abstract basis is a slow business and at first seemingly blind and aimless. The artist must train not only his eye but also his soul, so that he can text colours for themselves and not only by external impressions.³⁶

Thus, Kandinsky's influence extended beyond the formal or "external" and penetrated deeply into Ferren's ideology or "internal feeling."

Picasso, Mallorca and the *Association des Artistes Modernes Américains et Anglais*

Ferren's artistic circle continued to widen in Paris and it was around the time of the Galerie Zak exhibition in 1932 that he became acquainted with the wealthy and influential publisher of the *Cahiers d'Art*, Christian Zervos (1889–1970). Zervos was born in Greece and spent his childhood in Alexandria and Marseille before moving to Paris to study at the Sorbonne. Beginning in 1926 he published the *Cahiers d'Art*, a general art magazine that favored Byzantine sculpture no more than it did abstract art. The publisher was not particularly fond of American artists, especially those who did not speak French (Zervos spoke no English) and Ferren's fluency in French was no doubt one of the reasons that he would be among Zervos's favorite Americans.³⁷

³⁵ Ibid, 30.

³⁶ Ibid, 46–7.

³⁷ Christian Derouet, "Americans as Seen in the *Cahiers d'Art* before 1940," in Sophie Levy, ed., *Transatlantic Avant-Garde: American Artists in Paris, 1918–1939* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003): 83.

Zervos was immensely influential at the time and championed one contemporary artist above all others: Pablo Picasso.³⁸

Even though Picasso was some twenty years removed from his groundbreaking Cubist work, the transplanted Spaniard continued to exert a tremendous influence in Parisian art circles. While Picasso did not possess an early overt stylistic influence on Ferren at this particular moment, he did serve as a great inspiration for the younger artist. They met in 1932, through Manuel Ortiz de Zárate.³⁹ Initially, Ferren wrote at once admiringly and suspiciously of Picasso in his diary: “I am always attracted by his period le cubisme analytique, the austerity, etc. and [I] am increasingly convinced that he did not logically develop it.”⁴⁰ The same year of their meeting, Picasso had a encyclopedic retrospective exhibition at the Galerie Georges Petit that comprised 236 works with lenders from both sides of the Atlantic. It was a comprehensive exhibition, hung by Picasso himself and covered by the international press, with an entire issue of the *Cahiers d’Art* devoted to the show.⁴¹ The exhibition opened in June and Ferren must have gone to see it immediately, as he recorded his impressions in his diary on June 6. Furthermore, it was a revelation for the American as, while he had demonstrated considerable knowledge of Picasso’s cubist period, the Rose and Blue periods remained something of a discovery for him. Ferren noted that he had:

³⁸ Beginning in 1932 Zervos began to publish a multi-volume catalogue raisonné of Picasso’s work. Christian Zervos, *Pablo Picasso* (Paris and New York: Cahiers d’Art and E. Weyhe, 1932–1978).

³⁹ Ferren’s closeness to Picasso is open to speculation, but the two undoubtedly became acquainted, the younger American even helping to stretch the canvas for Picasso’s monumental painting *Guernica*. Craig Bailey indicates that Ferren became close to Picasso and that it was he who introduced Picasso to Dora Maar. See Bailey, *Ferren, A Retrospective*, 9.

⁴⁰ John Ferren Diary, June 6, 1932. John Ferren Papers, AAA. Reel 371.

⁴¹ Christopher Green, *Art in France, 1900–1940* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000): 68. Also for the *Cahiers* issue devoted to Picasso that contains articles in French, English, and German on the artist’s work, see *Cahiers d’Art* 7 (1932): 85–195.

Been 2 times [to the exhibition] all in all – less impressed than I had imagined. [I] was moved by the moving époque Rose et Bleu, which I had never seen before. In every canvas the painter's qualities are at a maximum. There is undoubtedly more energy and intensity in a single canvas than in all his collected contemporaries. Every picture is something.⁴²

While there is surprisingly no reference to it in his diary, Ferren's move to Mallorca lasted for more than a year, and the couple returned to Paris in 1934.⁴³ This time in Mallorca, indeed removed from the artistic center of Paris, was nevertheless a productive period for the artist during which he was transitioning ever closer to a mature style. This move is exemplified in two works, *Untitled Abstraction with Orange* (1934, unknown) and *Untitled* (1934, fig. 2.9). In the first painting, Ferren superimposes geometric shapes over a white ground. The composition is interspersed with jagged single and multiple parallel lines. While the orange polygon is partially transparent, revealing the dark pointed arch form behind it, there is little or no modeling to the shapes. In the second painting we see similar quasi-geometric shapes now rendered over a blue ground. The lines of the other painting are absent and the forms are subtly but distinctly modeled. The Amon Carter's painting *Untitled* serves as a harbinger of his mature style.

The year 1932 also coincided with the formation of the *Association des Artistes Modernes Américains et Anglais*, a group with which Ferren would later exhibit. The genesis of the group is not entirely clear and art critic, educator, painter, illustrator, and self-proclaimed founder Bertha Fanning Taylor (1883–1980) indicated

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ James Fitzsimmons, "A John Ferren Profile," 25. Fitzsimmons mistakenly puts Ferren in Mallorca as early as 1931, but clearly from diary entries he could not have been there until the second half of 1932. Additionally, there is a postcard from Edgar Varèse to Ferren in Mallorca dated 1932. See John Ferren Papers, AAA.

that it was originally formed mostly with other American women artists she knew, many of whom were studying with André Lhote (1885–1962) at the time. Taylor was well connected in the Parisian art world of the 1920s and 30s and as she recalled in her unpublished diary:

I decided it would be interesting to form a group of these artists midway between those who turned their back on all “modern” ideas, and those who thought nothing but pure abstract[ion] was worth considering (there were a number of young Americans with these ideas there at the time).⁴⁴

The group’s first exhibition was held at Galerie de la Renaissance and elicited such great interest that, according to Taylor, they “decided to take in some excellent English artists working along the same lines, and the group became the “Association des Artistes Modernes, Américains et Anglais,” with men and women members.”⁴⁵

The first exhibition of the *Association*, however, was made up entirely of American artists and can be understood within the context of a resurgence of interest by the French in the identification and construction of an “American School” of art. American artists had been coming to Paris since the nineteenth century, mostly to study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts or one of the private academies. The foundation of this resurgence of interest in American art had been laid by the great influx of American art students in the late nineteenth century as well as those Americans who exhibited at the Salon. The earliest generation of American avant-gardes arrived in the first decade of the twentieth century and included Stanton MacDonald-Wright, Morgan Russell (1886–1953), and Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975). This “first

⁴⁴ Bertha Fanning Taylor, “My Fifteen Years in France,” unpublished manuscript, 204. AAA reel 286. The exhibition’s catalogue, however, tells a different story. Taylor was not included in the exhibition, and there were many more men included than women. I have found no explanation for these inconsistencies.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 204–205.

wave” came to Paris primarily to learn the lessons of modernism and did not necessarily contribute to the larger dialogue of Cubism, at least not at a level that successive generations of Americans would contribute to modern painting. The French appetite for American art was later reinforced by the enormous 1919 survey exhibition of American art shown at the Musée National de Luxembourg.⁴⁶ It was not until the 1920s, however, with the arrival of artists such as Patrick Henry Bruce (1881–1937), Stuart Davis (1892–1964), John Storrs (1885–1956), Gerald Murphy (1888–1964), and others, that Americans began to make a significant contribution to the Parisian avant-garde.⁴⁷

By the early 1930s there was a curiosity about American art by the French, who were trying to identify just what made American art American. The inaugural exhibition of *Association des Artistes Modernes, Américain et Anglais* was something of a groundbreaking moment for American artists in Paris as it was an early recognition of and declaration for the individuality of American art, which had heretofore been considered entirely derivative of French art. Chil Aronson, who organized an exhibition of American artists in Paris in 1932 and whose rhetoric continued to suggest American art’s indebtedness to France, nevertheless wrote in the preface to the catalogue:

American art has always had European art for its basis. It is most apparent in matters of technic [sic]. I wonder if an Art does really become more national by virtue of the local character of the subject. I do not believe that it does, because the originality of any school of painting or of sculpture does not reside in its subject but in the

⁴⁶ See Lois Marie Fink, *American Art at the Nineteenth-Century Paris Salons* (Cambridg: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and *Exposition d'artistes de l'école américaine* (Paris: Frazier-Soye, imprimeur, 1919).

⁴⁷ Jocelyn Rotily, “A Picture of America by Gerald Murphy,” in Sophie Levy, ed., *A Transatlantic Avant-Garde*, 55 et passim.

individual strength of the plastic realization. And one sees clearly, how under the impulse of French Art the American artists strive to deepen and to individualize the power of plastic concretization.⁴⁸

The better known artists included in the exhibition were Hilaire Hiler (1898–1966), Carl Holty, John Graham (1886–1966), Walter Pach (1883–1958), Abraham Rattner (1895–1978), Vaclav Vytlacil, and Jean Xceron (1890–1967). In addition to the exhibition at the Galerie de la Renaissance and the accompanying catalogue, Chil Aronson also published a book that same year with an expanded essay and commentary on the artists' works. He was searching for a way in which to characterize American art in nationalistic terms and wrote, "If one searches to define the general character of American art of the United States, one discovers three principal themes running through it: realism, classicism, and romanticism."⁴⁹ Aronson drew important if perhaps oversimplified distinctions between the American school and that of the French, noting of the Americans that: "Their works indicate a new lyricism. A willingness to create their works disengaged from all archaism, from antiquated sentimentality, but also to avoid the mannerism of today."⁵⁰

Ferren's exclusion from this exhibition and publication is notable, given that he had already achieved a growing reputation by 1932. It coincided closely with his departure for Mallorca, which may serve to explain this. However, it may have also been a calculated move by the artist to distance himself from his fellow Americans, as he noted to Dorothy Seckler that: "Through the French contact [Ferren's father-in-

⁴⁸ Chil Aronson, *Artistes Américains de Paris* (Paris: Galerie de la Renaissance, 1932): 5.

⁴⁹ Chil Aronson, *Artistes Américains Modernes de Paris* (Paris: Editions "Le Triangle", 1932): 12. "Si l'on cherche à définir le caractère général de l'art américain aux Etats-Unis, on découvrira que trois principaux courants le dirigent: réalisme, classicisme et romantisme."

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 13. "Leurs oeuvres indiquent un lyrisme nouveau. Une volonté de créer des oeuvres dégagées de tout archaïsme, de sentimentalisme démodé, mais aussi d'éviter le maniérisme de nos jours."

law] I wasn't in expatriate circles."⁵¹ This explanation is also problematic as he would eventually exhibit with the *Anglo-Américains* after he had returned to Paris in 1934, but in the meantime he and his wife were living in Mallorca, far both geographically and culturally from the French capital.

The Mallorca period represents a clearly defined moment of stylistic change in Ferren's work. Many of the paintings the artist completed prior to his move to Mallorca were composed of Cubist-like interlocking geometric shapes as in *Composition aux Leones Roses* (fig. 2.10) of 1931. During his stay in Spain, however, Ferren moved away from the interlocking shapes and began to depict them individually, often floating them against a neutral-color group as in *Form Composition* (fig. 2.11) from circa 1933. At this time the artist often worked on coarse-weave burlap (perhaps because fine canvas or linen may have been hard to obtain in Mallorca) and he also began to introduce sand into his medium. The rough surface of the sand in *Form Composition*, is complementary to the coarseness of the burlap surface. By 1934 Ferren is moving toward his first mature style, exemplified in works such as the aforementioned *Untitled* (fig. 2.9). The curving trapezoidal forms of *Untitled* and other paintings from this period are beginning to be rendered with definition and depth in an early attempt to break free from the picture plane. Over the following year the artist continued to further model these forms in an increasingly three-dimensional manner that would be fully-realized in his paintings and plaster reliefs from 1936 onward. Ferren unfortunately spoke or wrote little about his time in Mallorca and we do not know if there were other artists on the island that he may have had contact with. By the end of 1934 he had returned to Paris.

⁵¹ Ferren interview with Seckler.

Association des Artistes Modernes Américains et Anglais, S. W. Hayter & Atelier 17

Back in Paris in 1934, Ferren was invited to show with the *Association des Artistes Modernes Américains et Anglais* and quickly became involved as a leader of the group. In 1935, the *Association's* fourth exhibition was detailed in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* and while the review noted that the group did not represent a specific aesthetic doctrine, it indicated a range of representational and abstract styles, and specifically mentioned abstract work located in the first gallery:

As the members of the group represent neither school nor doctrine, their works are extremely varied. It is only in the first gallery that one finds what could be classified: here we find abstract paintings.⁵²

This stylistic diversity is surprising for an artists' group at the time, especially considering the strict doctrinaire stance of other groups such as *Circle et Carré* and *Abstraction-Création*. The divergent styles of the officers serve as an example: the president of the group at the time was the academic American animal sculptor Herbert Haseltine (1877–1962) while Cecil Howard and Glyn Philpot (1884–1937) served as Vice-Presidents, Hayter was the Treasurer, and Ferren served as the group's Secretary.⁵³

Other exhibitors included abstractionists Americans Benjamin Benno (1901–1980), Frederick Kann (1886–1965), and Jean Xceron, as well as other lesser-known artists. Ferren showed three works, all of which are listed in the catalogue simply as *Peinture*. One of the three, however, is noted as being lent by the Museum of Living

⁵² Alexander Watt, "Le Group d'Artistes Anglo-Américains," *Beaux Arts Magazine* (June 1935): 8. "Comme les membres de ce groupe ne représentent ni une école, ni une doctrine, leurs oeuvres sont extrêmement variées. C'est seulement dans la première salle qu'on peut faire une classification: ici se trouvent les peintres de l'abstrait."

⁵³ Ibid. Also see, "'Concretionism in Art,'" newspaper clipping, August 10, 1936, John Ferren Papers, AAA.

Art, New York and may have been *Composition* (fig. 2.12) of 1934. The exhibition had fifty-two British and American exhibitors such as C. R. W. Nevinson, Abraham Rattner, Raphael Soyer, Alexander Calder, Jo Davidson, Malvina Hoffman, and others. It was most likely through this group show that Ferren became introduced to the British experimental printmaker Stanley William Hayter (1901–1988). Hayter had moved to Paris and opened his first printmaking studio there in 1927. When the studio relocated to No. 17 Rue Campagne-Première in 1933, it became known simply as Atelier 17. Hayter exhibited with the *Association* in 1935 and was one of the better known artists among them at the time. His *Pavane* (fig. 2.13) was singled out in Alexander Watt’s review in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*.

Pavane by William Hayter is the most striking, full of verility and lively colors. One cannot make a fair comparison between this painting and those surrounding it—the subtle paintings of Benno and Buckland-Wright, or the most finely executed of Ferren and Xceron.⁵⁴

Nearly concurrent with the *Anglo-Américains* exhibition that year, Ferren’s work was included in a group show of “Le Group de Atelier 17” at Galerie Pierre from May 13–25, 1935. Not an official group, it was instead a number of artists who had worked at Atelier 17 and the exhibition was sponsored by Hayter’s workshop. In addition to Hayter, other exhibitors included the New Zealand born illustrator and engraver John Buckland-Wright (1897–1954), Surrealists Max Ernst (1891–1976), Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966), Yves Tanguy (1900–1955), and others.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Watt, “Le Group d’Artistes Anglo-Américain,” 8. *Pavane* had also been reproduced in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, March 20, 1935, 3. “*Pavane* de William Hayter, l’oeuvre la plus frappante, est pleine de virilité et de couleurs vives. One ne peut pas faire un comparaison juste entre ce tableau et ceuc qui l’entourment—les peintures subtil de Benno et de Buckland-Wright, ou les oeuvres plus finement traitées de Ferren et de Xceron.”

⁵⁵ This exhibition would eventually travel to Maastricht in May 1936. Ferren noted that he sold two works from the exhibition. See John Ferren Papers, AAA.

The extent to which Ferren had worked in Hayter's Atelier 17 is not entirely clear, but he enthusiastically adopted Hayter's technique of etching on plaster. The resultant plaster engravings would become the first body of work for which Ferren would become known in his home country through his celebrated exhibitions at Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York. Art historian Joanne Moser has observed that,

Hayter's fascination with the relief character of the printed burin line led him and other members of Atelier 17 to explore printing techniques that emphasized the sculptural nature of the engraved plate.⁵⁶

Hayter's workshop was a hotbed of innovation and experimental methods and, as Moser notes,

The scope of experimentation at Atelier 17 encompassed methods of creating an image on the copper plate as well as new ways of printing the plates in an attempt to make intaglio media more responsive to the needs of contemporary artistic expression.⁵⁷

In his seminal book on printmaking techniques, *New Ways of Gravure*, Hayter noted that he had experimented with intaglio engravings on plaster as early as 1931.⁵⁸ In chapter nine of the book, Hayter details exactly how the plaster should be addressed:

Consider the block, illuminated from above diagonally, and then carve the surfaces to show light, shadow, recession, volume, or hollow in relation to this light. A plane turned towards light appears to come forward, turned against it, to recede. The consistent practice of this method is, as a rule, dull.⁵⁹

Hayter provided the inspiration for Ferren to adopt this technique and while the British artist claims to have worked with plaster intaglio as early as 1931, it is likely

⁵⁶ Joann Moser, *Atelier 17* (Madison, WI: Elvehjem Art Center, University of Wisconsin, 1977): 33.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁸ Stanley William Hayter, *New Ways of Gravure*. (New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1949): 147.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 153.

that the earliest works in this medium that Ferren saw were ones such as the Englishman's *Oedipus* (fig. 2.14) of 1934.

The earliest work by Ferren that displays the unmistakable touch of Hayter's swooping biomorphic curves is an engraving on paper, *Abstraction*, 1934 (fig. 2.15). While it is two-dimensional, *Abstraction* looks ahead to the artist's more sculptural carved plaster works that would appear in 1936. During that time, Ferren may have been taking a cue from another Atelier 17 regular and Hayter's workshop manager, British artist, John Buckland-Wright. Ferren's engraving, *The Hunt*, 1935 (fig. 2.16) includes Hayter's familiar biomorphic curves, but also incorporates figurative and vegetable imagery in a suggestively Surrealist vein that recalls Buckland-Wright's illustrations and engravings of about the same time, such as the etching *Jeune Fille au Miroir* (fig. 2.17).⁶⁰ Ferren's flirtation with surrealism was short-lived however, and by the next year he was creating completely abstract plaster reliefs of great skill and originality.

The year 1935 was a watershed year for Ferren and his career was advancing on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. On May 21, 1935 Jean Héliion arranged a meeting between Ferren and American collector, Albert E. Gallatin (1881–1952), whom Héliion had been advising on his collecting.⁶¹ Héliion had been instrumental in

⁶⁰ Ferren does not mention his relationship with Buckland-Wright in any of his papers, but it must have been one of mixed feelings. In a letter to Ferren from Sherry Mangan from 1940, Mangan writes:

Heard the other day, by the way, from John Buckland Wright. And what do you think that Hayterish Popfrontist turned out to be?—a censor in His Majesty's Ministry of Information. Had the colossal gall to scold me for my politics, the heel. And complimented me as "a first-class journalist and snapper-up of golden opportunities." The world grows harsh, and decisions are not made any more in the gentle haze of Montparnasse. To think what I once thought of J[ohn] B[uckland] W[right].

Sherry Mangan to John Ferren, undated, John Ferren Papers, AAA.

⁶¹ Gail Stavitsky, "The Development, Institutionalization, and Impact of the A. E. Gallatin Collection of Modern Art" (Ph.D. diss. New York University, 1990): 286.

focusing Gallatin's collection toward a more decidedly cubist aesthetic.⁶² That summer, and undoubtedly at the urging of Héliion, Gallatin acquired Ferren's *Composition* (fig. 2.18) of 1934 for his recently established Gallery of Living Art in New York. It was the first of Ferren's abstract works to enter a public collection. In fact, Gallatin, along with his friends, fellow American patrons and artists George L. K. Morris (1905–1975) and Charles G. Shaw (1897–1974), were the first Americans to purchase works by Ferren.⁶³

Collector, patron, some-time abstract painter, and early champion of American abstract art in the 1930s, Gallatin had established the Gallery of Living Art as part of New York University, where he showed some of the most progressive European (and soon thereafter, American) art. The Gallery of Living Art (which became the Museum of Living Art) was the earliest institution to support American abstract art and Gallatin worked very closely with artist advisors such as George L. K. Morris and Jean Héliion to accumulate a collection of contemporary art. Ferren's association with Gallatin, Morris, and Shaw led to his inclusion in the seminal *Five Contemporary American Concretionists* exhibition.

Five Contemporary American Concretionists

In March of 1936 Ferren was included in a small but seminal group show, *Five Contemporary American Concretionists* at the Paul Rinehardt Gallery, New York. Dubbed the "Concretionists," the other artists included Charles Biederman

⁶² Debra Bricker Balken, "Jean Héliion's American Connections," in Didier Ottinger, et al., *Jean Héliion* (London: Paul Holberton, 2004): 45. As an important indication of this shift in his collecting, in 1933 Gallatin had purchased Mondrian's *Composition with Blue and Yellow*, the first of the artist's works to enter an American collection.

⁶³ Ibid. Also see Seckler, AAA.

(1906–2004), Alexander Calder (1898–1976), Morris, and Shaw. Gallatin had selected the five artists and while there were clear affinities between them, they could not definitively be considered a school—their styles ranged from the cubist-inspired work of Morris and Biederman to the biomorphic curves of Calder and Ferren. Morris recalled in an interview with art historian Susan Larsen that

It was Gallatin's choice. We had no special personal relation to each other. You see, the general public and the museums thought abstract art had to be European. Gallatin selected five Americans doing abstract work to prove that it was not so.⁶⁴

As Larsen rightly points out, even though the term “concretionist” was used to describe the five artists, each one was working in a very independent direction. Two of them, Calder and Ferren, were not living in the United States at the time of the exhibition, and of the five, Calder was by far the best known having already shown at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York and exhibited extensively in Paris and elsewhere. He was reticent about his inclusion in the exhibition, related perhaps to the fact that while Gallatin had purchased work from him in the past, he felt he was not represented prominently enough in the Gallery of Living Art. He wrote to Gallatin: “You are anxious that I should “bolster up the show,” as Shaw put it, at Reinhardt's so I feel it only fair to me that you should expose my objects at Washington Square.”⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Susan Larsen interview with George L. K. Morris, Feb. 2, 1973 in Susan Carol Larsen, “The American Abstract Artists Group: A History and Evaluation of its Impact Upon American Art” (Ph.D. diss. Northwestern University, 1974). This Eurocentric attitude was perpetuated by Alfred Barr, director of the Museum of Modern Art. In organizing his 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* he had apparently been urged by Héliou, Léger, and others to include work by Ferren, to which he allegedly replied, “I am not interested in Americans.” See Stavitsky, “The Development, Institutionalization, and Impact of the A. E. Gallatin Collection of Modern Art,” 297–298.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Gail Stavitsky, “A Landmark Exhibition: Five Contemporary American Concretionists, March 1936,” *Archives of American Art Journal* 33 (1993): 4.

The term used to label the artists, “concretionist” was Gallatin’s choice, but it was not without precedent. Likely inspired by the *Art Concret* group formed by Van Doesburg, Gallatin must have envisioned so-called “concretionism” as the American contribution to the evolution of abstract art and an immediate descendant of the groups that preceded it. This evolution and use of the term “concrete” in Europe was noted by art historians Gladys Fabre and Ryszard Stanislawsky,

Art Concret was one of the first steps in an aesthetic evolution that progressively abandoned the theosophic and Neoplatonic foundations on which abstraction and non-objective art had been heretofore based.⁶⁶

For the Americans, however, the term had less import. George L. K. Morris, one of Gallatin’s close friends and an exhibitor in the *Concretionist* exhibition, noted the term implied a negligible philosophical importance and instead was based much more on purely formal aesthetics. “Gallatin probably used the term to imply that abstract art is concrete. It had a more positive connotation than a term like non-objective.”⁶⁷

Gallatin had known Christian Zervos in Paris, perhaps through his association with Hélión, who by 1934, had replaced Jacques Mauny (1893–1962) as Gallatin’s principle advisor. In January of that year Hélión, returned to Paris from the U.S. and “wrote to Gallatin, informing him of the local news concerning Christian Zervos’ new Cahiers d’Art gallery and a possible article [about the Gallery of Living Art] in this periodical.”⁶⁸ Gallatin’s visits with Ferren (and indeed other artists in Europe) continued after the *Five American Concretionists* exhibition and art historian Gail

⁶⁶ Gladys Fabre and Ryszard Stanislawsky, *Paris 1930*, 383.

⁶⁷ Susan Larsen interview with George L. K. Morris, Feb. 2, 1973 in Susan Carol Larsen, *The American Abstract Artists Group*.

⁶⁸ Gail Stavitsky, “The Development, Institutionalization, and Impact of the A. E. Gallatin Collection of Modern Art,” 264. Stavitsky’s exhaustive study on A. E. Gallatin is the most comprehensive examination of his influence as an early American collector of abstract art.

Stavitsky notes that in the summer of 1938 Gallatin acquired a small and unusually vertical etching on plaster by Ferren, *Composition*, 1936 (fig. 2.19). It is possible that Gallatin may have seen similar works at Ferren's exhibition at the Matisse Gallery in February 1938.⁶⁹ Interestingly, while Ferren's association with these American artists and the patron Gallatin remained relatively strong while he was in Paris, it dissipated quickly once he returned to the States after 1938. Following the *Five Contemporary American Concretionists* exhibition, Morris, Shaw and other American artists founded the American Abstract Artists group, from which Ferren would emphatically disassociate himself after his return to America.⁷⁰

On March 9 the *Five Contemporary American Concretionists* exhibition opened at the Paul Reinhardt Gallery, New York. The exhibition came on the heels of the seminal exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, organized by Alfred Barr at the Museum of Modern Art and was in many ways a response to it for its exclusion of American artists. In fact, according to Stavitsky, when Shaw learned of Barr's exhibition he personally phoned the director of MoMA to inquire as to the Americans he intended to include. Only three Americans were part of Barr's show, all of whom were considered as much European as they were American at that time: sculptor Alexander Calder, photographer and painter Man Ray (1890–1976), and graphic designer Edward McKnight Kauffer (1890–1954).⁷¹ These two exhibitions occurring so closely to one another, were instrumental in introducing abstract art on such a scale

⁶⁹ Ibid, 378.

⁷⁰ Alfred Barr in a response to a letter from Ferren wrote: "I am glad to know that you do not subscribe to the American Abstract Artists' manifesto." Alfred Barr to John Ferren, April 18, 1940. John Ferren Papers, AAA. This point is expanded upon in Chapter 3.

⁷¹ Gail Stavitsky, "A Landmark Exhibition: Five Contemporary American Concretionists, March 1936," 3. In 1937 Barr would give McKnight Kauffer a solo exhibition at MoMA. See Mark Haworth-Booth, *E. McKnight Kauffer: A Designer and His Public*, 2nd ed. (London: V&A Publications, 2005): 86, 94 et passim. Kauffer would go on to design a number of MoMA exhibition catalogue covers.

to the American public. Perhaps as something of a consolation to Shaw, Barr wrote in the catalogue to *Cubist and Abstract Art*,

As this volume goes to press, an exhibition of five young American abstract painters opens in New York [under the auspices of] The Gallery of Living Art at New York University. . . . [P]rimarily concerned with abstract art, [this museum] has steadily increased its collections under the guidance of its director A. E. Gallatin.⁷²

In addition, when called to task for the lack of Americans included in *Cubist and Abstract Art*, Barr, in justifying this decision, noted that the previous year the Whitney Museum of American Art had mounted the exhibition, *Abstract Painting in America*. The Whitney's show had been a large group show that included work by many semi-abstract painters, not one of whom entirely removed representation from his/her work. Stuart Davis was asked to write the text for the Whitney catalogue and he identified the greatest period of activity with regard to abstract art in America as occurring between the years 1915 and 1927. He was careful to make no qualitative judgments on these years, but simply to point out that abstract art was created most prolifically during that period. Clearly, Davis felt that an exegesis for abstraction was needed and wrote:

Our pictures will be expressions which are parallel to nature and parallel lines never meet. We will never try to copy the uncopyable but will seek to establish a material tangibility in our medium which will be a permanent record of an idea or emotion inspired by nature.⁷³

Despite this flurry of exhibitions of abstract art in 1935 and 1936, it appears that the American public was still ambivalent toward it. While some found abstraction to be

⁷² Quoted in Stavitsky, "A Landmark Exhibition," 2.

⁷³ Stuart Davis, "Introduction," in Whitney Museum of American Art. *Abstract Painting in America*. Exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1935): n.p.

praiseworthy, the American reviews of the *Five Contemporary American Concretionists* exhibition were predominantly negative. Henry McBride's review in the *New York Sun* was the most scathing of all, belittling both the work and the artists themselves. McBride disparagingly notes a tendency of contemporary artists to move away from a literal-narrative mode of painting to one of pure abstraction:

If you do begin to see the inevitability of non-literary [abstract] painting, now that the cinema has taken over—and so vehemently—the literature of the pictorial arts, then go to the Reinhardt Gallery this week and see what some of our American boys are doing in the non-representational line.⁷⁴

The criticism continued in a degenerative manner and even descended into mean-spiritedness, continuing:

One false impression that you have cherished for years in regard to abstract painting will be shattered by this exhibition. You will note that it does not seem to be so easy an art as you have always been saying it was. You remember that you used to say contemptuously that any child could paint that way. Well, it appear, it takes grown men a number of years to get the hang of it.⁷⁵

In the end, however, McBride concedes that, “Mr. Morris and Mr. Shaw have gained as painters during the year, [and] that Mr. Ferren is an exceedingly welcome newcomer with something of that assurance that comes with learning how to use the controls of Paris.”⁷⁶

Royal Cortisoz, critic for the *New York Herald-Tribune*, was only slightly less acerbic in his description of the abstractions currently on view in the city. Likening the so-called *concretionists* to Yves Tanguy's work, which was on view elsewhere in the city, Cortisoz writes:

⁷⁴ H.[enry] McB.[ride], “America Also Goes Abstract,” *The New York Sun* March 14, 1936, 30.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

His [Tanguy's] little paintings have all much the same character. Over and over he delineates what might be described as osseous medleys. He does them very well without demonstrating that it was really worthwhile to do them at all. The same remark applies to the five Americans, Messrs: Biederman, Calder, Ferren, Morris, and Shaw, who have placed a number of their abstractions on view at the Reinhardt gallery. But they have at least added a new word to current terminology. They announce themselves as "Concretionists."⁷⁷

The *Five Contemporary American Concretionists* exhibition was the domestic debut of Ferren's abstractions and he showed seven paintings in the exhibition. He also showed for the first time one of the earliest plaster etchings, *Plaster Abstraction* (1935). The exhibition traveled to France later that year, the result of the transatlantic relationship between Gallatin and Zervos. On June 15, 1936 a slightly modified version of the exhibition opened at the Galerie Pierre, Paris. Calder, who, as noted, had voiced reticence about participating in the exhibition from the start, demanded that his works be removed from the exhibition. As a replacement, Gallatin included a number of his own works.

Christian Zervos reviewed the exhibition in the *Cahiers d'Art*, singling out Ferren for some of his highest praise and drawing the earliest connection between the American and his close friend, Jean Héliion:

Ferren, who also exhibited alone at the Galerie Pierre, is the youngest of the five. He has earned our trust because he provides a glimpse of a sincere soul afflicted by serious anxieties and torn by countless tragedies, constantly borne by the desire to deepen his art and perfect his craft. He wants to move forward by taking painting to the extreme frontiers where cubism led it, and then take it further, to who-knows-where for the moment, since Ferren's current stage is just a transitional one and in no way final stage. The same goes for Héliion. But whatever expression finally crystallizes from the substantial core of Ferren's

⁷⁷ Royal Cortissoz, "More From the Modernists," *The New York Herald Tribune* March 15, 1936, sec. V, p. 10.

soul, it will always be clear, straightforward, and concerned with quality and balance. Painting will always profit from it.⁷⁸

As the publisher of the *Cahiers*, Zervos exerted a great deal of influence over the Parisian art world. It was he who, in many ways, was greatly responsible for Ferren's success in the French city. Furthermore, Zervos was well connected on both sides of the Atlantic and he was responsible for introducing Ferren to Alfred Barr through an encouraging letter of introduction, emphatic in its support for the American artist:

My friend Ferren is coming to New York for his show at the Pierre Matisse Gallery. I would be most obliged if you could concern yourself with his exhibition, lend him your moral support, and if possible promote him among collectors. He needs to obtain a certain financial success over there so that he can work in peace, free from constant financial worries.⁷⁹

Given the negative reviews the exhibition received in New York, Ferren may have felt some redemption from the praise it garnered in Paris. The artist had an opportunity to defend his work back in his home country through an Associated Press article titled "American Painter Defends 'Concretionism' Movement" that appeared in the *Richmond (VA) Times Dispatch*. He was quoted as saying, "We've had enough of revolution and the time has come to start building again on the essential values the moderns have discovered."⁸⁰ Echoing the artist's unpublished manuscript, "To the Critics of Abstract Art," it would be one of many public statements the artist would articulate throughout his career and signals the beginning of a life-long desire to

⁷⁸ Quoted in Christian Derouet, "Americans as Seen in the *Cahiers d'Art* Before 1940" in Levy, Sophie, ed., *A Transatlantic Avant-Garde: American Artists in Paris, 1918–1939* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003): 86.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Ibid.

⁸⁰ Anon., "American Painter Defends 'Concretionism' Movement," *Times Dispatch* August 11, 1936, newspaper clipping, John Ferren Papers, AAA.

elucidate abstract painting. Ferren is quoted as seeking to “link the freedom of abstract and cubist art with the painting developed centuries ago.”⁸¹ The problem, as Ferren saw it, was that “The cubists and their followers failed to retain the richness of painting itself. Abstract art and concretionism are evocative instead of pictorial, but they retain the natural elements of painting.”⁸²

Pierre Matisse Gallery, Surindépendants & the Plaster Engravings

Showing concurrently with the exhibition in America of the *Five Contemporary American Concretionists* was the third annual exhibition of *Le Group d’Artistes Anglo-Américains*. According to the exhibition’s catalogue, Michael Salaman had taken over from Ferren as the Secretary and Ferren’s close friend, American artist Harold English, had become the Treasurer. Ferren, as well as Hayter, and a few others were listed simply as “members.”⁸³ Smaller than the first exhibition with only forty-three exhibitors, Ferren showed only one work, titled *Composition*. Additional exhibitors that year included Benno, John Buckland-Wright, Ben Nicholson, Cathal O’Toole, Victor Pasmore, John Piper, and others. The group had lost some steam by this time which may explain the modest reviews, only one of which mentioned Ferren:

Le Group d’Artistes Anglo-Américains, ejects prosaicness and probationary in its, pruned and excellently aggrandized, third appearance, Galerie de Paris. . . . Adroits represent absolutism, conspicuously two Londoners, C. H. Howard and Merlyn Evans, John Power, of extreme finesse in the complex assembling and fragile

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ *Le Group d’Artistes Anglo-Américains*. (Paris: Moderne Imprimerie, 1936): n.p.

coloring of embryonic shapes and [John] Ferren, mobile in a melos of cosmic forms.⁸⁴

By the fall of 1936 Ferren's career had gained significant momentum and October of that year was a busy month for him. He had his solo New York debut exhibition at the Pierre Matisse Gallery opening on October 6th, and in Paris three of his paintings were included in the Salon de *Surindépendants* exhibition. Toward the end of September he departed France on the *Normandie* oceanliner bound for New York, where he would install his exhibition at Matisse's gallery. In advance of his departure he wrote to Matisse to notify him of his arrival and also to indicate which paintings he was sending:

The packer has come to take the paintings. I have added two paintings going to Pierre's, those of Zervos and the plaster belongs to the Museum of Modern Art. Barr gave the order to send it with the Surrealist shipment in October—this would be too late for us.⁸⁵

While Ferren was in New York to oversee his solo exhibition he was kept abreast of news in Paris through the diligent correspondence of Laure Ortiz de Zárate. The Salon des *Surindépendants* exhibition, a large group exhibition, included work by Hayter, Benno, and others. De Zárate described in adoring words how Ferren's work hung among his peers and included a rough sketch of one of the galleries of the exhibition. She wrote to her husband that,

Your canvases show quite well, especially the “organized chaos” [and have] received some compliments by this group of rats! For the most

⁸⁴ Unidentified newspaper clipping, John Ferren Papers, E. S. Bird Library, Syracuse University.

⁸⁵ John Ferren to Pierre Matisse, September 15, 1936. Pierre Matisse Gallery Papers, The Morgan Library. Ferren mentions here the plaster that Barr had purchased for MoMA's collection. This work must have been bought out of the *Five Contemporary American Concretionists* exhibition. “L’emballeur est venu prendre les tableaux. J’ai ajouté les deux tableaux de chez Pierre, celui de Zervos et le platre appartenant au Museum of Modern Art. Barr vient de donner l’ordre de l’envoyer avec l’envoi surréaliste en Octobre – ce qui sera trop tard pour nous.”

part, [they] say “we are happy that Ferren is showing, it is indeed a good show this year—[and includes] Hayter.”⁸⁶

She was clearly extremely proud of her husband, who by this time along with Alexander Calder, had become among the best known American artists in Paris. De Zárate continued her description: “Not badly placed, your canvases have the air of being slightly small as they are placed closely together on your _____ and at a distance.”⁸⁷

Meanwhile, back in New York, the official reviews of Ferren’s debut at Matisse’s gallery were just as positive as his wife’s commentary on the *Surindépendants* exhibition. The negative criticism of the *Concretionists*, it seems, had been forgotten as nearly every major newspaper in New York favorably reviewed the show. The new method of engraving and carving into plaster was recognized immediately by many as a significant step forward not only in technique, but also in the artist’s achievement of expression. One anonymous reviewer wrote,

In carrying out his ideas the artist has achieved some of his happiest results in a new technic [sic] he has devised—a combination of line engraving and bas-relief on plaster, enriched here and there by a sparing use of color.⁸⁸

Ferren showed his early plasters and engravings such as *Composition* (fig. 2.19), which combines bas-relief and sparing use of color, unlike some of his later, more colorful plasters. Works such as these illustrate how Ferren adopted Hayter’s swooping biomorphic line and his technique of engraving and carving into plaster.

⁸⁶ Laure de Ortiz to John Ferren, October 20, 1936. John Ferren Papers, AAA. “Tes toiles font très bien, surtout le “chaos organisée” reçu q[uel]q[ue] compliments mais cette bande de rats! Pour la plupart [ils] disent “nous sommes contents que Ferren est exposé, c’est bien lors salon cette année. Hayter.”

⁸⁷ Ibid. “Place pas mauvais, tes toiles ont l’air un peu petites car placées un peu rapprochés sur ton _____ et au bout d’une perspective.”

⁸⁸ Melvill Upton, “Art Galleries Fall into Line,” *The New York Sun* October 10, 1936, 19.

Over the next two years Ferren advanced the technique with more complex compositions and the incorporation of his developing ideas on color, as we shall see.

Hayter believed that the process of incising and engraving into plaster showed the relief and lines more clearly than a transfer of ink from plate to paper.⁸⁹ At the time, Ferren was the most prominent American to work within Hayter's circle, and while he never formally studied with the British artist (he emphatically stated that he was not Hayter's student), he nevertheless used the workshop to produce independent works.⁹⁰ Hayter was a number of years away from producing the innovative process of printing multiple colors at once that he developed in the U.S., but Ferren's use of the plaster engraving in Matisse's exhibition serves as a prelude to the immense influence Atelier 17 would later have in New York following the outbreak of World War II.

In addition to the plasters, large oil paintings were also included in the Matisse Gallery exhibition, but it was unquestionably the generally more modest-sized three-dimensional engravings that stole the show. In the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* a critic described the process in detail:

I mention the engravings first, for though the paintings dominate the exhibition in respect to size and vividness, they are not as important nor as personal a contribution to contemporary abstract art as are the engravings. Mr. Ferren cuts his design into the copper plate with a burin or engraving tool, inks his plate in the usual fashion and then presses it into a block of wet plaster. When the plaster has dried and hardened, the plate is then lifted off and the ink that in the sunken lines of the plate remains on the plaster, giving somewhat of a low relief effect.⁹¹

⁸⁹ K.B., *Bulletin of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco*, (2007): 43.

⁹⁰ James Fitzsimmons, "A John Ferren Profile," 25. Fitzsimmons mistakenly identifies 1937 as the first year that Ferren created the incised plaster reliefs.

⁹¹ Charles Z. Offin, "At the Galleries," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* October 11, 1936, C12.

The most positive review came from the Melville Upton in the *New York Sun*. Upton covered a range of fall shows that were concurrently on view and the by-line indicated that these varied from “Ultra-modern” to American “Primitives,” but it was Ferren’s exhibition that took top billing. The reviewer noted that the exhibition included a selection of both earlier paintings such as the Kandinsky-inspired *Untitled Abstraction with Orange* (fig. 2.20) which were much different from the curving lines of the plasters, as well as the most recent work by the artist. For Upton, as with other critics, however, it was the most recent plaster reliefs, with which he was most taken.

Tiring of the two-dimensional patterned abstractions of his earlier period, he [Ferren] has pushed his expression further till he is now preoccupied with the play of form and color in space. . . . In carrying out his ideas the artist has achieved some of his happiest results in a new technic he has devised—a combination of line engraving and bas-relief on plaster, enriched here and there by a sparing use of color.⁹²

In nearly all of the reviews of the exhibition the innovative plaster engraving technique is mentioned as a groundbreaking method. Emily Genauer, writing for the *New York World-Telegram*, reminded her audience that New York had first been exposed to Ferren’s work in the *Five Contemporary American Concretionists* exhibition, and indicated that he had since been maturing as an artist (never mind that it had occurred all in a matter of months). “In this solo show we find him [Ferren] working again at abstract canvases, but also in a new medium [of plaster engraving], which is an intensely interesting as it is original.”⁹³ Howard Devree’s praise in the *New York Times* was more cautious: “An accomplished draftsman, young Mr. Ferren

⁹² Melville Upton, “Art Galleries Fall into Line,” 19.

⁹³ Emily Genauer, “Galleries Show A. B. Davies’ Art,” *New York World-Telegram*, October 13, 1936, 25.

is continuing his explorations of “forms in space, modeled by color” to the bitter and colorful end.”⁹⁴

The national press—what little of it the exhibition received—was at least equally as effusive. *Art News* carried a sizable review of the exhibition and noted not only the inventiveness of the plaster engravings, but also reflected an appreciation beyond a formal level and included an astute awareness of the artist’s intention. Ferren was experimenting with different media such as sand (which had begun in Mallorca) as well as imbuing his works with a temporal dimension. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reviewer noted Ferren’s use of gesso and sand in his paintings, while in *Art News* attention was drawn to the suggestion of time. In a description that recalls the synesthetic experience that Ferren had in San Francisco years earlier, the review notes, “His paintings are pure abstraction in form and color. He believes that, without any natural content, he can synthesize and reawaken in his observers his experiences in nature by means of sensuous color and mass.”⁹⁵ It is his explanation of the plaster reliefs that is most illuminating.

In his rejection of a static visual experience he has tried to represent time in space by the interaction of three dimensional color masses. He claims that they are extraction of the experience between static and moving objects, as the changing relation between a moving green bus and a red shop window.⁹⁶

These generally positive reviews of Ferren’s work should be understood within the larger context of America’s mixed feelings toward abstract art during the 1930s. As demonstrated by the negative reviews that followed the *Five Contemporary*

⁹⁴ Howard Devree, “A Score of Shows Open in the Local Galleries,” *New York Times* October 11, 1936, sec. X, 9.

⁹⁵ Anon., “John Ferren,” *Art News* October 17, 1936, 15.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

American Concretionists exhibition, there was reluctance by many American critics and much of the general public to embrace abstract art. The divergent art criticism of the 1930s reflects the varying ways in which critics were searching for an art that could be considered “American” at a time when the country was grappling with resurgent nationalist sentiment and a devastating depression. Some of the resistance to abstraction was due to its reliance on European precedents and was manifested in the rhetoric of nationalism. Art historian Wayne Roosa has demonstrated such ideologies, most notably in the criticism of conservatives such as Thomas Craven, who championed Regionalism so dogmatically as to refer to Cubism as an incorrect application of the theory of relativity and the idea of simultaneity.⁹⁷ What is most significant, however, is the common ground that Craven shared with other, less conservative critics, such as George L. K. Morris, who in addition to being a painter and participant in the *Five Contemporary American Concretionists* exhibition, was art critic for *Partisan Review*. Morris, too, was essentially searching for an American art, and as Roosa accurately noted, his “eclectic approach, which was partly well-synthesized and partly a pot-boiler, radical and conservative, and personal yet borrowed from Europe, reflects the decade’s identity search as it sought a viable modern style for American art.”⁹⁸

“Borrowing” from Europe is something that characterizes much of the American abstraction produced in the 1930s. In the case of Ferren, I would argue that his transnationalism, well-established by 1936, places the artist in a curious *extra-American* position. In fact, the only critic to compare Ferren to other artists (albeit in

⁹⁷ Roosa, Wayne. *American Art Theory and Criticism during the 1930s: Thomas Craven, George L. K. Morris, Stuart Davis*. Ph.D. diss. Rutgers the State University of New Jersey, 1989, 172.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 244.

a negative manner) at this time, noted *only* Europeans: “Ferren’s seriousness is evident throughout his work. Yet he—like Picasso, Braque, Léger, and the others before him—fails to make of abstract form what certain of the old Chinese artists made of it, an emotional language understandable to all fraught with meaning.”⁹⁹ In America, Ferren’s connection to other artists (European or American) was overlooked by everyone else. In Paris, Christian Zervos, better informed and more familiar with Ferren’s oeuvre, remarked that the closest affinity his work had was to the paintings of Jean Hélion, who had exhibited in New York and was part of the collection at the Gallery of Living Art. Ferren himself later supported this assertion:

The closest person I was to at that time was Hélion, I would say, although I had a deeper space and a much more elaborate color, coloration. But if there are any parallels there I would say that in 1936, 1937 my work was closer to Hélion’s. Hélion and I saw a great deal of each other and there was a similar bent I think.¹⁰⁰

The common denominator between all the reviews of this exhibition was the recognition that the plaster engraving technique was a significant development and that Ferren’s employment of it was an artistic breakthrough. The plaster engravings were never actually intended to be completed works in themselves, however, and instead were meant only to serve a practical function as preliminary studies for paintings. As the shapes in the artist’s paintings became more thoroughly modeled by the mid-1930s, he would have used the plaster engravings to assist in envisioning a greater three-dimensional space in them. Ferren noted the irony of the technique’s success in a later interview:

⁹⁹ Malcolm Vaughn, “Abstract Paintings,” *New York American* October 10, 1936, 12.

¹⁰⁰ Ferren interview with Seckler.

Well, I did those actually as studies for my painting, kind of three-dimensional studies for the painting. See when you haven't got a press you can take a print off a plate with plaster. And I used to draw on the plate and take a print off with plaster, carve into it and get the effect of light. And then this just kind of evolved into the plasters.¹⁰¹

The source of inspiration for these complex arrangements of parabolic lines in his plaster engravings came from two sources. The first of these was Ferren's contact with Stanley William Hayter, which has previously been mentioned. The second stems from the artist's interest in and experience with engineering that he acquired while working for the telephone company years earlier in San Francisco. By late 1935 or early 1936 Ferren was combining elements from both sources and them to create the groundbreaking plaster relief sculptures.¹⁰²

Ferren's contact with Hayter and Atelier 17 has been noted by others and the formal similarities between his work and the American's are obvious.¹⁰³ Examining the work within the context of the artist's engineering background however has been neglected. Ferren had worked as an engineer for the telephone company in Los Angeles and San Francisco in the 1920s following high school. As an engineer, he would have known the technical manuals detailing the switching techniques of the rapidly developing automated phone systems such as *The Bell System Technical Journal* and *The Elements of Automatic Telephony*.¹⁰⁴ During the first few decades of the twentieth century, telephone switching underwent increasingly numerous

¹⁰¹ Ferren interview with Seckler.

¹⁰² Ferren's interest in engineering was likely common ground when he met Alexander Calder, who had attended Stevens Institute of Technology, New Jersey, and received a bachelor's degree in engineering. See Joan M. Marter, *Alexander Calder* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 13 et passim.

¹⁰³ See James Fitzsimmons, "A John Ferren Profile," 11. Surprisingly, reference to Hayter is absent in Craig Bailey, *Ferren: A Retrospective* and Ann Gibson and Irving Sandler, *The Abstract Spirit*.

¹⁰⁴ Arthur Crotch, *The Elements of Automatic Telephony* (New York: Spon & Chamberlain, 1924).

technological advances. Initially, switching required an operator to connect two parties, but by the 1920s great advances had been made with electronic automated switching, eliminating the need for a human operator. Journals devoted to telephone engineering were filled with technical articles and extensive diagrams which bear a striking resemblance to the artist's plaster engravings. These diagrams chart electrical frequencies and impedances and as seen in "Chart 14— G_{m2} and cH_{m2} at critical frequency" (fig. 2.21), and are filled with sweeping parabolic lines similar to those found in Ferren's plasters. These similarities are not mere formal coincidence.

The idea that the plaster engravings are related to Ferren's work as an engineer was supported by British citizen and fellow *Normandie* passenger Veronica Gillespie. In 1994, nearly sixty years after she had met the artist on the ocean liner, Gillespie recalled her encounter with John Ferren during his 1936 return to the United States for his exhibition at Pierre Matisse Gallery. Ms. Gillespie noted that,

He [Ferren] told me he was a telephone engineer but that he also made small sculptures and hoped to sell one to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He showed me this piece – a plaster-of-Paris block inscribed with fine lines which he said were the telephone-wiring system of Paris. Some small rectangles were cut out, to give it a claim to being three-dimensional.¹⁰⁵

This is not to say that Ferren intended to literally *illustrate* telephone systems by copying the diagrams. Instead, it was the notion of interconnectedness through systems that fascinated him and which had been identified by the anonymous reviewer of the first Matisse Gallery show in *Art News*.¹⁰⁶ Highly-developed plaster engravings such as *Untitled* (fig. 2.22) include a complex network of lines and

¹⁰⁵ Veronica Gillespie correspondence to Katharina Rich Perlow, January 6, 1994. John Ferren Files, Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, New York.

¹⁰⁶ See footnote 147.

striations that are common to his works from this period. The composition is based on the tension between striated areas and those of negative space. More specifically, the upper center of the work contains an area of two sets of nearly parallel parabolic lines that create a pattern close to that created by the lines in “Chart 14.”

By late October there were signs that the Ferren exhibition at the Matisse Gallery would travel to additional venues. Surely, Matisse would have been in favor of sending the exhibition to other venues in order to garner greater exposure for his artist, but he was not his only advocate. Psychologist and amateur art historian, Louis Danz, wrote to Ferren from California indicating that he was trying to persuade Los Angeles gallerist, Howard Putzel (who would later move to New York and become director of Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century Gallery), to take the show. “I have talked with Putzel, but as far as I can tell it is still up in the air, as he must be hard-up. I am doing all I can, however. It would certainly be nice if you could come to California—but of course you know best.”¹⁰⁷

Danz must have been persuasive as the exhibition traveled to Putzel’s gallery in Los Angeles, and subsequently on to Saint Paul, Minnesota and Chicago and was something of a critical and commercial success.¹⁰⁸ Arthur Millier, critic for the *Los Angeles Times* and a prolific etcher in his own right, was impressed with the work and noted:

John Ferren, at the Putzel Gallery, an Angeleno born and raised but long domiciled in Paris, makes his purely arbitrary shapes infectiously

¹⁰⁷ Louis Danz to John Ferren, October 20, 1936, Pierre Matisse Papers, Morgan Library.

¹⁰⁸ It was not without incident, however. As Ferren reported in a letter to Matisse, he was upset that the prices of the works had not been communicated to Putzel efficiently and therefore sales had been lost. Ferren was furious: “Putzel n’écrit que il n’a pu rien rendre a l’exposition parce que vous n’avez pas envoyé les prix. Donc, malgré les demandes qu’on lui aurait faites, il n’a pas pu réaliser des ventes.” John Ferren to Pierre Matisse, February 1, 1937, Pierre Matisse Gallery Papers, Morgan Library. Matisse was extremely apologetic in his response to Ferren.

gay and moving. He uses colors with a brilliance no Parisian and few easterners would attempt. As much fun as a bunch of colored balloons and much more various in invention.¹⁰⁹

By late November Matisse had sold at least nine of the plaster works for a total commission for the artist of \$301.00. Ferren himself had been delighted with his stay in New York, and wrote to thank his dealer in January 1937 and to let him know that he was thrusting himself into his studio, in an attempt to capitalize on the momentum of what had been an extremely productive period. “Here I am six weeks without you having given me any news—nor have I thanked you for your kindness and hospitality in New York. In returning I have closed myself in my studio without setting foot outside.”¹¹⁰

There is evidence that Ferren’s activities extended beyond the boundaries of both France and America at the time as he was invited to participate in the 1936 Triennale di Milano. The sixth edition of the exhibition, the intention for the Triennale, originally founded in Monza, but moved to Milan beginning in 1933, “the Triennale’s aims were to showcase craftsmanship, objects of everyday use, graphic arts, and everything that might be labeled design.”¹¹¹ While the U.S. was not a foreign exhibitor in the Triennale (there were ten European exhibitors in addition to Italy), there was a separate international section to the fair reserved for architecture and theatre design.¹¹² Ferren had designed a set for a ballet (fig. 2.23) which included a

¹⁰⁹ Arthur Millier, “Art and Artists,” *LA Times*, January 10, 1939, C7. [?check date]

¹¹⁰ John Ferren to Pierre Matisse, January 14, 1937, Pierre Matisse Papers, Morgan Library. “Me voici de retour depuis dix semaines sans vous avoir donné de mes nouvelles – ni de vous avoir remerciez pour votre gentillesse et hospitalité a New York. En rentrant, je me suis fourré dans mon atelier sans mettre le nez dehors.”

¹¹¹ Anty Pansera, Anna Venturelli and Antonio C. Mastrobuono, “The Triennale of Milan: Past, Present, and Future” *Design Issues* 2 (Spring, 1985): 25.

¹¹² Dario Marchesoni and Luisa Giussani, *La Triennale di Milano e il Palazzo dell’Arte*. (Milan: Elect Editrice, 1985): 88.

backdrop decorated with floating geometric shapes found in Ferren's paintings of the same period. In addition, there appear to be two groups of horizontal lines on the stage. There is no documentary evidence that this design was actually shown at the Triennale, but it seems reasonable to conclude that it was included.

Back in the U.S. however, Ferren was arousing interest among other American dealers besides Pierre Matisse and in July 1937 he was visited by Marion Willard who had founded the East River Gallery the previous year. Willard had apparently been following Ferren's work, likely through the Concretionist exhibition and his first show at Matisse's gallery the year before. She wrote to Ferren soon after visiting his studio: "Previously convinced of the integrity of your work, I then felt you were 'going places' to put it in a true American fashion."¹¹³ The two must have discussed the possibility of Willard handling Ferren's work, at least on a small scale as the dealer continued, "For some reason I have been thinking a good deal of the large sand painting and am not quite convinced of my ability to handle it successfully. On the other hand, the large green one, if it is available I am sure of."¹¹⁴ Willard, it seems, procured three of Ferren's works (it is unknown exactly which ones) and it is unclear how successful she was in selling them. Fortunately, Pierre Matisse had established something of a market for Ferren's work. Thus, with his residence in Paris and his successful exhibitions in Paris, New York and elsewhere in the U.S., Ferren had become undeniably transnational.

¹¹³ Marion Willard to John Ferren, July 22, 1937. John Ferren Papers.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

Chapter Three Return to America and the War Years: 1938–1945

Since 1936 Ferren had two years of increasing commercial and critical success in Europe and America, and 1938 began auspiciously for him with the opening of his second solo exhibition in New York at the Pierre Matisse Gallery opening on February 1. His excitement over and expectations of the show were somewhat tempered, however, by his unhappy divorce from Laurie Ortiz de Zárate, an emotionally devastating experience for the artist and one that would prompt him to embark on a soul-searching trip across the U.S., after which he intended to return to his adopted country of France. In a cruel twist of fate, Ferren's return to the U.S. that year was voluntary, but his subsequent stay was not. He came back to New York initially intending to remain for a circumscribed period of time. It was supposed to be a temporary *hegira* before his eventual return to Europe.¹ By the time Ferren was ready to return to Paris, however, he was unable to renew his visa because of the impending war and was, effectively, stranded in his home country.

As we shall see, this decisive break in the artist's life caused him years of artistic and personal drift that he would not be able to fully recover from until his return from service after the War and his move to Ninth Street in 1946, a veritable crucible of activity at that time. Craig Bailey has noted that Ferren felt as if "he, and many of his friends were just marking time [during the early 1940s]."² The 1938 Pierre Matisse exhibition served as a coda to Ferren's nearly eight years in Europe. It illustrated an American artist's highly developed adoption and advancement of

¹ Cummings interview with Ferren, AAA.

² Bailey, *John Ferren*, 11.

European modernism in the form of the plaster engravings and the abstract paintings from this period. Little did Ferren know that it would bring to a painful close a period of his life during which he had been essentially considered as part of the Parisian avant-garde.

Return to America & A Coda at Pierre Matisse Gallery

“Two Sculpture Shows Provoke Controversy” read the headline for Emily Genauer's review of Ferren's Pierre Matisse exhibition in the *New York World-Telegram*.³ He had shown a number of similarly constructed plaster reliefs along with a significant group of paintings in his 1936 exhibition at Matisse's gallery to some success. This time, however, the exhibition consisted almost entirely of what had been described in the pages of *Art Digest* by one anonymous reviewer as a "new technique which combines printmaking, painting and sculpture into a fourth medium."⁴ There were more than thirty reliefs in this exhibition and many art critics recognized their advancements in medium and design.

The whole effect, due largely to the abstract and precise linear quality of the original design is an intellectual stimulation to which the painting adds a slight dynamicism. Heightening the mathematical precision of the effect is the chaste white surface of the plaster.⁵

Indeed, Ferren had developed and refined his technique since his previous solo exhibition and now incorporated a more complex arrangement of parabolic lines and greater chromatic variation. Other art critics, however, were not so enamored with the work and wrote about it in less complimentary terms. The “intellectual stimulation”

³ E[mily]. G[enauer]., “Two Sculpture Shows Provoke Controversy,” *New York World-Telegram*, February 5, 1938, 13.

⁴ Anon., “Ferren's New Medium” *Art Digest* February 15, 1938, 9.

⁵ Ibid.

of Ferren's plaster reliefs praised by one anonymous reviewer, was attacked by another: "But it's all so stilted, so small in spirit. Oh, you super-cerebrals! Don't you know that the brain is sterile unless it correlates the functions of the whole man? How about exploring the regions below the neck?"⁶

The show was fairly successful, both critically and financially, despite the negative comments of a minority of reviewers. Matisse himself was completely enamored with the plasters and while they were similar to the works from 1936, this latest group illustrated how he had refined his style and technique by embellishing the abstract forms, considerably expanding the chromatic range, and carving the plaster with greater complexity. *Untitled (No. 15)*, 1937 (fig. 3.1, Gary Snyder Fine Art) is a strong example of these developments. Whereas the earlier plasters would often have large areas of undecorated white plaster and broad areas that gradually vary in depth, the carvings in this work are much more complex. The ground is filled with a series of dramatic vertically oriented diagonals that emanate from the left area of the composition and are predominantly colored bands of yellow interspersed with red, and black. Numerous biomorphic shapes float over the ground and are accented with checker-like patterns of black and white as well as richly hued highlights in blue, red, and yellow. Some large areas of white plaster remain, but overall the work is much more chromatic than the artist's earlier works.⁷

Matisse immediately recognized the potential salability of these new plasters and yet still did not hesitate to offer some suggestions to the artist about improving

⁶ Jerome Klein, "Sculptors Hand Passed For Place in Our Life," *New York Post* February 5, 1938, 30.

⁷ This greater compositional and chromatic complexity was not only limited to Ferren's plaster engravings. His oil paintings and pastel drawings underwent a similar transformation around 1937.

them even further. His enthusiasm and suggestions were conveyed to the artist soon after the work arrived in New York:

Your plasters just arrived. They are wonderful and I congratulate you. You did work. I am opening the show on the first of February for three weeks and we ought to sell them fast.

In the future do not make them so thick because it is too difficult to hang them in an apartment or a house, especially that they are larger.

I still like those with less color the best. The colored areas are heavy, with no vibration and do not balance with the play of light and lines and space in the other parts of the picture.

Would you be able to enlarge any of these plasters in case I could get some one to place it in a house? It seems to me that it could be done by having the designs enlarged on a plaster surface in doing the gravure directly on the plaster. You would have of course to find a way of putting the ink on. You know what I am driving at! We could use those as models and take orders! And this is the thing you should do eventually. Will you try to do it right now? Also see a way of keeping the plaster thin.⁸

Ferren trusted his dealer and considered some of his suggestions. He responded in a letter to Matisse that he desperately wanted to get back to painting and that he intended to show some new work in June. He had very specific ideas on the development of this work and articulated some of them in his response:

Mon cher Matisse,
Glad you like them. Very true – I did work – and as you say in America – I have plaster in my hair.

The thickness is for strength – and a lot of people don't agree with you about the color. Personally I'm inclined on your side. I believe that the solution is pure color in the cuts – as in the later one (no color on the surface) – which as Picasso said “fait que la couleur devient lumière.”

About enlarging them etc. The problems are innumerable. Working directly on the plaster may be possible. I did one I sent you that way.

⁸ Pierre Matisse to John Ferren, January 13, 1938, Pierre Matisse Gallery Papers, The Morgan Library.

But plaster is too fragile a medium – if the occasion offered I would like experimenting with Dupont’s “Plastics.”

Enlarging small ones is also difficult – proportions etc.⁹

In addition to revealing his willingness to trust his dealer’s instincts, this letter is continued evidence of Ferren’s interest in experimenting with different, non-traditional types of media, even though in this instance the opportunity for him to experiment with plastics never materialized. And while he would remain committed to working with oil paint throughout his life, he maintained a curious desire for experimentation with materials, painting briefly on a synthetic translucent support, Orlon, in the 1950s.¹⁰

Unfortunately, the show was not as commercially successful as Matisse had hoped. He was nevertheless able to place some of the plasters in important private and public collections. In a telling display of competitiveness with his former friend and one that serves as a harbinger of Ferren’s later relationship with a number of Americans with whom he had previously been amicable, Matisse informed Ferren that Albert E. Gallatin, who had chosen to include Ferren in the 1936 Concretionist exhibition and had purchased a work by Ferren for the Gallery of Living Art, came to the gallery bragging that he had sold four pictures from his exhibition at Passedoit Gallery.¹¹

Between 1936 and 1938 Ferren made approximately fifty plaster reliefs. A number of these were purchased for public collections including one by the Museum of Modern Art, one by Chick Austin for the Wadsworth Athaeneum, the Baroness

⁹ John Ferren to Pierre Matisse, January 21, 1938, Pierre Matisse Gallery Papers, The Morgan Library.

¹⁰ “New Means for Moderns,” *Life* November 22, 1954, 160-162.

¹¹ Pierre Matisse to John Ferren, March 8, 1938, Pierre Matisse Gallery Papers, The Morgan Library.

Hilla von Rebay purchased three for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, and two were acquired by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Despite Matisse's suggestion that sales were slow, it was a significant achievement for Ferren to have so many of his works enter museum collections in such a short period of time.

Additionally, Matisse was able to place other plasters in important private collections including those of patron of the arts Helena Rubenstein, author, musical impresario, graphic designer, and modern art collector, Californian Merle Armitage, as well as his two American colleagues artist and critic George L. K. Morris, and patron and artist Albert E. Gallatin.¹²

Reviews of the exhibition were generally positive and the most insightful one appeared in *Art News* in which the reviewer wrote:

Fine networks of parallel lines traced with compass-like incisiveness, interrelate geometric forms. But there is nothing of the lifeless optical experiment about them. Instead they have the hypnotic quality of telegraph wires watched from a moving train, and their easy ebb and flow establishes transparent, musical harmonies.¹³

The critic makes two important observations that are worth elaborating on. The reference to telegram wires is the only one by a critic during his career, a subject that was addressed in the previous chapter. The connection to music is also an important one and the wording of the review even recalls the moment of synesthetic revelation when Ferren realized that "The forms of things were only the particular expression of an energy, or substance, which they all shared in common."¹⁴

¹² John Ferren Papers, AAA. For information on Armitage see his autobiography, Merle Armitage, *Accent on Life*. (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1964). In the John Ferren Papers at the Archives of American Art there are photographs of the plasters from this show and a detailed list of who purchased them.

¹³ R. F. "A New Art Form in the Abstractions of John Ferren," *Art News* 36 (January 29, 1938) no. 18: 14.

¹⁴ Fitzsimmons, "A John Ferren Profile," 11.

Emily Genauer's review was also insightful, as she had recognized synesthetic qualities in musical form within the work:

These new abstractions are at once more imaginative, decorative and genuinely sculptural than his earlier works For devotees of abstract art they will have extraordinary charm and freshness, and the variations possible by different treatments of the same copperplate impressions will be endlessly intriguing. They are like a theme in music, repeated each time with different emphasis and effect.¹⁵

Carlyle Burrows, writing in the *New York Herald Tribune*, was equally laudatory and pointed out the connection between Ferren's work and science:

John Ferren's paintings on plaster at the Pierre Matisse gallery should appeal to all who appreciate the achievement of scientific precision in any form. His work is the acme of precision—from the drawing of his abstract linear compositions on inviting white plaster to the engraving of the intervening spaces. In the list of novelties, Ferren's idea—much developed and perfected since his last show—fills a niche by itself.¹⁶

Matisse was resourceful in getting the exhibition to travel to other venues and in the early spring a version of the show went to the Arts Club of Chicago where it was on view from March 15 to 28 and received only tepid reviews. Ferren's technique was singled out as being innovative but its contribution to modern art was, for whatever reason, suspect:

He likes lines that radiate from several centers in a single "picture," and he likes to cut into his plaster and tint the edges and some occasional other flat surfaces with red or another brilliant pigment. He doesn't just "play around," as a first glance suggests. He repeats motifs (a favorite is a bell) and his "mathematics" bears scrutiny. He's going somewhere, but where? Maybe he doesn't know himself.¹⁷

¹⁵ E.[mily] G.[enauer], "Two Sculpture Shows Provoke Controversy."

¹⁶ Carlyle Burrows, "Notes and Comment on Events in Art," *New York Herald Tribune* February 6, 1938, sec. VI, p. 8.

¹⁷ Newspaper clipping, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, n.p. Pierre Matisse Gallery Papers, Morgan Library.

Eleanor Jewett took a much more conservative approach to Ferren's work. Inherently suspicious of the artist's employment of plaster as his primary medium, she wrote:

John Ferren has employed plaster instead of canvas as the material best suited to his fancies. He has carved away a bit of plaster here and there and then used pencil, and sometimes color, to get the result he wanted, a result that seems weirdly vapid in the face of more realistic achievements.¹⁸

Beyond her inability or unwillingness to examine Ferren's work in a more constructive manner, Jewett was misinformed about the technique of Ferren's plaster engraving: "Ferren is a member of the Picasso group in Paris, which explains a great deal. A modernist enthusiast may find these odds and ends of stencil application vitally important; to the nonenthusiast they seem to have no connection with art."¹⁹

In August of 1938 Ferren had another solo exhibition, this time on the other side of the Atlantic, comprised exclusively of his pastels at the Galerie Beaune in Paris. The pastels were not simply studies, but works in their own right and as highly developed as the plaster engravings and the oil paintings. The medium allowed him the ability to achieve minute gradations in shading and had a surface that could be manipulated more extensively than other mediums. Compositionally, like many of his paintings, pastels such as *Untitled 9* (1938, fig. 3.2) have floating colorful geometric shapes over a neutral ground. Because of the consistency of the medium, however, Ferren was able to attain a greater range of shading than in the plaster engravings while maintaining the compositional complexity. *Time* magazine wrote a brief review of the Galerie Beaune show and quoted from Gertrude Stein's *Everybody's*

¹⁸ Eleanor Jewett, "Edzard Charms with Portraits of Young Girls," *Chicago Daily Tribune* March 16, 1938, 19.

¹⁹ Ironically, the Arts Club of Chicago would hold two exhibitions of Picasso's work the following year, one of drawings from Walter P. Chrysler's collection and the other a show that included *Guernica* and its studies and drawings. See Sophia Shaw, ed., *The Arts Club of Chicago: The Collection, 1916–1996* (Chicago: The Arts Club of Chicago, 1997): 127.

Autobiography, trumpeting him as one of the few Americans of note in Paris. Of the eighteen pastels the artist showed at the Galerie Beaune, the anonymous reviewer wrote:

Although I) a great many artists have been doing more or less abstract painting for 30 years, and 2) most of it can be pornographic only to be pornographic. . . . Critics found them [Ferren's pastels] fully abstract, only remotely Freudian, with more depth and movement than most abstract paintings. This was because Artist Ferren has the inventiveness to paint curving forms in space which are as interesting and satisfactory to look at as, say a page of designs for ships' propellers, done in color.²⁰

It was sometime around October 1938 that Ferren returned to the U.S., his reputation amongst artists, critics, and curators solidified, his career continuing to gain momentum, and producing his most innovative and sophisticated work to date. Indeed, Matisse was happy with Ferren's work and more importantly, he was able to place some of it in public collections. Ferren was becoming increasingly well respected among his peers and critics evidenced in the press, and yet in a very short span of time everything would change dramatically for him. The return to his homeland initiated a persistent (and detrimental) indeterminate nationality.

During Ferren's eight-year stay in Europe he consciously transformed himself into an essentially European personage. His marriage to Laure Ortiz de Zárate, his participation in exhibitions of European artists, his entrée into Parisian artistic circles all point to this transformation from a provincial representational artist in San Francisco with an earnest desire for, but little understanding of modern art, to one of great sophistication who helped codify the language of geometric abstraction in the 1930s, and through exhibitions in the U.S., helped transport it to America. He had

²⁰ Anon. (?), "American Abroad," *Time* August 29, 1938, 29.

consciously shed his American identity—the artist himself even indicated that he was not part of expatriate circles, but had become integrated into a group of European artists in Paris.

My contacts were mainly by being married to a Frenchwoman whose father was a painter. He was actually Chilean but raised in France. His name was Ortiz de Zárate. . . . He was a painter, a great friend of Derain and Picasso and so forth. So through the French contact I wasn't in the expatriate circles.²¹

One specific incident that occurred when he returned to the U.S. in 1938 that illustrates the significant cultural differences and prejudices—both his own as well as those of others—that plagued him after only just arriving in his home country. In a letter to his friend, the editor, poet, novelist, and journalist Sherry Mangan, who was working in Paris at the time, Ferren recounted the unpleasant encounter he had with a customs official when he arrived:

I arrive late in the evening. I didn't see the Statue of Liberty or the skyline. I showed infinite tact tolerance and self control with a customs officer. I undo the pastel packages and spread them around.

He: What's all this

Me: Painting

He: What kind of painting

Me: Abstract painting

He: Ah! subversive painting. What's wrong with this country is subversiveness. All these new fangled perverted ideas from Europe. Communism - fascism - abstract painting - sexy books. They build airplanes and then kill people with them. Everybody is perverted. W.P.A. workers - no ambition - no Americanism - no nothing and on and on. A real soul unburdening.

Right he may be - but meanwhile I was in such a funk that he couldn't let it pass. Enfin [Thus] after innumerable papers signed carries other officials etc. I got them through. His parting show was "All you Europeans ought to be thrown in a well!" He was so moved that he

²¹ Ferren interview with Seckler.

snarled at a timid little lady next to me to open all her bags and be quick about it - scaring her out of wits and into abject key trembling.²²

The exchange reveals not only the overriding suspicion with which abstract art was met in the 1930s in America as effete, intellectual, and inherently European, but more importantly how Ferren responded to this type of reaction. He appears to have taken pride in the fact that the customs officer identified him as European and clearly did nothing to persuade him otherwise.

“Premonitions of War”

Just before he left Europe, Ferren completed a series of anomalous paintings that were a radical departure from his mature abstractions. These were a small series of representational works depicting heads that used a similar formal device of interlocking and floating geometric shapes found in the artist’s abstract work. Ferren’s earliest works created in San Francisco were figurative, but these new figurative paintings were quite a departure for an artist who had so vociferously championed abstract art for the last eight years. It is unclear how many of these heads Ferren produced but at least two are known: *Untitled (Female Head)*, ca. 1938 and *Untitled (Male Head)*, ca. 1938 (figs. 3-3, 3-4).

Both figures have their eyes closed and the artist has rendered the features of the sitters’ faces with the distinct geometric and biomorphic shapes of some of his early works, seen, for example, in the bows in the woman’s hair. This creates severely distorted facial features and when combined with the woman’s downcast gaze in

²² Letter from John Ferren to Sherry Mangan, November 17, 1938. Sherry Mangan Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University. For information on Mangan see Alan M. Wald, *The Revolutionary Imagination: The Poetry and Politics of John Wheelwright and Sherry Mangan*. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983).

Woman's Head may suggest that the figure is bearing an emotional or physical weight. It was an effect that surely had not been lost on Picasso, and as Ferren noted in his interview with Paul Cummings, it was the Spanish artist who identified the paintings as a dark harbinger of the coming war.²³ James Fitzsimmons noted in his profile of the artist that at this time “He began to lose his bearings in his work. Paris, the winter of 1938, was pretty grim. All over Europe people were beginning to run for cover. Ferren made a series of imaginary portrait heads—tragic heads—which he showed to Picasso, who admired them and said: ‘They are premonitions of war.’”²⁴

In addition to articulating an ominous reality of an approaching war, these paintings may have served as a cathartic vehicle for the artist’s own personal expression of pain as he was in the middle of his divorce from Laure Ortiz de Zárate. They addressed serious issues of suffering and revealed at the very least a passing interest in humanist subjects by the artist. They were at this time, however, essentially anomalous in the larger context of his oeuvre as representations of figures, but they did signal a reemergence of representational subject matter however that would recur intermittently in his work over the next twenty years. *Untitled (Female Head)* and *Untitled (Male Head)* provide a curious and extreme departure from Ferren’s early abstract convictions.

Following a year of highs and lows that included his painful divorce, a successful exhibition at the Matisse Gallery, and a forced exile to his home country, Ferren decided to take a long car trip out the west coast, intending to travel south to Florida and then west through the desert of Texas on his way to California. It was a

²³ Ferren interview with Cummings.

²⁴ James Fitzsimmons, “A John Ferren Profile,” *Art Digest* February 15, 1953, 25.

way for him to escape some of the issues that plagued him, but it also provided an opportunity to return to his home state of California and see his family. Furthermore, the artist was scheduled to have a solo exhibition at the recently established San Francisco Museum of Art (today the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) in May, 1939. The museum had been started for the exhibition of contemporary art and its founding director, Grace McCann Morley, was a dynamic force and visionary entity who led the institution for the first twenty-three years of its existence. The museum had acquired two plaster reliefs by Ferren in 1938 through the collectors Mr. and Mrs. Forrest Englehart. Both *Untitled* and *#8 (Paris)* dated from 1937 and must have been purchased either from the exhibition in New York at Matisse's gallery or through Putzel's version of the show on the west coast.

Ferren continued to write brief entries in his diary at this time, but the largest source of information about his life during this period are the letters between him and Sherry Mangan, who was still located in Paris. Ferren's correspondence to Mangan reveals an artist who was devastated not only by his recent separation from his wife, but also by his inability to return to his adopted country. This emotional trauma and desire to return to Europe was manifested in Ferren's general repulsion toward the American artists he had met while in Europe. His general aversion to his American peers may have also been a primary reason why he did not pursue a position within the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration. At its peak in 1936, the number of artists on the payroll of the W.P.A. was about 5300 individuals, but by 1938 a conservative Congress was beginning to curtail Roosevelt's cultural programs

and over the next few years they would increasingly lose steam.²⁵ Ferren never spoke explicitly about why he did not join the W.P.A., but it is reasonable to assume that he didn't feel it necessary given his recent and seemingly increasing success. His emphatic disassociation from his American peers may have also been a defense mechanism in response to his own insecurities about acceptance in America. Furthermore, he may have quite possibly he simply felt that American artists lacked the sophistication of the Europeans. Whatever his reasons, the distance he kept from them was deliberate and calculated.

Mangan agreed to lend Ferren his car with the condition that he collect it from his parents house in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In the end of October Ferren wrote a detailed letter to his friend in Paris about the visit to pick up the car, which the two men affectionately called "Chugger." Chugger, it seems, needed some small repairs, that Ferren attended to, and he described the couple days he spent in Boston, meeting Mangan's family:

They search vainly for any reason for your being in Paris beyond gratify[ing] a personal whim. Your mother loves you dearly - as mothers do. Was troubled by your not growing thinner (I couldn't lie to the godly woman) - was so touched at hearing what irrelevant little details I could furnish - that she said my eyes were like yours.²⁶

Leaving Boston, he headed to Roxbury, Connecticut to visit one of the few Americans he deemed worthy to associate with: Alexander Calder. Ferren spent an uneventful three days with the sculptor and his wife, which nevertheless made an impression on him. He wrote to Mangan: "Rural life is the only solution in

²⁵ Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973): xi et passim.

²⁶ John Ferren to Sherry Mangan, October 24, 1938. Sherry Mangan Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

America—i.e.—if you’ve got the money. Connecticut intellectuals lead a very happy life.”²⁷ From there he made his way back to New York, where he would spend approximately one week at the Crane family mansion on Fifth Avenue.

Louise Crane (1913–1997) was a wealthy philanthropist and the daughter of Winthrop Murray Crane, former governor of Massachusetts. Crane’s mother was Josephine Porter Boardman, who had been involved with the founding of MoMA as a trustee and who was also particularly interested in helping to support American art at the museum.²⁸ Crane’s partner was poet Elizabeth Bishop, a classmate at Vassar and with whom she built a house in Key West, Florida, one of Ferren’s destinations. It’s not clear how Ferren became friendly with Crane, but he recounted to Mangan some of the people who frequented the Crane household and indicated that he was learning new American slang for jazz terms (“doughouse=double bass”; “licorice stick=clarinet” etc.).²⁹

There is no mention in Ferren’s diary or correspondence that he was painting during this period. He lacked not only a permanent home at the time, but also a studio and despite his hobnobbing with affluent company such as Louise Crane, he lived a bohemian hand-to-mouth existence at this time. He noted that he spent the last of his money to repair Mangan’s car and reflects pensively on his current situation,

In N.Y. I had to have a new clutch put in [it]. 18.50 and me voila – broke. . . . Here I sit - lonely - broke - the age of Christ - and what

²⁷ John Ferren to Sherry Mangan, November 17, 1938. Sherry Mangan Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

²⁸ “Museum Opens Large Exhibition of Its Own American Paintings,” The Museum of Modern Art, Press Release, December 15, 1948. http://www.moma.org/docs/press_archives/1285/releases/MOMA_1946-1948_0160_1948-12-15_121548-49.pdf?2010.

²⁹ Ferren mentions to Mangan that the Crane house was filled with eccentrics, mentioning “a duchess,” a “Hindu scholar” and others. John Ferren to Sherry Mangan, November 17, 1938. Sherry Mangan Papers, Houghton Library.

have I. Even my clothes aren't mine. The bum who sells the numbers racket on the street has more than I. What price artist?³⁰

Despite this downtrodden description of his life he remained intent on connecting with important figures of the art world at the time. The artist later recalled some of the difficulties he encountered:

At the same time it should be mentioned I was getting over a divorce and was emotionally disturbed, say in that sense by the events. The whole newness of the thing. I was also in a rather difficult position financially. I didn't know how I was going to live or anything else. And I found difficulties just contacting the art world here at home. I found that museum people and even many of the artists and other people who most amiable when I was a member of the Paris scene were not at all interested in me when I was in New York. And I found amongst many of the artists something I can now understand but didn't at the time, a resentment because I had been in the heyday of living it up in Paris, according to their light, when they were having a much harder time here.³¹

He remained more closely allied to the Europeans who were in exile in New York and continued to socialize with many of them during this time. He wrote to Mangan describing a party at James Johnson Sweeny's, curator at the Museum of Modern Art, which had "vicious cocktails - and I mean plural - and 'everybody' including Léger - off we went after to dinner - more cocktails sea food then to Harlem to Savoy..."³²

In the same letter Ferren indicates to his friend that he was already planning to take a long trip and noted that an exhibition of his work was opening in mid-December:

Perhaps I shall sell - I shall be happy...refurbish my soul and my back and who knows possibly do some work. There is no God - but in his strange ways he made me to paint. No mortal happiness is mine. Insect

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ferren interview with Seckler, AAA.

³² John Ferren to Sherry Mangan, Nov. 17, 1938.

that I am, I shall regard his works and paint it. Thus I shall absolve our sins and die in peace - without overcoat.³³

Two weeks later Ferren sent Mangan a much less optimistic update. The artist was beginning to realize just how much of his American identity he had lost during his time in Europe and moreover how the recent traumatic events of his personal life had affected him. He also seems to have struggled with the fact that while he had been riding something of a crest of success with his exhibitions at Pierre Matisse and in Paris, and despite his forthcoming exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art, he recognized that the momentum was beginning to slow. As far as his professional reputation was concerned, Ferren worried about what his friends back in Paris would think about his lack of success in America.

Me I'm hardly on a bed of roses: a case of violent maladjustment with occasional sad results - as my somewhat mad letter must have borne witness. I should have had a vacation before and not after New York. As yet nothing has broken for me. Please don't spread it- even [to] the copains – [it] might be harmful.³⁴

In less than a month, Ferren would leave New York for California where he would visit his family and friends. En route he planned to meet up with Harold Mudgett English (1890–1953) and his wife. English, a fellow Californian, had been a peripheral figure at Atelier 17, and had already returned to California. He had studied architecture at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and was also a painter who, like many artists, had left Europe prior to World War II, returning to his hometown of Los Angeles, where he remained until his death.³⁵ Ferren and English had become good friends while in Paris and after English had returned to the west coast he regularly

³³ Ibid. I have not been able to identify the exhibition he is referring to.

³⁴ John Ferren to Sherry Mangan, November 29, 1938. Sherry Mangan Papers, Houghton Library.

³⁵ Edan Milton Hughes, *Artists in California, 1786–1940*, 146.

checked in on Ferren's parents, regularly communicating to them Ferren's success abroad. Just prior to Ferren's departure from New York, English wrote to ask if Ferren wanted him to check on the status of works that Pierre Matisse had sent to Howard Putzel: "Your parents say you have not answered their letter concerning some pictures you left with what's-his-name, of Hollywood, who went to San Francisco. I will be going up there. Would you like me to see him about it?"³⁶ There was, to my knowledge, no response by Ferren regarding this matter, and it is possible that he asked Matisse to deal with it on his behalf.

Ferren left from New York soon after (or on) New Year's Day, and by the third week in January of 1939, had arrived in Key West, Florida. He eventually headed west to Laredo, Texas to meet up with English and his wife, with whom he would embark on a trip to Mexico. His first destination was Florida, however, where he would spend some time with Louise Crane. He reported to Mangan after he had arrived in Florida that his December exhibition "was not the greatest of successes. The critics ignored me. The Guggenheim bought one of the oils and I believe that some pastels sold after I left."³⁷ He was restless in Florida and could not enjoy himself. The easy life of the Keys did not agree with the urbane artist and he continued, "I find Key West dull—and this 'coasting' to be [a] considerable strain on the morale. I draw—take the sun—[they] say it's good for me—and think—the latter with some little success."³⁸ Ferren soon made his way west through Tallahassee, Mobile,

³⁶ Harold English to John Ferren, December 27, 1938. John Ferren Papers, AAA.

³⁷ John Ferren to Sherry Mangan, January 20, 1939. Sherry Mangan Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Alabama, New Orleans, and Houston on his way to Laredo, Texas, on the Mexican border, where he met up with the Englishes.

The group of three traveled south from Laredo, Texas, into Mexico where they sought out a number of frescos by Diego Rivera. Ferren's notes on the contemporary art and ancient sites that he saw in Mexico, were his first writings on art since his departure from Europe. Rivera's work was not entirely new to the artist and he very likely saw the Mexican painter's murals in person at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1930 and 1931. The first stop for Ferren and the Englishes, however, was the enormous pre-Columbian archeological site of Teotihuacán. The notes on his impressions of the site are sparse but he was able to appreciate the site on a formal level. Ferren wrote: "The rythm [sic] of the simple geometry very potent, noble and penetrating. The absolute antithesis of Colonial Baroque."³⁹

They soon moved on to Chapingo, a small town outside the city of Texcoco that is the location of the Chapingo Autonomous University, the national school of agriculture. Rivera had created a cycle of murals for the university shortly after it moved there in 1924, the titled of which is *Tierra Fecundada (Fertile Land)*. The murals represents the agrarian revolution and the issue of land reform as it relates to the Mexican revolution of 1910, although Ferren's interests lied primarily in the realm of composition and design and he seemingly had little interest in the political dimension of the work.⁴⁰ The cycle exists in a number of the buildings on campus, including the chapel, where "Rivera achieved his most explicit and poetic expression

³⁹ John Ferren Diary, March 15, 1939, AAA, Reel 371.

⁴⁰ For information on *Tierra Fecundada* and its commission see Desmond Rochfort, *Mexican Muralists: Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros* (London: Lawrence King Publishing, 1993): 67.

of the agrarian theme.”⁴¹ Indeed, the centerpiece of the chapel and perhaps the entire cycle, Rivera’s *The Liberated Earth with the Natural Forces Controlled by Man* is considered to be the “Sistine Chapel” of the Mexican Revolution. This group of murals made much more of an impact on Ferren than Teotihuacán had. He noted that they were “the best I’ve seen—admirable. More artistically sophisticated, classical nudes, forshortenings. There are tactile qualities except for the lower parts. It is at once naïve and self-conscious.”⁴² It is not surprising that these images had such a significant impact on him as art historian Desmond Rochfort noted,

The chapel of Chapingo represents one of Rivera’s most outstanding achievements. As a poetic narrative of revolutionary impulse and national texture, it has few equals, either within Rivera’s own mural work or with the work of Orozco and Siqueiros.⁴³

The group continued south to Cuernavaca, where once again they saw murals by Rivera, this time at the Palace of Cortez. This cycle, titled *History of Cuernavaca and Morelos*, is a long and critical narrative that begins with the Spanish conquest in the region and continues to the 1920s. It uses the history of Cuernavaca as a metaphor for the conquest of Mexico.⁴⁴ If these murals made an impression on Ferren he made no mention of it in his journals. The next stop for them was Taxco, where the first mention of the artist actually painting appears in his diary after a long absence:

“Painted with Harold [English] and very discontented with stupid results. . . . I struggle against boredom. A little “self-expression” would doubtless be beneficial.”⁴⁵

The diary continues with other brief and intermittent details from Ferren’s stay in

⁴¹ Ibid, 69.

⁴² John Ferren Diary, March 15, 1939. John Ferren Papers, AAA. Reel 371. “Il y’a tactile les qualités sauf la bas du fond. C’est à la fois naïf et self-conscious.”

⁴³ Rochfort, 80.

⁴⁴ Rochfort, 94.

⁴⁵ John Ferren Diary, March 17, 1939. John Ferren Papers, AAA. Reek 371. “Je lutte contre l’ennui.”

Mexico and it is interspersed with notes that he was painting, but ultimately to no great advantage. All of the entries are brief, sometimes only a line or two, and not nearly as revealing as his earlier writings, and it is not difficult to ascertain that he is clearly feeling adrift and his creative block did nothing to dispel this predicament.

Even though it is not mentioned, he must have returned north of the Mexican border and headed out to the west coast sometime in the Spring of 1939 for his solo exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art (May 10–31), where he would also give a talk about his work. He reported the latest to Mangan on May 5 from Los Angeles:

Here in the bosom of family I feel very far away. I'm broke. I have clients here though and hope is present. I have an exposition in San Francisco the 10th - vast - coupled with a lecture on "the painting of John Ferren." Laugh I thought I'd die! I may go up incognito (O Fame! O Fame!) on return journey to N.Y. Maybe I'll see something, but I doubt it. Your Times article - left its traces all over here.⁴⁶

Ferren made his way to the Bay Area, but didn't stay long in San Francisco and within weeks he had returned to New York. He indicated to Mangan, who was caring for his Parisian studio in his absence, that he wanted desperately to return to Paris. The more extended his stay became, the more he realized he was essentially European and thus the greater the desire to return there. He continued to correspond with a number of his artist friends in Paris and in June received a post card from the Dutch artist, César Domela, who was living there. Domela's outlook was not optimistic and he warned his American friend that it would be dangerous for him to return to Paris at

⁴⁶ John Ferren to Sherry Mangan, May 5, 1939. Sherry Mangan Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

this moment. “I would be delighted to see you again in Paris. Nothing has changed— all is the same...But if you return you run the risk of [encountering a] war.”⁴⁷

By the end of 1939 Ferren had returned to New York and taken an apartment on East 52nd St. He wrote to Mangan with both good and bad news:

Myself I spent an industrious penniless, stifling, war anguished summer. [Pierre] Matisse is in the French army and things looked very bleak. I'd of joined you - if I could but no passports or visas. Monsieur but the Gods have smiled a little. I am moving into an apt. with a fine studio. I sold a few hundred dollars worth of pastels. I am en menage with a...lass. Eternally good humored - handsome a friend from way back - & from this vantage point I'll carry the torch.⁴⁸

By this time, it was clear to Ferren that he would not be able to return to Europe and he asked Mangan to send some of his art books and to request that his art supplier, Levefevre-Foinet, store Ferren's paintings that he had to leave in his studio. The color supplier would ultimately end up storing Ferren's works until the mid-1960s, when, on his way back from a year in Beirut, Lebanon, he passed through Paris to discover that they still had much of his inventory.

A “European” in New York

While in New York, both prior to and after his west coast excursion, Ferren seemingly made no attempt to re-connect with George L. K. Morris, Albert E. Gallatin, or any other American artist other than Alexander Calder. Morris and Gallatin were the two men who were chiefly responsible for *Five Contemporary*

⁴⁷ César Domela to John Ferren, June 17, 1939. John Ferren Papers, Archives of American Art. Reel 371. “[Je] suis très content de te revoir bientôt à Paris. ___ rien à changé tour les même,... Seulement si tu retournes, tu carrés la risque d’une guerre...”

⁴⁸ John Ferren to Sherry Mangan, November 3, 1939. Sherry Mangan Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

American Concretionists—the 1936 exhibition that was Ferren’s initial introduction to the New York art world. This distancing from his American colleagues was intentional and calculated and more importantly it was symptomatic of how difficult it was for him to adjust to his new life in America and accept exile from Europe. The identity that he had established over the last eight years now placed him in an extremely peculiar position which resulted in his feeling much like an outsider in his own country.

Ferren was not creating much, if any, new work during the years after he arrived back in the States, but he was intent on continuing a connection with an art world other than that of his American colleagues—one that was composed primarily of Europeans in exile. Early in 1940 Ferren wrote to Alfred Barr to remind him of his presence in New York and to forthrightly declare his disassociation from his American counterparts including artists such as Morris and Gallatin and their peers who comprised the Abstract American Artists group (AAA). The only organized group of artists in America at that time with an abstract agenda, the AAA was founded in 1936 for the purpose of exhibiting abstract art by American artists.⁴⁹

Modeled on the example set by *Abstraction-Création*, the AAA had originally invited Ferren to join at its inception in 1936. Because of his earlier association with some members of the group as well as a certain stylistic affinity with their work, Ferren has often mistakenly been associated with, or wrongly identified as one of them. There had been an initial attempt to contact Ferren at the outset by R. D. Turnbull (1899–1943), who sent a prospectus and cover letter to him in Paris

⁴⁹ The most complete information on the AAA is still Susan C. Larsen, *The American Abstract Artists Group: A History and Evaluation of Its Impact Upon American Art*. Ph.D. diss. Northwestern University, 1974.

informing him of the group's formation and encouraging him to join. Morris and the other founding members that included Vaclav Vytlačil, Charles G. Shaw, Ibram Lassaw (1913–2003), Harry Holzman (1912–1987), Balcomb (1904–1990) and Gertrude Greene (1911–1956), Burgoyne Diller (1906–1965), and others, must have presumed that their colleague would feel sympathetic toward the group given their history together and many mutual acquaintances. Turnbull wrote to Ferren and included the prospectus of the new group, which read: “A group of American artists has recently been formed under the above title for the purpose of bringing together all those working in the ‘abstract’ direction, whether in painting or sculpture.”⁵⁰ The prospectus went on to explain that American artists working abstractly were spread across a large geographical region of the country that precluded any exchange between them. The U.S. lacked publications that championed abstract art that had appeared in Europe, and thus American artists were therefore required to rely chiefly on European publications for the dissemination of abstract visual imagery. The group's goals were to provide “a center for the exchange of ideas, the comparison of works, the clarification of new tendencies or directions, etc., and . . . by giving individual artists his own work at a minimum of expense.”⁵¹

The procedure for entry into the AAA was somewhat rigorous and required the nomination and successful election of an individual by the existing members of the group. However, because they knew his work, the group was offering Ferren entry into the group as a founding member, exempt from the usual procedures of application. They were actively soliciting those artists they felt most worthy and

⁵⁰ “American Abstract Artists,” undated, ca. 1936, John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

whose work was most sympathetic to theirs. They were hoping that Ferren would not only join the group, but that in addition he might help solicit new members. Turnbull, in his letter accompanying the prospectus, noted that “George Morris said he would write you further details of this new group, & I have written [Charles] Biederman more fully, if you can get in touch with him.”⁵²

The trail of correspondence goes cold at that point and it is unclear whether Ferren actually even received the invitation and if so, whether he intended to join the group or not, but his response—if there was one—was either never acknowledged or never received. In 1940, two years after Ferren had moved back to the U.S. and settled in New York, he discovered that his name had been included on the AAA’s roster without his permission. Morris had included it on the group’s petitioning of the Museum of Modern Art to show more American artists. When Ferren discovered this he was incensed, and his response was lengthy and acerbic and he wrote not only to request the removal of his name but also to let Morris have a piece of his mind.

Let’s get this straight. I do not condone the policy of the Museum of Modern Art. I do object to the use of my name in a manifesto in which I had no part in forming, without my knowledge or consent, which is unethical in any man’s country. I have headed several militant groups in the past, and the practice of inflicting a majorities [sic] opinion on an unnotified minority that ___ objectified in a public act that is hitherto unknown to me and displays a lack of democratic principles ___ at any artists group.⁵³

Morris must have informed Ferren that he had paid Ferren’s dues to keep him enrolled as an “active” member in the group, because Ferren responded, “Your help

⁵² R. D. Turnbull to John Ferren, undated. John Ferren Papers. Morris and the others must have assumed that Biederman too would be sympathetic to the group given his participation in the *Five Contemporary American Concretionists* exhibition. He never joined the group.

⁵³ John Ferren to George L. K. Morris, April 21, 1940, John Ferren Papers.

cannot preclude a blind moral obligation to support your group.”⁵⁴ He continues to note that while he does not disagree in principle with what the American Abstract Artists group is ultimately after as far as exhibiting, it is the methods by which this has been undertaken that he opposes. “I do not disagree with the members of the groups’ “united action,” nor [a] “certain amount of militancy.” I do disagree with changing uninformed members’ [ideas] into public manifestoes.”⁵⁵

Ferren’s discovery of Morris’ transgression with regard to the use of his name must have prompted him to contact Alfred Barr in order to definitively state that he was not a part of, nor did he want to be a part of, the American Abstract Artists group. While Ferren’s letter to Barr is now lost, Barr’s response to it is telling, and it would initiate a series of written exchanges (that would curiously grow in animosity) between the two men.

Thanks for your letter. I am glad to know that you do not subscribe to the American Abstract Artists’ manifesto.

Actually, I think there is something in what they say. I do hope we can do a show of contemporary abstract art, or possibly abstract art since 1930, which will include the best Americans. The reason Americans were not included in the previous show of Cubism and Abstract Art is simply that the exhibition was held only a few months after a large exhibition devoted exclusively to American “abstract” artists at the Whitney Museum.⁵⁶

Ferren’s declaration to Barr is further indisputable evidence that he was attempting to distance himself from the AAA and his American peers, even after two years in the U.S.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Alfred Barr to John Ferren, April 18, 1940. John Ferren Papers, Archives of American Art, Reel 371.

Over the next few months Ferren would continue a dialogue with Barr that ultimately ended with an unfortunate misunderstanding between the men. By October 1940 their relationship had soured as Ferren felt that he had not been accorded the attention by the director and no doubt by the museum that he felt he deserved. Arriving at the museum one day that month to see Barr without a scheduled appointment, Ferren was irate when he was turned away by an administrator there. He wrote to Barr in great frustration:

My dear Mr. Barr:

I offer in explanation of my writing a counsel that the conduct of you underlings bring no credit to yourself of the Museum. For the second time I have tried to see you and been given the snob brush off reserved for brush salesmen. . . . There are two explanations – the girls are overweened on the Rockefellers or the Museum’s policy of ignoring me since the purchase of a plaster five years ago is definite – you tell me.

My purpose in seeing you was amiable enough. You were in no physical danger. After seeing the new acquisitions I suggest I believe that it is about time that some representative work of mine was acquired, I have been here [in the U.S.] two years. I have been completely ignored.⁵⁷

MoMA’s Advisory Committee had purchased a plaster etching by Ferren for the collection in 1937. It is illuminating to briefly examine the manner and context in which his piece was exhibited. In early 1937, all of the Advisory Committee gifts from the last year were exhibited together in one gallery while other recent gifts by various sources, including works by other Americans, were exhibited in another gallery. Ferren’s work was the sole piece by an American in a gallery of European moderns, suggesting how the museum curators and Barr perceived him and his work. According to the press release, Ferren’s plaster was “of special interest for its novel

⁵⁷ John Ferren to Alfred Barr, October 23, 1940. John Ferren Papers, Archives of American Art.

technical method” and was one of several gifts by the committee that included Mondrian’s *Composition, White, Black and Red* (1936), Héliion’s *Composition* (1936), Hans Arp’s *Human Concretion* (1935), and Miro’s *Composition* (1933).⁵⁸ George L. K. Morris served as the chair of this committee, which also included Sidney Janis, Charles G. Shaw, and other champions of abstract art.

Indeed, Ferren did nothing to discourage the perception of his European identity after he returned to the U.S. A revealing photograph from ca. 1942 indicates a much closer allegiance to the European artists he had known in Paris, rather than his own countrymen (fig. 3.5). In this anonymous photograph the artist is shown in the apartment of Peggy Guggenheim at the center of a group of European artists in exile who had fled their respective countries because of the outbreak of World War II. Ferren is in the third row center among other notable artists including André Breton, Leonora Carrington, Marcel Duchamp, Max and Jimmy Ernst, Stanley William Hayter, Frederick Kiesler, Piet Mondrian, Amedée Ozenfant, and others. Interestingly, aside from Bernice Abbott, Ferren is the only American artist in the group. That he chose to remain associated with European artists four years after returning to his home country is telling, and evidence of his feelings of marginalization by his countrymen. Irving Sandler characterized this difference in attitude between the American and the European émigré artist articulately: “The European stance of the artist-aristocrat was quite different from that of the ex-WPA

⁵⁸ Press Release, The Museum of Modern Art, undated, circa Feb. 1937. http://www.moma.org/docs/press_archives/368/releases/MOMA_1937_0008_1937-02-05_2537-6.pdf?2010.

proletarian. The émigré thought of himself as more sophisticated and acted generally as if America were a provincial land, patronizing even what he liked.”⁵⁹

The year 1940 yielded a much-needed brighter outlook for Ferren than 1939 despite his disputes with Morris and Barr. He had recently become romantically involved with a woman (likely the woman referred to in his letter to Mangan above), Inez Chatfield, and the two would marry later that year. In May wrote to Mangan: “My life is nearly idyllic - and I believe fortunately for me, bereft of drama at the moment. Happy home life - and steadily painting.”⁶⁰ The remainder of the year was, as Ferren indicated, a happy one despite a seeming complete absence of professional activity. The following year, 1941 Ferren had only modest professional activity. He was scheduled to have another exhibition in Southern California, this time at the Design Project, a gallery in Los Angeles, in the fall. While the exhibition seems to have been well received and the opening was well attended, sales were lacking as the director of the space wrote to Ferren, “The opening [of your exhibition] brought out some two hundred people who milled and aghed and awed. Several requests for prices of the plasters, but no cash transference.”⁶¹ It is unclear exactly which works Ferren exhibited at Design Project and it seems to have been the only collaboration between that gallery and the artist.

Once again, there was little professional activity for Ferren for most of 1941 but by January 1942 things began to look up for the artist. Early that month he received a letter from Eliot Noyes, Director of the Department of Industrial Design at

⁵⁹ Sandler, Irving, *The Triumph of American Painting* (New York and Washington: Praeger Publishers, 1970): 33–34.

⁶⁰ John Ferren to Sherry Mangan, May 2, 1940, Sherry Mangan Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

⁶¹ John [unknown] to John Ferren, November 5, 1940. John Ferren Papers, AAA.

the Museum of Modern Art, inviting him to submit rug designs for an exhibition at the museum. The museum was organizing a show of rug designs and Noyes spelled out his objectives clearly in the letter:

The general purpose of the Department of Industrial Design of the Museum of Modern Art is to help in the creation of better design in all fields within our province which we can touch. As part of this program, we are now undertaking a project in the design of rugs. We are inviting ten carefully chosen American artists to submit designs.⁶²

Likely aware that the artists asked to participate might balk at crossing over into the field of “industrial design” Noyes attempted to allay any fears of production quality by assuring the artists that because of the method of hand weaving the V’Soske Shops, who had been contracted to produce the rugs, the quality would be carefully controlled. Furthermore, Noyes indicated that MoMA intended to travel the show throughout the country and that the rugs would be available for purchase, the artist to receive 25% of the \$400-\$600 purchase price. Noyes also made it very clear that while the museum retained the right to ask for revisions or reject any design, there were otherwise no limitations on color or shape but the size was limited to twelve feet.⁶³

Ferren must have undertaken this project with enthusiasm as he produced more than twenty studies in gouache. Only one was chosen to be produced by the company, but nine additional studies were shown in the exhibition.⁶⁴ On June 30th the exhibition opened and along with Ferren’s work and related studies, it included rugs

⁶² Eliot F. Noyes to John Ferren, January 5, 1942. John Ferren Papers, Archives of American Art, Reel 371.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Alice M. Carson to John Ferren, June 16, 1942. Archives of American Art, Reel 371. Alice Carson was the Acting Director of the Department of Industrial Design at the time.

and their preparatory designs by Stuart Davis, A. E. Gallatin, Gorky, Charles Howard, E. McKnight Kauffer, Loren MacIver, George L. K. Morris, I. Rice Pereira, and Marguerite Zorach.⁶⁵ The exhibition included some well known living American abstract painters, perhaps with the exception of Kauffer, who was better known as primarily working in England as a graphic designer.⁶⁶ The result was a show of abstract work that blurred the distinction between fine art and industrial design and had, it was hoped, the potential for greater appeal to the general public given the familiar medium of a domestic object. The exhibition was even reviewed in a mainstay of domesticity, *House and Garden*, which spoke glowingly about the designs in an article titled “Prophetic Rugs.”⁶⁷ The review noted the collaborative dimension: “Jointly created by painters and a master craftsman, these rugs, abstract in design, with emphasis on texture and color, point the way to a new synthesis of skills.”⁶⁸ Ferren’s *Abstract Design/For a Child’s Room* was illustrated in the publication (fig. 3.6).

In Ferren’s design there is an area of black near the center that has four tentacles of yellow radiating out to the right and terminating in a broad vertical stroke of yellow. On the left there are two red tentacles that extend to an amorphous area accented with red, green, black and grey, and crowned with a sinuous white shape.

⁶⁵ The exhibition would subsequently travel to Frederick & Nelson Company, Seattle; Indiana University, Bloomington; Skidmore College, Sarasota Springs; The Art Gallery of Toronto, Canada; The Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Columbus, OH; Vassar College, Poughkeepsie; The Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, NH.

⁶⁶ E. McKnight Kauffer had lived and worked in England from the nineteen-teens until 1940 when he returned to America because of the impending war. In 1937 MoMA presented a retrospective exhibition of Kauffer’s work. See Mark Haworth-Booth, *E. McKnight Kauffer: A Designer and His Public* 2nd ed. (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2005): 13 et passim.

⁶⁷ Anonymous, “Prophetic Rugs,” *House and Garden* (September 1942): 32-33.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 32.

The overall composition vaguely recalls some of the early abstractions he was creating in the early 1930s, but without the edges of defined geometric shapes.

Two of Ferren's additional rug designs show similar attributes. The untitled (fig. 3.7) horizontal format has the same neutral grey color background and wavy lines, in this instance blue in color. Ferren took a different approach in the vertically oriented design (fig. 3.8). Here the artist used a salmon color background filled with broad areas of color that are punctuated with striated brushstrokes. This work retains a few of the wavy lines found in the other designs, but here they are brown and much less prominent in the overall composition. The following year MoMA would ultimately purchase Ferren's rug for its collection, along with Stuart Davis' design *Flying Carpet*, the only two objects the museum purchased from that show. Barr stated very clearly in the press release that accompanied these recent acquisitions that "more than any of the other nine [rug] designers Ferren explored the possibilities of obtaining different textures through varying the thickness and density of the pile."⁶⁹

Service to his Country

Before Ferren's service in the war, he and Chatfield socialized with many prominent artists, some American but most of whom were Europeans living in New York. Chatfield worked as a typist and assistant for Peggy Guggenheim and helped with the production of the 1942 publication *Art of This Century*, the catalogue of

⁶⁹ "Museum of Modern Art Exhibits New Acquisitions," Press Release, The Museum of Modern Art, Sept. 22, 1943. http://www.moma.org/docs/press_archives/890/releases/MOMA_1943_0042_1943-07-22_43722-39.pdf?2010.

Guggenheim's collection, coming into contact with those in Guggenheim's circle.⁷⁰ In the fall of 1941 Guggenheim purchased two works by Ferren for her collection. She must have perceived Ferren's work as European, or at least linked his work to his European colleagues. Most of her collection at that time was comprised of work by Europeans and Ferren's painting, *Composition* (fig. 3.9), was shown in a 1942 installation at Art of This Century among work by European artists and installed near Antoine Pevsner's sculpture, *Developable Space*. The second work of Ferren's Guggenheim purchased was a plaster, *Tempora* (1937).

It's unclear just how close Ferren's connection was to Guggenheim was but he was present when she opened her first space in her townhouse on East 51st Street in the fall of 1942. The townhouse, which preceded Art of This Century by only mere months, "quickly became a center for the exiled art world's social life."⁷¹

Guggenheim's husband at the time, German artist Max Ernst, who had fled Europe and married Guggenheim to remain in the U.S., filled the townhouse with works from her collection as well as Native American artifacts that he had collected out West. His son Jimmy became Guggenheim's secretary to help with the collection and work on the beginnings of a catalogue intended to document the collection. A photograph from the fall of 1942 (fig. 3.10) shows Guggenheim in her townhouse surrounded by a coterie of artists including Leonora Carrington, Fernand Léger, John Ferren, Bernice Abbott, Amédée Ozenfant, Kiesler, Jimmy Ernst, Stanley William Hayter, Marcel Duchamp, Kurt Seligmann, Piet Mondrian, André Breton, and Max Ernst.

⁷⁰ Peggy Guggenheim, ed. *Art of This Century: Objects, Drawings, Photographs, Paintings, Sculpture, Collages, 1910 to 1942* (New York: Art of This Century, 1942).

⁷¹ Susan Davidson and Philip Rylands, eds., *Peggy Guggenheim & Frederick Kiesler: The Story of Art of This Century* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2004): 67.

Both of Ferren's works in Guggenheim's collection were included in the publication *Art of This Century*.⁷² As with most of the other artists included in the publication, only one work was illustrated: *Composition*. The patron/collector-cum-gallerist had initially begun work on the catalogue of her collection in the autumn of 1940 and had asked Ernst *père* to design it. Soon thereafter she hired Inez Chatfield to assist with the production of the catalogue and continued to acquire works up until the very last minute before its publication.⁷³ Guggenheim recalled in her autobiography that in the fall of 1942 she "was finishing the catalogue, and every time I bought another painting I rushed a new photograph and biography [of the artist] over to Mrs. Ferren, the publisher."⁷⁴ In what could be considered a slight against Surrealism, which Ferren had contested quite vehemently while he was in Paris, his statement in Guggenheim's publication read: "Then and now, arch enemies and opposites, good and awful: inasmuch as they are comprehensible, all artists say the same very few things. You know them. The incomprehensible offer parlor games."⁷⁵ The "incomprehensible" to which Ferren is referring is most likely the nonsensical element of Surrealism, which Guggenheim also supported. *Art of This Century*, it seems, was a forum in which the old disputes between the Surrealists and the abstractionists of the previous decade, could be, at least to some degree, reconciled. Guggenheim collected and showed work by both camps with no indication of any

⁷² Peggy Guggenheim, ed. *Art of This Century*, 98, 149.

⁷³ Susan Davidson and Philip Rylands, eds., *Peggy Guggenheim & Frederick Kiesler: The Story of Art of This Century*, 21.

⁷⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

animosity between them. She would, however, keep them segregated in *Art of This Century* by displaying them in separate galleries.⁷⁶

By the end of 1941 the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor and America had been dragged into World War II. Ferren was determined that he would, in some way, serve his country and he attempted to enlist in the Navy as an officer. He was unable to obtain a ranking position (perhaps because of his age, or the fact that he had not completed a college degree), but he did not become discouraged and redirected his efforts to contribute to the war effort in other ways.⁷⁷ He was able to make a significant contribution through different means by becoming Assistant Representative of the Overseas Operations Branch of the Office of War Information (OWI), a civilian position with no rank associated. The OWI was a temporary governmental agency established during the early stages of the war that consolidated government information services on June 13, 1942. It had a number of preceding agencies, but Roosevelt and others during the early stages of the war, even before the U.S. entered it, recognized the value of having a central agency to communicate information. The OWI was chiefly responsible for broadcast information regarding the war effort as well as overseeing poster and propaganda campaigns.⁷⁸ Ferren's first

⁷⁶ For a reconstructed floor plan of *Art of This Century* see *Ibid*, 182-3.

⁷⁷ It is unclear exactly why Ferren was rejected for service. It may have been because of his age at the time or perhaps because he did not have the required college degree to become an officer. Randall Jacobs, The Chief of Naval Personnel wrote to John W. Vandercook, one of Ferren's referees: "After careful consideration with reference to all classifications, the Bureau regrets to advise you that Mr. Ferren's qualifications are not considered sufficiently in line with the requirements of the Naval Service to warrant his selection from the large number of well qualified applicants for appointment to the commissioned or warrant rank in the Naval Reserve." John Ferren Papers, Archives of American Art, reel 371.

⁷⁸ The best source of information on the OWI is Allan M. Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942-1945* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1978): 31 et passim.

assignment for the OWI was in North Africa, undoubtedly because of his fluency in French. He was sent to Algeria, departing in April or May of 1943.

As historian Allan Winkler has noted, the OWI had a presence in most of the major theaters of war during its existence. “There the propaganda leaders’ problems in trying to portray what they hoped was a struggle for democracy became more urgent and certainly more difficult to resolve.”⁷⁹ Ferren’s service in the military was one that precluded him from working as an artist. He was ultimately responsible for overseeing the publication of various propagandistic materials during the war. During the two years that he was abroad he was kept abreast of the artistic developments, at least partially, through the correspondence with his wife, Inez Chatfield. The correspondence was not one way, and Ferren wrote faithfully to Chatfield, but as his missions were secretive, he continually remarked that he was unable to discuss the operations the forces were undertaking in any great detail.

Both Chatfield and Ferren were prolific letter writers and her missives offer an insightful glimpse into the New York art world of the early 1940s. Writing in early May to her husband after attending a benefit party for *Task: A Magazine for Architects and Planners*, Chatfield noted:

Well Sweet, last night I went to that party for *Task Magazine*. Naturally I wasn’t much fun alone. However, I was well taken care of by Peter Harnden and Serge Chermeyeff both taking me under their wing as if I were a lost chicken. Léger and Gorky were there and Gorky had the time of his life when they began auctioning off his pictures he said he would like to do it himself and got up and started singing Russian songs and telling some of his long involved stories—every once in a while adding that he had a baby daughter one month, three days and 7 hours old. Everyone enjoyed him immensely. Kiessler [sic] and his wife were there also—all present wished you Godspeed!⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Ibid, 84.

⁸⁰ Chatfield to Ferren, May 8, 1943. John Ferren Papers, AAA.

Throughout the month of May, Chatfield kept her husband well informed of the happenings in New York including the exhibition of artists under thirty-five years of age at Art of This Century,

the age was questionable in some instances—Irene Pereira who has definitely passed the 35 limit—so what? . . . The usual people were there: Sidney Janis, [Howard] Putzel (who is now Peggy’s secretary!) the Reises, Matta, the Motherwells, Héliou, Leger. . .”⁸¹

She continued with letters containing news about the exhibitions and artist friends of the couple. Further evidence of Ferren’s closeness with his European colleagues and his distance from many Americans is supported by those mentioned and those excluded from Chatfield’s letters. Just a day after her news about the exhibition at Art of This Century, she wrote,

Stopped into the Norlyst Gallery after work and who was there—gay as a child, slightly tight and looking very handsome in a beautiful new tweed jacket etc. but Tanguy! He sure is a charming fellow—it seems it was the opening day of his exhibition at Matisse and he had gotten bored and gone over to Norlyst and was drinking white wine with Eleanor [Lust] and Jimmy [Ernst]. He was very surprised to hear about you and said to send he warm regards when I write—which I do at this moment. Later went to Vandercook’s for dinner. They had the Gorky’s who brought the baby along. It sure is a beauty—as beautifully formed as the Reeveses’.⁸²

In August, MoMA presented an exhibition of recent acquisitions in which Ferren’s rug was included. The show was a mixture of various things and Chatfield diligently reported to her husband that

Your rug looks wonderful—much better than in the original show (I’m not the only one who thinks so either). It is hung beautifully. . . . Yours has that fine wall all to it’s self [sic] and the subtle tones seem more

⁸¹ Chatfield to Ferren, May 17, 1943. John Ferren Papers, AAA.

⁸² Chatfield to Ferren, May 18, 1943. John Ferren Papers, AAA.

beautiful than ever—and there is a bench right in front of it where people sit + admire your work. The Matta is extremely competent but looks much the same as all his other work.⁸³

On October 13, 1943 Alfred Barr received a letter from Stephen C. Clark, a trustee of the Museum of Modern Art, informing him that he had to step down as director of the institution.⁸⁴ Although he was allowed to remain on the staff, the founding director and the man chiefly responsible for exhibition programming and catapulting MoMA onto an international stage during the early period of the institution's life, now found himself required to vacate his office and work outside the museum. While Ferren and Barr were never close, and indeed they had suffered through a contentious spell after the artist's return to the U.S., he was able to articulate his true feelings toward Barr in a letter to his wife after she had informed him of the director's fate,

I don't know whether I am sorry or glad to hear about [Alfred] Barr. I actually don't give a damn. However, for the art of America I am inclined to think it might be just as well to have it in the hands of the Philistines. I can't for the life of me remember who the opposite of the Philistines were—but anyway—they weren't good enough. The sum of Alfred's effect on the creation of ____? is, I believe, slight—albeit his contribution to art education may be considerable. Time will tell. But the change only confirms my opinion that the Museum [of Modern Art] is only a New York institution like the ____? and the “New Yorker.” It fought for the already accepted and probably won. But it is essentially effete. Its distinction is in being so powerful which still

⁸³ Chatfield to Ferren, August 31, 1943. John Ferren Papers, AAA. In addition to her description of the exhibition, Chatfield included in this letter a schematic drawing of the how the exhibition was installed with indications of where each object was located. It was also the debut of Piet Mondrian's painting *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*. Chatfield included a small sketch of the painting and noted:

Mondrian has a new approach which I find very disappointing compared to his past work. His picture is called *Boogie-Woogie* and looks something like this and like his other work consists of rectangles on a white surface but the quiet pure beauty of his black on white with the spot of red has been replaced with red yellow and blue checker-like squares cutting vertical and horizontal across the canvas in what appears to look like a not too handsome piece.

⁸⁴ Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002): 360.

being effete it comes back to my old contention. If a people wont accept the artist—and the artist is not in himself self sufficient—(and how can he be more than others?)—any highjacker can take over, it doesn't matter who!⁸⁵

These comments suggest that Ferren, like many other Americans, felt MoMA was dismissive of American abstract art and by the early 1940s had become powerful to the point of being beholden to popular taste. It was, ironically, an opinion he shared with many members of the American Abstract Artists group, despite his distance from them in other regards.

Late in 1943 Ferren was assigned to oversee the Publications Division of the Office of Psychological Warfare, a subdivision of the OWI. Chatfield's diligent letter writing kept him abreast of the art world, while she also played the role of "artist's manager" well in the absence of gallery representation and handled Ferren's official correspondence. In December, Chatfield wrote to Ferren telling him that Elodie Courter, Director of Circulating Exhibitions at MoMA had contacted her to request two paintings of his for an upcoming traveling exhibition, *Twelve Contemporary Painters*. The first in a series of traveling exhibitions intended to introduce mid-career artists to a broader national audience, the exhibition was an eclectic mix of abstraction and representational work. In addition to Ferren, the other artists included were Daniel Austin, Francisco Christofanetti, Matta, Morris Graves, Arshile Gorky, Jacob Lawrence, Loren MacIver, Jackson Pollock, I. Rice Pereira, Walter Stumpffig, and Andrew Wyeth. Chatfield noted, "I guess you might as well be seen as be stuck

⁸⁵ John Ferren to Inez Chatfield, December 9, 1943. John Ferren Papers, AAA.

away here in the studio—she [Courter] will come tomorrow and pick them out. I'll try to get her to take 2 of those handsome large abstractions.”⁸⁶

December 1943 continued to be a month in which there was plenty of news to report from New York. Chatfield followed her correspondence regarding the MoMA exhibition with a letter indicating that the museum had requested two paintings for the show and that she would send over four for them to choose from. These included *Development and Multiplicity*, *Forms in Varied Atmosphere*, *Composition in Green* (fig. 3.11), and *Forms in Morning Light* (or *Blue on Blue*). As a concerned artist's wife, Chatfield reported to her husband that she priced the works between \$950 and \$2000, apparently an increase from previous prices as she noted: “I hope you don't mind the prices but damn it sweet, you had them entirely too low before—and if you do no more abstracts they will become increasingly valuable.”⁸⁷

Furthermore, Marian Willard, who had shown some initial interest in Ferren's work in 1937 and took some of it on consignment at that time, was having an exhibition celebrating the seventh anniversary of her gallery and she included some of Ferren's work. The gallery had become the Neumann-Willard Gallery in 1938 and Chatfield's letter suggests that Willard and Ferren never had a smooth relationship:

It might please you to know that La Willard is having a show entitled “Seven Years” in which she is showing all the stuff she has stolen over that period of time—the plaster she got out of you is included. I'm enclosing a clipping from the New Yorker and Robert Coates on same...⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Chatfield to Ferren, December 16, 1943, AAA.

⁸⁷ Chatfield to Ferren, December 22, 1943. AAA.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Regarding the MoMA exhibition, however, Chatfield noted that her husband was in good company with the eleven other artists included in the exhibition. It was an eclectic selection and as Chatfield noted to her husband, included

Matta, Pollock, [Loren] MacIver, Christofonetti, [I. Rice] Pereira, [Abraham] Rattner, [Morris] Graves, Raez, Austin (ahem!), [Jacob] Lawrence (the Negro who is being pushed—and rightly so) and Gorky—It is a rather weird list with only a couple of them worthy of showing with my love—However you should stand out beautiful by contrast—eh?⁸⁹

Chatfield also had other good news to communicate to her husband. She was pregnant. Over the course of the next year she continued to write faithfully and in January 1944 gave birth to Ferren's daughter, Gael. The frequency of Ferren's letters decreased during this time, most likely because his military responsibilities increased and he was relocated a number of times. By this time the Allies were well on their way to securing the North African theater and OWI began to turn its attention elsewhere, primarily to Italy. As Winkler points out,

With the North Africa adventure on its way to a successful military conclusion, the propagandists became increasingly concerned with other targets, Italy, just across the Mediterranean, seemed the next point of attack and propaganda concerns mounted accordingly.⁹⁰

Ferren was ordered to travel to this newly important theater with his unit sometime around January or February 1944 and stayed until August of that year. Winkler helps elucidate the position of the OWI,

In the struggle with Italy, OWI leaders understood, the same issues were at stake as those faced, and compromised in North Africa. The same basic questions of fascism versus democracy were involved...⁹¹

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Winkler, 90.

⁹¹ Ibid. The way the struggle against fascism was characterized by the OWI as articulated in Winkler's study is a relevant precedent for the characterization of the struggle against communism during the

Just days after the Allies officially liberated Paris, Ferren was sent there with his unit.

As he had once lived in Paris and had been friendly with Picasso during his sojourn there in the 1930s, he was charged with making contact with the Spanish artist, determining Picasso's whereabouts and establishing his safety. There is no documentation of the reconnection of these old acquaintances, other than two important pieces of visual evidence. The first is a wonderfully spontaneous line-drawing portrait of Ferren by Picasso (fig. 3.12). Inscribed "Pour Ferren, mon ami, 27 août 1944, Picasso," the portrait shows Ferren's face in a frontal position with a full beard and moustache. In the typical fashion of the artist's abstemious yet informative line drawings, the face is rendered with only a few strokes of the pen, yet captures the unmistakable character of the sitter.

Sketches he made in a sketchbook dated 1945 suggest the second indication that Ferren's contact with Picasso at the end of the war had an impact on him. Likely created before his return to the U.S. While sparsely illustrated with only a couple drawings of any significance, the sketchbook provides incontrovertible evidence of Picasso's impact on Ferren, even at this late date. The untitled *Sketch of a Woman's Head* (fig. 3.13) is one of the few full-color drawings found in any of Ferren's sketchbooks and illustrates a reconfiguring of the features of the woman's face, much in the same way that Picasso was working at the time. Beginning in 1941 Picasso executed a series of seated female figures, the one most similar to Ferren's sketch,

Cold War and helped informed the State Department's program of cultural diplomacy during the early 1960s, of which Ferren played a part. See Chapter 5.

Woman Seated in an Armchair (fig. 3.14).⁹² It was not the first time that Ferren had returned to the figure as his paintings from the late 1930s show. The composition here, however, is much different than the earlier works, though, as the artist has employed a rigorous Cubist approach to rearranging specific facial features such as the eyes, mouth, ears, and nose. There is a similar sketch for the head of a man in the same sketchbook and the remaining drawings are also of the human form, all looking ahead to the artist's continuing reluctance from here on to relinquish entirely representation in his work.

In September, 1945, Ferren's duties for the OWI were officially terminated due to the end of the War. He received a letter that month that read: "I understand, that in accordance with your conversation with Ferdy Kuhn, the technicality of sending you a notice is now being carried out. As you know, you are being highly recommended to the State Department."⁹³ Ferren would ultimately receive the bronze star for his service during the war and he received a certificate of commendation from President Harry Truman for his service. Following his return to the U.S. the artist he spent some time in Washington, D.C. before returning to New York. This unidentified letter indicating his recommendation to the State Department, however, would be a harbinger of things to come as twenty years later Ferren would be selected for service by the State Department as artist-in-residence for a cultural diplomacy program at the height of the Cold War.

⁹² See Michael FitzGerald, "Reports from the Home Fronts: Some Skirmishes Over Picasso's Reputation," in Steven A. Nash, ed., *Picasso and The War Years, 1937-1945* Exh. cat. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999): 113. Most of Picasso's wartime work had not been seen outside his studio. Ferren was likely one of the first Americans to see this work.

⁹³ Unknown to John Ferren, date unknown, AAA.

Chapter Four
1945–1959: Return to New York, A Series of Teaching Positions,
Abstract Expressionism

The maturation of Abstract Expression coincided with the years leading up to, during, and immediately following World War II. The period of the early 1940s was crucial for American artists and helped lay the foundation in their march toward what would become the dominant mode of painting (and sculpture) for the next decade. In fact, the importance of the early 1940s to the formation of Abstract Expressionism was recognized as soon as critics, curators, and historians began to frame the movement in a historical context, beginning around 1960. H. H. Arnason noted in his 1960 exhibition catalogue for *60 American Painters 1960*, that “Between 1943 and 1946 “Art of This Century” gave their first one-man shows to Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and William Baziotes. In these years the movement to be known as abstract expressionism was launched.”¹

For Ferren, the displaced American, the years that Arnason identified as launching Abstract Expressionism corresponded precisely with his time in service of the OWI. Furthermore, it hadn’t helped that the five years prior to his service, when he first returned to New York, he remained distant from his American peers and closer to his European artist-friends, essentially preventing him from gaining a foothold in New York. His second homecoming in 1945 was also difficult. Many of the European artists working there had returned home (or would soon to do so) and he once again found himself distanced from his American peers. While away during the

¹ Nancy B. Miller, ed., *60 American Painters: 1960, Abstract Expressionist Painting of the Fifties*. Exh. cat. (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1961): 14.

War, Ferren had been kept informed of the art world happenings through the diligent correspondence of his wife, and had been included in a few group exhibitions during these years, he nevertheless returned to the city as an outsider once again. Ferren had not participated in the W.P.A. as many of his contemporaries had, nor had he studied at the Art Students League, or anywhere in the U.S., for that matter, where he may have come into contact with other Americans. The few American friends he did have were those he had made a decade earlier while in Paris such as Gallatin and Morris and from whom he now appeared estranged. Fortunately, in 1946 he found a teaching job at the Brooklyn Museum School bringing him back into contact with other artists and thus helping to ease his reentry into the New York scene. This would be the first of a series of positions both on the East and West coasts that the artist would hold until his death in 1970.

Shortly after his return to the U.S., Ferren began spending the summers in Los Angeles, eventually building a house there. Over the course of the next decade or so he developed strong ties to Southern California, teaching a series of summer courses at UCLA, mounting two solo museum exhibitions of his work there, and in the mid-1950s even collaborating with Alfred Hitchcock on two films. The frequent trips back and forth between coasts greatly affected his painting at this time and as he mentioned to James Fitzsimmons regarding his California home and garden, “New York is the market-place of course, both in the commercial sense and as an idea-center. But California is my landscape. The color, the flowers, the air—it’s my land. I’m not an Easterner, never was, you see.”²

² James Fitzsimmons, “A John Ferren Profile,” 26.

Over the course of the next fifteen years Ferren was incrementally able to (re)establish himself as an *American* artist.³ Contributing to this transformation were articles Ferren wrote on Abstract Expressionism, describing its genesis and metamorphosis into a widespread phenomenon, and eventual academicization. His “Epitaph for an Avant-Garde,” was a seminal account and assessment of the movement.⁴ Ferren’s place among the New York School artists and his ideas on the movement weren’t without their detractors, however. Even though he was a charter member of the Club, he developed a rift with the artists of the Betty Parsons and Sidney Janis galleries, primarily with Robert Motherwell, which ultimately may have cost him a more secure place in the history of the movement. In an extensive diagram detailing the chronology of Abstract Expressionism, an apparent impromptu creation by Motherwell for artist and historian William C. Seitz, Ferren is absent (fig. 4.1).⁵ Much like the well know diagram by Alfred Barr detailing the chronology of modern art, Motherwell’s diagram includes all of the prominent figures of the movement and their dealers (some of whom, such as Eleanor Ward of the Stable Gallery, dealt in Ferren’s work) as well as many lesser known artists, all to the exclusion of Ferren.

Post-War Positions

In 1945, after nearly three years away from New York, Ferren once again found it difficult to re-enter the art world he had left behind. He and his new family moved into a loft on East 9th Street, the epicenter of Abstract Expressionism. The

³ Ferren’s declaration to Fitzsimmons would suggest that Ferren wanted to specifically be identified with California, or the west.

⁴ John Ferren, “Epitaph for an Avant-Garde,” *Arts* (November 1958): 24-26, 68.

⁵ William Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983): Appendix.

apartment was in the same building as two of the foremost Abstract Expressionists: Franz Kline (1910–1962) and Conrad Marca-Relli (1913–2000), while Hans Hofmann lived across the street. Unfortunately, however, even though Ferren was at the geographical center of the movement, he was obstructed by a debilitating creative block. He felt out-of-touch after his years away and as James Fitzsimmons noted in his profile on Ferren,

He now began again in earnest, producing a series of figure compositions: the protagonists of strange dreams, withdrawn cataleptic figures who appear to be in deep thought. . . . But it was not until 1949 that Ferren had managed to paint his way back to contemporaneity, his own contemporaneity.⁶

As art historian Irving Sandler and others have noted, while full-blown Abstract Expressionism was still a few years away, many of the artists of the New York School began working with automatic techniques that would soon lead to their mature styles.⁷ Despite the fact that many of the artists who became principal figures in this group had relied on European precedents with regard to automatic drawing and other fundamental elements of Abstract Expressionism, there had been an emerging backlash against the exiled European artists. This was problematic for Ferren as he had been thought of primarily as a European artist before the war. Now, the opportunity for him to re-shape his persona was before him once again.

The European artists who fled their countries before and during the war became so numerous in New York and attracted so much attention from galleries (Peggy Guggenheim) and museums (MoMA), that they caused many Americans to become suspicious, disenchanted, and even jealous of them. The worst offenders, in

⁶ Ibid, 25–26.

⁷ Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 30, 79.

the eyes of the Americans, were some of the best-known artists including Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, André Breton, Piet Mondrian, and others.⁸ Art historian Romy Golan has shown that in addition to criticism of European Surrealists from Americans such as Clement Greenberg and artist George Biddle, among others, some of the harshest criticism actually came from European émigré Klaus Mann, who published “Surrealist Circus” in *American Mercury* in 1943.⁹

These attitudes toward Europeans emerged at places such as the Waldorf Cafeteria, a meeting place for artists and an early forerunner of the Club. The three primary figures at the Waldorf were sculptor Philip Pavia (1912–2005) and painters Aristodemis Kaldis (1899–1979) and Lades Lewitin (1892–1966), Kaldis and Lewitin serving as the senior statesmen. Other artists who were part of this group included sculptors Ibram Lassaw (1913–2003), Reuben Nakian (1897–1986), James Rosati (1912–1988), and others. Despite the fact that Kaldis was a Turkish immigrant and Lewitin had been trained in Paris, Pavia recalled that resentment toward the Europeans among this group remained. Their work was perceived by the Americans as overwrought, over worn, and without question, overrated. The general attitude felt among those who attended the Waldorf Cafeteria is best summarized by Pavia’s own remark that:

From our point of view as working artists, we had already experienced a fatigue in Surrealism’s symbols. We weren’t art historians announcing a decline. It was just a case of the balloonish dreams, soft

⁸ Natalie Edgar, ed., *Club Without Walls: Selections from the Journals of Philip Pavia* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2007): 8.

⁹ Romy Golan, “On the Passage of a Few Persons Through a Rather Brief Period of Time,” in Stéphanie Barron, ed., *Exiles + Emigrés: The Flight of European Artists from Hitler*. Exh. cat. (New York and Los Angeles: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1997): 132 et passim.

forms and organic symbols becoming tired and overworked and remote from their original message.¹⁰

Some considered the Europeans as invading established artists and resentment brewed between them and their often younger and less established American counterparts. To be sure, the American artists were familiar with Surrealism and its use of symbols, automatism, and the subconscious, but for many, these were techniques and devices that had been used up and now had now reached a point of diminishing returns. And even though by the mid-1940s many of the European artists were returning to their home countries, resentment toward them still lingered. This was the environment in which Ferren found himself when he returned from the war.

Re-Entry

Through his service with the OWI, Ferren had made numerous diplomatic contacts, two of which he drew upon for assistance soon after he returned to the U.S. The artist was sent to Washington D.C. in November 1945 and was demobilized in the following spring. Subsequently, he briefly worked for the pollster, Elmo Roper (1901–1971), who, during the war had been hired to serve as deputy director of the OSS and was essentially charged with staffing the new intelligence agency.¹¹ Ferren was completely broke and down-on-his-luck, but fortunately he received a gift of \$1200 from two of his former colleagues at the OWI, Charles Douglas Jackson (1902–1964) and William S. Paley (1901–1990).¹² Jackson was an expert on psychological warfare and represented the OWI, serving as Deputy Chief,

¹⁰ Natalie Edgar, ed. *Club Without Walls*, 17.

¹¹ See Roper's biography: http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/center/elmo_bio.html.

¹² John Ferren to C. D. Jackson and William S. Paley, May 11, 1948. John Ferren Papers.

Psychological Warfare Branch (PWB), Allied Forces Headquarters (AFHQ) in 1943, and soon thereafter as Deputy Chief, Psychological Warfare Division (PWD), Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF), 1944-45.¹³ Paley had been chairman of the Columbia Broadcasting System and during the war served as a colonel in the army for the OWI in London.¹⁴ These men, and others with similar expertise, had been hired for their knowledge of communications logistics and theory and to implement the directives of the Psychological Warfare Division.

In his letter to Jackson and Paley, Ferren notes that after he quit working for Roper he returned to painting full time and tried, without success, to find an exhibition in one of the galleries on 57th Street. His fortunes went from bad to worse as domestic troubles with Chatfield forced Ferren to move to Los Angeles full time, where he took up with his brother Roy and began selling real estate. His misfortune continued with a series of health problems. He reported to his benefactors that he contracted malaria and mumps, convalescing in September and eventually returning to New York in October. Ferren had been courted by painter David Park (1911–1960) and Douglas McAgy, the visionary Director of the California School of Fine Arts, to come and teach at the San Francisco school. Park wrote to Ferren, who had already accepted a position at the Brooklyn Museum School, in early July to inquire whether or not he would be interested in taking a teaching position there.¹⁵

¹³ For more on Jackson's involvement with psychological warfare and his post-war activities, see: http://www.ibiblio.org/lia/president/EisenhowerLibrary/finding_aids/Jackson_CD_Papers.html.

¹⁴ Jeremy Gerard, "William S. Paley, Builder of CBS, Dies at 89," *New York Times* October 27, 1990, 1. Paley was also a collector and involved with the Museum of Modern Art. See William Rubin and Matthew Armstrong, *The William S. Paley Collection*. Exh. cat. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1992: ix et passim.

¹⁵ It is unclear how Ferren and Park knew each other. They may have met in San Francisco prior to 1931 despite no mention of it in Ferren's diary. Park moved the Bay Area in 1929. See Helen Park Bigelow, *David Park, Painter: Nothing Held Back* (Manchester, VT: Hudson Hills Press, 2009): 13.

McAgy had recently taken over as director and transformed the historic art school into a hotbed of innovative teaching through a series of forward-thinking changes. He established the first fine art photography department by hiring a literal who's who of faculty that included Ansel Adams (1902–1984), Dorothea Lange (1895–1965), Imogen Cunningham (1883–1976), and Minor White (1908–1976). He also attracted artists such as Elmer Bischoff (1916–1991), Hassel Smith (1915–2007), and Clyfford Still (1904–1980), who along with Park, taught painting and drawing. McAgy was also successful at luring visiting speakers from the east coast and elsewhere such as Mark Rothko and Marcel Duchamp.¹⁶ Park spoke highly of McAgy's program at the school and noted to Ferren,

I'm still at it. I'm at the California School of Fine Arts & it's a damn stimulating place under Douglas McAgy, the new director. He's going to have to get someone new on the faculty and it might be a good place for you if he liked the idea.¹⁷

The timing was unfortunate. Ferren responded to Park that he had already accepted the teaching position at the Brooklyn Museum Art School. McAgy nevertheless continued to pursue him and wrote him in New York approximately two weeks later,

David Park has shown me his good letter from you and I am kicking myself that I didn't try to sink the hooks in you before Brooklyn. . . . On the basis of a few remarks in your letter I am reluctant to give up the notion of your presence here sooner or later.¹⁸

¹⁶ Thomas Albright, *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area: An Illustrated History*, 16 et passim. Also see, Susan Landauer, *The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism*, 5 et passim.

¹⁷ David Park to John Ferren, July 1, 1946. John Ferren Papers.

¹⁸ Douglas McAgy to John Ferren, July 16, 1946. John Ferren Papers.

Ferren continued to work diligently during this time and scoured 57th Street in search of a gallery. He noted to his benefactors, Jackson and Paley:

I did 26 paintings during the summer period and, with them, made the rounds of 57th Street. The season was already under way and bookings are normally made a year in advance. I obtained an opening for the last show of the season, May 15 to 30 [1947] at the Kleeman Galleries.¹⁹

This initial exhibition at the Kleeman Galleries would ultimately be the first of three shows he would have at the gallery over the next two years.

Searching for a Sense of Purpose: John Ferren, Mythmaker

Just as Ferren had depicted the figure in a series of heads before his return from Europe in 1938, he once again came back to representational or semi-representational painting by depicting figures in the late 1940s. The works from this period often have narrative or mythological titles and can be understood within the larger context of nascent Abstract Expressionism's adoption of mythological subjects in the 1940s. For the New York School artists, the nihilism that had been created by the war, needed, as art historian Stephen Polcari noted, citing Nietzsche, to be "overcome."²⁰ The result, for many Europeans and Americans alike, was an exploration of mythical subjects. Art Historian Martica Sawin articulated this tendency:

The desire for a new unifying myth accompanied by meaningful visual symbols was to be a leitmotif during the next few years for deracinated Europeans, as well as for some of the younger American artists who had outgrown the styles and subjects of the 1930s.²¹

¹⁹ Ferren to Jackson and Paley, John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

²⁰ Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 3.

²¹ Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1995): 150.

Sandler also identified this as a watershed moment of realization for artists of the New York School. He emphasized that it was new territory, both stylistically and conceptually for American artists.

Confronted with a world that seemed to have lost its reason, the new avant-garde artists were in a quandary.... The then-dominant Modernist art, geometric abstraction, looked increasingly irrelevant in this traumatic time. Everything it stood for—rationalism, art-for-art’s-sake, a brave new machine age, and the explicit or implicit futuristic vision of man and society as perfectible—ceased to be believable.²²

The result for many at this time, both abstract and representational artists alike, was that humanist subject matter began to enter the visual discourse with greater prominence. For some artists of the New York School, such as Gottlieb, Motherwell, Gorky, Pollock, and Rothko this was manifested in an exploration of Greco-Roman mythological subjects.²³ Because of his service in the war, Ferren arrived at similar subject matter slightly later than some of his contemporaries, but he nevertheless drew on the trauma of the war and his own personal experiences and may now be understood as a participant in this trend. Indeed Bailey notes that, “The anguish of divorce and the trauma of a war-fraught exile from Paris perhaps compelled the humanist subject matter of the tragic heads of 1938 and the themes of Icarus, Lazarus, and the Damned in 1947.”²⁴

This new direction in his work was presented to the public for the first time at the Kleeman Gallery exhibition in May and prompted the headline “Ferren’s

²² Sandler, *Abstract Expressionism and the American Experience*, 68.

²³ Ibid. For an insightful discussion on Rothko’s use of myth see Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 118 et passim.

²⁴ Bailey, *Ferren*, 11.

Paintings More Human” in the *New York World-Telegram*. The anonymous reviewer was insightful in his recognition of the humanistic content:

Perhaps it is reading something into them to suggest that these newest works may be a reflection of that war service. Not that they have anything whatever to do with war. . . . They’re bigger, looser, broader. For all their sharp, near-abstract stylization they clearly depict human beings—children playing, mothers weeping and the like.²⁵

The general reviews were mixed about this type of semi-abstract painting. At the time, Jackson Pollock created his first true drip painting and Rothko, Newman, and Still were moving away from mythic imagery in their works and toward dissolution of the image (although mythic subjects remained). Thus, it must not have won Ferren any points with his abstract counterparts that he was working in this semi-abstract style. Edward Alden Jewell wrote indifferently of Ferren’s first body of post-war work in the *New York Times*:

These are new oils, and once more we find instanced a shift on the part of a once completely non-objective artist to procedure in which representation figures extensively...In contriving this new style Ferren seems with some eclecticism to have scanned the modern movement, pausing here and there in his scrutiny—with Picasso, with Héliou perhaps (as the ‘Children Playing’ especially suggests), maybe, much further back, with Toulouse-Lautrec.²⁶

Ferren reported to Jackson and Paley that he exhibited 15 works total and had, at that point, sold two paintings from the exhibition. He reminded the men of his previous exhibitions in New York in the 1930s and must have felt the need to qualify his position as he wrote,

My work of that time, although it sold well, was known mainly by an “avant-garde” group. Given the short memory of the local public, my name was known, for all practical purposes at this time. The show was

²⁵ Anon., “Ferren’s Paintings More Human,” *New York World-Telegram*, May 17, 1947, 11.

²⁶ Edward Alden Jewell, “A Week of Variety: Recent Work by Miro and John Ferren – Guerrero and Emerson Tuttle,” *New York Times*, May 18, 1947, 10.

well received publicly and Mr. Barr of the Museum of Modern Art, N.Y., among others wrote me a personal letter of appreciation.²⁷

Alfred Barr did indeed praise Ferren's latest body of work in a letter to the artist, setting aside any disputes the two may have had in the previous decade. In a letter to Ferren, Barr wrote:

Dear John, I went to see your show again and want to tell you how much I enjoyed it. I liked especially *The Watchers*, #1 and *Torso* #12. It seems to me that you have come a very long way since the beginnings of your new direction which I saw that evening a couple of years ago at your house.²⁸

In June Ferren flew to Los Angeles, California, where he had accepted a summer teaching position at the Art Center School (now the Art Center College of Design). The combination of a rigorous teaching schedule at the Art Center, a lack of painting space in his brother's house (where Ferren was staying at the time), and general fatigue, precluded him from creating any significant work. He returned to New York in October (1947), recharged from his time on the West Coast, and resumed his teaching duties at the Brooklyn Museum Art School. His interest in mythological subjects continued and over the next few months created some ninety-two works in gouache, tempera, and oil, forty of which were selected for his second solo exhibition at the Kleeman Galleries in April 1948.²⁹

Ferren's interest in myth came at a time when many artists of his generation had recently rediscovered it as subject matter. The "mythmakers," as Sandler calls them, included Rothko, Gottlieb, Gorky, Pollock, Newman, Still and certainly a host of other painters. Ferren, of course, had been absent at that seminal moment of June

²⁷ Ferren to Jackson and Paley.

²⁸ Alfred Barr to John Ferren, May 22, 1947. John Ferren Papers.

²⁹ Ferren to Jackson and Paley.

1943 when the now famous letter that Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb wrote to the art critic Edward Alden Jewell in defense of their paintings of mythical subject matter was published in the *New York Times*.³⁰ It is not surprising that Ferren had a particular interest in tragic subjects such as Icarus, who, according to Ovid escaped imprisonment by using fragile wings created for him by Daedalus, his father, but tragically flew too close to the sun, melting his wings and hurling Icarus into the sea. Having returned from the war and struggled to re-integrate himself in the much different art world of New York, Ferren must have identified with the Icarus character.

Ferren noted to Jackson and Paley that the reviews of his second Kleeman show were much better than his first. Critic and artist Rosalind Browne wrote,

John Ferren for many years identified with the non-objective metier, recently turned back to nature in a modified form of semi-abstract romanticism, and now presents at the Kleeman Galleries the second group of oils and gouaches created in his new role, providing ample assurance of his continuous development along freer and fertile line of expression.³¹

Ferren's work at this time integrated references to the natural world with abstract imagery. While certain critics made note of his use of representational imagery, others chose instead to focus on the abstract dimension in his work. His use of recognized imagery at this time was short-lived as the artist noted that,

³⁰ Edward Alden Jewell, "The Realm of Art: A New Platform and Other Matters: 'Globalism' Pops into View," *New York Times* June 13, 1943, X9. The letter came in response to Jewell's articulated bafflement over Rothko's *The Syrian Bull* and Gottlieb's *The Rape of Persephone* in the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors Exhibition. For an detailed analysis of the letter in its various stages of creation see Bonnie Clearwater, "Shared Myths: Reconsideration of Rothko's and Gottlieb's Letter to the *New York Times*," *Archives of American Art Journal* 24 n. 1 (1984): 23.

³¹ Rosalind Browne, "Gallery Previews" *Pictures on Exhibit* 10 (April 1948): 30.

about '47, spring of '48, I began to move back into abstraction but obviously influenced by my entire environment at that time. Otherwise I took the abstract expressionists experience quite seriously.³²

During the last few years of the 1940s his work fell somewhere in between abstraction and representation and typical of this transitional period is *Figure*, 1947 (fig. 4.2). Set against broad areas of unmodulated color there is a female figure languorously leaning forward toward the viewer. The figure's features have not been delineated and the figure's hair hangs down, painted in a stylized manner. There is little shading or modeling to the figure and forms are suggested merely by a few brushstrokes. The works from this period show a general economy of brushwork that is unlike the work that will follow in the coming decade. *Figure* illustrates how far the artist had come from the brief flirtation with a late-Cubist approach we saw in his sketchbook. Instead, this painting is much closer to the humanist-inspired figurative works being created by Stephen Greene (1917–1999), Philip Guston (1913–1980), Jules Kirschenbaum (1930–2000), and others at this time. It can be linked even more closely, however, to the work of Mexican artist, Rufino Tamayo (1899–1991).

Emily Genauer, who had been supportive in her criticism of Ferren's 1936 and 1938 exhibitions at Pierre Matisse Gallery, continued to respond favorably to this new body of work,

He's still doing abstractions, but they're as big and loose and free as is earlier work was constricted. He uses bold, broad color areas, combines them with heavy, linear accents, and, as a result, attains compositions full of power, vigor and originality, too, in most cases, although one or two do suggest the work of Tamayo.³³

³² Seckler interview with Ferren, AAA.

³³ Emily Genauer, "Ferren Broadens Out with Vigor and Originality," *New York World Telegram* April 20, 1948, 16.

Genauer's suggestion of the influence of Tamayo was astute. Tamayo had joined the Brooklyn Museum School faculty in 1945 and had already been exhibiting in New York to great acclaim. When comparing work by the two artists from these years it is clear that they share an undeniable affinity. Similarly to Ferren, Tamayo was also painting semi-abstract distorted figures that often appear in front of broad areas of abstract shapes and/or areas of unmodulated color. As curator Diana du Pont illustrated in her extensive exhibition catalogue, *Tamayo: A Modern Icon Reinterpreted*, Tamayo was intent on creating a "new realism" based on his own recreation of nature. Du Pont wrote that "Since Tamayo saw descriptive realism as 'reactionary,' he sought to clarify that modern figuration should not be confused with conventional realism."³⁴ A revealing comparison is between Ferren's *Figure* and an etching by Tamayo from the same year, *Hombre Contemplando la Luna (Man Contemplating the Moon)*, (fig. 4.3) and the painting, *Girl Attacked by a Strange Bird* (fig. 4.4). Both artists incorporate geometrically-stylized figures with broad areas of unmodulated color and a heavy dark outline. Tamayo's name is not mentioned in any of the Ferren papers, but it seems reasonable to conclude that the two men must have known each other and exerted at least some influence on one another, if only on a subconscious level.

The *Art News* review of the second Kleeman show highlighted the anatomical differences in Ferren's figures in various media and employed language that suggests the successful marriage of abstraction and representational painting.

³⁴ Diana C. du Pont, "'Realistic, Never Descriptive' Tamayo and the Art of Abstract Figuration," in Diana C. du Pont, ed., *Tamayo: A Modern Icon Reinterpreted* Exh. cat. (Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2007): 32 et passim.

His use of anatomy is deftly realistic, but in most of his gouaches and oils he does not use anatomy, he arrives at it—with an extraordinary inventiveness. He can invest an abstract design with human expression; stamp a gesture, violent or subtle, in to flat segments of color; and lure facial eloquence out of shapes that have nothing to do with a face.³⁵

Overall, the reviews for the Kleeman show were mixed. Some critics applauded the artist's new direction, while others were critical of it. Ben Wolf of *The Art Digest* was complimentary and identified the mythological interest in his work:

The artist, working in a semi-abstract idiom, has well balanced a literary interest in subject matter with an intelligent regard for spatial considerations. Ferren's recurring interest in the story of Icarus is an example of this integration of intellect and emotion.³⁶

The anonymous reviewer for the *New York Sun* however, found this narrative inclination a serious detriment to the work,

He [Ferren] is best, though, when completely escaping from subject matter, for he is not so happy in storytelling as in the episode of the "Fall of Icarus." In the effort to make you understand what happened he cheapens the composition.³⁷

Return to Abstraction

For his third and final exhibition at the Kleeman Gallery in May 1949 Ferren revealed another significant shift in his work. Again symptomatic of his search to rediscover his artistic voice, this new body of work looks ahead in style to his abstractions of the 1950s. The transcontinental travel that the artist had undertaken over the last couple years (combined with earlier experiences crossing the country) was an important inspiration for a series of abstract paintings. While informed by the

³⁵ Anon., "John Ferren," *Art News* (April 1948): 52.

³⁶ Ben Wolf, "Ferren Exhibits" *The Art Digest* April 1, 1948, 16.

³⁷ Anon., "Kleeman Gallery," *The New York Sun* April 9, 1948, 29.

Western desert and loosely based on a sense of place, these works signaled a return to a fully-abstract mode of painting. Critical reviews of them were mixed. This body of work included paintings such as *Desert Landscape*, 1951 (fig. 4.5) and were predominantly earth-toned abstractions of large and small areas of monochromatic color. Judith Kay Reed, reviewer for *Art Digest*, noted the show's success was found in the artist's progress and the way in which abstract work expresses the subject so well, and that the fifteen paintings in the exhibition symbolize "the spirit and substance of desert life as it assaults the senses."³⁸

The *New York Times* praised the paintings and Stuart Preston wrote that many of the new works were indeed

inspired by aerial views of the Painted Desert. Looked at from on high, a landscape becomes an abstract pattern, a particularly dazzling one in this case. Rivers are transformed into coiling lines; "trees, and mountain tops that freeze" are no more than intersecting patches of color. Ferren has made ingenious use of this panorama. Design is kept flat, but color is made to play tricks so that the final effect is convulsive.³⁹

The critics, however, were mistaken in their assessment that the work was directly taken from the desert landscape. Never one to pass an opportunity for greater clarification of his work, and despite the fact that Preston's review had been generally favorable, Ferren wrote a detailed letter to Howard Devree, editor and art critic at the *Times*, in defense of his work and attempting to elucidate it. Ferren wanted to set the record straight: "First, my pictures are not ariel views. If Mr. Preston has not become aware of the shifting perspectives used by modern artists since the advent of cubism,

³⁸ Judith Kaye Reed, "Song of the Desert," *Art Digest* May 1, 1949, 15.

³⁹ S.[tuart] P.[reston], "Five New Painting Exhibitions Open Here; Nelson, Presser, Ferren, Show Their Works," *New York Times* May 7, 1949, 11.

it is high time he did.”⁴⁰ What Preston failed to grasp about the paintings, and an important idea that dates back to the artist’s days in San Francisco, is that they were essentially based on a synesthetic *experience* of the landscape, not a *physical* experience of the landscape. Countering a second claim that they were described as panoramas of the desert, the artist continued:

They are condensed reconstructions from memory of specifically *felt sensations* expressed in a slowly developed, and, I believe, a personal idiom. The subject ‘matter’ is of the forms and light of the Great American desert. The ‘subject’ is my personal insight into the significance of these forms. These paintings are the linking of the inward and outward aspects of a very American phenomenon.⁴¹

Continuing to elucidate for Devree and further expounding on his synesthetic ideas, Ferren wrote:

The major part of my personal idiom in painting has been the development of color to the three fold purpose of expressing emotion psychologically, form and space. I share this concern with the majority of contemporary artists who wish to add to, rather than imitate, the great gains of Picasso, Matisse, Bonnard, et al. To have twenty years of work at this task dismissed as ‘tricks’ is a gratuitous insult.⁴²

Unfortunately, and for reasons that are not clear, Kleeman dropped Ferren from his stable of artists by the end of 1949. Furthermore, his relationship with Inez Chatfield had soured considerably and they agreed to divorce, with Chatfield taking custody of their daughter. Ferren would however, find happiness shortly thereafter and remarry after falling in love with a former student of his at the Brooklyn Museum School, Rae Tonkel. Nevertheless, the artist once again found himself without a gallery, and

⁴⁰ John Ferren to Howard Devree, May 9, 1949. John Ferren Papers. Ferren began his letter by expressing his surprise that the review appeared on a Saturday in what he called a “second string.”

⁴¹ Ibid. *Ephasis mine*.

⁴² Ibid.

approached his old dealer, Pierre Matisse, to ask if he would consider bringing Ferren back to the gallery. Matisse responded that he was sorry that he could not assist his old friend.

Early Educational Pedagogy

From the early part of his teaching career Ferren developed an educational pedagogy that included advanced ideas on modern painting and the modern artist. Much of it was based on ideas of modern art that he had written about during his years in Europe in the 1930s. The earliest evidence of a structured pedagogical philosophy was articulated in an address to the students in his advanced painting class at the Brooklyn Museum School on April 6, 1949. Alluding to some of his earliest writings in France, his primary ideas were based on the notion that (1) creative thinking with regard to sciences and humanities has changed radically since the beginning of the twentieth century; and (2) the modern artist has a responsibility to utilize these new ways of thinking and reflect what Ferren referred to as a “post-mechanistic” society. Indeed, many of the ideas on contemporary art that he was formulating had been fermenting for some time and they also informed his future papers and talks. It was the beginning of a lengthy career as an extremely conscientious and dedicated art educator.

There were thirty students in his Brooklyn Museum School class that year and all of them participated in this forum. He posed two questions to them: “What is the direction of modern painting?” and “What do you want to do in your own

painting?”⁴³ Ferren, in a characteristically macro-approach to art history, positioned contemporary painting within the larger context of a changing society. He recognized that there were indeed *reasons* why contemporary painting looked the way that it did and this inclination would be the driving force behind most of his writings of the next few years. The purpose of this exercise was likely to gauge the students’ knowledge of contemporary painting as well as to clearly establish where they felt that it was positioned within the continuum of art history (if at all). Ferren gathered the responses from these two questions and reported to the class his findings, and while he noted that only a few of them had a truly comprehensive grasp on contemporary art—and there were even those who opposed it among his students—for the most part there was an optimistic outlook for the future of art.

In summation the majority [of the students] seemed firmly planted on the modern road. Even the realist faction were for modern “means” although they didn’t clearly explain how they would use them. There was a general attitude that art should broaden and deepen in expressiveness. In other words, you all conceived a margin as existing in which art can be bettered. This is essential optimism.⁴⁴

Ferren essentially sets up a dialectical relationship between philosophies based on a logical determinism and those that rejected determinism and were founded on logical overstructures. This logical determinism, Ferren argued, was essentially responsible for the development of the Renaissance that “attempted to create logical structures in which every part fits a symmetrical whole.”⁴⁵ His presentation was not

⁴³ John Ferren, “Address to Students,” unpublished manuscript, Brooklyn Museum Art School, April 6, 1949. Special Collections, E. S. Byrd Library, Syracuse University.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 9.

one-sided and in attempting to provide the broadest view possible to his students, he noted objections to this particular stance:

Taoism which inspired the great Sung painters and the Franciscan Christianity that inspired Giotto and his school, refused the determinism of logical overstructures and insisted on the maintenance of a carefully preserved indeterminateness as the key to the understanding of the world and man. It will be noted that most of the arts which influence the modern painter were those done under this looser form of religion.⁴⁶

Ferren linked the immense technological and cultural changes that had occurred since the early part of the twentieth century to fundamental shifts in thinking. He argued that intuitive thinking combined with a new language of mathematics, not bound by the restricting principles of an earlier era, had created a new paradigm of thought. For example, he was acutely aware of new ways of thinking about mathematics in the early part of the century, which included fourth-dimensional and non-Euclidean geometry and how ideas such as these helped shift ways of thinking. While fourth-dimensional and non-Euclidean geometry had been developed before the turn-of-the-century, art historian Linda Henderson noted that it was the mathematician Henri Poincaré who was most responsible for disseminating these ideas during the early years of the century.⁴⁷ Ferren communicated the new methods of thinking brought about by these changes to his students:

The new perceptions born in science are continually exerting their forces on the world. But, many of them are sealed in the hermetic language of mathematics. Many of them seep out in adulterated form. Many are deformed mechanistic prejudices. These new perceptions

⁴⁶ Ibid, 10.

⁴⁷ Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983): 15 et passim. Henderson notes that Poincaré published three influential texts all within years of one another that were chiefly responsible for this dissemination. They were *La Science et l'hypothèse* (1902), *La Valeur de la science* (1904), and *Science et méthode* (1908).

lack flesh and it is the artist who is the traditional maker of image, he who gives flesh.⁴⁸

In addition to informing his students about the history of thought and how it related to modern art, he felt that the artist had a very specific responsibility and spelled it out for these students:

The artist has a role in society, one of great use and purpose, above party or class. We are not here to charm or blandish, although such weapons are sometimes useful in the front lines. We are here to formulate in concrete, transmittable form the concepts of man today who is breaking very painfully away from a dead world into a new but unforeseen one.⁴⁹

Ultimately, Ferren wanted to communicate to his students what he felt was the chief responsibility of the modern artist: “It is to conjoin in the minds and sensitivities of his fellows the newly perceived links between matter and spirit so that man can fashion himself better.”⁵⁰

Ambassador for Abstraction

The years 1950 and 1951 were filled with both success and heartache for the artist. Ferren began teaching at Queens College, the start of a fruitful twenty-year appointment that would eventually culminate with his chairmanship of the department. In 1950 the Ferren family began to regularly spend their summers in Los Angeles, where they purchased a second home. Furthermore, in May 1951, Ferren was instrumental in instituting the first of a series of exhibitions at the Stable Gallery,

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 17.

a seminal showcase of Abstract Expressionism that became known as the 9th Street Show. Unfortunately, personal tragedy struck the artist that year, too. The artist's seven-year-old daughter died from injuries sustained when the sleeping child fell from her bunk bed.

The decade was also the beginning of a series of public lectures and articles by Ferren in which he would help to elucidate Abstract Expressionism. He had written prolifically during his time in Europe during the 1930s but ultimately these were unpublished philosophical musings of a young artist finding his way among the avant-garde of Paris. The writings from the 1950s and later show an undeniable maturity and willingness to elaborate on aspects of abstract painting that were for many either perplexing, beyond comprehension, or simply incommunicable. He became, in many ways, an ambassador for abstraction.

In the summer of 1950 Ferren and his wife Rae began spending summers in Los Angeles. He taught a series of summer classes there but he also found much more time for his own work. The California sojourn became a ritual for the artist over the next decade and was repeatedly one of his most productive times of the year. In the fall of 1951 Ferren was appointed a permanent position at Queens College as Lecturer in Art. He would teach a variety of courses over the years at Queens, but he became known among his students primarily as a teacher of color theory. Much like his ideas on the history of thought and its relation to art, Ferren had formulated his ideas on color through his participation in the avant-garde in Paris and the pre-war years in New York. Rather than take a dogmatic stance, he allowed for and encouraged experimentation by the student:

This course is designed to link the available and current knowledge of the theory of color to its practical manipulation by the artist, designer and teacher. Theory will be adequately stressed by lecture and student practice but will be eventually subordinated to the development in the student of independence, taste and adventure in the use of color as an expressive medium. It is the intention to have theory grow logically out of the practice.⁵¹

Since the 1930s Ferren had considered himself a colorist as he noted to Seckler: “Color has always been my thing and this, for instance—curiously the mystique of the time was held against me.”⁵² The artist continued to note that his inclination toward color might have been detrimental to him,

I can remember—I won’t mention names—but people close to me would say, “Ferren, if you’d just paint black and white everything would go fine for you.” I never could. I was too involved with color.⁵³

Ferren’s color legacy was perpetuated by one of his former students, Herb Aach (1923–1985), who would go on to also teach at Queens College and write about color theory.⁵⁴

Stable State of Mind

Ferren’s role in the development of Abstract Expressionism was broad and in addition to being a painter and a teacher, he was instrumental as an organizer by helping to realize a series of groundbreaking group exhibitions of his contemporaries. These were seminal exhibitions that had grown out of conversations at the Club over whether its members should mount exhibitions or not. By 1951 the Club had been

⁵¹ John Ferren, “Art 36-C Color Theory,” course syllabus, May 1951, John Ferren Papers (not AAA). The legacy of Ferren’s ideas on color theory was perpetuated most successfully by his former student Herb Aach, who would himself teach color theory at Queens College from (years).

⁵² Ferren interview with Seckler, AAA.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ See Herb Aach, “Insight Out: Gestalt of the Eye,” *Arts Magazine* 41 (March 1967): 66. Also, Aach translated Goethe’s *Farbenlehre* in 1971.

firmly established and was holding regular meetings, and, as sculptor and founder Philip Pavia stated, the presentation of an exhibition was a paradigm-shifting statement by the group,

The Ninth Street Show was the first modest foray for the very young “abstract expressionist” art. It would be a turning point, because the show delivered a punchy, powerful message that would define the Club and change theories of art.⁵⁵

Simply deciding on whether to hold an exhibition had been problematic for the group, many of whom vehemently voted against it, apparently at the urging of Willem de Kooning. According to Sandler, it was Milton Resnick (1917–2004) who began to lobby for the idea. De Kooning initially objected because “it might indicate a trend or position and curb the open character of The Club. De Kooning believed strongly that anonymity was vital, and he was heeded.”⁵⁶ However, Ferren, Marca-Relli, Kline, and Cavallon were all so enthusiastic about the idea that de Kooning changed his mind. Thus, with the help of the art dealer and Club member, Leo Castelli, the group rented a storefront space at 60 East 9th St. and on May 21st the series of exhibitions known as the 9th St. Show was born.⁵⁷ The inaugural exhibition was, for many, an introduction to Abstract Expressionism and the show included sixty-one artists—some of the most prominent members of the movement such as the converted de Kooning, Pollock (who apparently participated reluctantly), and Franz Kline, who designed the poster for the exhibition.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Natalie Edgar, ed., *Club Without Walls*, 99.

⁵⁶ Irving Sandler, *A Sweeper-Up After Artists*, 38.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Marika Herskovic, ed. *New York School Abstract Expressionists: Artists Choice by Artists, A Complete Documentation of the New York Painting and Sculpture Annuals: 1951–1957* (Franklin Lakes, NJ: New York School Press, 2000): 12.

The exhibition became an annual event and in the subsequent years moved to the Stable Gallery that socialite Eleanor Ward had opened in 1952. The Stable Gallery was run by Nicolas Carone (1917–2010), a charter member of The Club, and the person chiefly responsible for the gallery's progressive roster of artists. In addition to Carone's foresight as Director of the gallery, Ward was also being advised by Alexander Iolas, who, according to Carone, intended to introduce her to artists both American and European. Carone noted to art historian Paul Cummings, however, that it was he who,

started the [Stable] gallery really. I got all the artists for her [Ward]. I got the first show -- it was Edward Dugmore. I got Marca Relli. And after that, Ernie Briggs and John Ferren and Noguchi, Joseph Cornell, Robert Rauschenberg, Twombly, James Brooks, Jack Tworkov and his sister, Biala. Well, you name them. They all became well-known.⁵⁹

Ferren would continue to help organize and exhibit his work in the five following Stable Annual Exhibitions, as they came to be known.⁶⁰

Ferren's active involvement with the Club was instrumental in helping him re-establish a place within a sympathetic community of artists. By the early-1950s the exclusion that Ferren had felt before and immediately after the war was beginning to disappear as he became more and more integrated into the circle of the New York School. He was establishing strong connections with most of the members of the Club and participated extensively in its activities. Of Ferren's involvement with the Club, Craig Bailey noted that,

⁵⁹ Nicolas Carone interview with Paul Cummings, 1968. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

⁶⁰ There was no Stable Annual in 1952, but they continued from 1953 to 1957. While the initial exhibition was a ground-breaking show by the sheer volume with which Abstract Expressionism was represented, they became less relevant each subsequent year.

The group's emphasis on personal freedom and individual growth meshed with his own. Common interests led to stronger ties and more formal meetings under the aegis of The Club, which was devoted primarily to open and panel discussions covering topics from aesthetics to psychiatry. Ferren's informed and persuasive participation in these discussions contributed to his assumption of The Club's presidency in 1955.⁶¹

Art and Creative Thinking

The year 1952 was an exceptionally busy one for Ferren as he participated in a number of public symposia, all addressing specific issues in contemporary art. At the Club, he participated in the four following panel discussions: "Abstract Expressionism II," in January, which Ferren moderated and included Peter Busa (1914–1985), Byrgone Diller, Perle Fine (1905–1988), Adolph Gottlieb (1903–1974), Harry Holtzman, and Elaine de Kooning (1918–1989); in March, "The Purist Idea" moderated by Harry Holtzman, and included Paul Brach (1924–2007), James Fitzsimmons, and Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967); in April, "The Problem of the Engaged Artist" an interdisciplinary panel which Ferren moderated, and included musician John Cage (1912–1992), dance critic Edwin Denby (1903–1983), and poet Emmanuel Navaretta (1914–1977); and at the end of the year in December Ferren moderated "American Criticism of American Painting," which included a panel of three distinguished critics: Robert Goldwater, James Fitzsimmons, and James Thrall Soby.⁶²

Ferren also began to participate in intellectual circles *outside* the art world. In May he was invited to speak at the annual meeting of the Industrial Research Institute. Founded in 1938 under the auspices of the National Research Council, the

⁶¹ Bailey, *Ferren*, 5.

⁶² For a list of panels at the Club see Natalie Edgar, ed. *Club Without Walls*, 158 et passim.

Industrial Research Institute is a non-profit professional organization whose mission it is to “enhance the effectiveness of technological innovation in industry.”⁶³ Ferren’s presentation, “The Problem of Creative Thinking in Painting,” was part of a series of presentations that focused exclusively on similar creative methodologies between the arts and industry. It was an interdisciplinary program that included papers by leading thinkers in other fields. Austrian-born composer Ernest Krenek (1900–1991) who worked with a twelve-tone technique and later electronic music presented “The Problem of Creative Thinking in Music.”⁶⁴ The third presenter, poet John Berryman, had been a founder of the Confessional school of poetry and was a significant figure in American post-war letters. His paper was titled “The Problem of Creative Thinking in Poetry.”⁶⁵

Ferren’s paper, which was subsequently published as “Art and Creative Thinking,” in the December 1952 issue of *Arts and Architecture*, gives us insight not only into the artist’s thoughts on the creative responsibilities of the contemporary artist, but also on his use of language to explain these issues.⁶⁶ The audience at the conference was certainly *not* the painters, sculptors, and critics who attended sessions at the Club, nor were they necessarily art aficionados or museum goers who were knowledgeable on art. Instead, they were men and women of science and industry and Ferren’s use of certain metaphors and comparisons should be noted for their scientific associations. His intention was to illustrate similarities between the thought processes in art and science.

⁶³ <http://www.iriinc.org/>. Accessed August 2, 2009.

⁶⁴ For information on Krenek see: H. Garrett Bowles, *Ernst Krenek: A Bio-Bibliography* (New York and London: Greenwood Press, 1989).

⁶⁵ For information on Berryman see: Paul Mariani, *Dream Song: The Life of John Barryman* (New York: Morrow, 1990).

⁶⁶ John Ferren, “Art and Creative Thinking,” *Arts & Architecture* 69 (December 1952): 18, 36-37, 39.

The paper began by identifying a common interest in the abstract qualities and forces found in both the fields of science and art. To underscore the transdisciplinary nature of his argument, he commenced with a quote from biologist Edmond Sinnott: “It is not the *character* of the constituent parts of a living thing but the *relations* between them which are the most significant.”⁶⁷ Ferren noted that this same mantra had essentially become an art classroom platitude for the previous forty years and continued to elaborate that,

the pattern the painter perceives in nature or in himself and fixes on the canvas is *first* found by searching for the animating structure which links separate phenomena and gives them meaning. This concept, or more properly, method of concept, is essentially modern thinking and is, I believe the highest imaginative order.⁶⁸

Ferren posited that in order to establish a new way of creating, one must rely on what he admits is a wholly unscientific term: *intuition*. However, he makes a clear distinction between an irresponsible intuition without any type of discernment and one that he calls *trained*, which carries with it its own control. The artist, he insisted, like the scientist, should use intuition cautiously and within certain boundaries. “The present swing toward intuition is possibly a temporary curative measure, but the painter today *does* use the intellect against the intellect.”⁶⁹ Ferren believed that the intellect was, as it always had been, the most valuable tool that humankind has, *but*, that it was a tool only, first to orient the mind toward creative perception.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 18.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 36.

Ferren divided creative thinking into three distinct phases, which were universal in their purpose and could be considered valid for either science or art. The first phase he described as “intellectual-sensibility” phase and consists essentially of data collection, which for an artist could include his/her education and development of visual literacy. The second phase is the creative act and, as the artist notes, and requires, at least on some level, a “leap of faith” by the practitioner “in a possible unity of apparently intractable elements into a new synthesis.”⁷⁰ Again, however, he warns that a clear distinction must be drawn between a mystic and the true creative worker. It is in the third phase, though,

where the insight releases the energy necessary to implement itself and give it flesh. It is in this third period that occurs the conventional white heat of inspiration which is, actually, a mad scramble to fit all the little pieces together in their new order.⁷¹

“Art and Creative Thinking” was the first published paper by Ferren and the first significant writing by him since before the war. It provides some insight into his artistic practice as well as indicating his desire to participate in a discourse that extended far beyond the walls of the Club or the environs of 9th Street.

Exhibiting on Both Coasts

Not long after the Industrial Research Institute conference, Ferren had a solo exhibition at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art from July 6 to July 27. It would be the first museum exhibition of his work since 1939 and consisted of both oil paintings and watercolors (fig. 4.6). While the exhibition was a modest show with only regional

⁷⁰ Ibid, 39.

⁷¹ Ibid.

coverage, it was, nevertheless, reviewed favorably by collage artist, professor of art at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and art critic for the *Santa Barbara News Press*, William Dole (1917–1983).⁷² In the review, Ferren is quoted explaining the inspiration for the imagery found in his watercolors:

Few things come into the world already named. These water colors are inspired by natural phenomena, plants, trees, flowers, landscape and sunlight, but their imagery also points inward and their meaning exists for me, at present, on a non-verbal level. Therefore, rather than misname them, I have not given them titles and I ask the spectator to contribute his own association if he feels the need.⁷³

He was speaking of works such as *Color Abstract IV* (fig. 4.7) which was included in the exhibition and may be seen in the left side of the installation shot (fig. 4.6). The center of the composition is occupied by a branch-like armature around which broad areas of flat color are interspersed with abstract calligraphic ciphers. The work is indeed suggestive of vegetal or plant forms but ultimately remains completely abstract. In his review, Dole notes that the oil paintings are much larger and have specific titles, but are equally suggestive of flora and natural forms as the watercolors. Dole's assessment of the exhibition was summarized as such: "In some ways these paintings resemble those of the School of New York, but their foundation in an observation of, and a response to, nature gives them a human value of true validity."⁷⁴

In late February 1953, Ferren had his first solo show in New York in four years at the Iolas Gallery. Owned by the Egyptian-born Green art dealer Alexander Iolas, who was also advising Eleanor Ward, the gallery primarily showed work by

⁷² See William Dole interview with Gerald Nordland, December 6, 1975, February 21, 1977, Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, 1984.

www.archive.org/details/williamdoleoralh00dole. Accessed June 26, 2010.

⁷³ Quoted in William Dole, "Art in Review," *Santa Barbara News Press* July 13, 1952, newspaper clipping. John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

European Surrealists. It would be Ferren's first and last show with Iolas before joining the Stable Gallery. The paintings that Ferren made in the early 1950s are often characterized by gestural areas of color applied over a white ground. As he had articulated a year earlier how nature inspired the watercolors exhibited in Santa Barbara, these paintings also have references to nature as in *Contemplations of Geraniums* (fig. 4.8) in which lozenge-shaped areas of color and whiteness suggest an image. While they refer to nature much like the desert paintings, they are in no way illustrative of it in a pictorial sense. This was identified by the reviewer writing for *Art News* who compared Ferren's approach to that of Claude Monet in that works by both artists are concerned primarily with sight, even if in very different ways.

However,

the difference being that Monet went outdoors and looked and painted, while Ferren goes outdoors and looks and remembers, too, while he paints. He synthesizes memories and perceptions and uses flashes of intuition, projecting them in a flash of paint in which the touch counts.⁷⁵

Critic James Fitzsimmons, who had just published a detailed profile on Ferren in *The Art Digest*, further articulated how Ferren's paintings are related to nature:

There is a sense of stirring and expanding, of organic forces which rise, fall and intermingle in the middle air. Not that there are any horizons of illusion of deep space in Ferren's work: everything floats on the surface above the canvas, and if this is nature's *felt* reality, it is seen from above—or perhaps felt from inside. Ferren's art deals with intangibles but it is not itself intangible.⁷⁶

In *The Art Digest* the review was equally adulatory of the exhibition and even identified that the paintings the artist had produced in the summer of 1952, the so-

⁷⁵ F. P. "John Ferren," *Art News* 52 (March 1953): 38.

⁷⁶ James Fitzsimmons, "Art," *Arts and Architecture* 70 (April 1953): 34.

called “California paintings” of which *Contemplations on Geraniums* surely belongs, that had white ground. The fall and winter paintings had both a different texture and different tenor:

There is a reoccurrence of the void—now in luminous grays—which works also as a surface. Suspended in (or placed upon) the background grey are flamelike bursts of heavy calligraphy, active as both line and color. The result, particularly in one large grey painting, is spontaneous yet poised and controlled.⁷⁷

In November, *Art Digest* presented an article titled “Symposium: The Human Figure,” in which four artists who had worked in an abstract (or semi-abstract) manner commented on their return to the human form. The article was part of an ongoing series in which specific questions regarding issues in contemporary art were posed to four artists and their responses were published. The editors of the publication must have wanted to represent a variety of artists who had varying levels of representational approaches in their work as the respondents included Ferren as well as recently turned representational painter Balcomb Greene (1904–1990), scion of Social Realism, Raphael Soyer (1899–1987), and New York School painter who had also recently turned to painting the figure, Alfred Russell (1920–2007). The questions were presented with the position that the figure had re-emerged as a significant subject in contemporary art:

Recently several artists who have been painting in a non-representational style have rediscovered the human figure. Does this signify an exhaustion of the full potentialities of pure abstract forms in art? Does it suggest that non-objective art has limitations, or that there are contemporary needs which cannot be gratified by non-objective forms? Does it point to problems that inhere in non-objective idioms, or to problems peculiar to individual artists? Can the human figure be

⁷⁷ P. B., “Fifty-Seventh Street in Review,” *The Art Digest* Feb. 15, 1953, 18.

re-interpreted so that it will have validity for our time, and, if so, what forms might the new expressions of it take?⁷⁸

Of the four respondents Raphael Soyer was the one most strongly allied with painting the figure, and in fact, by the early 1950s had become perhaps the most prominent figure painter in New York. Soyer was also the oldest of the group and had been painting the figure longer than the others. His response to the questions reflected a polarized division among artists and critics and Soyer even questioned the notion of a “rediscovery” of the figure:

The ‘re-discoverers’ of the human figure are not unique. They serve as a barometer of the art atmosphere in the world today. There is a universal trend towards representationalism and humanism. The roving reporters who supply our art magazines with news of the latest art developments in Paris and elsewhere, have, in their partisanship, seen fit to ignore this movement.⁷⁹

Soyer’s comments reveal bitterness on the part of representational artists, who, according to Soyer, have been largely overlooked in favor of abstraction.

Balcomb Greene, on the other hand, was an artist who had been central to the American Abstract Artists group in the 1930s. His turn toward representational painting must have been a curious decision for his fellow AAA painters. Greene’s primary contribution to the this dialogue, however, was a warning about the dangers of painting representationally:

A woman’s arm represented without meaning is an artistic sin. But the arm of a man’s shoulder, coming into focus and anatomically correct, can gather meanings which seem distinct but are undesirable. If the arm is only for design it is useless; the non-objectivists are correct. If the man’s shoulder becomes a policeman’s uniform with the cliché

⁷⁸ “Symposium: The Human Form,” *Art Digest*, November 15, 1953, 12–13, 32–33.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 33.

that he is a tool of the capitalist system, the painting was dated before it was made.⁸⁰

While Russell's comments on his return to the figure were fairly innocuous, Ferren had the most substantive things to say on the subject. His inclusion in the forum is by itself something of a curiosity, for while he had worked with the figure, or in a representational mode on-and-off since the late 1920s, in 1952 he was working in an entirely abstract manner, even painting in an experimental manner with various supports, including the synthetic translucent material Orlon in works such as *New York Summer Landscape* (fig. 4.9). Nevertheless, his contribution to the topic was significant and recalled the connections he made between the different fields of science and art in his presentation at the Industrial Research Institute conference the year before, wrote:

In a world where matter is conceived as energy and (to some of us) as spirit, the object or figuration must be newly seen. This can't be done by abdicating to the Western tradition of figure painting (did I hear right that we were independent of Europe?) or by foisting the abstract idiom on conventionally seen or conceived nature. It can't be Pollock on the surface and Bouguereau underneath and be valid for our time.⁸¹

Ferren made a key observation and a key distinction in his comments that was not touched on by the other respondents. He argued that use of the figure in art was more than simply use of the subject and implied an *explicitly* humanist idea (i.e. a philosophy). "The basic problem is not the figure. It is figuration, the use of the object, any object, including the figure. At the same time the use of the figure as a

⁸⁰ Ibid, 12.

⁸¹ Ibid, 13.

central theme is more than the use of a subject. It implies a *philosophy*.”⁸² This “philosophy” was rooted in existential thought and Ferren recognized that “Abstraction gave us the fresh plastic truths of our time. Abstract expressionism gave a new range to the sensibility involving the whole, ‘existential’ man. Its humanism is implicit not explicit.”⁸³ This idea, which had its roots in a post-war re-appraisal on humankind’s existence as well as a reconsideration of the figure in art (that pre-dated this particular article), would ferment over the course of the decade, and eventually become the central theme in Peter Selz’s seminal exhibition *New Images of Man* at MoMA in 1959.

Ferren Paints a Picture

Over the course of the next three years Ferren continued to exhibit in both gallery and museum shows, and was the subject of two articles, the previously mentioned profile by James Fitzsimmons that was helpful in bringing a wider audience to Ferren’s complex background and the February 1954 article in *Art News*, “Ferren Paints a Picture,” by Lawrence Campbell.⁸⁴ Campbell’s article was part of a series primarily devoted to New York School painters and the author (which varied from issue to issue) would document the creation of a painting from start to finish. They were intended to detail the workings of artists and helped illustrate both visually and verbally, a singular artistic practice. Campbell, noted that during the academic year Ferren was effectively rendered a “Sunday painter” due to his positions at

⁸² Ibid. Emphasis mine.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Lawrence Campbell, “Ferren Paints a Picture,” *Art News* 52 (February 1954): 34-37, 52, 54.

Cooper Union, Queens College, and classes in his studio on Eighth Street. However, the author colorfully detailed what occurred once the semester ended:

early in June comes deliverance. With wife, baby and camping gear stowed away in his car, he heads for Highway 66 and California, to Brentwood, a suburb of Los Angeles, where he has his summer home. On the way they camp out in the desert. This annual contact with a region filled with wild animals by night, empty by day, never fails to wash out of Ferren's mind the influences of the East.⁸⁵

For readers of the article it helped to show just how nature plays a seminal role in the creation of his work, a notion that we will return to at the end of this chapter. The first peek into the artist's creative process was described by Campbell as:

For several hours on that sunny morning of June 24—it was six A.M.—the 60 by 48 inch bare white canvas of Belgian linen remained untouched. . . . While apparently taking it easy, relaxing in a folding chair, Ferren was really making a hundred starts in the privacy of his mind. These first ideas came from the impressions of the things around him (the overwhelming confusion of gently-stirring trees, geraniums, early morning smells, sunlight) and from the memories of recently painted pictures.⁸⁶

In the end, Campbell gallantly if unsuccessfully, intended to explain to his readers the ideas behind the artist's process and he noted that “according to Ferren, structure is ‘the informing idea or spirit behind the pattern which holds all the elements in place.’ This demand for insight or imagination, so opposed to the chore, once believed essential, of portraying accurately observed reality, has its counterpart in the realms of biology and physics.”⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 36.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 37.

In February 1955 Ferren had a significant solo exhibition of his work at the Stable Gallery. It would be his first solo exhibition at that gallery and was likely a direct result of his involvement with the series of 9th Street exhibitions. Due to the gallery's inseparable connection to many seminal Abstract Expressionists, this exhibition was the most significant gallery show for Ferren since his 1938 exhibition at the Pierre Matisse Gallery. Showing a new body of large-scale work, it signaled his return to the New York scene and prompted critic Campbell, a year removed from his last article of Ferren, to write: "John Ferren has his best show in a career of many shows. Some of these wall-sized paintings continue the direction of about a year ago....But these canvases are now much denser, more profoundly exhilarating."⁸⁸ In general the works shown at this exhibition were more dynamic in their compositions than previous paintings with densely explosively gestural areas of color such as *Sierra* (fig. 4.10) and *The Conquest of Mexico* (fig. 4.11), both of which were included.

This body of paintings was the most dramatic color statement by Ferren since the 1930s and it was noted by the press. Campbell wrote glowingly that:

Ferren seems to be able to make colors do exactly what he wants them to do, in defiance of the so-called laws. In one painting, a green (according to him the hardest color to control) unexpectedly plays the positive role of a red. By emphasizing here, dulling there, or shaking the whole into discord, he achieves a series of sealed-in experiences, self-contained, unique, yet each ultimately a perfect union.⁸⁹

The critic writing for *Arts Digest* was slightly less effusive in his praise, but nevertheless recognized the artist's skillful and effective use of color:

⁸⁸ L[awrence]. C[ampbell]., "John Ferren," *Art News* 53 (February 1955): 57.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Sierra and *Summer's Night* belong to this group of color-dramas, as do two tasteful, untitled works. These stand out as serene statements in contrast to the group titled *Summit, Conquest of Mexico* and *Season's Figuration* in which he uses clusters of violent pigment exploding from the tube to point up their character. When Ferren feels compelled to add surface excitement or curving whips of paint to heighten or underline the tensions his taste sometimes deserts him, but on the whole these are richer works than most.⁹⁰

The exhibition was a critical success and a declarative statement of Ferren's re-emergence in the New York art world. It was also the harbinger of a successful year to come.

Not long after his show at the Stable Gallery, Ferren wrote an article for *Art News*, "Stable State of Mind," that coincided with the Fourth Annual 9th Street Show in which Ferren was also an exhibitor. As he had with the inaugural 9th Street show, he once again helped organize the exhibition as a juror that year along with James Brooks, Nicholas Carone, Perle Fine, Elaine de Kooning, Conrad Marca-Relli, Jack Tworkov, Ibram Lassaw, and James Rosati (1911–1988). Ferren recognized that Abstract Expressionism had surpassed adolescence and advanced to a mature state. "Stable State of Mind" was the first attempt by him to bring some clarification to the movement while also detailing the specifics of the organization of the exhibition:

It [the show] is a mirror turned toward the creative activity of a group, a group that is singularly impervious to the traps of academic procedure; a group that works, produces, breeds, interbreeds and, by such showings as this, marks a place which permits the middle-of-the-roaders to find their cherished and critically protected middle of the road.⁹¹

In 1955 Abstract Expressionism was certainly at or near its peak in terms of creative development. Thus, it is ironic that Ferren mentions the imperviousness of

⁹⁰ L. G. "John Ferren," *Arts Digest* February 1, 1955, 22.

⁹¹ John Ferren, "A Stable State of Mind," *Art News* 54 (May 1955): 22.

the movement to the traps of academic procedure considering that this very situation prompted him to write “Epitaph for an Avant-Garde” only three years later.

Nevertheless, he was compelled to give a brief explanation of the show and noted that, “Color is on the upswing. The dialogue between color and composition is an ancient and difficult one, more so when used not descriptively or decoratively but in the psychological expressiveness that the Abstract Expressionist attitude demands.”⁹²

By June 1956 the success that Ferren had been enjoying was crowned by the purchase of his *Red and Blue* (fig. 4.12) by the University of Nebraska Art Galleries (now the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery). The news was reported nationally in an article in *Time* magazine titled “What the Museums Are Buying.”⁹³ What is most illuminating about the purchase of Ferren’s work by the University is not necessarily that it was purchased, but the reasons behind its purchase as Norman Geske, then director of the University Art Galleries, explained:

This [purchase of the Ferren] was an attempt to place ourselves up to date. We felt this was particularly brilliant. Ferren works with a full recognition of the accidental values you can get into a painting. He sometimes drops liquid paint on a canvas; the drops spread themselves. *Red and Blue* is pretty much that sort of thing. In general it looks highly accidental, but to those of us who know better it represents a good deal of sensitivity.⁹⁴

Thus, for Geske, Ferren represented a strong example of contemporary painting and without using the term Abstract Expressionism (perhaps deliberately so), Geske acquired a work that represented one strain of the movement.

⁹² Ibid., 63.

⁹³ Anon., “What the Museums are Buying” *Time* June 25, 1956, p. 72-3.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 72.

The Trouble with Harry, Vase Paintings, and Vertigo

As noted earlier, the Ferren family began to spend their summers in Los Angeles in the early 1950s. Ferren's brother Roy lived there, and the city was familiar to the artist as his childhood home. It was the beginning of nearly a decade of mostly summer activity in the region that included a number of solo exhibitions as well as a series of teaching assignments. By the middle of the decade it also led to the development of the artist's relationship with film director Alfred Hitchcock, ultimately resulting in his participation in the production of two of Hitchcock's films: *The Trouble with Harry* and *Vertigo*.

It's unclear how Ferren met Hitchcock, but during the decade Ferren became more and more associated with the West Coast, Southern California in particular. Extremely knowledgeable about art after having studied art history at the University of London, the British-born director was also an avid collector and had incorporated artwork into his films from early on.⁹⁵ It is also possible that Hitchcock had seen Ferren's 1952 exhibition at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. For the director, working with artists was nothing new as he had collaborated with visual artists on specific scenes in his films before and in 1944 had hired Spanish Surrealist Salvador Dalí (1904–1989) to design the nightmare sequence for Gregory Peck's character John Ballantine in *Spellbound*.

Ferren was hired by Hitchcock in 1954 to create a series of paintings, charcoal sketches, and pastels for use in *The Trouble with Harry*, a dark comedy based on the novel by Jack Trevor Story. One of the director's least-successful films, it follows the

⁹⁵ Sue Taylor, "The Man Who Saw Too Much—Hitchcock," *Art in America* (June 2001): 37 et passim.

story of a small town in Vermont in which the discovery of a dead body leads the three main characters to the assumption that each of them had somehow been responsible for the man's death. Ferren's paintings and drawings were to be by the hand of Sam Marlow, an artist and one of the main characters in the film, played by John Forsythe. Many of the paintings verge between representational works and complete abstraction and they played a central role in establishing Forsythe's character.

Marlow is a local modern artist in a small rural town in Vermont who attempts to sell his works in the general store and post office to tourists, with very little success. The paintings serve as a conspicuous modern counter to the modest rural country life in this small town. It is unclear what happened to the paintings after production of the film was completed, but stylistically they recall other works by the artist from the late-1940s through the mid-1950s. Clear compositional and chromatic similarities are revealed when a still from the movie (fig. 4.13) is compared to a concurrent work such as *Branches* (1955, fig. 4.14). Film historian Susan Felleman has observed that Ferren's paintings for the film were intended to serve a specific function beyond that of mere prop. She posits that Hitchcock had recognized Ferren's interest in and ability with color and used it accordingly:

As modernist, abstract works, of the mid-century, they are indices of freedom, sensual experience, psyche and spirit. Color and abstract form are difficult to describe and to discuss, but they are felt. Ferren's pictures participate here, albeit whimsically, in a dialogue about art and value that in fact had some urgency in the post-war period and they convey something of Hitchcock's identity as a visual artist.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Susan Felleman, "The World Gone Wiggy: Color and Disorientation in *The Trouble with Harry*," unpublished paper, 2009. n.p.

In addition, as noted previously, Ferren's paintings at this time (and indeed, those in the film) were sometimes transgressive works that crossed back and forth between representation and abstraction. Felleman notes that the paintings "function as surrogates for us, and perhaps for Hitchcock, too—whose favorite painter, Paul Klee, like Ferren, made somewhat mysterious and vividly chromatic pictures that shift between and across abstraction and figuration."⁹⁷

Building on the momentum from his first show at the Stable Gallery, Ferren had his second and even more impactful show there in February 1957. Once again he was presenting an entirely new body of work that signaled the return of recognizable imagery. These were Ferren's "Vase" paintings that had as their central form a large curving symmetrical shape around which the composition was built, often overlaid with areas of gestural abstract painting. This return to representation was something of a risk for the artist as Irving Sandler noted in his review in *Art News*: "John Ferren may provoke some controversy as to where he fits among Abstract-Expressionists, but this veteran exhibitor shows a courageous commitment to probe deeply into his art."⁹⁸

Nevertheless, the show elicited numerous positive reviews. Nearly all who wrote on the show noted the symmetrical nature of works such as *The Vase* (fig. 4.15) which depicts a vertically-oriented vase shape with two areas of gestural painting that provide two horizontal compositional counters. In linking the forms found in his paintings to antiquity, one reviewer wrote:

Think of the central in art, that is, the perfectly symmetrical centralized composition—where does it occur? Barring Byzantine-

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ I.[rving] S.[andler], "John Ferren," *Art News* (February 1957): 12.

derived Romanesque examples, Byzantium is really the first stop, working backwards; thence it is necessary to go eastward or jump back to archaic Greek sculpture and on into primitive art. Which is by way of saying that one scarcely realizes how addicted to asymmetry and *contrapposto* we are until confronted with a radical departure such as John Ferren offers in his new work, a series of large canvases all of which are based on total centrality or on equilibrium through duplication.⁹⁹

Robert Coates, known for coining the term “Abstract Expressionism” and writing for

The New Yorker, noted that,

John Ferren’s collection is his first in two years, and it marks both a change and a signal advance. His design has been tightened appreciably and his symbolism made clearer, while his color has become infinitely richer and more glowing.¹⁰⁰

The greatest acclaim, however, came from Dore Ashton, who identified two significant issues the artist addressed in this body of work.

In his strange, absolutely personal canvases, Ferren has tackled two major problems: He has returned to the identifiable object, trying to endow it with symbolic significance, and he has utilized a compositional device long neglected, that of absolute symmetry.¹⁰¹

While Ferren had employed representational imagery a decade earlier, Ashton recognized that this imagery had a specific metaphysical dimension and stated,

In choosing the great vessel as bearer of his feelings, Ferren opens his paintings to a host of associations since it can be interpreted as crucible of life, metaphor for plenty, or ritualistic object. . . . There is even the presence (probably instinctively selected) of the “madala,” the oldest symbol in existence for the magic circle of life.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ M.[artica] S[awin]. “John Ferren,” *Arts Magazine* (February 1957): 54.

¹⁰⁰ Robert M. Coates, “The Art Galleries,” *The New Yorker* February 23, 1957, 80.

¹⁰¹ D.[ore] A.[shton], “Art: Object and Order,” *New York Times*, February 15, 1957, 49.

¹⁰² Ibid.

This was a prescient identification as it was approximately six years before the “mandala” shape appears in his paintings of the early to mid-1960s. Aside from Sandler, Ashton was one of the critics who knew Ferren well and was able to expand on the genesis of these works,

Ferren’s arrival at the idealism of these paintings, where flux is subordinated to the abstract notion of stasis, was prepared by extensive search. He has always been an avid reader, wandering through volumes of poetry and philosophy.¹⁰³

In the summer of 1957, approximately two years after his work on *The Trouble with Harry*, Hitchcock asked Ferren to participate in the production of another film, this one titled *From Amongst the Dead*. During the years since *The Trouble with Harry*, the prolific director had produced two additional projects: *The Man Who Knew Too Much* and *The Wrong Man* and had wasted no time preparing for this new production. As in *Spellbound*, *Vertigo* (as *From Amongst the Dead* would soon be re-titled) would have a dramatic nightmare sequence that Hitchcock wanted an artist to design. The director used much of the same crew with this production that he had on *The Trouble with Harry*, many of who were legendary figures in their respective areas of film production. Hal Pereira (1905–1983) had worked as a production designer and art director on dozens of Hollywood projects and served as the principal oversight on Ferren’s design for the sequence. In addition, other Hitchcock regulars assisted in production of the sequence including associate producer Herbert Coleman, director of special photographic effects John Fulton, production manager Clarence Oscar “Doc” Erikson, and an additional art director, Henry Bumstead.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

As is sometimes the case with film production, certain sequences are treated as distinct undertakings, separate from the overall production, and the dream sequence in *Vertigo* was no exception. Further evidence of its importance to the film was the expediency with which production of it was undertaken. There was an initial meeting to discuss the necessities of the scene: a dream sequence in which the main character, an acrophobic John “Scottie” Ferguson, played by Jimmy Stewart, finds himself in the middle of a nightmarish sequence of events. In August, before the principal photography of the film even began, Ferren was at work on his designs, submitting sketches on August 27th. A few days later on September 4th many on the production crew convened and he presented an extensive four-page treatment for the scene. His original ideas for the scene were accepted with very little changes.¹⁰⁴

The finished scene lasted less than one and a half minutes, and begins with the camera close on Scottie’s face while he is sleeping, the entire screen overlaid with a pulsating translucent blue color. He wakes alarmed and we see through his eyes the image of a colorful nosegay that mirrors one purchased by Madeleine in a preceding scene as well as one held by Carlotta, the great-grandmother of the female lead, Madeleine (Kim Novak), in her portrait in the museum. The nosegay floats on a black background at the center of the screen that instantly morphs into a series of flying abstract shapes of different colors (fig. 4.16). This is followed by a series of brief vignettes that pulsate with alternating translucent colors red, yellow, and blue. Scottie then witnesses Carlotta, speaking with an unidentified character, and is subsequently

¹⁰⁴ Dan Aulier, *Vertigo: The Making of a Hitchcock Classic* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1998), 147–148. Despite the copious amount of scholarship that has been written on Hitchcock, there has been very little research on Hitchcock’s relationship with Ferren. Dominique Paini and Guy Cogeval, eds. *Hitchcock and Art : Fatal Coincidences*. Exh. cat. (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2000).

shown walking through a graveyard and coming upon an open grave, causing him to have vertigo. To transmit the feeling of falling Ferren superimposed Scottie's head over a design of radiating bands of black and white overlaid with the same pulsating translucent colors. The sensation of falling is heightened by a silhouette of Scottie falling away from the picture plane.

Just as Felleman has observed that the paintings in *The Trouble with Harry* were indices of psyche, color played a similar role in Ferren's scene for *Vertigo*. The extensive treatment for scene #215, as it was identified in the production notes, were incredibly detailed and began with what is identified in the proposal as the "Central Idea":

There is imposed on the entire sequence a Color Throb or Pulsation. This is a rhythmmed beat of colored light which swells from and recedes to darkness. This pulsation is rhythmmed to begin at a normal heart beat and gradually increase to a flutter in the final revelation. The color changes in hue from indigo blue through the spectrum as the sequence progresses, in psychological and emotional cohesion with the scene, ending in pure white and black at the end.¹⁰⁵

The importance of color and rhythm were essential to the success of the scene and Ferren underscored this in a series of footnotes on the memo explaining,

Once the color pulsation effect is achieved, the essentials are: a. Keying of the color changes at the psychologically proper time. By this, I do not mean the keying according to the script—but the duration of each color scene to permit the spectator to absorb the effect. a. The rhythm of the pulsation. The increase in tempo must be slow and deliberate (uninterrupted) throughout the sequence. If possible, this should be mechanically controlled. a. All dissolves, from one image to another, are lap dissolves.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 146.

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Ibid, 147.

In the initial color sequence of the scene Ferren employs shapes similar to those in his paintings of this period. The detailed proposal included a nearly second-by-second description with notes for the color scoring of the first shot and an even longer description of the second shot. Ferren apparently created storyboards for the sequence that are no longer extant. They are referred to in the proposal in the “Second Shot”:

Revealing the portrait of Carlotta. When Scottie’s head leaves screen, Carlotta’s head appears. Do not show Frame, just her head of the painting, and just as Scottie’s head was isolated so is Carlotta’s. During the dissolve, the color beat changes from indigo blue to a clear blue. Then, a chromatic change to yellow green takes place as indicated on Card #2 as the flowers replace the face.¹⁰⁷

This description immediately preceded the moment in the scene when the nosegay transforms into a group of floating shapes in a variety of colors (fig. 4.17), which is described in the proposal as an “explosion.” While most of the scene was designed by the artist to use color over actual film footage in order to create certain psychological effects, the floating shapes of this “explosion” are reminiscent of some of the artist’s quintessential abstractions from circa 1935–37. However, the effect of the explosion is more closely related to some of the quasi-representational vase paintings that the artist was creating at this time and had shown at the Stable Gallery earlier that year.

Hitchcock consciously used color, composition, and various effects just as an artist would use these elements to create a painting or sculpture. Furthermore, Hitchcock and his wife Alma, were avid collectors of contemporary art and had important works in their collection by Raoul Dufy, Paul Klee, and many other modern artists. Curator and historian Nathalie Bondil-Poupard has perceptively noted that,

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in *Ibid*, 146.

After conceiving of his subject in pictorial terms, with lines and strokes, then in terms of words and sentences, Hitchcock would compose his images and their timings, as a painter would.¹⁰⁸

One of the subjects in which Ferren and Hitchcock were no doubt able to connect most (aside from that of French wine) was the use of color in each of their works. Ferren acknowledged that color was one of the things that had separated him from the core Abstract Expressionist painters and when we think of the canonical works by Pollock, de Kooning (in the late 1940s), and Kline and others, nearly all composed their works primarily absent of color. When asked about this, Ferren responded,

Early abstract expressionism had to be somber, black and white, you see. And I can remember—I won't mention names—but people close to me would say, "Ferren, if you'd just paint black and white everything would go fine for you." I never could. I was involved with color.¹⁰⁹

For Hitchcock, the use of color in his films was extremely considered and deliberate and as the director himself stated,

One advantage of color is that it would give you more intermediate shades. I should never want to fill the screen with color: it ought to be used economically—to put new words into the screen's visual language when there's a need for them.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Nathalie Bondil-Poupard, "Alfred Hitchcock: An Artist in Spite of Himself," in Dominique Païni and Guy Cogeval, eds., *Hitchcock and Art: Fatal Coincidences* (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2000): 185.

¹⁰⁹ Ferren interview with Seckler, AAA.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Nathalie Bondil-Poupard, "Alfred Hitchcock: An Artist in Spite of Himself," 186.

Nature in Abstraction and The Provincetown Arts Festival

In 1958 Ferren's work was included in two significant group exhibitions. The first was an exhibition organized by John I. H. Baur, curator at the Whitney Museum of American art titled *Nature in Abstraction: The Relation of Abstract Painting and Sculpture to Nature in Twentieth-Century American Art*. Opening in January at the Whitney Museum, the ambitious and didactic exhibition included work by sixty-six artists and was intended to illustrate how nature has played a role in the creation of abstract imagery. Baur was as interested in the creative *process* as he was in the end result, and it is informative to consider his thesis in the context of imagery in Ferren's work in 1957 (especially in light of his recent *Vase* series), but also in the larger context of abstract painting in general. For the exhibition Baur selected Ferren's painting *The Garden* (fig. 4.18).

Baur identified two distinctly different attitudes toward nature by artists in the show: those who dealt with it consciously and those who were involved with it in more indirect or unconscious way, the latter group he most closely allied to Abstract Expressionism.¹¹¹ Furthermore, Baur divided the artists in the exhibition into three general groupings that addressed certain aspects of nature. They were: "The Land and the Waters"; "Light, Sky and Air"; and "Cycles of Life and Seasons." Ferren's painting was located amongst the "Cycles of Life and Seasons" and Baur identified him (rightly) as working from nature consciously. Baur had sent all of the artists a questionnaire regarding their particular relationship with nature, some of who

¹¹¹ John H. I. Baur, *Nature in Abstraction: The Relation of Abstract Painting and Sculpture to Nature in Twentieth-Century American Art*. Exh. cat. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958): 6 et passim.

responded extensively. Ferren, in typical fashion, was thorough and deliberate in his response, but found the curator's questions problematic.

In his response to the questionnaire Ferren states that *The Garden* is clearly a nature picture, and that some ideas in it could be traced to his earliest works but he also notes the difficulty he has accepting the strict dichotomies Baur had presented in his questions: conscious vs. subconscious and eternal qualities vs. objective.¹¹² Ferren stated,

In doing the *Garden*, and other pictures like it, I did believe in the total submersion in the experience in nature, submersion which includes a Lucritian impersonality and objectivity (in experiencing—not projection) and certainly an appetite for “certain eternal qualities or forces.” My picture was intended to convey the totality of this experience (which is not specific to our time or place).¹¹³

Ferren continued to detail the genesis of his compositions in an articulate, if somewhat loquacious way,

One thing—in this kind of painting—there are no ‘a priori’ concepts of a technical or stylistic sort, and I would add even aesthetic or philosophical. Although each artist carries a substitute of these with him before his canvas. It is ‘action painting’ if this term be expanded beyond the muscular to include the mind, emotions and sensibilities. This ‘free wheeling’ or lack of ‘a priori’ intellection has been part of our time. It postulates an intuitive approach to knowledge and/or nature, rather than a rational one. Zen if you wish.¹¹⁴

The second exhibition that was important for Ferren that year was the summer exhibition at the Provincetown Arts Festival titled *American Art of Our Time*.

Intended to be a survey of contemporary American art, Ferren scored a major success when his painting *The Birches* (fig. 4.19) was awarded the exhibition's first prize.

¹¹² John Ferren to John H. I. Baur, April 1, 1957, John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

Illustrated and reviewed in the *New York Post*, the reviewer, Bennett Schiff, wrote: “Ferren’s painting is a work of the sheerest grace and sensitivity, the color entrancing, the use of light and space masterful and the entire concept almost orientally mystical in effect. It has that kind of fluidity and grace. It is a lovely piece of work.”¹¹⁵ It was some consolation for the artist, but he confided to his diary: “First Prize Provincetown. This helps but is confirmation after the fact. I feel that I have emerged as an artist and a person from an incomprehensible tumult.”¹¹⁶

“Epitaph for an Avant-Garde”

By 1958 Abstract Expressionism’s bright star was fading. Indeed, two years earlier the movement had lost its flamboyant king, Jackson Pollock, and that same year the potency of the Club began to decline as Philip Pavia had left to start his publication, *It Is*, and Ferren, who had temporarily taken over the responsibilities of running the organization, subsequently handed them off to Irving Sandler.¹¹⁷ Thus, by the end of the decade, Abstract Expressionism was becoming ubiquitous as it began to be embraced by mainstream institutions, championed by many critics, and the topic of national and international group exhibitions that disseminated the style to a wide audience.

As a central figure in the development of abstraction in Paris during the 1930s and a core member of the Club and the New York School in New York during the late 1940s and early 1950s, Ferren found himself in the unique position of having witnessed and participated in the birth of two avant-garde movements. With Ferren’s

¹¹⁵ Bennett Schiff, “In the Art Galleries,” *New York Post Weekend Magazine* July 20, 1958, M12.

¹¹⁶ John Ferren Diary, July 17, 1958, John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

¹¹⁷ Irving Sandler, *A Sweeper-Up After Artists*, 14.

inside knowledge of avant-garde circles in Paris as well as his participation within the New York School he felt compelled to serve in the capacity of spokesperson for the movement. Some of his earlier publications of the decade such as “Art and Creative Thinking” (1952) and “An Artist Pursues the Reality Beneath Appearances” (1954) were general statements about the methods and intentions of contemporary artists, while other writings such as “The Bottle and I” and “Stable State of Mind” (1955) were meant to be a more poetic approach to writing the history of Abstract Expressionism and the scene on 9th Street. His last essay of the decade, however, “Epitaph for an Avant-Garde,” written in 1958, was a historical explanation of where Abstract Expressionism had come from as well as a signal that its days were waning.

Based on a talk that Ferren had given earlier that year at the University of Florida titled “The Role of the Avant-Garde,” renaming it “Epitaph” altered its meaning substantially, and suggested a wider discontentment within the movement itself. There had been many a bellwether prior to 1958 indicating that stagnation had settled over the movement and that its ubiquity had become part of its downfall. Sandler notes that Abstract Expressionism had become widely imitated by the late 1950s:

The very number of followers indicated that gesture painting was becoming a dead end. Most of them were clearly mediocrities, deficient in intelligence and ambition, churning out hand-painted illustrations of illustrations in *Art News* and *It Is*. . . . they were servile mimics who fabricated pictures in someone else’s manner, with minor deviations, or who mixed the styles of others, contriving a measure of ‘originality.’¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 206.

Among many artists and critics there seemed to be a consensus that by 1958 Abstract Expressionism had indeed become sterile and formulaic. This fatigue may partly explain why few attempted to explain its formation or genesis and the ideas underlying it at the time. And, unlike Clement Greenberg's famous declaration in 1939 in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," that it would be the avant-garde that would *save* American culture from the detrimental effects of kitsch, Ferren's "Epitaph" delivered it's early history under the presumption that the avant-garde, or at least this phase of it, had been expended.¹¹⁹

Ferren readily admitted from the outset in his article that by simply attempting to explain or detail the history of an avant-garde movement he was guilty of one of the central sins against its own etiquette. However, he felt compelled to give the movement a history from *within* and not leave it to critics and historians (who were not artists and thus, in his mind, not true participants) to write its history. He also concedes that his account is simply that of one person: "My attempt here is to explain the origin and motivations of this movement insofar as one single participant, limited by his own nature, experience and perception, can do so."¹²⁰ Ferren notes two key rebellions by artists against the Regionalists and Mexican Muralists, with whom the Americans of his generation felt they could not connect, and the second rebellion against the School of Paris, primarily the Cubists and Surrealists. He presciently notes that there were elements important to the group that came out of Surrealism, such as tapping into the subconscious and that this combined with other ideas that took hold,

¹¹⁹ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6 (Autumn 1939): 34-49. For what remains a good analysis of Greenberg's text see: Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983): 34 et passim.

¹²⁰ John Ferren, "Epitaph for an Avant-Garde," *Arts* (November 1958): 24.

such as “the two-dimensional surface of Cubism, the free form of Miró and Kandinsky, the primitivism of Klee, the end-all of Mondrian, the color of Matisse and Bonnard, the genius pure and simple of Picasso.”¹²¹

The great break, however, and one that allowed the Americans to step out of the shadow of the Europeans according to Ferren, was one that was rooted in an existential realization.

It is no accident that contemporary painting used lots of black and white. It didn't come from the sunlit fields—it came from white lofts in dirty buildings on dirty streets and from the inner resources of the mind. Its beginning was urban, of the city. It was an art of the individual, lonely and in rebellion, even if the rebellion was muted.¹²²

Art historian Stephen Polcari characterized the movement using similarly humanist-based language:

Central to Abstract Expressionist art and thought is the representation of the fundamentals of human life, which the artists conceived of as filled with disorder, suffering, conflict, and terror as well as sublime joy and hope. They portrayed human emotional history as a patter of universal and endless struggle and conflict, which began in the ancient/primitive/prehistoric past. Abstract Expressionist art reveals a quest for security, continuity, and harmony in a world of inexorable and unavoidable chaos and tragedy.¹²³

Ferren's “Epitaph” was one of the earliest attempts to understand the formulation of the movement and it is telling that he wrote it using a second-person plural voice. The article does have similarities with Harold Rosenberg's seminal essay “The American Action Painters.”¹²⁴ Both avoid explicitly naming Abstract Expressionists and both make reference to an existential situation as a fundamental

¹²¹ Ibid, 25.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 34.

¹²⁴ Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” *Art News* (Dec. 1952): 22.

aspect of the movement. Rosenberg famously described the canvas as “an arena in which to act...”¹²⁵ while Ferren, perhaps less poetically, wrote that

Our new arrangement was, quite simply, no arrangement. We kept all the elements of painting—those that we knew or felt—suspended, as it were. We faced the canvas with the Self, whatever that was, and we painted. We faced it unarmed, so to speak. The only control was that of truth, intuitively felt.¹²⁶

Ironically, while Ferren was explaining the movement and acting as a vociferous champion of its style, he was simultaneously being excluded from its canonical formation. At the same time as his article “Epitaph” was published in *Arts Magazine* a large group show of Abstract Expressionism, organized by the Museum of Modern Art, was traveling through eight European countries. As Rene d’Haroncourt, director of the museum, noted in the Foreword: “Most of the artists have been shown in the Museum, but even in New York we have not until now undertaken so comprehensive a survey [of Abstract Expressionism].”¹²⁷ Indeed, many of the key figures of the movement were included such as Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Philip Guston, Grace Hartigan (the only woman), Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and others. There were seventeen artists in all, hardly a comprehensive survey.

Has the Situation Changed?

Following closely on the heels of Ferren’s “Epitaph” article and only further illustrating the “crisis” of Abstract Expressionism, a panel was held at the Club on the

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ John Ferren, “Epitaph for an Avant-Garde,” 25.

¹²⁷ *The New American Painting As Shown in Eight European Countries*. Exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1958): 5.

current state of the movement. Moderated by Irving Sandler, the panel discussion, “Has the Situation Changed?” included curator, Thomas B. Hess, founding director of MoMA, Alfred Barr, and seminal critic and champion of Abstract Expressionism, Harold Rosenberg, to examine the current state of Abstract Expressionism. What Ferren alluded to in “Epitaph” but never fully articulated was expressed at the Club and even expanded upon in print with a multi-part article that appeared in *Art News* in 1959 and based on the panel.¹²⁸ “Is there a New Academy?” posed the question to a variety of artists, both painters and sculptors, and asked whether Abstract Expressionism had become an academic movement.¹²⁹ In the opening remarks for “Part I” Sandler clarifies that the term academic suggests a certain type of establishmentarianism that removes individuality and replaces it with formulaic repetition.

The term itself [Academy] has been used with increasing frequency, usually by critics who always have opposed the new kinds of painting, and it has been used in the derogatory sense, implying that so-called Abstract-Expressionist idioms, whose primary value has been individuality, have been turned into prescriptions for painting and sculpture.¹³⁰

While the artists questioned in Part I could not agree on the exact meaning of the term academic, they were unanimous in their agreement that a new Academy existed. Those canvassed in the first part included Helen Frankenthaler (b. 1928), Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967), Landes Lewitin (1892–1966), Nicholas Marsciano (1908–1991), Elaine de Kooning (1918–1989), and David Hare (1917–1992). Only one from

¹²⁸ Sandler has identified that by 1959 “gesture painting,” had become academic. See Sandler, “A Sweeper-Up After Artists,” 201.

¹²⁹ [Irving] H. S[andler], “Is There a New Academy?” *Art News* (Summer 1959): 34–37, 58–59.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

this group seemed to feel that a new Academy did not exist, Herman Cherry (1909–1992), while Norman Bluhm’s (1921–1999) response was unintelligible.

“Part II” of the article appeared in the September issue of *Art News* and included responses by artists Michael Loew (1907–1985), Milton Resnick, (1917–2004), Friedel Dzubas (1915–1994), Richard Stankiewicz (1922–1983), George Sugarman (1912–1999), Raymond Parker (1922–1990), Jack Tworkov (1900–1982), Alex Katz (b. 1927), and John Ferren. Sandler noted that the inquiry had taken a slightly different direction: “The enquête, originally begun in answer to implication that Abstract-Expressionists’ idioms have turned into formulas, led finally, on these pages, into a probing evaluation of the current scene.”¹³¹

Most of the conclusions drawn by this second group of respondents, much like the first group, was that yes, there was indeed a new Academy. Ferren concurred with an amusing if fictitious anecdote in which he recalled:

It was nasty outside but perfectly lovely in my studio. I had three calls from Europe. They want some of my early, rough, “real gutsy” and American things. Curiously, they demanded a certain speed limit—325 miles per hour. Black and white, of course, with possibly one other color, providing that it is dirty. Oh! another thing . . . there must be nothing “painterly” about them.¹³²

He continues with a tongue-in-cheek assessment of the situation.

It [the new Academy] is clearly understood as a good, generous public service and it certainly is when you think what people would buy if they weren’t shown the way . . . and everyone involved vociferously denies any involvement and this, of course, keeps the fun clean.¹³³

¹³¹ Irving Sandler, “Is there a New Academy?” *Art News* 58 (September 1959): 36.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 39. Ferren’s reference to speed recalls his earlier comment in “A Stable State of Mind,” in which he noted, “The de Kooning whiplash line, whose speed I estimate at, roughly, ninety-four-and-one-half miles per hour, is seen here and there but is being used within the speed limits.” Ferren, “A Stable State of Mind,” 23.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

Ferren's tone is quite different here than it was in "Epitaph" and instead of providing an exegesis of the avant-garde he presents an amusing evaluation of the current situation, but still with important ideas. He writes,

Some of these guys [in the "new Academy"] think that there is a permanent revolution or something and that other ideas or emotions can be expressed in our movement beyond those we have already brought forth out of the sweat of our brows in those terrible years when the magazines ignored us. There is something intellectual about ideas anyway. Didn't we say that our idea was no idea? And then some jerk said that no idea was an idea. But everyone knows that brains hamper a real artist and that there is something lovable about our floundering for the right word or shape or color. After all, we made floundering an art form and we are loved all over the world for it; our academy is very keen on this.¹³⁴

The decade concluded for Ferren with both success and disappointment. His relationship with the Stable Gallery ended with his fourth and final solo show of watercolors and oil studies there from March 8 to April 3, 1959. In June, however, he had an exhibition of his paintings at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Opening on June 29th the exhibition included a group of recent work by the artist and also presented a teaching opportunity, as he was invited to go and speak on abstract art at the university. In the review published in *The Milwaukee Journal* the review noted the artist's use of both color and symbolism in his work,

By far the most expansive use of color, with splashes and streaks that play against each other or blend together is provided in "Augustana." This is a fiery painting, lightened with planes of bright yellow.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Donald Key, "Ferren's Style is Bold, Colorful," *The Milwaukee Journal* July 5, 1959, pt. 5, 6.

And, he noted that this “New York artist will come to the UWM campus Monday and will be featured in a one week institute on contemporary painting. At 11:30 a.m. Thursday, he will lecture on ‘The Ideas of the American Avant-Garde.’”¹³⁶

¹³⁶ Ibid.

Chapter Five
An Art Ambassador, Dynamic Symmetry, and Radiosity, 1960–1970

The last decade of Ferren's life was one of the most creative and productive periods for the artist. By 1960 he had become a well-respected art educator as a professor at Queens College and in addition to his classes, he lectured throughout the country on abstract and contemporary art and many of these lectures formed the basis for a series of articles published during this period. He was also finally free from a disabling transnational identity. In 1968 the Ferren family sold their house in Brentwood, California and moved full-time to East Hampton, New York. As a community that had been an outpost of the New York art world for many years, Ferren joined a large group of New York School and other artists who had relocated to the beach town.¹

Ferren's painting underwent a significant transformation in the 1960s. For him, this period was characterized by an increasing shift away from a gestural approach to painting and toward a more hardedge geometric style, due in large part to three primary reasons. These included (in no specific order) (1) the artist's explorations of radiosity, essentially the radiation of a color, both emitted and reflected, from a surface; (2) his increasing interest in dynamic symmetry; and (3) a one-year appointment as Artist-in-Residence for the State Department in Beirut Lebanon. Ferren's stylistic development can also be understood within the larger context of the fundamental shift in the aesthetic paradigm by the early- to mid-1960s.

¹ Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner were some of the earliest of Ferren's contemporaries to move out to East Hampton. They were soon joined by Alfonso Ossorio, Conrad Marca-Relli, and Wilfrid Zogbaum, who sold parcels of his land to Ferren and Willem de Kooning. See Helen A. Harrison and Constance Ayers Denne, *Hamptons Bohemia: Two Centuries of Artists and Writers on the Beach* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002): 76.

Painter Philip Pearlstein noted that “The sixties were characterized by Pop Art, constructions of all kinds, hard-edge abstraction and my own kind of the hard realism—it’s all ‘hard’—sharp, clear, unambiguous.”² These late stylistic developments were unfortunately never fully realized due to Ferren’s premature death in 1970.

The decade was an exciting and sometimes frustrating period for the artist as his final show at the Stable Gallery in 1959 was his last gallery exhibition for three years. By this time many had felt that Abstract Expressionism had run its course, and Ferren concurred. Abstract Expressionism’s demise had been swirling around in the discourse among artists and critics for a few years and as noted had included a series of articles (such as Ferren’s “Epitaph”) and in the form of panel discussions at the Club. Ferren had been one of the first artists to articulate that the once groundbreaking style had become formulaic. He remained intent on revealing truths about his generation, which may not have won him the most favor from some.

Sandler observed:

Fellow artists scorned conventional society and its stifling mores in the Eisenhower era and in this sense were rebels. Within this group, John was a gadfly, quick to point out hypocrisies. For example, he twitted his colleagues on their boastful claims to being avant-garde, pointing out that abstract expressionism had become ‘established’—and he was one of the first to recognize that it had.³

In 1962 he joined the Rose Fried Gallery, where he would show until 1968 when he switched to A. M. Sachs Gallery just before his death in 1970. Ferren articulated this period to Dorothy Seckler that it was a conscious decision on his part,

² Quoted in Irving Sandler, *American Art of the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988): 13.

³ Sandler, *A Sweeper-Up After Artists*, 101.

I just pulled out. Now that can be a neurotic stimulus or it can be a very rational one. I'm inclined to think now it was more rational than neurotic although there may have been neurotic influences in it.⁴

Ferren's cultural horizon was broadened significantly when, in 1963, he was chosen by the U.S. State Department to serve as the first Artist-in-Residence in Beirut, Lebanon. This was an experimental government program that was part of the larger context of cultural diplomacy and the competition for allegiances in the Middle East at the height of the Cold War. For ten months the artist and his family lived in Beirut and the experience had a profound effect on his work. It served as an additional catalyst in his shift away from a gestural approach toward more hardedge forms, in some ways reminiscent of his work from the 1930s. Ferren was able to continue his interest in color and optics in these paintings and they laid the foundation for what would become his most innovative and experimental works in more than thirty years, created late in the decade.

In addition to his stay in the Middle East, his return to a more hard-edge style and a focus on color relationships was aided by the rediscovery of a cache of his early work from the nineteen thirties in Paris that Ferren had presumed lost. On his way back to the U.S., traveling through Paris from Lebanon, Ferren learned his former paint supplier, Lefevre-Foinet, had preserved a large portion of this body of work. It was something of a revelation to him and was in many ways a motivational factor in the production of new work.

By the final years of the decade he was working with an experimental and innovate use of color and optical effects, this time in three-dimensions, and

⁴ Ferren interview with Seckler, AAA.

incorporating radiosity, or reflective light. While they were inherently sculptural by the nature of their three-dimensionality, these works are not sculpture in the conventional sense but instead should be considered as part of a wider development at this time to expand the boundaries of painting. Ferren's work from this period is little known and his premature death ultimately prevented him from bringing it to full maturity. What is significant however is that unlike his Abstract Expressionist contemporaries, many of who were continuing to work in a gestural style such as Willem de Kooning, James Brooks, and others Ferren's work from this period can be connected to other experimental painting that emerged at the end of the 1960s by a younger generation of artists. Ferren's switch from the Rose Fried Gallery to the A. M. Sachs Gallery helped facilitate this development and brought him into contact with a number of younger experimental painters who showed at the gallery including Washington Color Field painters Thomas Downing (1928–1985), Howard Mehring (1931–1978), and Leon Berkowitz (1919–1987) as well as artists such as Cesar Paternosto (b. 1931) and Jane Kaufman (b. 1938). The A. M. Sachs Gallery also showed work by artists who worked in three-dimensions with a strong color-based ideology such as Tal Streeter (b. 1934) and Lyman Kipp (b. 1929). These associations could have only likely further encouraged Ferren to explore the third dimension in his work.

Leading A Charge

The beginning of the decade got off to an exciting and confrontational start for John Ferren. John Canaday had become chief art critic for the *New York Times* in

1959 and began what was considered by many New York artists, something of a crusade against Abstract Expressionism. Canaday was inflammatory out of the gate and in his first article for the paper titled “Happy New Year! Thoughts on Critics and Certain Painters as the Season Opens,” published on September 6, 1959, he essentially committed what Sandler has described as a character assassination against the New York School.⁵ While he acknowledged the style of Abstract Expressionism to be the dominant one of the day (even though many artists and critics within the movement were already pronouncing it dead), and even admitted that some practitioners of the style were competent artists, he was, nevertheless, generalizing and acerbic in his comments, raising the ire of the more progressive elements of the New York art world. Canaday wrote:

There can be no objection to abstract expressionism as one manifestation of this complicated time of ours. The best abstract expressionists are as good as ever they were—a statement not meant to carry a concealed edge. But as for the freaks, the charlatans and the misled who surround this handful of serious and talented artists, let us admit at least that the nature of abstract expressionism allows exceptional tolerance for incompetence and deception.⁶

These remarks incensed artists of the New York School by suggesting that those in the public “have been had” by the artists. Canaday even pointed a finger at the critics, who he insinuated, had been negligent of their duties,

Ever since poor Ruskin ruined himself by accusing Whistler of throwing a pot of paint in the public’s face and losing the libel suit that Whistler clapped on him, timid critics have been wiping the paint out of their eyes with a smile.⁷

⁵ John Canaday, “Happy New Year! Thoughts on Critics and Certain Painters as the Season Opens,” *New York Times* Sept. 6, 1959, p. X16.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Thus, his attack was not only directed at the artists themselves and the work that they produced, but also at those critics who helped support them. Furthermore, Canaday denied any advancement for the movement or that it might lead to greater developments: “That we will go forward from abstract expressionism seems unlikely, since it is more and more evident that these artists have either reached the end of a blind alley or painted themselves into a corner.”⁸

It was a bold-faced affront to Abstract Expressionism and rightly infuriated many in the art world. In January 1960 Irving Sandler met with Ferren to organize a counter-attack against Canaday and defend the honor of abstract artists across the country.⁹ This was the first in a series of meetings among those who sought to respond to the article. The official response would not come for another year. During the interim, however, the attacks by the conservative critic continued in the *Times* and likely only fueled the fire of the artists. A large group of artists, critics, scholars, and collectors finally responded to Canaday in print in February 1961. “A Letter to the New York Times” opened by stating,

Reading Mr. John Canaday’s columns on contemporary art, we regard as offensive his consistent practice of going beyond discussion of exhibitions in order to impute to living artists en masse, as well as to critics, collectors and scholars of present-day American art, dishonorable motives, those of cheats, greedy lackeys or senseless dupes.¹⁰

The response cited five specific quotations from Canaday articles in which the authors claimed that the critic used excessively inflammatory or derogatory language in discussing contemporary art. The letter acknowledged that any critic is certainly

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Sandler, *A Sweeper-Up After Artists*, 226.

¹⁰ “A Letter to the New York Times,” *New York Times* Feb. 26, 1961, X19.

entitled to his or her opinion about any given work of art, but in this instance, “his terminology of insults is scarcely adequate to describe emerging art works and tendencies, and we scorn this waging of a polemical campaign under the guise of topical reporting.”¹¹ In fact, the group suggested that by employing such incendiary practices that he was actually dodging a much greater responsibility as an art critic, noting that,

Every style and movement in art history contains examples of work by imitative or uninteresting artists. To keep referring to these in order to impugn the whole, instead of attempting to deal seriously with the work of the movement, is the activity not of a critic but of an agitator.¹²

The letter was signed by forty-nine artists and art world luminaries and in addition to Ferren and Sandler included some of the central figures of Abstract Expressionism such as de Kooning, Motherwell, Newman, and David Smith (1906–1965), along with prominent critics, scholars, and museum professionals such as Meyer Schapiro, Robert Rosenblum, dance critic Edwin Denby, composer John Cage and others. It is not clear exactly what the letter to Canaday achieved. He appears not to have responded to it (at least not in print) and as previously noted and articulated by Sandler, “By 1961, Abstract Expressionism had become recognized nationally and internationally. It had become the Establishment. . . . Attempts to consider the new American painting as radical had lost credibility.”¹³ Thus, the uproar over Canaday’s article and any discontent it may have caused quickly faded away.

The dawn of the 1960s was a busy time for Ferren. Sculptor and friend Philip Pavia had launched his publication dedicated to abstract art, *It Is*, in 1958, and he

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Sandler, *Abstract Expressionism and the American Experience*, 199–200.

asked Ferren to contribute articles on multiple occasions.¹⁴ Furthermore, he was continuing to teach at Queens College as well as give lectures on the state of contemporary art across the country. In Ferren's continuing attempt to defend, advocate for, and elucidate contemporary art, he gave an invited address to the art students and faculty of The Ohio State University in May of 1960, an address that was posthumously published in the journal *Leonardo*.¹⁵ The artist began by underscoring the inherent linguistic conundrum presented when attempting to speak about art, noting that the "language of prose, at least, can only attempt to talk about the *ideas* of art."¹⁶

Ferren had continued to develop his ideas on abstraction and its development, by now having been a part of it for more than thirty years. In this address, mostly to students, he wanted to make clear to his audience that nature was never divorced from art as a concept (which was one of the precepts of John Baur's exhibition at the Whitney Museum two years earlier), as many may have thought.

The great divorcement took place with literature, not nature, or more precisely, with the 'literary' in the nineteenth-century sense of the word. Art did not divorce itself from poetry or philosophy or science. To the contrary, it raided them for images, reasons and justifications. It did divorce itself from the *narrative*, the *time bound* and the current political and social morality of the period.¹⁷

His argument was spoken with conviction and in defense of statements such as those made by Canaday about modern art and more specifically abstract art. It was not

¹⁴ In the first issue of *It Is* in the spring 1958, Ferren had two works reproduced, both unidentified. The following issue included John Ferren, "On Innocence in Abstract Painting," *It Is* 2 (Autumn 1958): 12.

¹⁵ John Ferren, "Visual Art: The Current Situation," *Leonardo* 5 (Winter 1972): 63–68.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 63.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 64.

articulated with a vitriolic defensiveness, though, but a compassionate empathy that desired an understanding of the work.

We are naturalist painters, as naturalistic as the Impressionists. Our nature is merely different. It belongs to physics and fission. It remains to give it purpose, not to grovel before it, as we spread paint on our canvases but to dominate it, humanize it. Abstract art can be the ultimate humanism. In fact it must be.¹⁸

In 1961 Ferren became involved with a cause that exposed a rare political side of the artist. Facing economical troubles, *Dissent: A Quarterly of Socialist Opinion*, organized an exhibition to help the struggling magazine. Founded in 1954 by New York intellectuals Irving Howe and Louis Coser, who described the publication as helping to provide,

dissent from the bleak atmosphere of conformism that pervades the political and intellectual life of the United States; to dissent from the support of the *status quo* now so noticeable on the part of many former radicals and socialists; to dissent from the terrible assumption that a new war is necessary or inevitable, and that the only way to defeat Stalinism is through atomic world suicide.¹⁹

Art historian and champion of Abstract Expressionism Meyer Schapiro was on the editorial board of the magazine and presumably was the link between it and the exhibition that was organized for its benefit. Schapiro also served on the *Dissent* art committee along with other notables such as de Kooning, art critics and advocates for Abstract Expressionism Thomas B. Hess and Harold Rosenberg, artists Larry Rivers and Robert Motherwell, and the prominent Broadway lawyer H. William Fitelson.²⁰

The exhibition was comprised of thirty artists selected by the committee and included

¹⁸ Ibid, 67.

¹⁹ The Editors, "A Word to Our Reader," *Dissent: A Quarterly of Socialist Opinion* 1 (Winter 1954): 3.

²⁰ Nancy Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism, 1940–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 22.

some of the biggest names from the New York School such as Adolph Gottlieb, Grace Hartigan, Franz Kline, Elaine and Willem de Kooning, and Barnett Newman. The exhibition did not create much of a stir, was not reviewed in the *Times*, and Ferren made no mention of it in his diary.

Around 1961 Ferren's work once again took a stylistic turn and he began to combine elements of his gestural style from the 1950s with what Irving Sandler has identified as "field" painting, a practice that discarded the Cubist methods of picture-making and employed an all-over approach to the composition.²¹ Ferren had also switched galleries and was now represented by the Rose Fried Gallery, where in January 1963 he debuted this new hybrid style of painting (he had an earlier exhibition at Rose Fried, but it was a small retrospective with many earlier works). Ferren had created bodies of painting around two distinct themes and part I of the exhibition included Ferren's *Season* series. The gallery's press release attempted to articulate the hybrid nature of the paintings and indicated that this group of paintings were "characterised [sic.] by a centralised [sic.] rectangular image of great graphic complexity, like a Celtic interlace, which is contained in a field of pure color."²²

Part II of the exhibition, which opened February 1st and contained works from the artist's *Rose* series, all completed in 1962. Like the paintings shown in part I of the exhibition, these too "retain the central image but revolve around the rhythms and formal mutations observed in flowers—specifically the rose."²³ Many of the paintings from this group of works alluded to personal relationships the artist had with women

²¹ Irving Sandler, *Abstract Expressionism and the American Experience*, 105 et passim.

²² "Exhibition of Paintings by John Ferren," Press Release, Rose Fried Gallery, January 1963, John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

²³ *Ibid.*

who were, or had been, important in his life and included *A Rose for Gertrude* [Stein], *A Rose for Rae* [Ferren], *A Rose for Rose* [Fried], and so on. The press release for part II again refers to the artist's Celtic origin by stating that "the Irish rose is certainly a Gaelic tribute to the orange and the green and a reference to Ferren's Celtic origins."²⁴

Sandler reviewed the show positively in *Quadrum*, noting that Ferren's paintings "contained mazes of free-wheeling, high-keyed brushstrokes within an axial, rectangle-within-rectangle structure. The mat rectangles animate as they are animated by the fleshy calligraphy, but it is the intense hues which provide the major visual interest."²⁵ In addition, and quite presciently in light of Ferren's work to come, Sandler also identified the artist's attempt to fuse color with geometry and continued: "There is in his painting an ambitious and successful attempt to fuse an austere Cubist geometry with impulsive Fauve color."²⁶

The exhibition also received a positive and insightful review in the pages of *Art News*. The reviewer made two particular observations about color and geometry that forecast Ferren's mature paintings of the 1960s.

Characteristic are a central event and brilliant colors living in light. They come together as a picture within a picture—bright interlacing calligraphy oscillating in the center, like pure light energy, and around it a frame, or specific environment, making that light a unique occurrence and one part of general phenomena.²⁷

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Irving Hershel Sandler, "New York Letter," *Quadrum* 14 (1963): 123.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ N.E., "John Ferren," *Art News* 61 (January 1963): 46.

Indeed, these paintings emphasized color, but now provided an underlying armature over which this color was laid. “This new geometric coherence gives these paintings a convincing inner core of structure that intensifies and completes their expression.”²⁸

Painter and critic Sidney Tillim (1925–2001) was not nearly as taken with the hybrid nature of these works and was much less complementary about the show.

Tillim noted that most abstract paintings “fail for the same reason: they are insufficiently abstract. They fail to make a distinction between a picture of an image and a picture *as* an image.”²⁹ His primary criticism of the show was his perception that Ferren was hedging between representation and pure abstraction. Tillim’s own painting, which until then had been a geometric abstract style, by the early 1960s was becoming increasingly figurative.³⁰ His formal descriptions of Ferren’s work were unflattering and suggested derivativeness (particularly to works by Rothko and Pollock) and declared, “An artist like Ferren has always been inconsistent on both counts. He is no less so in his new work, which was shown in two parts, each representing a facet of his dual contradiction.”³¹ This would be Ferren’s last exhibition in New York before an extremely impactful stay in the Middle East.

Beirut: A Cultural Ambassador

Scholars often set the historical events of the decades following World War II against the backdrop of the Cold War, characterizing them as a dialectical struggle of ideologies between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The Cold War was fought on

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ S.[idney] T.[illim], “John Ferren,” *Arts Magazine* 37 (March 1963): 68. Emphasis mine.

³⁰ Katy Siegel, “Critical Realist: Katy Siegel on Sidney Tillim,” *Artforum* 42 (September 2003): 208–9. (208–211)

³¹ S. T., “John Ferren,” 68.

numerous parallel and intersecting fronts, and military and political confrontations between the U.S. and its Western allies and the U.S.S.R. and the Eastern Bloc, have received the lion's share of historical examination. One area of Cold War studies that illuminates the period from a slightly different perspective but has yet to be thoroughly examined is that of cultural diplomacy. As the Cold War progressed, each side increasingly realized the value of cultural diplomacy within the context of conflict. Cultural diplomacy took many forms and in the early 1960s and John Ferren became a participant as the State Department's first "artist-in-residence," stationed in Beirut, Lebanon. He became, in effect, part of the larger ideological battle between East and West.³²

In the 1950s and early 1960s, the Middle East was a region in which the two superpowers struggled for allegiances. It became clear to the U.S. Government that by the late 1950s the exportation of various aspects of American culture could be used to win the hearts and minds of civilians in regions throughout the world and thus score an ideological triumph over the Soviet Union. This notion had long historical roots. Richard Arndt, who served as cultural liaison for the United States Information Agency (USIA) during this period, observed that in the 1940s Nelson Rockefeller, who was involved with the post-war affairs of the Truman administration, as well as being deeply involved in MoMA, pushed for greater cultural diplomacy through the

³² Some recent Cold War studies have focused specifically on aspects of cultural diplomacy. See Andrew H. Falk, *Upstaging the Cold War: American Dissent and Cultural Diplomacy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010). Also see David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). The best general study on cultural diplomacy, however, is Richard T. Arndt, *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc., 2005).

visual arts. Rockefeller recognized that cultural diplomacy could only bolster political diplomacy and he drew on his knowledge and connections in both areas,

In Europe exporting individual collections of art, as a national policy, had been practiced between monarchs since the Renaissance. It is thus the more surprising that modern European diplomacy did not at first pursue this practice. In the U.S. the export of visual art showed up earlier in formal diplomacy. Once again, the idea and drive came from Nelson Rockefeller.³³

The U. S. and Soviet Union actually instituted a cultural exchange program in which exhibitions were sent to the other country with the hopes of opening a wider discourse between the two states as well as illustrating technological and cultural achievements.

In 1958–9 MoMA organized a traveling exhibition of Abstract Expressionist painting that traveled throughout the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc countries.³⁴ This exhibition was part of a much wider strategy of cultural export on the part of the U.S., which was not limited to the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe. As historian Frances Stonor Saunders has observed that by the mid-1950s the U.S. Government “had organized thirty-three international exhibitions, including the US participation in the Venice Biennial (the only country to be privately represented). At the same time, loans [of artwork] to US embassies and consulates increased dramatically.”³⁵ Saunders reports in her exhaustive study that officials for the programs of exchange, such as Porter McCray, employed by both the Museum of Modern Art in the traveling exhibitions division and during a one-year leave as an attaché in the US Foreign Service, nevertheless maintained that, “The main emphasis of the International

³³ Arndt, *The First Resort of Kings*, 363.

³⁴ For the Rockefeller family’s involvement with MoMA and others cultural brokers who were responsible for the organization of exhibitions for export during this time see Eva Cockcroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War,” *Artforum* 12 (June 1974): 39–41.

³⁵ Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 1999): 268.

Program [of traveling exhibitions] was about art—it wasn't about politics, and it wasn't about propaganda."³⁶

In 1963, curator and critic Dore Ashton organized a large traveling exhibition of 100 contemporary paintings. Funded by the Johnson Wax Company, the exhibition was widely circulated throughout the Far East with the help of the United States Information Agency (USIA), a governmental agency that, much like the OWI that Ferren had worked for during WWII, was responsible for communicating to foreign publics in promotion of U.S. national interests. In fact, transmission of the “message” was so important that even when sending an exhibition was impossible, its directive was still sent as, “complete slide collections of the paintings were sent to all posts, where they found use as lecture materials and for window display.”³⁷

Nelson Rockefeller had suggested the idea of sending not only exhibitions as part of a cultural exchange program, but artists themselves. It was not until after Ashton's exhibition however, under the auspices of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (CU), a division of the U.S. State Department, that his idea would be realized. In the fall of 1962 the CU revived the Rockefeller's idea of sending a painter to a foreign country, presumably in lieu of an exhibition of paintings. This was an experimental program and the first and only time that the State Department would hire an “artist-in-residence” and Lebanon was selected as the location.

While not having the highest diplomatic priority for the Kennedy administration, Lebanon was nevertheless considered by many as “the showplace for the Arab world,” and identified by some as playing a particularly key role in

³⁶ Quoted in *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 367.

establishing a presence in the region.³⁸ It is unclear exactly how the process of choosing the artist to be sent abroad occurred, but John Ferren's name had been put forth and when approached by the CU and offered this position, he enthusiastically accepted.³⁹ The intention of sending Ferren to Beirut was three-fold. First, he would set up his studio, which would serve as a magnet for the local art community and help disseminate abstract painting, identified by the State Department as an *American* style of painting. Second, as an extremely well read and articulate artist (and indeed, one who was fluent in French), Ferren was expected to lecture on modern art throughout the Middle East, which he did. The final responsibility for the artist while in Beirut, was to realize an exhibition of his own including paintings made prior to and during his stay there, occurring at the end of his tenure. In October he wrote to his brother Roy and noted,

My dealer has emerged full of beans with all sorts of activities in the air. The Metropolitan Museum is considering a picture, a show in the spring, out of town collectors and museum people coming up and it looks like, I say, it looks like my slump may be coming to an end. At least I feel cheerful.⁴⁰

This assignment came at a moment when the artist was emerging from a period of relative inactivity and searching within his work and it was, it seems, a welcome opportunity.

An unclassified document from the American Embassy in Beirut to the State Department detailed the objectives of the program in a succinct way,

³⁸ This relationship was not completely one-sided as Lebanon had been characterized in this way by Nadim Dimechkie, Lebanese Ambassador to the U.S. in a memorandum of a conversation between the ambassador and President Kennedy. Sarah Rogers, "Innocents Abroad, Again: American Art in Beirut, 1953–1975," unpublished mss.

³⁹ As noted in Chapter 3, it was likely Ferren's honorable service in WWII that led to his appointment in the Middle East.

⁴⁰ John Ferren to Roy Ferren, October 10, 1962, John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

For the past several years the Exchange Program has been designed to promote the achievement of two different but complementary objectives. The first, to assist in increasing Lebanese understanding of U.S. foreign policy objectives and to assist in obtaining their support in achieving these objectives. The second, to assist this independent and freedom-loving small state of the Middle East in its further orderly development.⁴¹

The State Department drew a distinction between American and European painting, and, as Lebanon had been a former French colony until gaining independence relatively late in 1943, the region had been squarely under the cultural influence of Europe. In the State Department memo, the choice of Ferren to serve was qualified as such,

Mr. Ferren was an excellent choice to represent American artists in general and to the Lebanese in particular. His European experience and particularly his fluent French enabled him to understand and be understood by Beirut artists. Yet he and his work are thoroughly American and represent the application of talent in a truly *American* manner.⁴²

Furthermore, it probably didn't hurt that the artist was already somewhat familiar with the Middle East region, through his service in North Africa during World War II. In addition, rather than send inanimate objects in the form of an exhibition or slides of paintings, the program offered an excellent opportunity for the U.S. to have a "man on the ground," so-to-speak, to represent, articulate, and transmit American culture in person. The State Department memo emphasized the importance of making a distinction between European culture and American culture,

Lebanese artists are quite familiar with European art and artists, and while recognizing New York as the new art center, they have very little contact with or knowledge of the work and people there. Because

⁴¹ Annual Report on the Educational Exchange Program for FY 1964. June 2, 1964. John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

⁴² Ibid. Emphasis mine.

of his stature as an artist, his academic experience, and real-world approach to society, Mr. Ferren was an ideal choice for bringing the best of the United States here.⁴³

Ferren always downplayed the seeming mysteriousness with which he seems to have been chosen for the job of cultural ambassador. In his interview with Dorothy Seckler, the artist simply stated,

I was sent there as artist-in-residence. I was the first painter to be sent under those auspices. I was not an exchange professor, I wasn't teaching, I just painted. [I] Gave an exhibition and mingled with the artists in Lebanon. That's all. I was there for ten months.⁴⁴

There was a great deal of speculation around Ferren's appointment among his peers, especially when they considered his involvement with the psychological warfare division of the OWI during World War II.⁴⁵ His colleagues were apparently relentless in their speculation about what exactly his responsibilities were supposed to be while in the Middle East. As Arndt notes, Ferren's,

case illustrates various dilemmas. To explain his absence to US friends, he quoted the purpose his embassy handler and project-designer had written him: he was to be "an artist, in the deepest sense of the work." Once he tired of hearing insinuations about espionage from Lebanese and Syrian friends, he explained the he had a *bourse*, a scholarship, which quieted them.⁴⁶

Ferren came away from the experience in Lebanon a much-changed artist. He found similarities in the light and colors between the Middle East and California and while

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Seckler interview with Ferren, AAA. After Ferren returned to the U.S. he had a debriefing interview with State Department employees, the recording of which I have not been able to locate.

⁴⁵ It's possible, and even likely, but without documentary evidence at this point, that Ferren's nomination to be the artist-in-residence in Beirut is related to his previous assignment in the OWI. His former acquaintance and later patron, C. D. Jackson remained involved in politics following World War II and particularly those concerning anti-communist activity. He had a particular interest in the countries of the Eastern Bloc.

⁴⁶ Richard Arndt, *The First Resort of Kings*, 373.

the intensity of his palette did not change in his paintings, the gestural brushwork of earlier paintings gave way to a much more rigorous, hard edge type of abstraction that was in many ways closer in feel to his early work in Paris in the 1930s.

Ferren and his family arrived in Beirut in September 19, 1963. As an indication of his important role as a signifier of western artistic practice, he was advised to send a number of completed paintings so that he would have an established body of work immediately upon arrival. In addition, he was encouraged to bring or send paints, canvases, brushes, and any other art supplies he might need while working in the region, as some things were difficult to obtain. Bringing completed paintings only underscored the immediacy with which the State Department wanted him to demonstrate American contemporary painting to the local artists and art students. He sent twenty canvases, eighteen of which were quite large. These included *The Windows*, *Sakian Gate*, *The Sign*, *Cathedra Magna*, *The Blue Vase* and others.⁴⁷ Many of the works he brought had been shown at his Stable Gallery exhibition of 1957 and would be included in his Lebanese exhibition the following year.

While the effect of his stay in the Middle East was not felt immediately in his work (it would become most prominent around 1965), he was nevertheless prolific while he was there and by the end of his stay he had created a significant body of new paintings which were included in his exhibition at the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Beirut. The exhibition was accompanied by a generous catalogue and was supported by the patronage of the Honorable Armin H. Meyer, the American

⁴⁷ "Paintings for Shipment to John Ferren c/o Richard Arndt, American Embassy, Beirut, Lebanon," undated manuscript, ca. 1963, John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

Ambassador to Lebanon, further suggesting the official context of the exhibition and Ferren's residency. Meyer's public service had begun in 1943 when he joined the staff of the U.S. Office of Wartime Information in Cairo. It's not clear whether Ferren had any contact with Meyer during the war, but the two men no doubt connected in Lebanon via their shared experience with the OWI.⁴⁸

Comprised of fifty-two works in all, nearly half of the exhibition was made up of paintings completed before the artist arrived in Beirut, while twenty-five of the paintings were oils completed in Beirut with an additional seven studies in ink, watercolor, and pastel (presumably these too were completed in Beirut, but it's not exactly clear). The lengthy biographical notes to the catalogue were written by H. H. Arnason, who gave a brief history of Ferren's career. Arnason noted presciently the incorporation of a rigorous geometry that pointed ahead to his subsequent paintings as well as recognizing the similarities that existed between this new work and that of the 1930s. Arnason wrote,

Frequently...a frame of flat, uniform but brilliant color encompasses a large central square of highly dynamic brush movement. It is perhaps wrong to use the phrase 'frame,' since the flatly painted outer area in tension with the highly activated inner square, is the essence of the painting's impact. The effect of the recent paintings varies from the lyrical, in which there is a slower tempo and less complicated interweaving of light brush patters, to the violently aggressive in which the paint of the central square is applied in large, bold, and rugged strokes which inter-penetrate one another in a battle of forms. . . . There is in all of them a sense of control, of discipline which takes us back to the geometric paintings of the thirties.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Dennis Hevesi, "Armin H. Meyer, 92, Diplomat Who Served in 3 Countries," *New York Times*, September 10, 2006, 40.

⁴⁹ H. H. Arnason and Georges Schahadé, *Exhibition of Paintings by John Ferren* (Beirut, Lebanon: Centre d'Art Contemporain, 1964): n.p.

In addition to the biographical essay contributed by Arnason, prominent Lebanese poet and playwright, Georges Schehadé (1905–1989), wrote a touching ode to the artist’s ability with color in a brief essay “La Racine des Couleurs” (*The Root of Color*). Schehadé appropriately opens his essay with a sensory description of seeing a painting by Ferren for the first time:

When one is in the presence of one of John Ferren’s paintings for the first time, one is struck by the brutality of this painting, as if one had received a bucket of colors, then immediately, the eye registers the precision, the harmony, the exactitude that one catches a glimpse of and if one lingers, ever so little, to observe the details of this painting one succumbs to the trap of its delights.⁵⁰

This exhibition traveled to London and was shown at the U.S. Embassy there (fig. 5.1). While it did not have an earth-shattering impact on the London scene, it was reviewed favorably by the *London Times*:

More recent paintings show a tendency to construct an inner and outer system of brush strokes giving, as it were, a double tempo, the use of clear and brilliant colour being notable in such a painting as the “Manara” of 1964. Throughout, there is a sense of tension, occasionally oppressive from a psychological point of view, which prevents one from regarding the works as superficial colour arrangements and makes a strong impact.⁵¹

The works completed in Beirut included in the exhibition point to an interesting transitional style that combined the gestural work of his Abstract Expressionist paintings of the 1950s while looking ahead to the artist’s post-Beirut hard edge work.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Quand, pour la première fois, on est en présence d’une toile de John Ferren, on est frappé par la brutalité de cette peinture, comme si l’on recevait un seau de couleurs en pleine figure, puis, presque aussitôt, l’oeil enregistre la justesse, l’harmonie, l’exactitude de ce qu’il entrevoit, et si l’on s’attarde, tant soit peu, à observer les détails de la toile, on succombe au piège de ses délices.

⁵¹ “In the London Galleries Now,” *London Times*, March 19, 1965, newspaper clipping, John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

Ferren's stylistic shift, while subtle, is nevertheless perceptible in a comparison between two similar works in the exhibition.

The Yellow Season (fig. 5.2) from 1961 was one of the largest canvases in the exhibition and comes from a series of works that has a solid color border with a dense central area of wildly gestural painting. It has strong similarities with the much smaller *Blue Border* (fig. 5.3) but nevertheless exhibits parallel characteristics and both were works that the artist had completed in the U.S. and brought to Beirut. *Beit Eddin* (fig. 5.4) from only two years later and completed while the artist was in Lebanon, points to a new direction in his painting, which would not mature until a couple years later. The title of the work is taken from the name of the Beit Eddin Palace, a sprawling early 19th-century palace complex outside of Beirut. The painting has a similar border, but now composed with a hard edge, an early indication of the later-1960s paintings. Furthermore, *Beit Eddin* also has a central area of gestural painting, but instead of a dense tangle of frenetic strokes, the marks in the later painting are more selective, less dense, and more sprawling. There is also the inclusion of what appears to presage the central "eye" type of motif, one that Ferren's friend and colleague at Queens College, Louis Finkelstein, would come to refer to as his "mandala" or "mandorla," which would not be fully articulated in his work for another two years.⁵² One thing that remained constant and central through this transitional period of work, however, and something that Georges Schehadé commented poetically on, was Ferren's insistence on the importance of color.

Ferren's assignment in Beirut was covered in the U.S. press. Of the most prominent coverage, *Newsweek's* article titled "Middle East Squiggle," positioned the

⁵² Louis Finkelstein, "John Ferren's Mandorla," *Art News* 65 (Summer 1966): 65–7.

artist using language that was suggestive of Cold War struggles.⁵³ It stated that “Ferren was the choice for a number of reasons. For one thing, as an abstract-expressionist, he is a member of a distinctly *American* school; for another, he speaks fluent French, and he is a bona fide professor—chairman of the Art Department at Queens College.”⁵⁴ And, to underscore the reasoning and efficacy of the assignment, the article concluded:

In Tehran, the USIS asked him not to talk at a conservative art school for fear of upsetting people. In Karachi, the leader of the traditionalist school heckled him severely, but ‘other artists jumped up and started blasting the heckler.’ In Lahore, the local museum director ‘bugged me at every turn. But, when I finished he got up and said he was converted. Everyone was astounded.’⁵⁵

Upon his return to the U.S., Ferren wrote a lengthy press release about his stay in Lebanon and its effect on his painting. Handwritten by the artist in the third person, it is unclear whether this document was ever published or even used by the artist, his gallerist, or the State Department, but it is nevertheless an illuminating look into how he characterized his stay there. The document notes Ferren’s freedom from any required teaching and suggested his regular lectures around the region. It also detailed the exhibition of paintings completed during his stay there that occurred at the U.S. Embassy in London, and a traveling exhibition of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in which his work was included. He summed up the effect of his stay in the following passage:

Ferren’s stay was undoubtedly enriching to both himself, as an artist, and his contacts. In conversation he underlines the interest that met his own work and contemporary American work in general on his travels.

⁵³ Anon., “Middle East Squiggle,” *Newsweek* April 13, 1964, 56. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

An occasion he was heckled by conservative cliques and promptly defended, on the floor, by other, usually younger, artists. American art represented freedom to them from clichés of their inherited nationalist and European forms. Our gesture of liberation was the bond of sympathy.⁵⁶

Post Painterly Abstraction

At the same time that Ferren was showing his recent paintings in Beirut, Lebanon, he was also being associated with a phenomenon identified by influential critic Clement Greenberg, as “Post Painterly Abstraction.” Greenberg had organized an exhibition around this phenomenon and it opened half a world away at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in April of 1964. Greenberg, who had been a pioneering critic and great champion of Abstract Expressionism, or, what he preferred to call “Painterly Abstraction,” now identified a recent phenomenon that he saw as a continuation or progression forward that he simply called “Post Painterly Abstraction.” As the academicization of Abstract Expressionism had been identified in 1950s articles such as “Is There A New Academy?” and Ferren’s own, “Epitaph for an Avant-Garde,” Greenberg also recognized this trend in the catalogue and similarly articulates what he understood to be a *standardization* of the characteristics of “Painterly Abstraction.”

The most conspicuous of the mannerisms into which Painterly Abstraction has degenerated is what I call the “Tenth Street touch” (after East Tenth Street in New York), which spread through abstract painting like a blight during the 1950s. the stroke left by a loaded brush or knife frays out, when the stroke is long enough, into streaks, ripples, and specks of paint.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ John Ferren, “Press Release,” undated manuscript (ca. 1965), John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

⁵⁷ Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Post Painterly Abstraction*. Exh. cat. (Los Angeles: LACMA, 1964): n. p.

For Greenberg, the phenomenon of Post Painterly Abstraction was a reaction against an *attitude* of Abstraction Expressionism, rather than against the movement itself. The exhibition was meant to illustrate this trend, and as Greenberg noted, it “is a reaction more against standardization than against a style or school, a reaction more against an attitude than against Painterly Abstraction as such.”⁵⁸

The *Post Painterly Abstraction* exhibition included work by 31 American and Canadian painters and is today most closely allied with the development of Color Field painting. Indeed, some of the better-known artists in the exhibition have become stalwarts of Color Field painting such as Gene Davis (1920–1985), Sam Francis (1923–1994), Helen Frankenthaler (b. 1928), Morris Louis (1912–1962), Jules Olitski (1922–2007). Additional artists in the exhibition included Friedel Dzubas (1915–1994), Paul Feeley (1910–1966), Al Held (1928–2005), Ellsworth Kelly (b. 1923), Nicholas Kruschenik (1929–1999), and Frank Stella (b. 1936), among others. Many of the artists in the exhibition retained painterly characteristics in their works and out of all of them, Ferren, as Greenberg concedes, was the one who most retained that “Tenth Street touch”:

Almost a quarter of the painters represented in this show continue in one way or another to be painterly in their handling or execution. One of them, John Ferren, even retains the “Tenth Street touch,” but by boxing it within a large framing area he somehow manages to get a new expressiveness from it.⁵⁹

While Greenberg included three of Ferren’s paintings in the exhibition: *Terra Caliente* (1961), *Mars Mist* (1961–62), and *Untitled* (1962), which is similar to *Untitled (JF#31)* (fig. 5.5), these were transitional works for the artist and should be

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

understood as such. They were in some ways the culmination of years of a gestural style of abstraction that many—Ferren included—were trying to escape.

Chronology is important here and we should keep in mind that while the Post Painterly Abstraction exhibition was traveling across the country and into Canada, Ferren was half-way around the world developing a new style that built on his earlier innovations. Ferren's works in the exhibition, from just a year or two earlier, attempted to synthesize a gestural approach to abstract painting with broad areas of unmodulated color. These were ostensibly figure-ground relationships as the gestural painting served as the "figure" while the areas of color served as the "ground." In addition, many of these works relied on a square format and in *Untitled* the central area is a chromatic explosion of agitated brushstrokes that sits on the static ground of red in the form of a solid border around the edge of the painting. The synthetic nature of these paintings had been first recognized by Irving Sandler in his review of Ferren's 1963 exhibition at the Rose Fried Gallery. Sandler noted the rectangle-within-rectangle format and noted the compositional and chromatic juxtaposition: "The mat rectangles animate as they are animated by the fleshy calligraphy, but it is the intense hues which provide the major visual interest."⁶⁰ Furthermore, he described the components of the paintings as "an ambitious and successful attempt to fuse an austere Cubist geometry with impulsive Fauve color."⁶¹

To be sure, the artist's stay in the Middle East was an important catalyst for this stylistic shift in his work, but in 1965, not long after he returned to the U.S., he was serendipitously reacquainted with a body of his work dating from the 1930s. In

⁶⁰ Irving Hershel Sandler, "New York Letter," *Quadrum* 14 (1963): 123.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

November of that year, after he had returned to the U.S., Ferren wrote to Greenberg, informing him of this windfall and suggesting that he might like to come and see these paintings. Ferren's relationship with the critic was not a particularly close one and despite Ferren's inclusion in the *Post Painterly Abstraction* exhibition, Greenberg's opinion of Ferren's work had been made clear in the exhibition catalogue—that he retained a “Tenth Street touch,” thereby suggesting, in no uncertain terms, a retardataire approach. Nevertheless, Ferren was anxious to have Greenberg come and see his early work. He wrote to the critic that seeing these paintings again,

has of course been of interest to me and I have concluded that they are of more than passing interest in general. I know and understand your reluctance to go visiting but would like to send this signal. If you have the time & inclination I would enjoy showing them to you in my downtown studio.⁶²

It is unclear whether Greenberg visited Ferren in his studio and it seems that the critic wrote nothing more about Ferren's work after the *Post Painterly Abstraction* catalogue.

Mandorla Paintings

John Ferren's first exhibition in the U.S. after returning from the Middle East was held at the Rose Fried Gallery in January 1966, and he showed an entirely new body of work that once again represented a significant stylistic and even conceptual shift in the artist's work. He had been moving toward abandoning the gestural touch that had characterized his work since the early 1950s and it was gradually being

⁶² John Ferren to Clement Greenberg, November 10, 1965. John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

replaced by broad areas of unmodulated color that had first made its appearance in his paintings from the early 1960s.

The exhibition at the Rose Fried Gallery in January 1965 was the first public showing of the artist's new style and were an important return to the artist's explorations of color and optics. They were the predecessors of the last and perhaps most innovative work he would create in the following years just before his death. Not only had his style shifted significantly, but also he was now using much higher-keyed and fluorescent colors while continuing to experiment with color relationships and color effects. He described his use of them in a letter to Edmund Vigtel, Director of the High Museum, Atlanta, three years later in 1968:

In the series of which the picture in question is a part, I was interested in the problem (or challenge) that the intensity of fluorescent paint presents. I am not sure which one you have but a visual analysis will show that next to fluorescent red, pure cadmium red, light appears brown, next to fluorescent orange pure, cadmium orange appears yellow ochre, etc. This extension of range of color expression is like going from a string quartet to full orchestra, a fascinating idea.⁶³

Ferren would continue to experiment with color for the remaining years of his life.

This particular show at the Rose Fried Gallery was once again, something of a re-entry into the art world of New York for Ferren had been away for nearly one year at a moment when the aesthetic paradigm had fully embraced the reduced forms of Minimalism and the appropriation of advertising imagery in Pop Art. In advance of his exhibition, Ferren wrote to his old friend and then owner and publisher of *Art International*, James Fitzsimmons, to notify him of his coming exhibition and suggesting that he might consider covering it for the magazine. He included a group

⁶³ John Ferren to Edmund Vigtel, unknown date, 1968, John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

of slides with the correspondence as visual evidence of this significant development in his work. He wrote:

As you see I have returned to a format similar to my work in the thirties but with those forty years wrestling with color back of them. I am now sixty and of sound and sober body and mind and you will indulgently permit me to state that I believe I have done (Allah permitted) a meaningful contribution.⁶⁴

The exhibition containing the Mandorla paintings opened at the Rose Fried Gallery January 4, 1966 and received mixed reviews. Hilton Kramer, chief critic for the *New York Times* found them unremarkable. He noted that while,

Mr. Ferren is a pro. Rarely in advance of currently accepted styles, he rarely holds back from testing and absorbing what his colleagues on the scene have rendered acceptable. He occupies a sturdy middle ground.⁶⁵

Kramer continued to note that these paintings included the “disks of the ‘optical school’,” but he did not link them concretely with Op Art nor did he mention any Op artists working at the time. It is clear, however, that Kramer missed the intention of these works by linking them to Op Art, which Herb Aach would note the following year in his article “Insight Out: Gestalt of the Eye.”⁶⁶

Dore Ashton was much more supportive in her assessment of the work and she noted its symmetrical form, but failed to make the immediate connection to the artist’s *Vase* paintings of the late 1950s (which she had also championed) until her “New York Commentary” review the following year.⁶⁷ Ashton saw the value in these works and noted immediately that the artist “returned from the Middle East with a

⁶⁴ John Ferren to James Fitzsimmons, undated, ca. December 1965, John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

⁶⁵ Hilton Kramer, “John Ferren,” *New York Times* January 22, 1966, 25.

⁶⁶ Herb Aach, “Insight Out: Gestalt of the Eye,” *Arts Magazine* 41 (March 1967): 66.

⁶⁷ Dore Ashton, “An Evolution Illuminated: New York Commentary,” *Studio International* 171 (March 1966): 115.

strong modification of his style. His new paintings at the Rose Fried Gallery are ordered far more stringently, with brushwork giving way to sharp contours and curvilinear shapes giving way to the straight line.”⁶⁸ Ashton’s comments were not without criticism, however, and she noted “gratuitous designs that work their way up and down in vertical bars to one side of the mandala. The profusion of detail distracts from the essentially hieratic quality of his image.”⁶⁹

The greatest champion of these new works and the new style that Ferren had embraced was fellow painter, colleague, and friend at Queens College, Louis Finkelstein (1923–2000). Finkelstein was born in New York and served for many years as the Chair of the Art Department at Queens College. Finkelstein was also a colorist by nature and inherently understood Ferren’s pursuit of it in his work. Finkelstein’s article “John Ferren’s Mandorla,” which appeared in the summer issue of *Art News* was a concerted attempt to explain color and composition in these paintings in detail. Finkelstein acknowledges that Ferren has not always “fit in”:

Chronologically, Ferren should have been a painter of the 1950s. Certainly he was around. He was always too suspect for the ‘50s because he was thought to be too refined, too genteel and a little glib. For the ‘60s with the emphasis on production and aggressive pompierism he is somewhat too discreet to be seen easily.⁷⁰

Indeed, Ferren’s colleague emphasizes the importance of color in the Mandorla paintings but distinguishes these from artists such as Albers or Larry Poons,

The colors are fairly intense and although they interact according to simultaneous contrast, they produced neither Op dazzle nor Tadasky in-and-out. No after-images appear to be induced.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Louis Finkelstein, “John Ferren’s Mandorla,” *Art News* 65 (Summer 1966): 35.

⁷¹ Ibid, 65–6.

Finkelstein also discussed compositional aspects of the paintings emphasizing the Mandorla shape, which he identified as having been inspired by arch doorways and other forms Ferren saw during his stay in the Middle East.

The function of the mandorla is very specific. In much the same way that the face of an egg-and-dart molding gives an observer a sense of the concave and convex character of its side view, the interaction of the curved side of the mandorla and the separate arcs of color with the rectangular elements create by induction (see definitions 1b, 2a, 2c, 4 and 6 Webster) a series of projections and hollows throughout the canvases. The rhythmic import of this concave and convex construction is the major structure of the canvas. The only other painter I have seen do this is Rothko whose world appears to have a mystical or visionary bases whereas in Ferren these is *no necessary connotation at all*, only the phenomenon.⁷²

Finkelstein also identifies a geometric inclination that appears to be more of an intuitive observation by the author than a true compositional investigation. Not only are the arcs of the mandorlas concentric, as Finkelstein notes, but also they actually have several centers, their measurements revealing that there are “intriguing proportions from each other, such as the Golden section.”⁷³

The importance of this group of works lies not only in the development of new imagery for the artist, but also because they initiated a period of experimental painting that can be seen within the context of a changing artistic milieu in the mid- to late-sixties. Indeed, just as quickly as Minimalism and Pop had risen to prominence, the legitimacy of their reduced forms and reflection of popular culture were beginning to be questioned by a younger generation of artists. Art historian and critic Robert Pincus-Witten has identified how critics like Greenberg had established a hegemonic modernism and characterized the period as such:

⁷² Ibid, 66.

⁷³ Ibid.

Younger artists, excluded from a golden circle of elect painters and sculptors and repulsed by an agenda based in modernist self-referentiality, came to view a reflexive formalism and the gallery system that sponsored it as alien and pernicious. In short, the academy of abstraction became The Enemy and the activities covered by the term Postminimalism emerged. This opposition continued on from the 1960s into the 1970s with the conflation of Conceptualism and Minimalism.⁷⁴

Most interesting and most useful here is a greater examination of how the geometry that Finkelstein alluded to played a crucial role in Ferren's work at the time.

Subversive Geometry

By the mid-1960s, for whatever reason, Ferren's interest in mathematics reemerged. It had been fairly dormant since the late 1930s when he used it, if only superficially, to create some of his early rectilinear paintings and the carved plaster works. This mathematical interest was manifested in a number of different ways, the most important of which was in his exploration of and surprisingly quick and seemingly comprehensive understanding of dynamic symmetry. It also took the form, albeit in more superficial ways, of the artist's exploration of ellipses and superellipses as well as other concepts such as the catenary, a parabolic curve that in mathematical function is the equivalent of the hyperbolic cosine function. Ferren would use these concepts in the composition of his paintings, an aspect of his work that has remained entirely overlooked until now.

At its most basic, dynamic symmetry is a proportioning system that relies on a mathematical construction of the spaces created by squares and rectangles of particular shape and content. It relies on an understanding of the Pythagorean

⁷⁴ Robert Pincus-Witten, *Postminimalism into Maximalism: American Art, 1966–1986*. (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987): 1.

Theorem: the square on the hypotenuse of a right angle triangle is equal in *area* to the sum of the squares on its other two sides and from this, root rectangles and a variety of diagonal axes are established within a square (fig. 5.6). Dynamic symmetry also establishes that certain ratios may be used to create compositions that have inherent order, balance, symmetry, and dynamism. It has been used to determine specific design principles and was made most famous by artist Jay Hambidge (1867–1924) in a series of publications on the topic, which in turn, led others to write on the subject.⁷⁵

Perhaps Hambidge’s most impactful publication on the topic was *Dynamic Symmetry in Composition as Used by the Artists*, which was a systematic accounting of theories of dynamic symmetry as used by Christine Herter, George Bellows, Howard Giles, Denman Ross, and Leon Kroll. Of these artists, Bellows was (and remains) the best known and during the years 1918 to 1920, not long after Bellows met Hambidge, he incorporated dynamic symmetry as a basis for creating many of his compositions.⁷⁶ In addition, Hambidge’s writings spawned further interest in the topic and others began investigating it. Included among the Ferren papers was a copy of the article “Dynamic Symmetry” by Albert A. Southwick that appeared in *The American*

⁷⁵ Jay Hambidge, *Dynamic Symmetry in Composition as Used by the Artists*. New York: Brentano’s Publishers, 1923. Also see: Jay Hambidge, *The Elements of Dynamic Symmetry*. New York: Brentano’s Publishers, 1926. Hambidge had given a series of lectures on dynamic symmetry at venues in New York City beginning in nineteen-teens and found a receptive audience, some of whom subsequently transmitted his findings to their own students. Hambidge, *Dynamic Symmetry in Composition*, 6 et passim. Hambidge had studied the principles of dynamic symmetry for many years before revealing it to the art public at large. Many of his studies were undertaken with the examination of Greek architecture and vase painting. It was the Greek’s use of dynamic symmetry, Hambidge posited, that was responsible for the beauty and proportioned design found in Greek art and architecture.

⁷⁶ Michael Quick, *The Paintings of George Bellows*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992): 63 et passim.

Architect and the Architectural Review in 1922.⁷⁷ The opening lines may give an indication of the potential that dynamic symmetry promised, as Southwick wrote:

Whatever one may think of Dynamic Symmetry, it is a subject which should receive, and will in any case demand thoughtful consideration. If its principles have the fundamental character that is claimed for them, then no amount of opposition can more than delay its general acceptance. If on the other hand, the claims made are based on defective or insufficient deductions from the facts, those interested would be glad to know it. Already there are many who believe that it is indispensable for their work, and if they are right, development may in a not very distant future produce results which can now be only vaguely imagined.⁷⁸

It is clear, however, from Southwick's text, that, despite its incorporation by a few prominent artists of the day, as noted in Hambidge's *Dynamic Symmetry as Used by the Artists*, the uses of dynamic symmetry had yet to be fully explored and embraced by the artistic community.

It is not surprising that Ferren became interested in dynamic symmetry given an earlier propensity to mathematically-inclined plaster reliefs of the 1930s and the artist's trans-disciplinary lecture on creative thinking in 1952. Nevertheless, it is not clear exactly why Ferren became interested in dynamic symmetry at specifically this moment. There was an exhibition on dynamic symmetry at the Rhode Island School of Design in 1961 that included an accompanying catalogue.⁷⁹ While there is no evidence that Ferren saw the exhibition, he could have certainly known about it through the catalogue. It seems that by the mid-1960s, due perhaps in part to the exhibition at RISD, there was a small revival of interest in the ideas behind dynamic

⁷⁷ Albert A. Southwick, "Dynamic Symmetry," *The American Architect and the Architectural Review* January 18, 1922, 54-55.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 54.

⁷⁹ *Dynamic Symmetry: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Providence: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 1961).

symmetry and two additional publications appeared at this time. One was a reprinting of Hambidge's seminal *The Elements of Dynamic Symmetry* in 1967, but the other and more important publication in terms of disseminating ideas, *Dynamic Symmetry: A Primer*, had appeared the year before and written by Catherine Herter, the most devoted follower of Hambidge's ideas.

Herter was most taken with Hambidge's ideas on dynamic symmetry and, as Hambidge himself notes, was an enthusiastic student, assiduously copying the diagrams used in his lectures. It was she, more than any other artist, who understood it most thoroughly and through her study of it and constant sketches and that she imparted the knowledge to others.⁸⁰ *Dynamic Symmetry: A Primer*, while exhaustive yet manageable, uses extensive diagrams to illustrate the ideas found in dynamic symmetry and takes the reader through a methodical path of explanation.⁸¹ Herter makes an important distinction early in her book between the "static" and the "dynamic." She notes that as the notion of dynamic symmetry is based upon the areas of squares and rectangles, "The motivating force that turns the square from a seeming blank space into a living, dynamic space is its diagonal."⁸²

A sketch by Ferren found among his papers definitively confirms his knowledge and exploration of the ideas behind dynamic symmetry (fig. 5.7). Containing two of the most basic diagrams relating to dynamic symmetry, the left side of the sketch illustrates a square, again, the most basic form for dynamic symmetry, subdivided within it, the root 2, root 3, root 4, and root 5 rectangles. This

⁸⁰ Jay Hambidge, *Dynamic Symmetry in Composition As Used by the Artists*, 8.

⁸¹ Catherine Herter, *Dynamic Symmetry: A Primer*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1966. Herter had attended one of Hambidge's early lectures on the topic of dynamic symmetry in 1917.

⁸² *Ibid*, 9.

diagram is illustrated in many of the publications on dynamic symmetry and was often used as an exercise for students on the subject.⁸³ The second diagram on the right side of the sketch is one that was also a common exercise for students on the subject and illustrates the golden ratio within a square.⁸⁴ From these exercises, Ferren quickly moved on to advanced geometric explorations that incorporated more sophisticated elements of dynamic symmetry.

Because it essentially stems from the basic geometric unit of a square, often referred to as a unified square because of its centrality, it is easy to see why dynamic symmetry would have been appealing to him given Ferren's interest in the central image of his late-1950s and early 1960s paintings. It appears, however, that his knowledge and incorporation of dynamic symmetry may have stretched back to the early 1930s and made its appearance in some of his early paintings. There is no reference to dynamic symmetry among his letters and diaries from this period, but even a cursory look at one painting from a group that the artist painted while he was in Mallorca, around 1932, clearly indicates if not an understanding of the mathematical principles of dynamic symmetry, then at the very least an intuitive grasp of its compositional schema. *Untitled* (ca. 1931, fig. 2-2) is a vertically oriented painting, its composition divided into four asymmetrical rectangular quadrants. Two diagonals radiate from the upper right of the painting, one equally dividing the upper two quadrants on a diagonal, the other dividing the two right quadrants on a diagonal. The lower left quadrant is a square and together, the two lower quadrants clearly form a root 2 rectangle. Likewise, the two quadrants on the left side of the painting form a

⁸³ See Ibid, 32, fig. I-21.

⁸⁴ See Ibid, 172, fig. V-9.

vertical root 3 rectangle. The two diagonals deliberately cross both the upper two quadrants and the right two quadrants, both emanating from the upper right corner of the unified rectangle. As Herter indicates “A diagonal line, or several diagonal lines, may be thought of as pathfinders, as guides or guidelines in directing a composition. The vertical and horizontal subdivisions of a chosen space may be united by them.”⁸⁵ Ferren may have based his composition on a schema that incorporated the diagonals found in three reciprocal root 2 rectangles (fig. 5.8). In the illustration, multiple diagonals radiate from all corners of the rectangle and when compared to the diagonals in the Ferren painting, two of them match up.

Ferren’s interest in, or at least his use of, dynamic symmetry in the creation of his paintings waned from the mid-1930s when he began to incorporate free-form floating biomorphic shapes. It was in the mid-1960s, when he returned to a more hard edge geometric style that he reintroduced concepts of dynamic symmetry back into his work, this time in a much more sophisticated way. Now, he pursued it with a much more rigorous approach than before and with a greater understanding of its principles. As a result, he created much more complex compositions with multiple divisions and subdivision of the spaces in his paintings. Among the Ferren papers there are dozens of studies from the mid- to late-1960s for paintings that detail Ferren’s explorations into compositions based on his studies of dynamic symmetry. While his paintings from the early 1930s allude to the rectangles and diagonals in the composition, the complex underlying geometry of the later works, which is extensively detailed in the studies, is hidden in the final work. Only by close examination of the studies are the multiple diagonals used to indicate the areas of

⁸⁵ Ibid, 80.

division and the numerous reciprocal and mean rectangles and revealed. These are the building blocks of dynamic symmetry.

The importance of the sketch in working out the final composition in these 1960s paintings is most clearly revealed in a comparative analysis between the study for and the finished painting *Sala Nar* (fig. 5.9, 5-10), which the artist annotated as translating to “Holy War” in the sketch. He made an elaborate compositional study for the painting, establishing the general layout of the primary elements as well as the location of the large lozenge shape mandorla. The underlying symmetry of the painting is disguised by the geometric divisions as well as by the slightly off-centered mandorla shape. However, when viewed in relation to the preliminary sketch, we can see the inherent symmetry at work in the painting. Not surprisingly, the composition changed somewhat from the initial sketch to the final painting with minor tweaks to the geometry here and there. The general shape and composition, however, essentially remained the same. The painting is horizontal in orientation and made up of a central band of red that contains a series of concentric mandorla shapes. This central section is flanked on either side by vertical bands, some of which continue the entire length of the painting while others are subdivided horizontally.

The central vertical section containing the mandorla shape is made up of two overlapping root 2 rectangles. As seen in Ferren’s diagram, the lower portion of the composition—that below the upper most horizontal band—is a square. The diagonals of the square intersect to the left and below center inside the mandorla shape, as noted on the diagram. The shape of the painting itself is a vertical root 2 rectangle, as seen in Ferren’s sketch (fig. 5.9), and it is generally divided into vertical bands of varying

width across the entire surface of the canvas. The largest band is in the central part of the painting is solid red and contains one of Ferren's signature mandorla shapes from this period. It also appears to be a root 5, or a 2.236 rectangle, subdivided into squares on either end with two bands in the middle. As Herter noted in *Dynamic Symmetry: A Primer*, the root 5 rectangle contains the golden section, and because of this "it is the most versatile of all root rectangles."⁸⁶ The outermost bands on the left and right of the composition are subdivided horizontally with broad bands of varying colors. The final composition of the painting is quite close to the sketch. What do not appear in the final painting, however, are the numerous diagonals the artist used to compose the painting. Unlike his work from the early 1930s and demonstrating his exponentially greater grasp on the concepts of dynamic symmetry, Ferren used a complex system of reciprocal, or subdivided, rectangles in the composition for *Sala Nar*. The center vertical band of the painting containing the mandorla shape is actually a vertical root 5 rectangle as illustrated by the two square shapes on the top and bottom with a narrow band between.

Gestalt of the Eye

While he may have had a resurgent interest in geometry and mathematics around this time, color's importance remained central to Ferren's work. In March 1967 some of the ideas on color that Ferren had developed over the years were elucidated in an article titled "Gestalt of the Eye" by Herb Aach that appeared in *Arts Magazine*. Born in 1923 in Cologne, Germany, Aach had been a Jewish refugee who fled his home country in 1938 and after serving in the U.S. Army during the war, had

⁸⁶ Ibid, 139.

returned to New York where he studied painting with Rufino Tamayo and John Ferren at the Brooklyn Museum School.⁸⁷ While there, Ferren's lessons on color had a profound impact on him and provided the foundation for a lifetime of color investigation. The two artists became close friends, and Aach, more than any other of Ferren's students, was most responsible for continuing Ferren's color legacy in his work and his teachings.

In 1948 Aach lived in Mexico for two years while continuing his studies at the Escuela de Pintura y Escultura in Mexico City. After he returned to the U. S., he found a job testing paints for the Art Crayon Company and moved to Hazelton, Pennsylvania with his family, where the company was located. He continued to stay in regular contact with Ferren and returned to New York in 1963 and two years later took a teaching job at Queens College, working with Ferren in the Art Department. At the time of Aach's article on Ferren, water-based polymer paint, or acrylic paint, was a fairly recent invention and given his professional experience, Aach had intimate knowledge of the chemical composition and other properties of the medium. In the article, Aach leads by indicating that Ferren considers himself old fashioned in his steadfast use of oils, which give his works a luminous quality.

It is possible to enter his surfaces as one would enter a mirror, in comparison to Noland or Kelly [who both pioneered acrylic use],

⁸⁷ For biographical information on Aach see <http://home.comcast.net/~jaach/>. Accessed January 9, 2010. Aach translated Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Farbenlehre*, published just after Ferren's death. Aach writes in the Foreword:

Finally, I should like to acknowledge a great personal debt, one that is at least indirectly related to my work on this book: the recent passing of John Ferren, one of the truly great color men and my revered teacher, friend, and fellow painter, fully underscored for me the tremendous inspiration I received from him throughout our association.

Rupprecht Matthaei, ed., *Goethe's Color Theory* American Edition trans. and edited by Herb Aach (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1971): 4.

whose surfaces act like stop signs and prevent penetration. Olitski's [who also used acrylics] recent surfaces fall half way in between.⁸⁸

While Aach acknowledges that the end of painting had been proclaimed by some, he focuses almost entirely on the painters of Ferren's generation instead of the younger generation—in fact, his own. In a revealing inference toward a younger generation however, Aach notes that the present time is one *of* the present and disavows the past and as such painters have cut themselves off from past traditions.

In color, the dry, matter-of-fact look permeates Noland, Louis, Kelly, etc. Yet the French look remains very much in Rothko, Gottlieb, Newman and even Reinhardt. The former are becoming more and more painting-as-object oriented, possibly due to a conflict of color-as-codex or color-as-environ. At a time when the end of painting is proclaimed, it is most encouraging to see Ferren carry forth.⁸⁹

Aach's is a rigorous formal-based investigation into the paintings in which his emphasis is equally on color and composition. He continues:

The temptation at first glance to categorize Ferren's paintings into the decorous hard-edge mold is tantamount to totally missing them. In the triptych, each module produces its own rhythm which echoes in or to each other. Line is volume as well as demarcation, and placing in time related to musical interval, the melodic jumps of atonality.⁹⁰

Aach tips his hat to Op Art in the pursuit of an optical-based type of painting, but acknowledges that it was only a beginning.

Aach and Ferren had actually been in discussion over such topics for a number of years. In 1955, Aach had written Ferren an extensive letter with his reactions to the Rothko exhibition that had been held at the Sidney Janis Gallery. Even at this early stage the two men are in dialogue about the visual and optical

⁸⁸ Aach, "Insight Out: Gestalt of the Eye," 66.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

effects of the paintings. Aach writes to Ferren that when viewing these paintings by Rothko, “There is the strong sense of the corona being caressed to the ultimum. The color is superb, and it creates a feeling of pleasantry, almost of total well-being.”⁹¹ It is clear that Aach, like Ferren, was interested in the psychological and physiological effects of color and composition. Aach continues in his assessment of Rothko by interpreting his reception of the work in a technological context,

My first analysis was pleasure of the moment, pure color physiological reaction. That is incorrect. There is much more than that....I felt if I were some electronic device to which some visual phenomena data was being fed in order to make me expectorate consequential data.⁹²

Indeed, this notion of technology and human interaction with both art and technology carries through into Aach’s article twelve years later, when he writes:

We have entered into an age where perception in itself is becoming instrument, and the gestalt of the eye a means of control. Op was a crude beginning. This is most effectively seen in *Duo*, where there is a dominant color volume, one for each eye.⁹³

Aach’s assessment of *Duo* suggests it was intended to be seen in a binocular fashion and each part is part of a larger unified whole.

Three Dimensions and Radiosity

Beginning in 1967 Ferren took a step forward in his work and, after an absence of nearly thirty years, returned to working in three dimensions. To be clear, the artist was not abandoning painting. These new works were not sculptures in the conventional sense of the term, but instead can be understood within the context of a

⁹¹ Herb Aach to John Ferren, April 28, 1955, John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Aach, “Gestalt of the Eye,” 66.

wave of experimental painting that began to appear in New York in the late 1960s. This inclination by painters to explore painting as manifested in other media, took innumerable forms and styles and was, in many ways, a reaction against the dogma of a powerful and dominant Minimalist discourse. A number of artists and scholars have noted this phenomenon and artist David Reed articulated it as such:

Painting was under attack as an outmoded medium in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the experimental painting that interested me was caught in the middle. It was condemned by the conservative defenders of tradition, who used outmoded definitions and old-fashioned criteria to make judgments against it. At the same time, it was dismissed by those who did not see how painting could be connected to other forms of experimental art.⁹⁴

Pincus-Witten also recognized in his seminal and insightful study on the post-minimal period that painting, while coming under attack from many different angles, was evolving into something new:

By the end of the '60s, pure painting was hobbled by its bondage to formalist values insofar as it irresiliently carried the values of first generation Abstract Expressionist painting through a second and third phase. As this shriveling occurred, so did sculpture flourish. Concurrently, all the unsatisfied need to experiment was cut away from the easel enterprise and was manifested as some kind of sculptural polymorph.⁹⁵

For Ferren, working in three dimensions allowed him to expand his exploration and experimentation with color that was in part a continuation of the carved plaster works he had produced in the 1930s. It also inextricably links him to a younger generation of artists—the generation to which Reed and Pincus-Witten refer—in his continued experiments in painting. Interestingly, the term “radiosity,”

⁹⁴ David Reed, “Streets and Studios” in Katy Siegel, ed., *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967–1975*. (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2006): 21.

⁹⁵ Robert Pincus-Witten, *Postminimalism into Maximalism*, 255.

the effect of projecting or rendering of color on an often, but not necessarily, colorless surface through the reflection of light, does not appear in any of the writings on Ferren's work, nor that of other artists who incorporated this optical effect into their work.

In April 1968 Ferren showed for the first time a series of three-dimensional constructions that he had been working on at the Rose Fried Gallery in his fifth and final solo show there in a show titled "Color in 3 D." These were innovative yet at the same time harkened back to his engraved plaster works of the 1930s with their emphasis on the effect of color and geometric shapes. Ferren's interest in optics and the optical effects of color reached a new level in these three-dimensional works. There were a few other artists who were creating three dimensional works that incorporated radiosity at the time, but were scarce and included sculptor Michael Steiner (b. 1945), Luigi Tomasello (date), and German Minimalist artist Sigfreid Cremer (b. 1929), who has been associated with the ZERO group, Fluxus and Nouveau Réalisme. There does not appear to be any direct connection between Ferren and these other artists and we must assume that they were working independently of one another.

At this later stage in his career, Ferren was beginning to embark on some of the most experimental work of his life, and he came into contact with a group of younger painters, especially through his association with a new gallery: A. M. Sachs, which he joined in 1968. Yet, for whatever reason Ferren still seemed to be haunted by the social unease of his earlier years. He was approaching the seventh decade of his life and recognized that he was no longer the young artist of his Parisian days, nor

was he the mature man who was part of the groundbreaking New York School. By now a member of the venerated Century Association, the historic social club of writers, artists, architects, musicians, and general proponents of the arts, he was, by all means, one of the senior artists working in New York. However, Ferren wrote in his diary:

After dinner at Century with Ivan Albright, Ralston Crawford, Byron Nannas, Anasen Ritchie (a gathering of oldsters) and last comment – but I must carry some burden from the past with me still. I am apprehensive, defensive and insecure with new faces. In strange groups I still feel like a teenager ill at ease. It is curious that I do not feel this way abroad and function there in an entirely different way. I cannot trace this a high school hazing comes to mind but I see it before that - and why localized to America?⁹⁶

He continued to produce advanced work that now blurred the lines between painting and sculpture not unlike what he was creating before he left Paris. The connection between Ferren’s current work and that of the 1930s was not lost on critic Gordon Brown, who reproduced one of the artist’s plasters in his article “Reflective Art: The Light Constructions of John Ferren,” in the May issue of *Arts Magazine*.⁹⁷ These three-dimensional works allowed the artist to combine his interest in color and light and achieve an innovative result: radiosity.

Brown was astounded at the effect created by Ferren’s works and wrote in language that actually recalls some of the reviews of Ferren’s plasters from the 1930s, that:

[The artist] has come about as close as anyone can to *inventing a new art form*. When you first look at his work, what you think you are seeing are tall pillars, probably made of colored translucent plastic,

⁹⁶ John Ferren Diary, November 8, 1968, John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

⁹⁷ Gordon Brown, “Reflective Art: The Light Constructions of John Ferren,” *Arts Magazine* 42 (May 1968): 32–33.

which either emit light themselves, or transmit the light coming from the window. What you are really seeing are painted wooden boards, set at angles to reflect the colored light from other painted boards.⁹⁸

These works were meticulously considered and initially took the form of sketches before being worked up in three dimensions as a maquette. Three maquettes from circa 1968 are shown in this photograph (fig. 5.11) which, even on this small scale, illustrates well the effect of radiosity. These may have been envisioned as public works of art, as Gordon Brown noted in his article:

Philip Johnson has suggested that Ferren's light-sculptures could be made the size of a cathedral. It would be wonderful to walk through such constructions. For that matter, they could be skyscrapers. In the meantime, let's try to have these pieces set up in aluminum, on an appropriately large scale, in civic centers and important street intersections. Such colorful constructions could transform contemporary urban life.⁹⁹

Another reviewer, writing in *Art News*, noted that Ferren had pushed color optics one step further (presumably he meant more than other painters had and into the third dimension). "As the light source changes in position or intensity, the reflections change too. The constructions appear transparent, almost resembling stained glass, although they were simply accomplished in wood and paint."¹⁰⁰

The reviewer in *ArtNews* recognized the advances the artist was making with color and noted that

As the light source changes in position or intensity, the reflections change too. The constructions appear transparent, almost resembling stained glass, although they were simply accomplished in wood and paint. Ferren has always seen color in musical terms where sensuality and physical law mix in the elements of pitch, timbre, resonance and echo; so after their first impact these constructions, which could be

⁹⁸ Ibid, 32. Emphasis mine.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ N.E., "John Ferren," *Art News* 67 (May 1968): 13.

described as color organs, seem like reasonable extensions of his general approach.¹⁰¹

John Canaday continued to praise Ferren's work and compared the long thin vertical elements in Ferren's work to a constructivist stage set or a cathedral interior. The color he compares to the stained glass of a cathedral and in the end simply called the work "very effective."¹⁰² While not exactly effusive praise, and certainly missing the larger color (and even experimental painting) context out of which these works come, it was nevertheless a positive take.

A. M. Sachs Gallery

In 1968, after his last exhibition at the Rose Fried Gallery Ferren joined the A. M. Sachs Gallery, a move that would bring him into closer contact with some of the younger experimental painters working in New York. Certainly one of the more egregious omissions among the (albeit limited) research on Ferren's life and work has been his place within the context of experimental painting during this period. Furthermore, this period has suffered in general from a lack of thorough scholarly examination and only now is the metaphorical curtain being pulled back on it. I have noted above David Reed's characterization of the period as one in which the medium of painting came under attack but was ultimately fruitful in catalyzing new approaches and methods. Art historian Katy Siegel has indicated that:

The questioning of painting in the mid-1960s was both a critique of the immediate past of painting in New York—the dominance of the Color Field painters and the so-called "Tenth Street" descendants of de Kooning—and of painting's more general prospects for the future. One of the few avenues that painting's critics perceived as legitimate was

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² John Canaday, "Show Offerings Range from Albers to Paik," *New York Times* April 20, 1968, 29.

pursued by Frank Stella, who was seen by many as the “last painter,” an artist really working within or toward the new principles of Minimalism and the literal qualities of the art object.¹⁰³

Indeed, Ferren’s three-dimensional work could serve as evidence in support of Siegel’s assessment of the period.

One of the younger artists whose work Ferren came into contact with through his association with the A. M. Sachs Gallery was Cesar Paternosto (b. 1931). Born in Argentina, Paternosto moved to New York in 1967 and was working in a hard edge minimal style of painting, sometimes creating multi-unit shaped groupings of paintings the artist called “complex units.”¹⁰⁴ These works were serial by virtue of the multi-parts and reliant on color as the reviewer of his 1968 exhibition at the Sachs Gallery noted: “The slight variations in shapes and colors are the key to symmetrical-asymmetrical relationships which the artist forced me to search out.”¹⁰⁵ While Paternosto’s time in New York overlapped with Ferren’s for the three years before he died, and despite the fact that they both showed in the same gallery, the Argentinean artist claims not to have met the older American, nor did he acknowledge being influenced by the American’s work. Paternosto does recall, however, how the owner of the gallery, Abe Sachs referred to Ferren as the most significant artist in the gallery.¹⁰⁶

Much like his constructions of circa 1968, his two-dimensional paintings from this period adopted similar long thin vertical elements that seem to radiate color from their edges. Paintings such as *Faharjo* (fig. 5.12) are constructed using a solid color

¹⁰³ Katy Siegel, “Another History is Possible” in Katy Siegel, ed., *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967–1975*. (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2006): 31.

¹⁰⁴ J. S. “Cesar Paternosto,” *Arts Magazine* 43 (September/October 1968): 60.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Cesar Paternosto to the author, email correspondence, March 9, 2010.

ground, in this case red, and punctuated sparsely with thin bands of color not unlike the “zips” that Barnett Newman had produced nearly twenty years earlier. Ferren, however, was after something much different than Newman and these paintings were in no way based on or inspired by Newman’s work. Ferren’s interest remained in the effects of color. These paintings were two-dimensional counterparts to his constructions and captured on a planar surface—at least as best as possible—the characteristics of radiosity and would be a brief departure for the artist as he would undergo one last stylistic shift in his work.

Joining the A. M. Sachs Gallery was a logical move for a number of reasons. Ferren’s relationship with Rose Fried was beginning to sour. Aesthetically, he didn’t fit into the program that Fried was pursuing and his work was much more closely allied on formal and conceptual levels with those artists at A. M. Sachs. Ferren would have his final show during his lifetime there in November 1969 at Sachs, showing his most recent work. Returning to working almost exclusively in two-dimensions, the show was once again well received by the press. Hilton Kramer reviewed the show this time and wrote: “One of the recent pictures—‘Double Star’—is the finest single work I know by this artist, and two others are almost as good: ‘Royal Choice’ and ‘Green, Violet, Orange and Red.’”¹⁰⁷

While Kramer does not emphasize the important role that color plays in these works in his review, the critic in *Arts Magazine* did, writing that:

Color shapes undulate sending reverberations across the entire surface in these works. In his recent paintings, Ferren has evolved an almost sculptural figure-ground setting, in which a monumental central presence sends vibrant tonal movements radiating actively

¹⁰⁷ Hilton Kramer, “Art,” *New York Times* Nov. 22, 1969, 30.

outwards.... The tempo is lively, absorbing the viewer into a state of enjoyable optical participation, rather than overwhelming him.¹⁰⁸

This was the last group of paintings Ferren completed and they reflect another stylistic shift, this time away from the strict vertically-oriented paintings such as *Faharjo* toward more organic and biomorphic shapes. While most of these works continue to employ symmetry, the regularized forms of his paintings from the mid-1960s are gone and the stars, loops, ellipses and other shapes that appear in these works are composed much more freely. Furthermore, they are no longer reliant on the rigid structure of dynamic symmetry and seem to have been based on a more intuitive approach to composition. Color still plays an important role in their construction, however, and as we can see in *Double Star* (fig. 5.13) three almond-shape forms, the two outermost each contain a four-pointed star while the central shape has a vertically oriented pair of reversed parentheses that touch at their apex.

Other critics were not so entirely won over by Ferren's latest show. Carter Ratcliff, writing misguidedly in *Art International* suggested a corporeal presence in some of these works and notes,

His new canvases contained bright, extravagantly curved shapes which could be read either as surfaces or cross-sections of bodies. This ambiguity suggested Ferren was interested, simply, in the total presence of the body.¹⁰⁹

Ratcliff seems unaware of previous bodies of work that Ferren had developed working with radiosity and dynamic symmetry (as well as the mandorla paintings), as he completely misses the point. His compliments, which are entirely formally based, are tempered by his lack of understanding of the work and from where it came:

¹⁰⁸ M. B., "John Ferren," *Arts Magazine* 44 (November 1969): 59.

¹⁰⁹ Carter Ratcliff, "New York Letter," *Art International* XIV January 20, 1970, 91.

The rich referential content was unusual in paintings so up-to-date in appearance. This content was brilliantly handled and saved the modish additions to his technique from being merely that. Among the most modish was his use of spray painting. The sprayed areas of these images suggested changes in the nature of tissue and so were entirely appropriate to the complexity of Ferren's sense of the organic.¹¹⁰

The exhibition was also reviewed in *Artforum* by Jerrold Lanes, who stated his nostalgic appeal of Ferren's work: "John Ferren's was a sympathetic show, and while I confess that for me part of its appeal is in the memories it evokes of bygone days, when this artist seemed more important than he does today, the exhibition is worthwhile in another respect, too."¹¹¹ His remaining comments are not too enlightening (or enlightened) as he compares the work to some of Ferren's better-known contemporaries:

The reason I thought the show was worthwhile is simply that I realized its qualities of feeling are to be found in a great deal of coloristic work which, in appearance, is so rigorously disciplined and cerebral—for example, in the work of Rothko, Newman, Louis, and Olitski, to name a few.¹¹²

Ferren would not be able to continue the experimental painting that he had been exploring as just six months following his first exhibition at the A. M. Sachs Gallery Ferren died prematurely at the age of 64 on July 25, 1970. The cause was cancer. He had been taken long before his time and at a moment when he was producing some of the most progressive and experimental, and indeed some of the best work of his life. and his teaching legacy, especially on color, would be continued at Queens College for many years by his younger colleague and friend, Herb Aach.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Jerrold Lanes, "John Ferren," *ArtForum* 8 (January 1970): 73.

¹¹² Ibid.

The obituary in the *New York Times* stated that Ferren was “An active man, whose hobby was camping in the desert, he expected activity in others: ‘Art is no more passively perceived than is a mathematical formula,’ he once said.”¹¹³ Ferren was buried in the Green River Cemetery in East Hampton.

¹¹³ “John Ferren, 64, is Dead,” *New York Times* July 26, 1970, 57.

Chapter Six Conclusion

Since Ferren's death there has been moderate and intermittent commercial interest in his work and increasing attention from scholars and curators particularly directed toward the work of the 1930s. Less than two years after he passed away, the A. M. Sachs Gallery, which continued to handle the artist's estate, mounted an exhibition of his work. Two years later, the gallery mounted another show of his work and when Abe Sachs retired and closed his gallery in 1984, Katharina Rich Perlow, who had worked for him, opened her own gallery and continued to represent the estate. Thus, Ferren's work has continued to have uninterrupted gallery representation since his death. Perlow has been tireless in organizing exhibitions of Ferren's work and continues to highlight specific themes and chronological periods throughout his oeuvre.

The seeds for this dissertation were planted over thirty years ago by Craig Bailey's 1979 exhibition and catalogue *John Ferren*. Bailey's was the earliest attempt at a comprehensive scholarly assessment of John Ferren's life and work. This study is a much deeper inquiry into the artist's work and aims at positioning him with greater clarity in the context of modern art. By surveying his entire career and highlighting his most significant contributions, I am arguing for a revision of his previously marginalized status. It is true that unlike some of his better known colleagues, Ferren lacked the institutional support and the imprimatur of an influential critic often needed for entrée into the canonical pantheon. This dissertation examines the important achievements of an artist including his seminal importation of European

modernism in the 1930s to America, writings on Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s, and helping to redefine painting through experimental endeavors during the 1960s.

While this dissertation is the most comprehensive examination of John Ferren's life and career to date, it does not mean that all questions surrounding the artist have been answered and that further research could not be pursued. Ferren's interest in and use of color is one aspect of his career that is touched on here but deserves further exploration. Without any extended formal art training he was able to absorb the lessons of Matisse and Kandinsky and developed a sophisticated use of color, which culminated in his investigations on color and radiosity in the late 1960s. He passed his color legacy on to many of his students and his teaching indeed lived on after his death and was continued by his former student and close friend Herb Aach, who unfortunately also died prematurely in 1985.

Greater focus and clarity could also be brought to Ferren's relationships with his Abstract Expressionist peers. I have not been able to determine the true dynamic between him and the painters who have long been considered the "inner circle" of Abstract Expressionism. We know for sure that there was some tension between Ferren and the artists of the Sidney Janis Gallery, but in what form that was manifested is not entirely clear. Other relationships between the artist and his peers remain in need of clarification. For example, while Ferren and Morris had an acrimonious falling out over the use of Ferren's name on the AAA's roster, both artists remained very much present on the scene in New York following World War II, yet they never seem to have repaired their friendship. Ferren's relationship with

Hélión is even more perplexing. It was he with whom Ferren was most closely associated in the 1930s, just at the time when he was unable to return to Paris. Hélión came to the U.S. on an off beginning in the mid-1930s and he remained there from the fall of 1938 until January 1940.¹¹⁴ Given Ferren's closeness with the Frenchman during the Parisian years, it is somewhat mystifying that there is absolutely no correspondence between the two artists in the Ferren papers, or any mention of their relationship after the mid-1930s. Examining these relationships in greater depth could lead to a greater understanding of the context of each of the movements of geometric abstraction and Abstract Expressionism. Ferren's understanding of and approach to Abstract Expressionism was filtered through his experiences in Europe and as a principle proponent of the preceding generation of abstract painters.

This dissertation contains the themes of re-making (the artist's persona) and renewal of subject matter and a return to representational painting, but I have deliberately treated these with a light touch. I hope that these issues will be investigated in greater depth in the future. For my purposes it was neither necessary nor practical to further examine these topics. Additionally, greater focus and examination should, in the future, be brought to specific aspects of Ferren's work. There has been much scholarship written on the use of mythological themes by the Abstract Expressionists. While Ferren may have come "late to the party" in terms of utilizing these subjects, he nevertheless incorporated them for a period of time in his work. Because Ferren went through numerous stylistic shifts throughout his career, I

¹¹⁴ Didier Ottinger, Henry-Claude Cousseau, Matthew Gale, and Debra Bricker Balken, *Jean Helion*. Exh. cat. English edition. (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2004), 187 et passim.

felt that for this dissertation it would be most useful to treat these as broad areas that follow a clear chronology, rather than limit examination to a particular area or theme.

When I began this study I intended to explore Ferren's career as an art educator in detail as evidence of his lasting legacy. In the end, however, I decided that my time would be better spent examining the last decade of the artist's life and work for its place within the changing notions of painting in the late 1960s. I hope that as the historiography continues to expand on the period of the late 1960s and early 1970s that Ferren will be considered among these artists for his contributions. This study will serve not only as a reference for John Ferren's life and art, but that it will provide a foundation upon which future scholarship regarding the artist, and even some of his peers, will be built.

Bibliography

Archival Sources

John Ferren Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

John Ferren Papers, John Ferren Estate.

John Ferren Papers, Special Collections, E. S. Byrd Library, Syracuse University.

John Ferren interview with Paul Cummings, June 7, 1968, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.

John Ferren, interview with Dorothy Seckler, June 12, 1965, transcript, AAA.

Nicolas Carone interview with Paul Cummings, 1968. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

Pierre Matisse Papers, The Morgan Library and Museum.

William Dole interview with Gerald Nordland, December 6, 1975, February 21, 1977, Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, 1984.

Sherry Mangan Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Books, Articles, Theses

“A Letter to the New York Times.” *New York Times* Feb. 26, 1961, X19.

Aach, Herb, “Insight Out: Gestalt of the Eye.” *Arts Magazine* 41 (March 1967): 66.

Albright, Thomas. *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945–1980*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

A.[shton], D.[ore]. “Art: Object and Order,” *New York Times*, February 15, 1957, 49.

“American Abroad,” *Time* August 29, 1938, 35.

Anfam, David. “Clyfford Still’s Art: Between the Quick and the Dead,” in James T. Demetrian, ed., *Clyfford Still: Paintings, 1944–1960* Exh. cat. Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution in association with Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2001.

Anon. “Art Galleries Fall into Line,” *The New York Sun* October 10, 1936, 19.

- _____. "Ferren's New Medium," *The Art Digest* Feb. 15, 1938, 9.
- _____. "Ferren's Paintings More Human," *New York World-Telegram*, May 17, 1947, 11.
- _____. "Kleeman Gallery," *The New York Sun* April 9, 1948, 29.
- _____. "John Ferren," *Art News* (April 1948): 52.
- _____. "What the Museums are Buying," *Time* June 25, 1956, 72–3.
- _____. "Symposium: The Human Form," *Art Digest*, November 15, 1953, 12–13, 32–33.
- _____. "New Means for Moderns," *Life* November 22, 1954, 160-162.
- _____. "Middle East Squiggle" *Newsweek* April 13, 1964, 56.
- Armitage, Merle. *Accent on Life*. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1964.
- Arndt, Richard. *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*. Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, Inc., 2005.
- Arnason, H. H. and Georges Schahadé. *Exhibition of Paintings by John Ferren*. Exh cat. Beirut, Lebanon: Centre d'Art Contemporain, 1964.
- Aronson, Chil. *Artistes Américains Modernes de Paris*. Paris: Editions "Le Triangle", 1932.
- _____. *Artistes Américains de Paris*, Paris: Galerie de la Renaissance, 1932.
- Ashton, Dore. "An Evolution Illuminated: New York Commentary," *Studio International* 171 (March 1966): 112–115.
- _____. "New York Commentary," *Studio International* 173 (May 1967): 263–265.
- Aulier, Dan. *Vertigo: The Making of a Hitchcock Classic*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998.
- B., K. *Bulletin of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco*, (2007): 43.
- B., M. "John Ferren," *Arts Magazine* 44 (November 1969): 59.

- B., P. "Fifty-Seventh Street in Review," *The Art Digest* Feb. 15, 1953, 18.
- Baber, Alice, Herb Aach, Gabriele Rosenberg, and Robert Slutzky. *Color Forum*. Exh. cat. Austin: The University of Texas, 1974.
- Bailey, Craig. *Ferren, A Retrospective*. The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 1979.
- Balken, Debra Bricker. "Jean Hélion's American Connections" in Didier Ottinger et al., *Jean Hélion*. London: Paul Holberton, 2004.
- Balken, Debra Bricker and Deborah Menaker Rothschild. *Suzy Frelinghuysen & George L.K. Morris, American Abstract Artists: Aspects of Their Work & Collection*. Exh. cat. Williamstown, MA: Williams College Museum of Art, 1992.
- Barron, Stéphanie, ed. *Exiles + Emigrés: The Flight of European Artists from Hitler*. Exh. cat. New York and Los Angeles: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1997.
- Baur, John H. I. *Nature in Abstraction: The Relation of Abstract Painting and Sculpture to Nature in Twentieth-Century American Art*. Exh. cat. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Biederman, Charles Joseph. *Charles Biederman; a retrospective*. Minnesota: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1976.
- Bigelow, Helen Park. *David Park, Painter: Nothing Held Back*. Manchester, VT: Hudson Hills Press, 2009.
- Black, Peter and Désirée Moorhead. *The Prints of Stanley William Hayter: A Complete Catalogue*. Mount Kisco, NY: Moyer Bell Limited, 1992.
- Bowles, H. Garrett. *Ernst Krenek: A Bio-Bibliography*. New York and London: Greenwood Press, 1989.
- Brodsky, Joyce. *The Paintings of Yun Gee*. Exh. cat. Storrs, CT: The William Benton Museum of Art, 1979.
- _____. *Experiences of Passage: The Paintings of Yun Gee & Li-Lan*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2008.
- Brook, James, Chris Carlsson and Nancy J. Peters, eds. *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1998.

- Brown, Gordon. "Reflective Art: The Light Constructions of John Ferren," *Arts Magazine* 42 (May 1968): 32–33.
- Browne, Rosalind. "Gallery Previews" 10 *Pictures on Exhibit* (April 1948): 30.
- Burrows, Carlyle. "Notes and Comment on Events in Art," *New York Herald-Tribune* October 11, 1936, VII, 6.
- _____. "Notes and Comment on Events in Art," *New York Herald-Tribune* February 6, 1938, sec. VI, 8.
- _____. "John Ferren," *New York Herald-Tribune* May 5, 1949, Sec. 5, 6.
- _____. "Art: The Academy, Other Events," *Herald-Tribune Book Review* February 24, 1957, p. 11.
- C[ampbell], L[awrence]. "John Ferren," *Art News* 53 (February 1955): 57.
- Campbell, Lawrence. "Ferren Paints a Picture," *Art News* 52 (February 1954): 34-37, 52, 54.
- Canaday, John. "Happy New Year! Thoughts on Critics and Certain Painters as the Season Opens," *New York Times* Sept. 6, 1959, p. X16.
- _____. "Show Offerings Range from Albers to Paik," *New York Times* April 20, 1968, 29.
- Caute, David. *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Clearwater, Bonnie. "Shared Myths: Reconsideration of Rothko's and Gottlieb's Letter to the *New York Times*," *Archives of American Art Journal* 24 n. 1 (1984): 23–25.
- Coates, Robert M. "The Art Galleries," *The New Yorker* February 23, 1957, 79–80, 82.
- Cockcroft, Eva. "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum* 12 (June 1974): 39-41.
- Cohen, R. "John Ferren," *Art News* 83 (Feb. 1984): 169.
- Cortissoz, Royal. "More From the Modernists," *The New York Herald Tribune* March 15, 1936, sec. V, p. 10.

- Craven, David. *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent During the McCarthy Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Crotch, Arthur. *The Elements of Automatic Telephony*. New York: Spon & Chamberlain, 1924.
- Cullen, Deborah T. "Robert Blackburn: American Printmaker." Ph.D. diss., Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, 2002.
- Dailey, Victoria, Natalie Shivers, Michael Dawson, and William Deversell. *LA's Early Moderns: Art, Architecture, Photography*. Los Angeles: Balcony Press, 2003.
- Davidson, Abraham. *Early American Modernist Painting: 1910 – 1935*. New York: Harper and Row, 1981.
- Davidson, Susan and Philip Rylands, eds. *Peggy Guggenheim & Frederick Kiesler: The Story of Art of This Century*. New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2004.
- Denny, Robin. "Charles Biederman: From the actual to the sublime" *Studio International* (Sept. 1969): 65-67.
- Derouet, Christian, Thomas M. Messer and Vivian Enidcott Barnett. *Kandinsky in Paris: 1934–1944* New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1985.
- Devree, Howard. "Modern Retrospect: Work by Post-Impressionist Masters—Four Contemporary Americans," *New York Times* April 11, 1948, X11.
- _____. "A Score of Shows Open in the Local Galleries," *New York Times* October 10, 1936, sec. X, 9.
- Dole, William. "Art in Review," *Santa Barbara News Press* July 13, 1952, p. 9.
- Dorfman, Geoffrey, ed. *Out of the Picture: Milton Resnick and the New York School*. New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2003.
- du Pont, Diana C., ed. *Tamayo: A Modern Icon Reinterpreted* Exh. cat. Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2007.
- Duncan, Nancy Hall and Irving Sandler. *The American Avant-Garde: A Decade of Change, 1936-1946*. Exh. cat. Greenwich: Bruce Museum of Arts and Science: 2000.
- Dynamic Symmetry: A Retrospective Exhibition*. Exh. cat. Providence: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 1961.

- E., N. "John Ferren," *Art News* 61 (January 1963): 46.
- _____. "John Ferren," *Art News* 67 (May 1968): 13.
- Edgar, Natalie, ed. *Club Without Walls: Selections from the Journals of Philip Pavia*. New York: Midmarch Press, 2007.
- The Editors. "A Word to Our Reader," *Dissent: A Quarterly of Socialist Opinion* 1 (Winter 1954): 3.
- Ehrlich, Susan, ed. *Pacific Dreams: Currents of Surrealism and Fantasy in California Art, 1934–1957*. Exh. cat. Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles at the Armand Hamer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, 1995.
- Evans, Myfawnwy. "Dead or Alive," *Axis* 1 (January 1935): 3-4.
- _____. "Hélion To-day: A Personal Comment," *Axis* 4 (November 1935): 4-9.
- Exposition d'artistes de l'école américaine*. Paris: Frazier-Soye, imprimeur, 1919.
- F., R. "A New Art Form in the Abstractions of John Ferren," *Art News* 36 (January 29, 1938) no. 18: 14.
- Fabre, Gladys C., and Norbert Nobis. *Abstraction Création 1931-1936*. Exh. cat. Münster: Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, 1978.
- Fabre, Gladys and Ryszard Stanislawsky. *Paris 1930, Cercle et Carré: Arte Abstracto Arte Concreto*. Exh. cat. Valencia: Institut Valencia d'Art Modern, 1990.
- Falk, Andrew H. *Upstaging the Cold War: American Dissent and Cultural Diplomacy*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010.
- Farrell, Michael. *Collaborative Circles: Friendship Dynamics and Creative Work*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- Felleman, Susan. "The World Gone Wiggy: Color and Disorientation in *The Trouble with Harry*," unpublished paper, 2009.
- Ferren, John. "Art and Creative Thinking," *Arts & Architecture* 69 (December 1952): 18, 36-37, 39.
- _____. "New Art and Old Morals – Another View" in Loren MacIver, ed., *New Horizons in Creative Thinking*. New York: Institute for Religious and Social Studies, 1954.

- _____. "A Stable State of Mind," *Art News* 54 (May 1955): 22–23, 63,–64.
- _____. "On Innocence in Abstract Painting," *It Is* 2 (Autumn 1958): 12.
- _____. "Epitaph for an Avant-Garde," *Arts* (November 1958): 24-26, 68.
- _____. "Content in Contemporary Art," *Canadian Art* 18 (Nov.-Dec. 1961): 415–418.
- _____. "Visual Art: The Current Situation," *Leonardo* 5 (Winter 1972): 63–68.
- Fink, Lois Marie. *American Art at the Nineteenth-Century Paris Salons*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Finkelstein, Louis. "John Ferren's Mandorla," *Art News* 65 (Summer 1966): 35, 65–67.
- Fitzsimmons, James. "Art," *Arts and Architecture* 70 (April 1953): 8–10, 12–13, 34–35.
- _____. "A John Ferren Profile," *Art Digest* February 15, 1953, 11, 25–26.
- Friedel, Helmut and Tina Dickey. *Hans Hofmann*. Exh. cat. English edition. New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998.
- G.[enauer], E.[mily]. "Two Sculpture Shows Provoke Controversy" *New York World-Telegram* February 5, 1938, 13.
- G., L. "John Ferren," *Arts Digest* February 1, 1955, 22.
- Genauer, Emily. "Galleries Show A. B. Davies' Art," *New York World-Telegram* October 13, 1936, 25.
- _____. "Ferren Broadens Out with Vigor and Originality," *New York World Telegram* April 20, 1948, 16.
- Gerard, Jeremy. "William S. Paley, Builder of CBS, Dies at 89," *New York Times* October 27, 1990, 1.
- Gibson, Ann and Irving Sandler. *The Abstract Spirit: John Ferren (1905-1970)*. Exh. cat. East Hampton, NY: The Stony Brook Foundation, 1993.
- Goodrich, John. "Looking Back on an American Revolution," *Sun* May 31, 2007, 22.

- Christopher Green. *Art in France, 1900–1940*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000.
- Greenberg, Clement. “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” *Partisan Review* 6 n. 5 Autumn 1939: 34-49.
- Le Group d’Artistes Anglo-Américains*. Exh. cat. Paris: Moderne Imprimerie, 1936.
- Gruen, John. *The Party’s Over Now: Reminiscences of the Fifties—New York’s Artists, Writers, Musicians, and their Friends*. New York: The Viking Press, 1972.
- Guilbaut, Serge. *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Guggenheim, Peggy, ed. *Art of This Century: Objects, Drawings, Photographs, Paintings, Sculpture, Collages, 1910 to 1942*. New York: Art of This Century, 1942.
- Hamalian, Linda. *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth*. New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991.
- Hamalian, Linda, ed. *Kenneth Rexroth: An Autobiographical Novel*. Revised edition. New York: New Directions Books, 1991.
- Hambidge, Jay. *Dynamic Symmetry in Composition As Used by the Artists*. New York: Brentano’s Publishers, 1923.
- Harrison, Helen A. and Constance Ayers Denne. *Hamptons Bohemia: Two Centuries of Artists and Writers on the Beach*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002, 76.
- Haskell, Barbara. *The American Century: Art and Culture, 1900–1950*. Exh. cat. New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art in Association with W. W. Norton, 1999.
- Haworth-Booth, Mark. *E. McKnight Kauffer: A Designer and His Public*, 2nd ed. London: V&A Publications, 2005.
- Hayter, Stanley William. *New Ways of Gravure*. New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1949.
- Héliou, Jean. “From Reduction to Growth,” *Axis* 2 (April 1935): 19-24.

- Henderson, Linda Dalrymple. *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- Henry, Gerrit. "John Ferren," *Art News* 84 (Summer 1985): 121–122.
- Herskovic, Marika, ed. *New York School Abstract Expressionists: Artists Choice by Artists, A Complete Documentation of the New York Painting and Sculpture Annuals: 1951–1957*. Franklin Lakes, NJ: New York School Press, 2000.
- Herter, Christine. *Dynamic Symmetry: A Primer*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc, 1966.
- Hess, Thomas B. *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase*. New York: The Viking Press, 1951.
- Hevesi, Dennis. "Armin H. Meyer, 92, Diplomat Who Served in 3 Countries," *New York Times*, September 10, 2006, 40.
- Honan, William H. "Long-Lost Brooklyn Murals are Being Restored," *New York Times* July 20, 1988, C15.
- Hughes, Edan Milton. *Artists in California* Third Ed. Sacramento, CA: Crocker Art Museum, 2002.
- Jachec, Nancy. *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism, 1940–1960*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Jakovski, Anatole. "Wassily Kandinsky," *Axis* 2 (April 1935): 9-12.
- Jewell, Edward Alden. "A Week of Variety: Recent Work by Miro and John Ferren – Guerrero and Emerson Tuttle," *New York Times* May 18, 1947, 10.
- _____. "The Realm of Art: A New Platform and Other Matters: 'Globalism' Pops into View," *New York Times* June 13, 1943, X9.
- Jewett, Eleanor. "Edzard Charms with Portraits of Young Girls," *Chicago Daily Tribune* March 16, 1938, 19.
- Kandinsky, Wassily. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. translated and with an introd. by M. T. H. Sadler. New York: Dover Publications, 1977.
- Kantor, Sybil Gordon. *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002.
- Kent, Adaline. *Autobiography: From the Notebooks and Sculpture of Adaline Kent*. Houston, TX: The Gulf Printing Co., 1958.

- Key, Donald. "Ferren's Style is Bold, Colorful," *The Milwaukee Journal* July 5, 1959, pt. 5, 6.
- Klein, Jerome. "Sculptors Hand Passed For Place in Our Life," *New York Post* February 5, 1938, 30.
- Kramer, Hilton. "John Ferren," *New York Times* January 22, 1966, 25.
- _____. "John Ferren," *New York Times* June 15, 1979, p. C1, C23.
- Landauer, Susan. *The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism*. Exh. cat. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996.
- Lane, John R. and Susan C. Larsen. *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, 1927–1944*. Exh. cat. Pittsburgh: Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, 1983.
- Lanes, Jerrold. "John Ferren," *ArtForum* 8 (January 1970): 73.
- Larsen, Susan Carol. *The American Abstract Artists Group: A History and Evaluation of its Impact Upon American Art*. Ph.D. diss. Northwestern University, 1974.
- _____. "The American Abstract Artists: A Documentary History 1936–1941," 14 *Archives of American Art Journal* (1974): 2-7.
- _____. *An American Modernist: Paintings from the '20s and '30s by Vaclav Vytlacil*. Exh. cat. New York: Graham Gallery, 1988.
- Larsen, Susan C. and Patricia McDonnell. *Charles Biederman*. Exh. cat. Minneapolis: Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, 2003.
- Lee, Anthony W. *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1999.
- Levin, Gail. *Kandinsky and the American Avant-Garde, 1912–1950*. Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University, 1976.
- Levin, Gail and Melinda Lorenz. *Theme & Improvisation: Kandinsky and the American Avant-Garde, 1912–1950*. Exh. cat. Boston, Toronto and London: Bullfinch Press, 1992.
- Levy, Sohpie, ed. *A Transatlantic Avant-Garde: American Artists in Paris, 1918–1939*, Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003.

- Lizza, Richard William. *The American Abstract Artists: Thirties Geometric Abstraction as Precursor to Forties Expressive Abstraction*. Ph.D. diss. Florida State University, 1985.
- Los Angeles County Museum of Art. *Post Painterly Abstraction*. Exh. cat. Los Angeles: LACMA, 1964.
- Lovatt, Anna. "Dorothea Rockburne: Intersection," *October* 122 (Fall 2007): 31-52.
- Masheck, Joseph. "John Ferren," *Artforum* 10 (April 1972): 87.
- Marchesoni, Dario and Luisa Giussani. *La Triennale di Milano e il Palazzo dell'Arte*. Milan: Elect Editrice, 1985.
- Mariani, Paul. *Dream Song: The Life of John Barryman*. New York: Morrow, 1990.
- Marter, Joan M. *Alexander Calder*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Matthaei, Rupprecht, ed. *Goethe's Color Theory* American Edition trans. and edited by Herb Aach. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1971.
- McKinzie, Richard D. *The New Deal for Artists*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973.
- Mecklenburg, Virginia. *The Patricia and Phillip Frost Collection: American Abstraction 1930-1945*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1989.
- Mellow, James R. "An Avenue a Serious Artist Has to Follow," *New York Times* January 13, 1974, 27-28.
- M.[illier], A.[rthur]. "Art Parade Reviewed," *Los Angeles Times* November 9, 1941, C6.
- M., J. R.. "John Ferren," *Arts* 33 (November 1958): 55.
- McB.[ride], H.[enry]. "Kleeman Galleries" *New York Sun* May 6, 1949, 26.
- _____. "America Also Goes Abstract," *The New York Sun* March 14, 1936, 30.
- Miller, Nancy B., ed. *60 American Painters: 1960, Abstract Expressionist Painting of the Fifties*. Exh. cat. Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1961.
- Millier, Arthur. "Museum Show: Sculpture in Ninth Annual is Varied and Promising," *LA Times* April 29, 1928, C10.

- _____. "Southern California Art," *LA Times* April 21, 1929, C9.
- _____. "Art and Artists," *LA Times*, January 10, 1939, C7.
- Monroe, Gerald M. "The American Artists' Congress and the Invasion of Finland," *Archives of American Art Journal* 15 (1975): 14-20.
- Mooradian, Karlen. *The Many Worlds of Arshile Gorky*. Chicago: Gilgamesh Press, Limited, 1980.
- Morris, George L. K. "The Gallery of Living Art, New York University" *4 Axis* (Nov. 1935): 9-11.
- Moser, Joann. *Atelier 17* Madison, WI: Elvehjem Art Center, University of Wisconsin, 1977.
- Moure, Nancy Dustin Wall. *California Art: 450 Years of Painting & Other Media*. Los Angeles: Dustin Publications, 1998.
- Nash, Steven A., ed. *Picasso and The War Years, 1937-1945*. Exh. cat. London: Thames and Hudson, 1999.
- The New American Painting As Shown in Eight European Countries*. Exh. cat. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1958.
- O'Connor, Francis V. *Jackson Pollock*. Exh. cat. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1967.
- Offin, Charles Z. "At the Galleries," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* October 11, 1936, C12.
- O'Hare, Mary-Kate, et al. *Constructive Spirit: Abstract Art in South and North America, 1920s-1950s*. Exh. cat. Petaluma, CA: Pomegranate, 2010.
- Ottinger, Didier. Henry-Claude Cousseau, Matthew Gale, and Debra Bricker Balken, *Jean Helion*. Exh. cat. English edition. London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2004.
- P., F. "John Ferren," *Art News* 52 (March 1953): 38-39.
- P.[reston], S.[tuart]. "Five New Painting Exhibitions Open Here; Nelson, Presser, Ferren, Show Their Works," *New York Times* May 7, 1949, 11.
- Païni, Dominique and Guy Cogeval, eds. *Hitchcock and Art : Fatal Coincidences*. Exh. cat. Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2000.
- Pansera, Anty, Anna Venturelli and Antonio C. Mastrobuono. "The Triennale of Milan: Past, Present, and Future" *Design Issues* 2 (Spring, 1985): 23-32.

- Perlow, Katharina Rich. *John Ferren: Journey of an American Modernist*. Exh. cat. New York: Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, 2007.
- Pierre, Arnuald. "Jean Hélion et Albert E. Gallatin, Un aspect des échanges entre l'Europe et les Etats-Unis" in *Made in USA, L'art Américain, 1908-1947*. Exh. cat. Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2001.
- Pincus-Witten, Robert. *Postminimalism into Maximalism: American Art, 1966–1986*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987.
- Porter, David, ed. *A Painting Prophecy—1950: Personal Statement*. Washington D.C.: David Porter Gallery, 1945.
- Porteus, Hugh Gordon. "Ulterior Motives" *5 Axis* (Spring 1936): 20-23.
- Preston, Malcolm. "Matter with Spirit," *Newsday* July 30, 1971, A8–9.
- Polcari, Stephen. *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Ratcliff, Carter. "New York," *Art International* 14 (March 1970): 70.
- Quick, Michael. *The Paintings of George Bellows*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992.
- Ratcliff, Carter. "New York Letter," *Art International* XIV January 20, 1970, 91.
- _____. "New York Letter," *Art International* XVI March 20, 1972, 36.
- Read, Herbert. "Jean Hélion," *Axis* 4 (Nov. 1935): 2-4.
- Reed, Judith Kaye. "Song of the Desert," *Art Digest* May 1, 1949, 15.
- Rembert, Virginia Pitts. *Mondrian, America, and American Painting*. Ph.D. diss. Columbia University, 1970.
- Ritchie, Andrew Carnduff. *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America*. Exh. cat. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1951.
- Robbins, Daniel. *Joaquín Torres-García, 1874–1949*. Exh. cat. Providence, R.I.: Rhode Island School of Design, 1970.
- Rochfort, Desmond. *Mexican Muralists: Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros*. London: Lawrence King Publishing, 1993.

- Roeder, Jr., George H. "What Have Modernists Looked At? Experiential Roots of Twentieth-Century American Painting," 39 *American Quarterly* (Spring) 1987: 56-83.
- Rogers, Sarah. "Innocents Abroad, Again: American Art in Beirut, 1953–1975," unpublished mss, 2009.
- Roosa, Wayne. *American Art Theory and Criticism during the 1930s: Thomas Craven, George L. K. Morris, Stuart Davis*. Ph.D. diss. Rutgers the State University of New Jersey, 1989.
- Rosenberg, Harold. "The American Action Painters," *Art News* (Dec. 1952): 22–23.
- Ross, Clifford, ed. *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990.
- Rubin, William. "The New York School—Then and Now: Part I," *Art International* 2 (March-April 1958): 23-26.
- _____. "Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition," *Artforum* V (February 1967): 14-22.
- Rubin, William and Matthew Armstrong. *The William S. Paley Collection*. Exh. cat. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1992.
- S.[andler], I.[rving]. "John Ferren," *Art News* (February 1957): 12.
- S.[andler], I.[rving] H.[ershel]. "John Ferren," *Art News* 61 (May 1962): 12.
- S., J. "Cesar Paternosto," *Arts Magazine* 43 (September/October 1968): 60.
- _____. "Herb Aach at Seligmann," *Arts Magazine* 44 (Feb, 1970): 62.
- Salvesen, Magda and Diane Cousineau, eds. *Artists' Estates: Reputations in Trust* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005).
- Sandler, Irving. *The Triumph of American Painting*. New York and Washington: Praeger Publishers, 1970.
- _____. *The New York School: Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties*. New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978.
- _____. *American Art of the 1960s*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988.

- _____. *Art of the Postmodern Era From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s*. New York: Harper Collings, 1996.
- _____. *A Sweeper-Up After Artists: A Memoir*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2003.
- _____. *Abstract Expressionism and the American Experience: A Reevaluation*. Lenox, MA and New York: Hard Press Editions and School of Visual Arts in association with Hudson Hills Press, 2009.
- Sandler, Irving Hershel. "New York Letter," *Quadrum* 14 (1963): 115–124.
- Saunders, Frances Stonor. *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*. New York: The New Press, 1999.
- Schiff, Bennett. "In the Art Galleries," *New York Post Weekend Magazine* July 20, 1958, M12.
- S.[awin], M.[artica] "John Ferren," *Arts Magazine* (February 1957): 54.
- Seitz, William. *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983.
- Seuphor, Michel. *Cercle et Carré* Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1971.
- Shaw, Sophia, ed. *The Arts Club of Chicago: The Collection, 1916–1996*. Chicago: The Arts Club of Chicago, 1997.
- Siegel, Katy, ed. *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967–1975*. New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2006.
- _____. "Critical Realist: Katy Siegel on Sidney Tillim," *Artforum* 42 (September 2003): 208–211.
- South, Will, et al. *Color, Myth, and Music: Stanton Macdonald-Wright and Synchomism*. Exh. cat. Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Museum of Art, 2001.
- Southwick, Albert A. "Dynamic Symmetry," *The American Architect and the Architectural Review* January 18, 1922, 54-55
- Spaulding, Frances. *John Piper, Myfanwy Piper: Lives in Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Spurling, Hillary. *Matisse the Master, A Life of Henri Matisse: Volume II, 1909–1954*. London: The Penguin Group, 2005.

- Stavitsky, Gail. *The Development, Institutionalization, and Impact of the A. E. Gallatin Collection of Modern Art*. Ph.D. diss. New York University, 1990.
- _____. "A Landmark Exhibition: Five Contemporary American Concretionists, March 1936," *Archives of American Art Journal* 33 (1993): 2-10.
- Taylor, Sue. "The Man Who Saw Too Much—Hitchcock," *Art in America* (June 2001): 36-39; 41.
- T.[illim], S.[idney] "John Ferren," *Arts Magazine* 37 (March 1963): 68.
- Tristschler, Thomas Candor. *The American Abstract Artists, 1937–1941*. Ph.D. diss. University of Pennsylvania, 1974.
- Tuchman, Maurice, et al. *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*. exh cat. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. New York: Abbeville Press, 1986.
- Upton, Melville. "At the Galleries," *The New York Sun* February 5, 1938, 10.
- Vaughn, Malcolm. "Abstract Paintings," *New York American* October 10, 1936, 12.
- Vrachopoulos, Thalia Trezos. "Jean Xceron: Rediscovered Modernist Pioneer: Life and Works: 1912–1949." Ph.D. diss., Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, 1999.
- Vure, Sara. *Circles of Influence: Impressionism to Modernism in Southern California, 1910–1930*. Exh. cat. Newport Beach, CA: Orange County Museum of Art, 2000.
- Wald, Alan M. *The Revolutionary Imagination: The Poetry and Politics of John Wheelwright and Sherry Mangan*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983.
- Walsh, Kenneth R. "Abstraction as Weapon," *Axis* 5 (Spring 1936): 23-26.
- Watt, Alexander. "Le Group d'Artistes Anglo-Américains," *Beaux Arts Magazine* (June 1935): 8.
- Weinstein, Tresca. "Under the Spotlight," *Times-Union* February 27, 2005, 11, 4.
- Weschler, H. "Paris Notes," *Axis* 3 (July 1935): 28.
- Whitney Museum of American Art. *Abstract Painting in America*. Exh. cat. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1935.
- Wilkin, Karen. *Hans Hofmann: A Retrospective*. Exh. cat. New York: George Braziller, Inc., 2003.

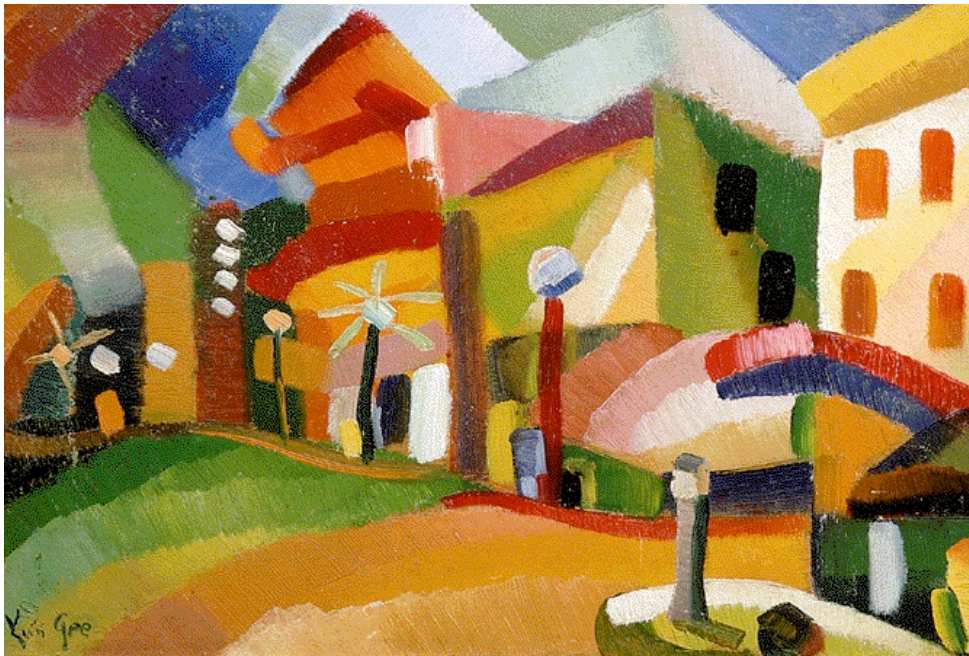
Winkler, Allan M. *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942–1945*. New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1978.

Wolf, Ben. "Ferren Exhibits," *The Art Digest* April 1, 1948, 16.

Zervos, Christian. *Pablo Picasso*. Paris and New York: Cahiers d'Art and E. Weyhe, 1932–1978.



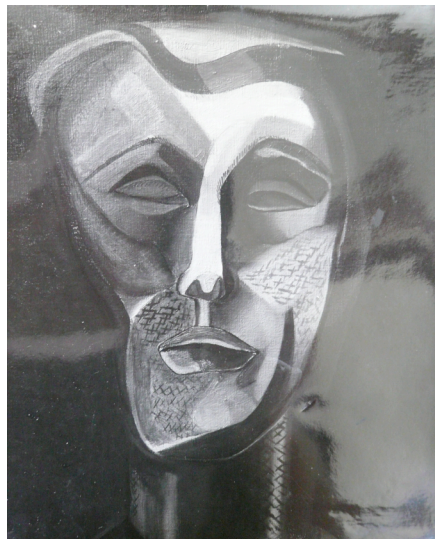
1.1 John Ferren, *The Kiss*, ca. 1924, white gypsum cast from plaster original, 6 3/4 x 11 3/4 x 8 in., Estate of John Ferren



1.2 Yun Gee, *San Francisco, Chinatown*, 1927, oil on paperboard, 11 x 16 in. Oakland Museum of California, Gift of Mrs. Frederick G. Novy, Jr.



1.3 John Ferren, *Untitled*, ca. 1927, medium unknown, dimensions unknown



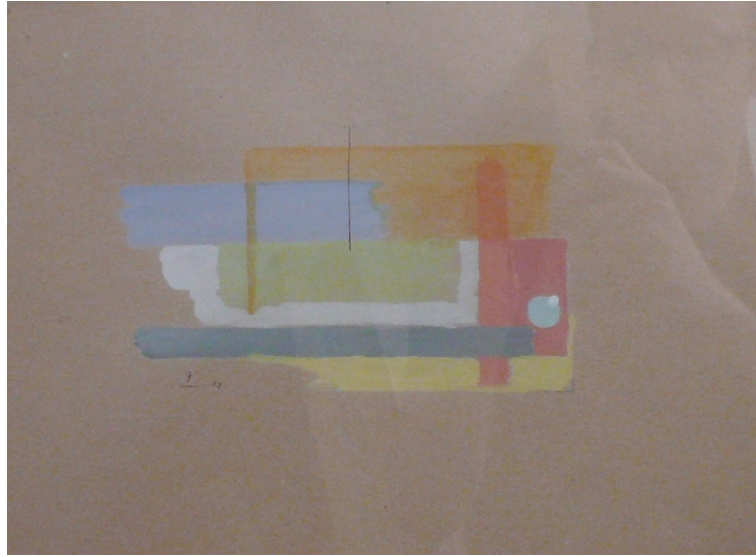
1.4 John Ferren, *Untitled (Man's Head)*, ca. 1928–9, medium and dimensions unknown



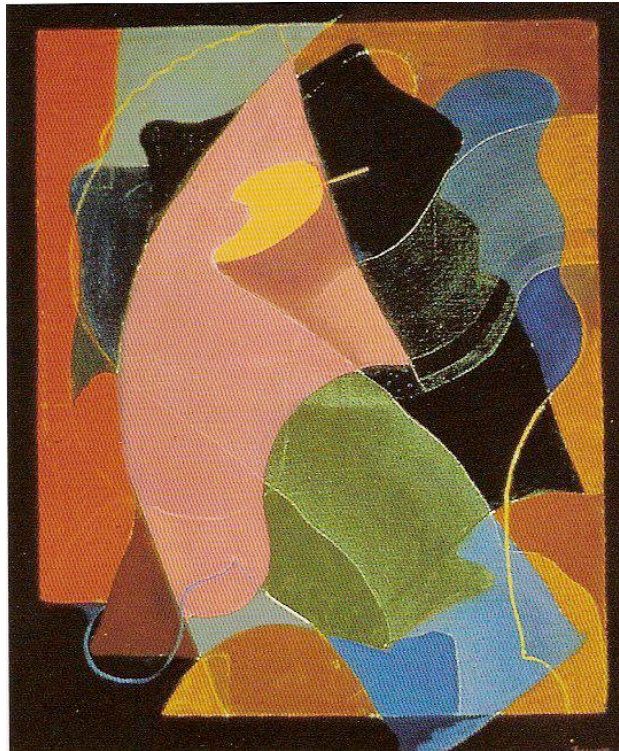
1.5 Vaclav Vytlacil, *Still Life with Guitar and Cactus*, 1929



1.6 John Ferren, *Untitled (Sketch of an Italian Town)*, 1929, ink and wash, dimensions unknown



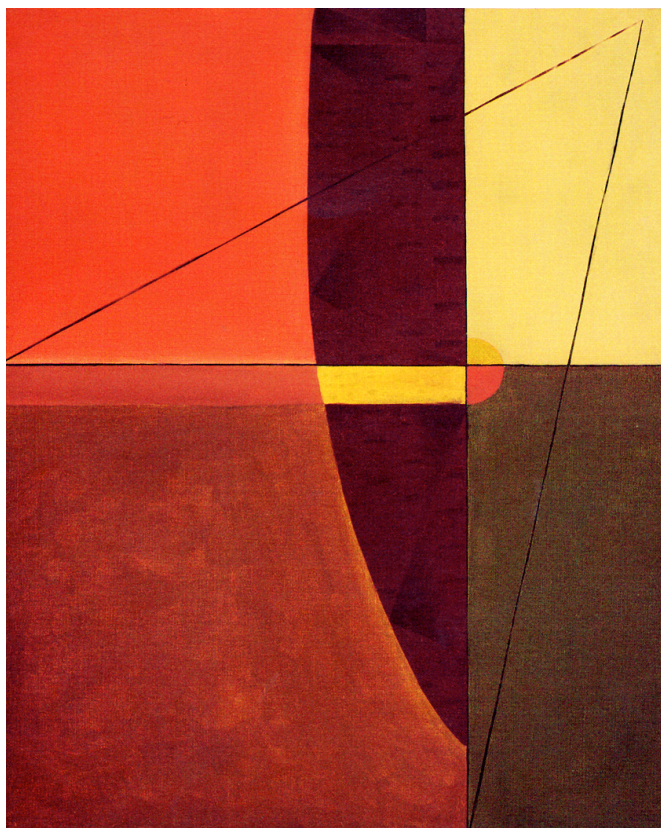
1.7 John Ferren, *Untitled*, 1933, gouache, 8 ½ x 11 ½ in. John Ferren Estate



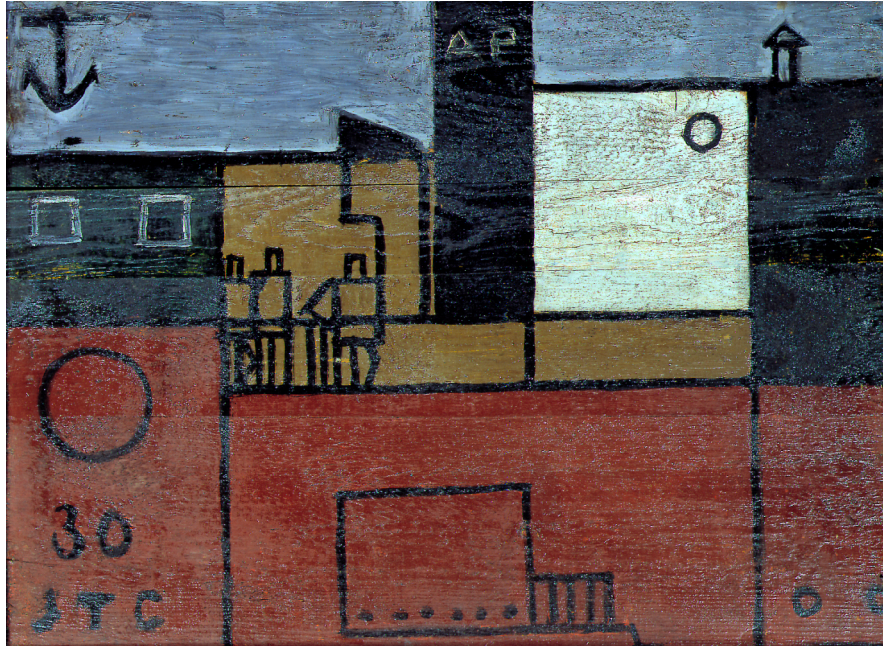
1.8 John Ferren, *St. Tropez*, 1931, oil on canvas, 25 ¼ x 21 ¼ in.



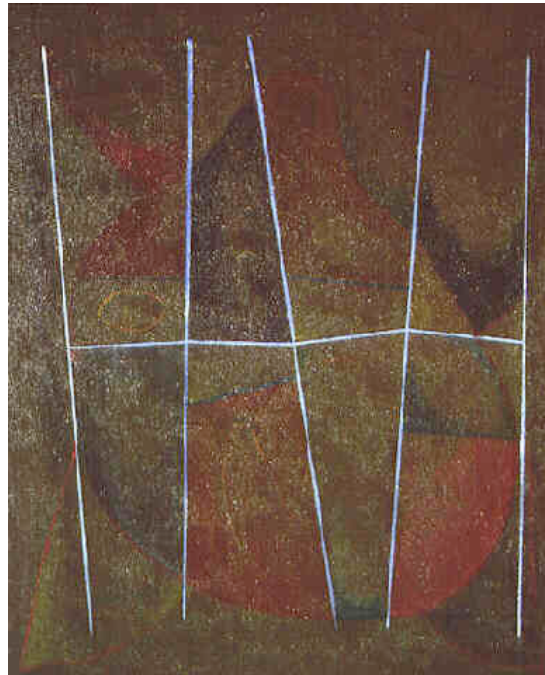
2.1 John Ferren, *Untitled (No. 18)*, 1932, oil on canvas, 28 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 23 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.



2.2 John Ferren, *Untitled*, ca. 1931, oil on canvas, 24 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.



2.3 Joaquín Torres-García, *Bateau Constructif*, 1930, oil on wood, 20 ½ x 15 ¾ in.,
courtesy of Jan Krugier Gallery



2.4 John Ferren, *Le Cheuve Souri*, 1932, oil on canvas, 28 1/8 x 23 ½ in.



2.5 John Ferren, *Mallorca*, 1934, watercolor, 9 x 11 in.



2.6 John Ferren, *Green Abstraction*, 1933, oil on canvas, 25 ½ x 35 ½ in.



2.7 John Ferren, *Mallorca*, 1934, oil on canvas, 24 x 29 in.



2.8 Wassily Kandinsky, *Dominant Curve*, 1936, Oil on canvas, 50 7/8 x 76 1/2 in.
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum



2.9 John Ferren, *Untitled*, 1934



2.10 John Ferren, *Composition aux Leones Roses*, 1931, oil on canvas, 24 x 20 in.



2.11 John Ferren, *Form Composition*, ca. 1933, oil and sand on burlap, 21 ¼ x 25 ¾ in.



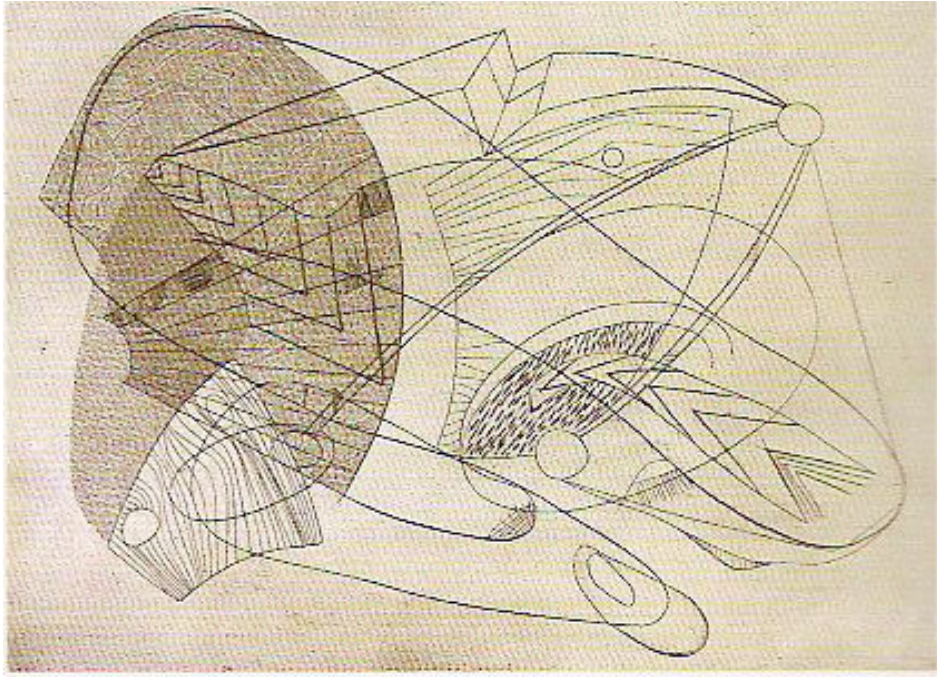
2.12 John Ferren, *Composition*, 1934, oil on canvas, 18 ¼ x 21 5/8 in., Berkshire Museum



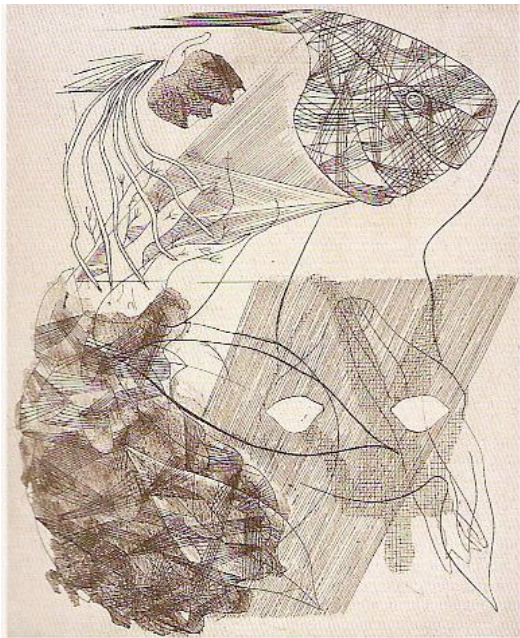
2.13 Stanley William Hayter, *Pavane*, 1935, engraving with soft ground etching and drypoint, ed. 30, 11 ½ x 7 ¾ in.



2.14 Stanley William Hayter, *Oedipus*, 1934, engraving and etching with roulette, ed. 30, image: 5 7/8 x 6 5/16 in.; sheet: 9 x 12 5/16 in.



2.15 John Ferren, *Abstraction*, 1934, 11 x 13 ³/₄ in. , engraving, edition unknown



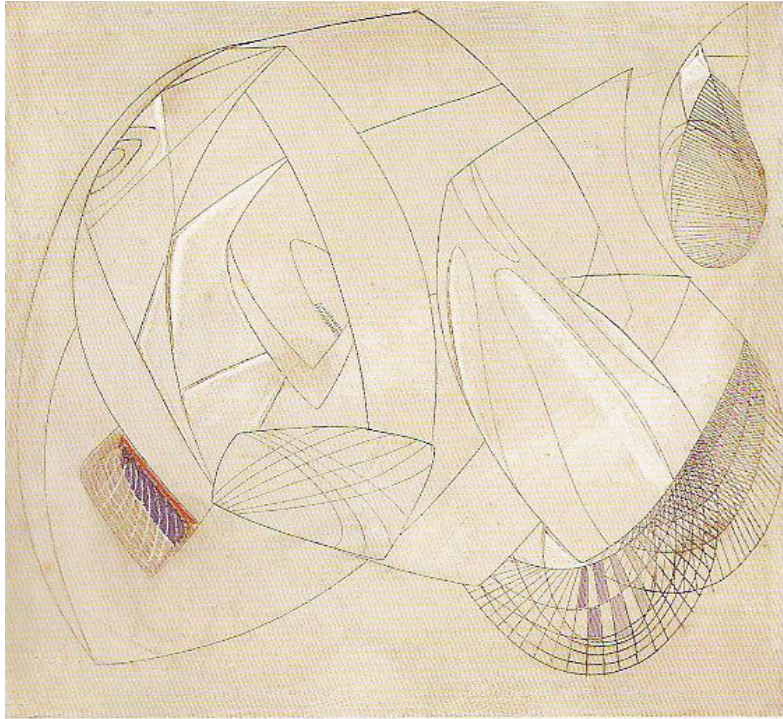
2.16 John Ferren, *The Hunt*, 1935, engraving, edition unknown, 13 ¹/₂ x 10 ³/₄ in.



2.17 John Buckland.Wright, *Jeune Fille au Miroir*, 1936, etching, ed, 30, 4 ¼ x 7 in.



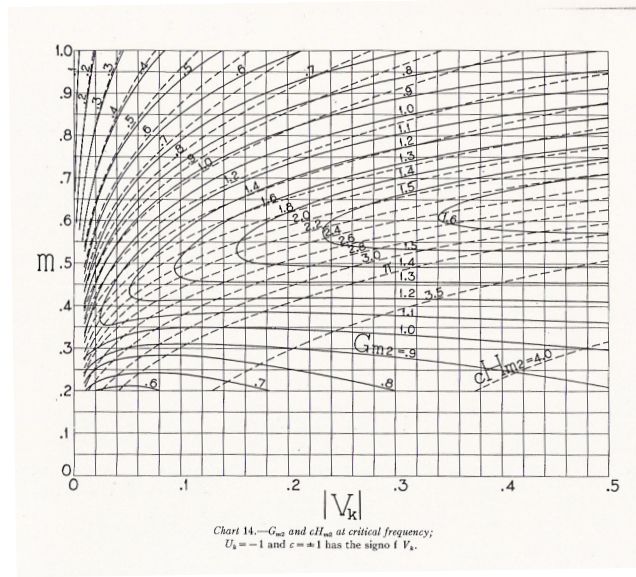
2.18 John Ferren, *Composition*, 1936, painted plaster relief, 11 x 8 5/8 in., Albright.Knox Gallery of Art, Gift of A. Conger Goodyear



2.19 John Ferren, *Composition*, 1936, etched and painted plaster with intaglio, 13 ½ x 14 in.



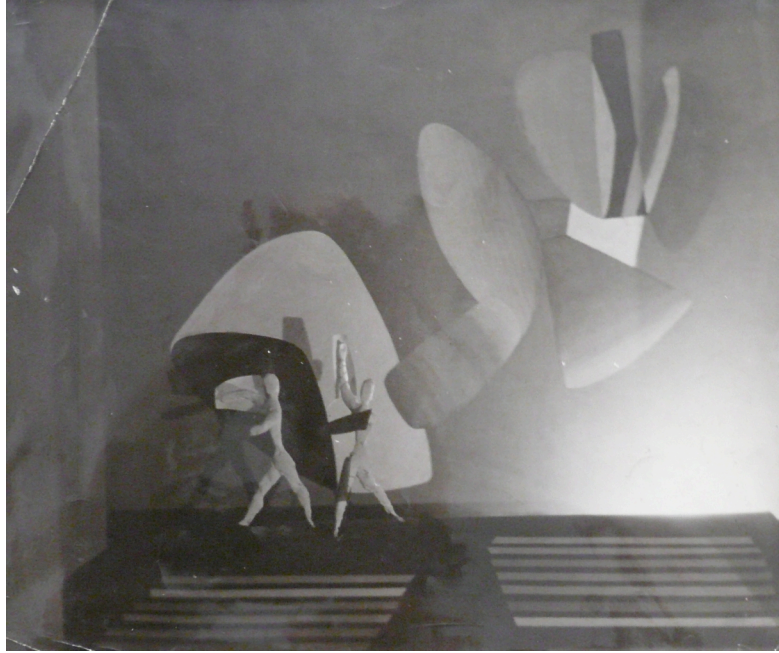
2.20 John Ferren, *Untitled Abstraction with Orange*, 1934, oil on canvas, 22 x 36 ½ in., Nora Eccles Museum of Art, Utah State University



2.21 “Chart 14— G_{m2} and cH_{m2} at critical frequency” from Arthur Crotch, *The Elements of Automatic Telephony*, 1924



2.22 John Ferren, *Untitled*, 1937, painted plaster relief, 10 7/8 x 15 3/8 in.



2.23 John Ferren, *Model for a ballet, Act 1*, ca. 1935, medium and dimensions unknown



3.1 John Ferren, *Untitled (No. 15)*, 1937, painted plaster relief, 15 ½ x 13 in.



3.2 John Ferren, *Untitled 9*, 1938, pastel on paper, 18 ½ 25 in., Michael Rosenfeld Gallery



3.3 John Ferren, *Untitled (Female Head)*, ca. 1938 oil on canvas, 18 x 15 in.



3.4 John Ferren, *Untitled (Male Head)*, ca. 1938, oil on canvas, 18 x 15 in.



3.5 Unknown photographer, “Artists in Exile” with Peggy Guggenheim, 1942
(John Ferren third row center)



3.6 John Ferren, *Abstract Design/For a Child's Room*, ca. 1942, medium and dimensions unknown



3.7 John Ferren, *Untitled (Rug Design)*, ca. 1942, gouache on paper, 9 x 12 in.



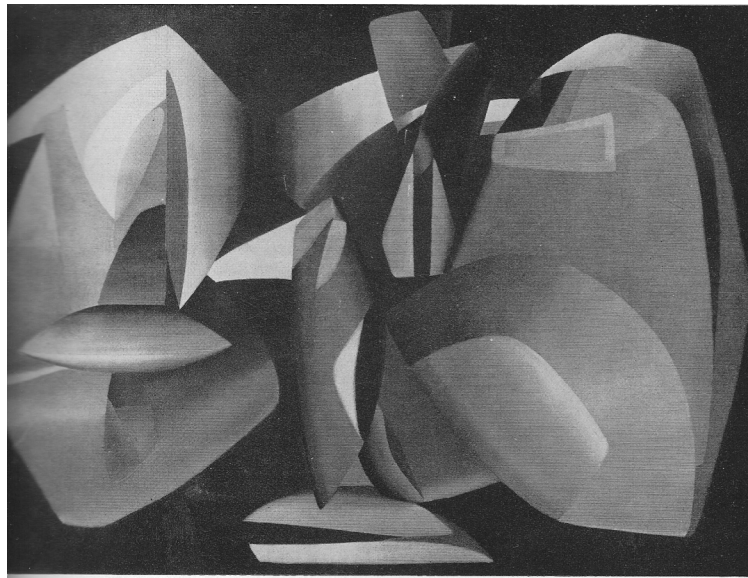
3.8 John Ferren, *Untitled (Rug Design)*, ca. 1942, gouache on paper, 14 x 11 in.



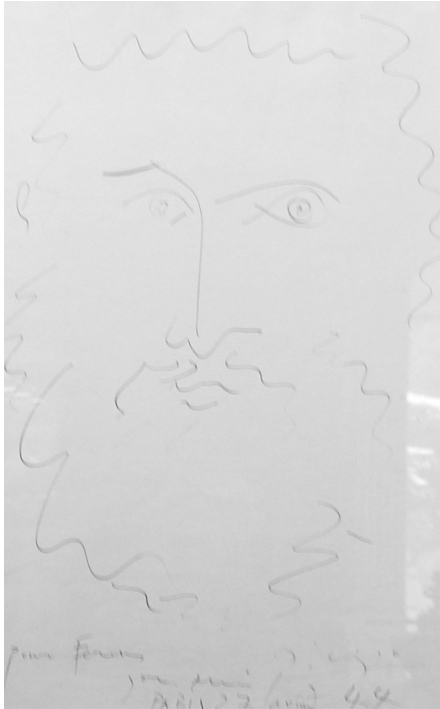
3.9 John Ferren, *Composition*, 1937, Peggy Guggenheim Collection



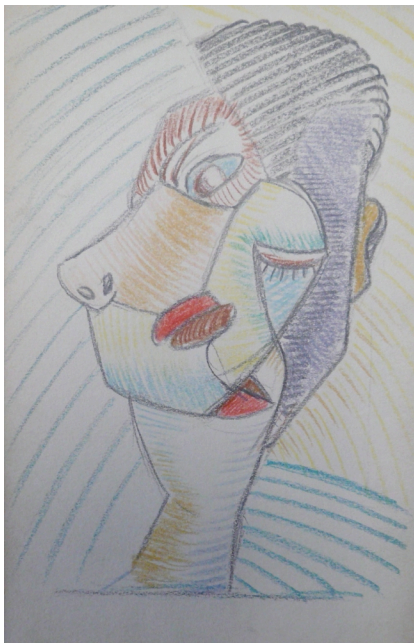
3.10 Unknown Photographer, "Artists in Exile" at Peggy Guggenheim's townhouse, ca. 1942



3.11 John Ferren, *Composition in Green*, 1936, oil on canvas, 28 ¾ x 39 in.



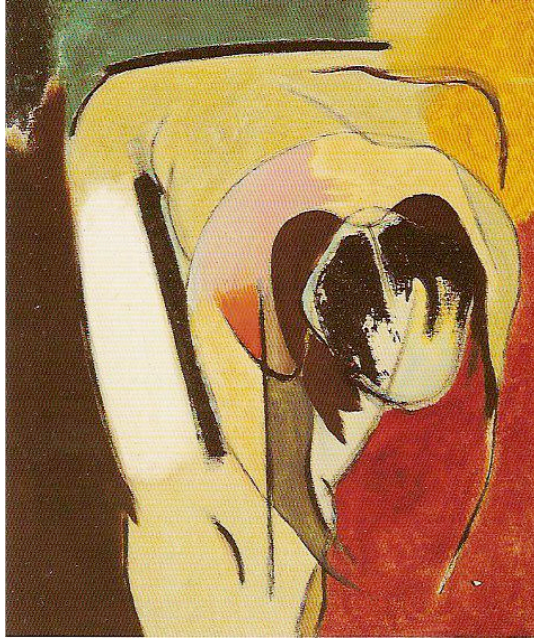
3.12 Pablo Picasso, *John Ferren*, 1944 ink on paper, dimensions unknown



3.13 John Ferren, *Untitled (Sketch of a Woman's Head)*, ca. 1945, colored pencil on paper, dimensions unknown



3.14 Pablo Picasso, *Woman Seated in an Armchair*, 1945



4.2 John Ferren, *Figure*, 1947, oil on canvas, 30 x 25 in.



4.3 Rufino Tamayo, *Hombre Contemplando la Luna (Man Contemplating the Moon)*, 1947, etching and aquatint, 7 7/8 x 5 3/4 in.



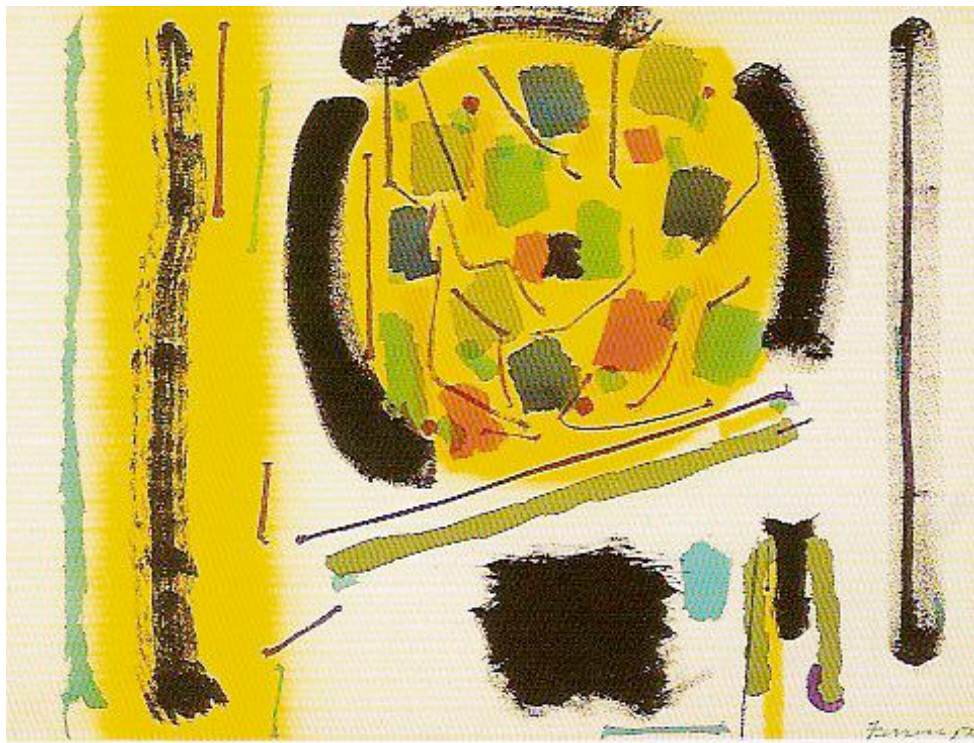
4.4 Rufino Tamayo, *Girl Attacked by a Strange Bird*, 1947, oil on canvas, 70 x 50 1/8 in.; Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Zadok



4.5 John Ferren, *Desert Landscape*, 1951, oil on canvas, 50 x 65 in.



4.6 Unknown photographer, John Ferren Exhibition, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1952



4.7 John Ferren, *Color Abstract IV*, 1952, gouache and watercolor on paper, 20 x 26 in.



4.8 John Ferren, *Contemplations of Geraniums*, 1952, oil on canvas, 47 ¾ x 36 in.



4.9 John Ferren, *New York Summer Landscape*, 1953, oil on orlon, 20 x 29 in.,
Parrish Art Museum, South Hampton, NY



4.10 John Ferren, *Sierra*, 1952, oil on canvas, 50 x 72 in.



4.11 *The Conquest of Mexico*, 1954, oil on canvas, 81 x 61 ½ in.



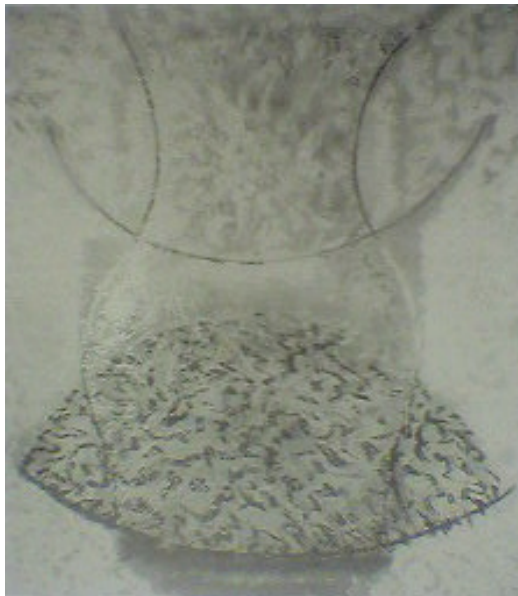
4.12 *Red and Blue*, 1954, oil on canvas, 48 x 38 in. Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, Lincoln, Nebraska



4.13 Movie still from Alfred Hitchcock's *The Trouble with Harry*



4.14 John Ferren, *Branches*, 1955, oil on canvas, 73 x 51 in.



4.15 John Ferren, *The Vase*, 1956, oil on canvas, 73 x 64 in.



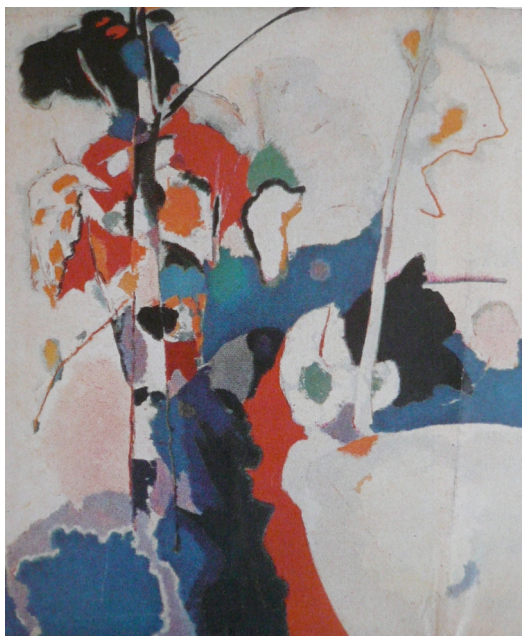
4.16 Movie still from Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*



4.17 Movie still from Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*



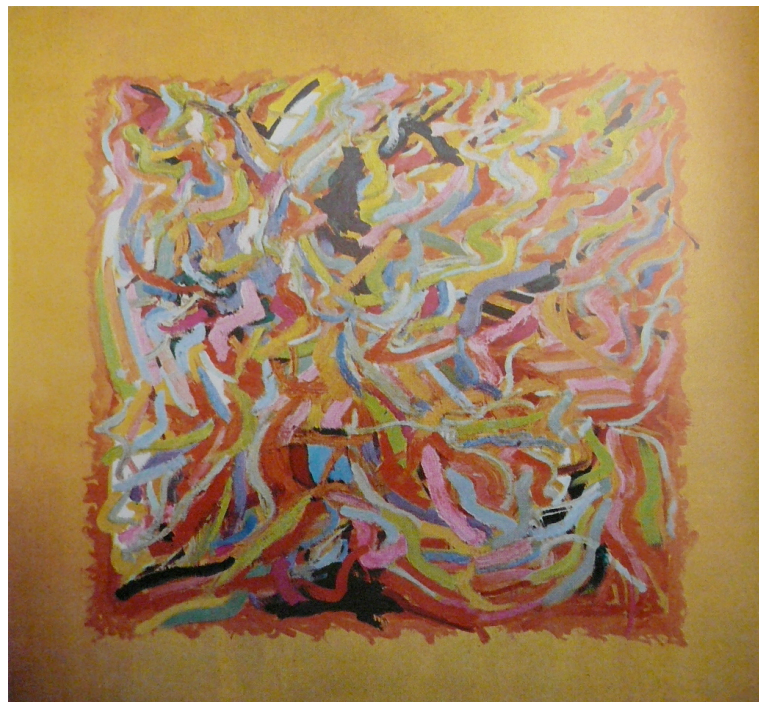
4.18 John Ferren, *The Garden*, 1954, oil on canvas, 82 x 65, Whitney Museum of American Art



4.19 John Ferren, *The Birches*, ca. 1955, dimensions, medium, and location unknown



5.1 Installation shot of John Ferren Exhibition, American Embassy, London, 1964



5.2 John Ferren, *The Yellow Season*, 1961, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown



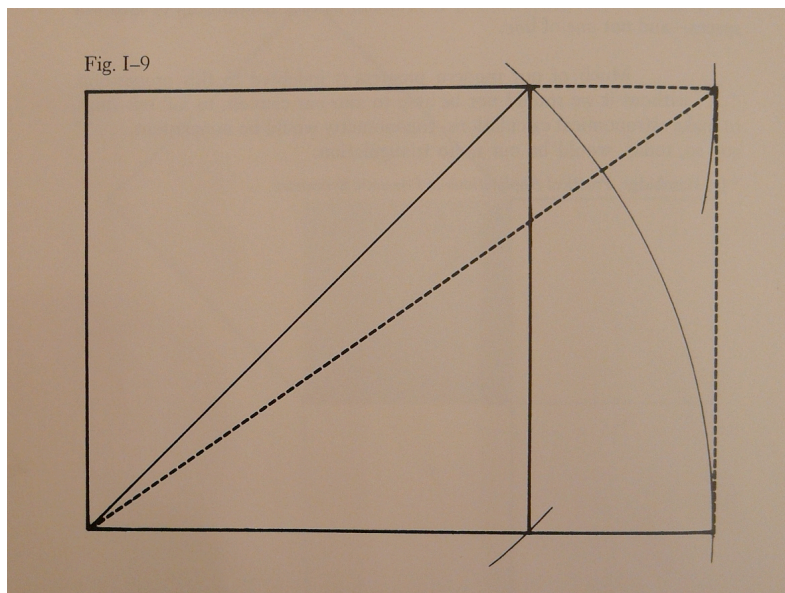
5.3 John Ferren, *Blue Border*, 1961, oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in.



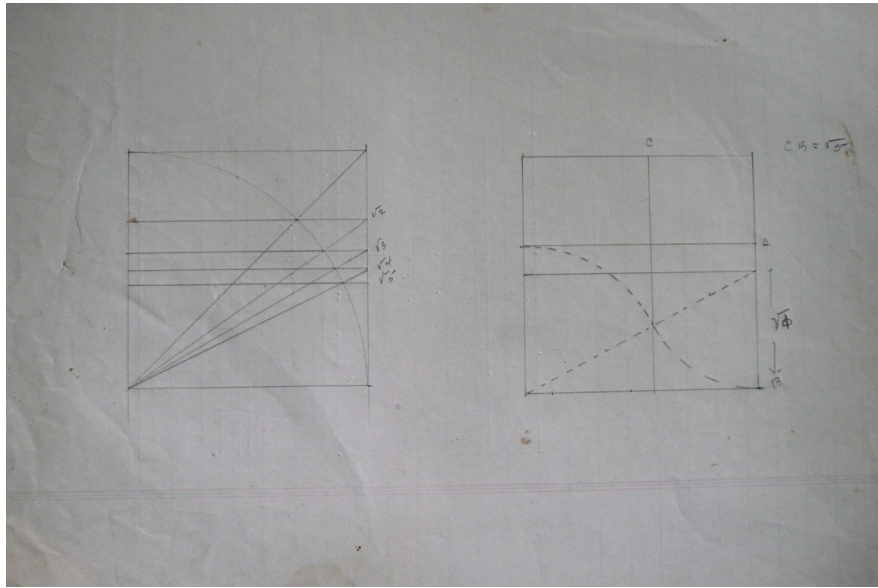
5.4 John Ferren, *Beit Eddin*, 1963, oil on canvas, 55 7/8 x 47 1/4 in.



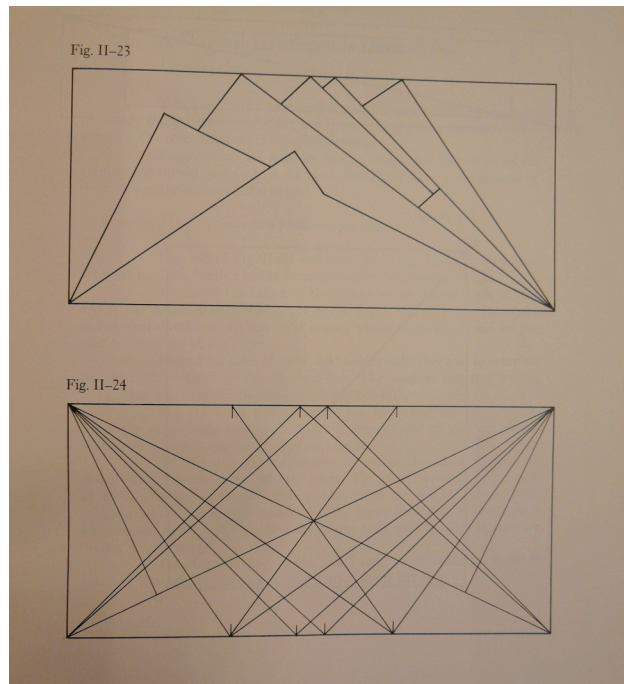
5.5 John Ferren, *Untitled (JF#31)*, 1961, oil on canvas, 47 ½ x 47 ¾ in., Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY



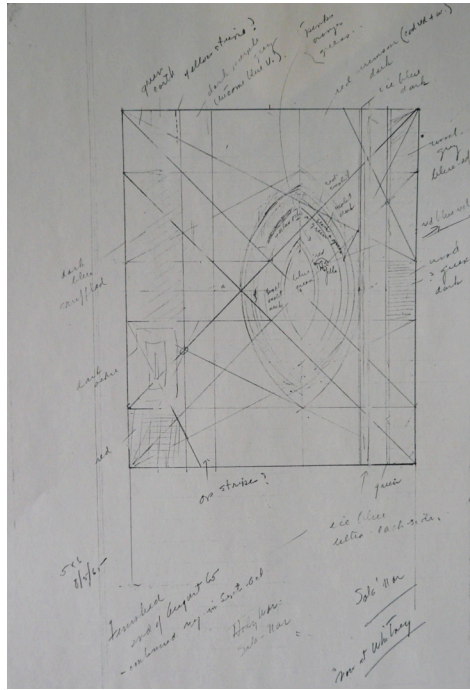
5.6 Illustration of a Root 2 Rectangle



5.7 John Ferren, Diagram of diagonals and root rectangles within a square from John Ferren's sketchbook, ca. 1965



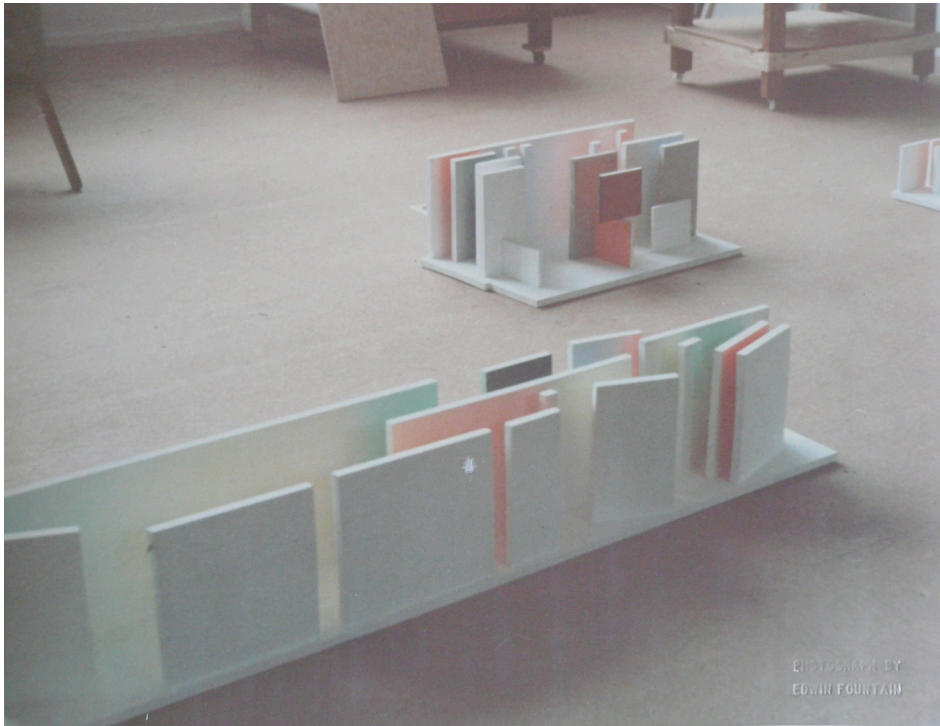
5.8 Illustration from Catherine Herter, *Dynamic Symmetry: A Primer*



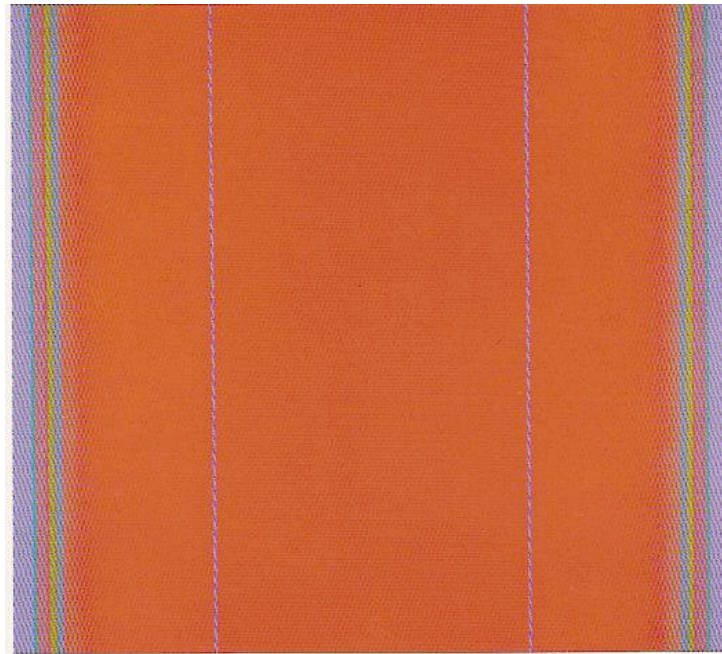
5.9 John Ferren, Study for *Sala Nar*, 1965, pencil on paper, dimensions unknown



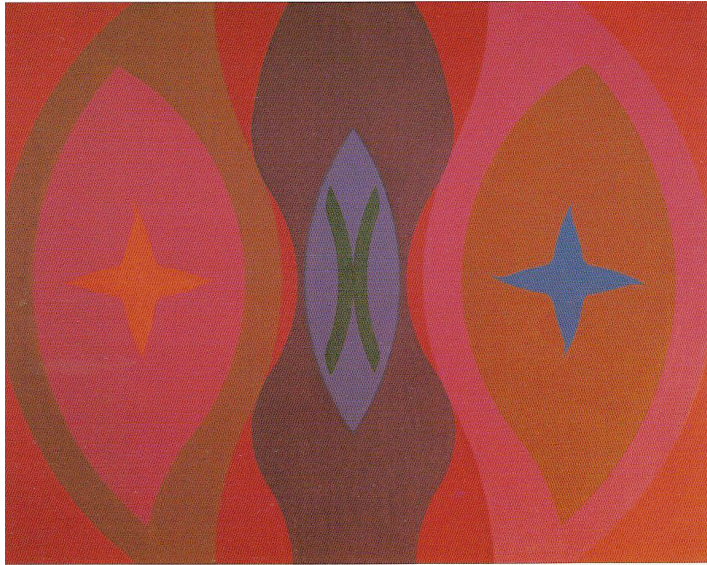
5.10 John Ferren, *Sala Nar*, 1965, oil on canvas, 72 x 60 in., Whitney Museum of American Art



5.11 Photograph showing three maquettes, ca. 1968



5.12 John Ferren, *Faharjo*, 1968, oil on canvas, 36 x 40 in.



5.13 John Ferren, *Double Star*, 1969, oil on canvas, 58 x 72 in., Queens College, CUNY