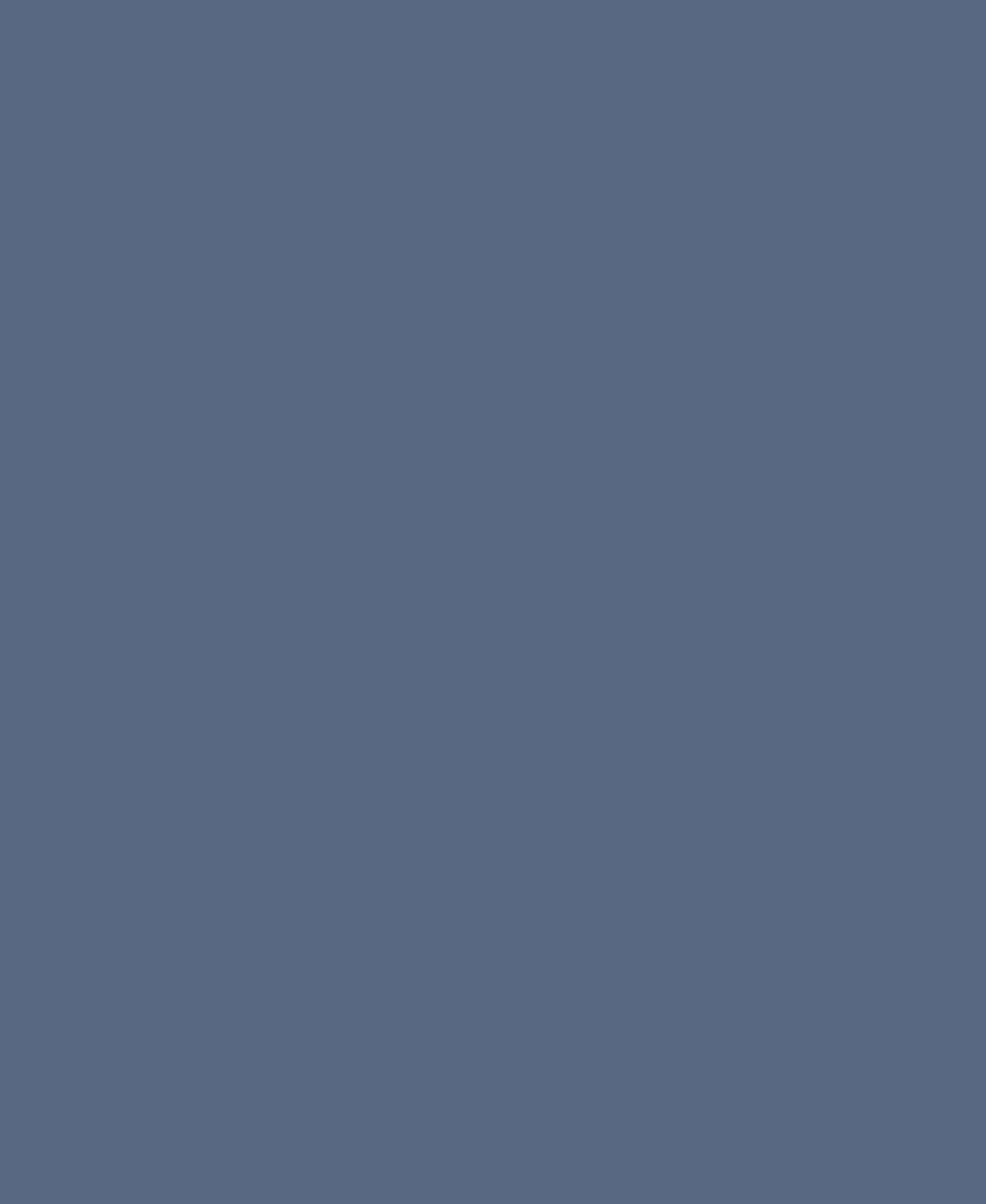


LEON BERKOWITZ

THRESHOLDS OF PERCEPTIBILITY

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THRESHOLDS OF PERCEPTIBILITY:
THE COLOR FIELD PAINTINGS OF
LEON BERKOWITZ

ESSAY BY JASON ROSENFELD

OCTOBER 3-NOVEMBER 2, 2019

HOLLIS TAGGART 521 WEST 26TH STREET, NEW YORK, NY 10001



FOREWORD

A significant contributor to the development of color field painting and an influential art educator, Leon Berkowitz has often been associated with the Washington Color School movement, although he resisted this label. Berkowitz's affiliation with the Washington Color School painters began with his founding of the Washington Workshop Center for the Arts in 1947 in collaboration with his wife, poet Ida Fox. Throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s the Workshop was a cultural fulcrum that brought together performing and visual artists, including painters Gene Davis, Morris Louis, and Kenneth Noland, among others, who later formed the Washington Color School. Berkowitz, however, created some of his most distinctive paintings after the closing of the Workshop in 1956. During this highly creative period, which began with extended travel to Europe in 1954 and lasted until his death in 1987, Berkowitz perfected a luminous, almost spiritual, approach to color. Using semi-transparent layers of paint to achieve seamlessly blended chromatic transitions, he created large-scale paintings that appear to vibrate and glow, creating a highly sensory experience.

This exhibition inaugurates the gallery's representation of the Estate of Leon Berkowitz and we are delighted to begin a reinvestigation of the artist's legacy. For propelling our interest in the artist, we are indebted to astute collector Sandy Gross.

Our deepest thanks is extended to John Dietsch and Maureen Berkowitz for their stewardship of Berkowitz's collection and continuous support and partnership. We are also extremely grateful to catalogue author Jason Rosenfeld, Distinguished Chair and Professor of Art History at Marymount Manhattan College, who brought great enthusiasm and energy to the project. His thoroughly researched essay, which places the development of Berkowitz's career in a broader context, offers the most complete study on the artist to date. Finally, we would like to thank Kara Spellman, Director of Research and Acquisitions, and the entire gallery team, for their commitment to this exhibition.

Hollis Taggart
Jillian Russo



THRESHOLDS OF PERCEPTIBILITY: THE COLOR FIELD PAINTINGS OF LEON BERKOWITZ

JASON ROSENFELD

In 1836, the landscape painter John Constable wrote that his contemporary, British Romantic artist J.M.W. Turner, in his latest pictures “has outdone himself, he seems to paint with tinted steam, so evanescent and so airy.”¹ In works such as *Keelmen Heaving in Coals by Moonlight* of 1835 (fig. 6), Turner combined a lifetime’s study of nature and the properties of paint with a maverick facility of working with brushes, palette knives, rags, and other implements, and the particularities of atmosphere in industrialized Britain, to make pictures whose subtle communication of light effects left Constable, an equally formidable painter of the landscape, gobsmacked. In Washington, D.C., in the early 1970s, Leon Berkowitz began to produce abstract pictures that similarly were the product of a lifetime of experimentation and mastery of medium and materials, achieving exceptional levels of evanescence and atmospheric sensitivity.

Berkowitz’s mature style, represented by nine works in this exhibition, came out of the New York Abstract Expressionist Color Field painting of Mark Rothko (1903–1970) and Barnett Newman (1905–1970), but he remained apart from that movement by living in Washington, D.C., and going his own way. Pictures such as *Unities No. 12* of 1971 (p. 27) bear an exquisite intensity of delicately modulated color in a kind of vibrational aesthetic—their surfaces appear to pulsate. The over seven-foot wide picture spreads out in front of the viewer in a landscape format, with its deepest tones at the upper and lower edges. Berkowitz would apply many layers of a custom oil and turpentine pigment to

achieve these magical surfaces. They seem to pull you into their depths while at the same time warm colors—such as the bands of orange that demarcate the green edges from the inner pinkish-red field—push out into your space. In *Tantric I* of 1981 (p. 41), soft rose hues radiate from a slightly elevated but central orb, within which vertically stacked pale discs of orange, indigo, and green emerge or recede—it is delightfully impossible to tell. This is Berkowitz’s own form of “tinted steam”—has any other American abstract painter better conveyed a sensation of misty dawn as in *Transition* (p. 39), or the density of late twilight as in *Envelope #2* (p. 35). The artist wrote, “I find that it is possible within the energies of light itself to respond to the rhythms of life . . . The paint freed from matter, and become vision, pulses in space in response to my whole being—From the sources of life I return to the energy of light.”² Turner’s final words on his deathbed in 1851 were, “The sun is god.” Perhaps with less irreverence, Berkowitz, more than any other American abstract artist of his generation, translated natural light into his own immersive, atmospheric, visionary, sophisticated, and scintillating art.

Berkowitz was born on September 14, 1911, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His parents were Jewish Hungarian immigrants and he was the seventh of eight siblings. In Philadelphia he met Ida Fox, a German-American poet who would become his first wife and a frequent collaborator on his exhibitions. While he initially found success as a welterweight boxer in the Golden Gloves, he formed aspirations of becoming an artist, but the Great Depression impelled him to seek a degree that



could assure him an income from teaching. Thus, he attended the University of Pennsylvania on scholarship and studied Art and Education, graduating with a B.F.A.; he would eventually make teaching a parallel career to his work as a painter. The couple moved to Washington, D.C., where Berkowitz took the Civil Service exam and was assigned to the Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Fox worked as a statistician at the National Housing Agency. In 1943 he joined the army but did not go overseas. He was stationed at Camp Lee (now Fort Lee) in Prince County, Virginia, and worked in the hospital under the staff psychologist and psychiatrist dealing with neurotic soldiers. It was there that he was introduced to Freudian and Jungian ideas and assessment formats such as Rorschach tests.

what had been the mining heiress Evalyn Walsh McLean's childhood home at 2020 Massachusetts Avenue. The organization eventually moved to New Hampshire Avenue, where they held important shows of contemporary art in the early 1950s.³ It encompassed an exhibiting body, a school devoted to fine art, theater, dance, and poetry, and a cooperative radio station, WCFM.⁴ By this time Berkowitz was teaching at Western High School on 35th and R streets in Washington.⁵ The Workshop became a draw for many artists in the region, including Morris Louis (1912–1962), who joined the staff in 1952, and Kenneth Noland (1924–2010), who became involved in 1953. It was an ambitious community organization, on the formula of a cooperative, and as Berkowitz later recalled, “I was hopeful that we could start a trend of the city setting up situations where the people themselves could make the art.”⁶

In 1945 the Berkowitzes and Helmuth Kern, executive secretary of the Potomac Cooperative Federation, began to conceive of a community organization that would come to fruition in 1947 as the Washington Workshop Center for the Arts and be housed on the fourth floor of

The Berkowitzes were not isolated in Washington, taking the train frequently to New York, and establishing relationships with metropolitan artists such as Willem de Kooning (1904–1997). He absorbed a great deal from

Fig. 1 Helen Frankenthaler, *Mountains and Sea*, 1952.
Oil and charcoal on canvas, 86 ¾ × 117 ¼ inches.
Helen Frankenthaler Foundation Inc., on loan to the
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

that paramount American art scene, but as he later recalled, “The great question in my mind was whether I had found my own voice.”⁷ The Berkowitzes visited the Dutch-born Abstract Expressionist de Kooning’s exhibit at the Sidney Janis Gallery on a trip to New York with Louis and Noland in early 1953,⁸ and during the same weekend they all, along with Clement Greenberg (1909–1994), Franz Kline (1910–1962), the gallerist Charles Egan, and *The Nation*’s literary editor Margaret Marshall, famously paid a studio visit to Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011). This would prove to be a seminal event for the development of painting in Washington.⁹ There, they would have seen her inventive soak-stain works such as *Mountains and Sea* from October 26, 1952 (fig. 1), and possibly other paintings such as *10/29/52* and *Open Wall* of 1953 (both Helen Frankenthaler Foundation).¹⁰ The following week, the Washington Workshop opened an exhibition of Louis’s work with a text by Berkowitz. A discussion between the Berkowitzes and Sidney Janis (1896–1989) also resulted in the Workshop taking the first retrospective of de Kooning from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, which opened on New Hampshire Avenue in June 1953 accompanied by a catalogue by Greenberg.¹¹ The Watkins Gallery at American University hosted Berkowitz’s first one-person show that same year. Consequently, in interviews he referred to 1953 as the *annus mirabilis*, the miraculous year that put his art, and Washington, on the fine art map.

Berkowitz would recall that what the visit to Frankenthaler’s studio “did for Louis was to demonstrate a technique he had never used—the idea of staining . . .

with acrylic on unsized canvas. . . . Because before that, he used his paint as plastic paint. He used it thickly. He poured it but he poured it thickly. The energy was the same. . . . I feel that what he got from Frankenthaler was simply a technical thing.”¹² However, this visit to the rising star Frankenthaler’s studio had little effect on Berkowitz’s art, as opposed to her immediate impact on Louis (fig. 2) and Noland, and Greenberg’s subsequent embrace of those two artists’ works. Up to this point Berkowitz had come out of a social realist background so characteristic of east coast Jewish artists.¹³ He then began to introduce a fauvist coloration into his palette, the product both of his experience with the Phillips Collection’s French avant-garde works in Washington and meeting Greenberg, who was working on a book on Matisse at this time.¹⁴ But Berkowitz’s pictures of the mid-1950s bear a distinctly de Kooning cast—closer to the gestural, outline mode of the Action painting of that artist’s wing of Abstract Expressionism, combined with the post-Surrealist images of William Baziotes (1912–1963), than the more subtle and tonal geometries of the Color Field artists with whom Berkowitz eventually would be more in sympathy.¹⁵ But in 1954 he and Ida left the United States for Europe for a new kind of inspiration, just as the Washington Workshop was hitting its stride, traveling initially to Spain.

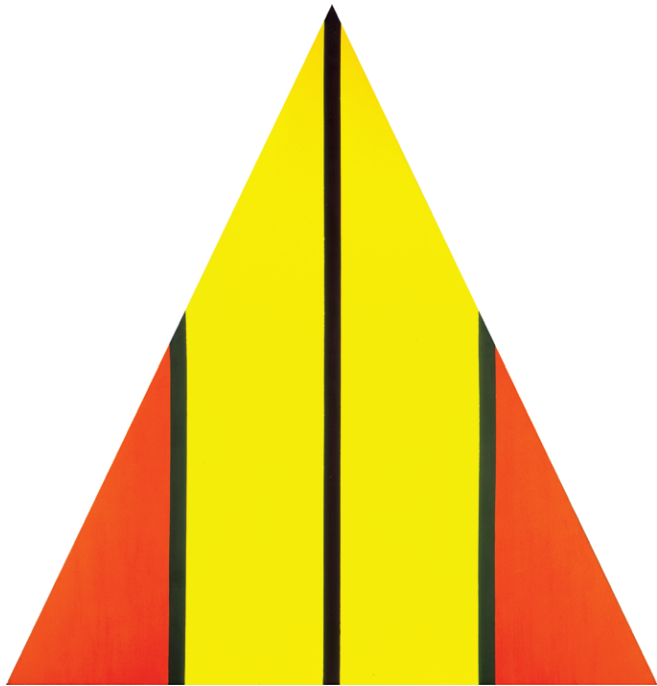
In Europe Berkowitz studied at various art academies and began to work *en plein air*, inspired by the light and atmosphere of Palma de Mallorca. An inceptive experience that always stayed with him happened in Spain: “. . . I got out on the hill. . . And I set my canvas up against



a wall that must have been up there in the time of the Moors. And I was surrounded by just the sky, the sea below it, just endless space. And that's where I felt comfortable. And I've been living in that space ever since."¹⁶ In plein-air painting, it was not the vista that produced an aesthetic response but simply being out in open space. This was what Europe gave Berkowitz: not an indoctrination into traditions via all the academies he attended from Spain to Paris to Italy, but a sense of openness and a desire to treat the canvas as a new field. Yet in an interview in June 1979 he firmly rejected the ideas that he was painting landscapes and that he was part of a group:

I didn't do landscapes. I worked *from* landscapes. Never did an actual landscape. . . . I made statements. . . . I come *out* of landscapes. I make that a distinction for myself as defense for people who're called color painters. I'm not a member of the Washington Color School. Definitely not. And I don't work with those concepts at all.

For Berkowitz, retrospectively, it was important to show that he did not adhere to the general ideas of the Washington Color School: using particular shapes, rigidly organizing colors into hard-edged compositions, working with staining and flow on unprimed canvases.¹⁷ He had his own trajectory: "The only way you can develop—and I'm theorizing, now, but I believe this—as an artist, is to go your own way. And you have to know what your way is. . . . Sometimes you have to invent your way, because it isn't the way the art world is going. So the great artist will always cut it, clear-cut, or pull through it."¹⁸ Boastful or not, the artist was correct—his pictures of the mid-to-late 1950s do not resemble nor take up the strategies of Louis or Noland or the artists that would follow their examples in Washington, and of course he did not relocate to New York. This individualistic approach was more firmly secured in his two and a half years spent working near Haverfordwest in Pembrokeshire, southwest Wales, near to St. David's Cathedral. As he later recalled, "I learned more about light and color from the Welsh landscape. . . . and the bird tracks and the sky than I could ever have learned in art school."¹⁹



Thus, his evolution did not follow the examples of his mostly younger peers in Washington, such as Noland and Louis or Howard Mehring (1931–1978) and Thomas Downing (1928–1985).²⁰ He took his time, arriving at what might be seen as his signature, most powerful style, only in the 1970s—these are the works that mainly feature in the present exhibition. His work is consequently difficult to pigeonhole. The heavy, gestural outlines of the mid-1950s paintings gave way in the early 1960s, when he was working in this very isolated part of Wales, to horizontally-oriented and flowing abstractions. He noted, “Wales is there in temperature. It’s another world compared to Spain. There is a kind of efflorescence in the light, like it [was] actually rainbows. And it’s partly because . . . of the water vapors in the air which split the light.”²¹ Resulting works such as *Untitled* of 1963 (p. 19) suggest activated skylscapes viewed from airplanes, with here a slightly rightward rising red scar across the lower center presenting an extreme solar effect on the horizon, similar to the poet Hart Crane’s description of the noon sun as “A rip-tooth of the sky’s acetylene” in “To Brooklyn Bridge.”²² Such pictures bear no foreground, middle ground, or background. Berkowitz’s canvases have entered this vivid sky.

Fig. 2 Morris Louis, *Trellis*, 1953. Acrylic resin on canvas, 76 × 104 inches. High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia. Gift of the Marcella Brenner Revocable Trust, 2010.233

Fig. 3 Barnett Newman, *Chartres*, 1953. Acrylic on canvas, 120 × 114 inches. Daros Collection, Switzerland

Once Berkowitz returned to Washington, subsequent works in the mid-1960s featured more regularized bands of color. In pictures such as *Galilee* (p. 23), he rejected the shaped and striped canvases of artists such as Frank Stella (b. 1936) or Newman (fig. 3),²³ in a calculated denial of the thingness of the painting, its sculptural autonomy, in favor of traditionally rectilinear supports, multiple pulsating horizons with bands of color that vibrate up and down the composition in a rising trapezoidal form, and shards of bare canvas piercing down from just off the upper left and right corners. The emphasis on complementary colors—red and green in *Galilee*—banded and broken up by wider, deep blue-blacks, and with that alluringly sandy-yellow lower edge, both encourage and deny recession into space, giving a tension to the form. Works such as *Galilee*—with its titular reference to northern Israel, resemblance to ancient Hebrew textile hues and patterns, and mastaba-like composition—would give way to even less historicist white or black-and-white images featuring vertical banding in the Rorschach-like *Chasuble* series of 1965–1967, more tightly joined thinner vertical bands in the *Cathedral* series in 1968, and richly structural use of color in the multiple *Corona*, *Oblique*, and *Vertical* works of 1968–1969. This was Berkowitz’s most protean period, when he perfected his technique of brushing on thin washes of an oil and turpentine concoction, as described below, and moved towards the complete dissolution of perceivable linearity. These are assured and beautifully painted works; they formed a challenge to the trendy staining of canvases, random mark-making and shaped

Fig. 4 Leon Berkowitz in his studio and blow-drying a painting, 1973

supports of Abstract Expressionist works, and rejected the visual pyrotechnics and vertigo-inducing sharp banding and manipulations of form in Op art at the same time that they took on the Minimalist dependence on regularity. As ever, Berkowitz steadily pursued his own approach, mastering application of diluted paints, and evolving an optics that entranced, pulsated, vibrated, and conveyed emotion. He was on the cusp of his signature format.

Berkowitz's most familiar and successful style emerged in the very early 1970s during a period living in SoHo in New York, with the *Duality* (p. 25) series and the *Unities* (pp. 27, 29, and 33), in which the bands of color were pressed onto the top edges in landscape format, and the sides in portrait format, and the center was given over to radiant masses of color, freed from division or line. He referred to these expanding color fields as "single enveloping space[s]."²⁴ The inspiration for such works came from many sources. Berkowitz was a superb manipulator of hues on the cyan/blue/indigo/violet end of the color spectrum. Such tones in *Envelope #2* of 1974 (p. 35), *The Pool II* of 1976 (p. 47), and *Big Bend No. II (Double Violet)* of circa 1976 (p. 37) emerged from a seminal experience on Capri, Italy, in the 1950s: "[Here's] a secret of painting you can't learn in art school. They can tell you how to *mix* the blue, or what the opposing color to blue is, but the *experience* of blue is where you find it. And I found it very much in the Blue Grotto, and of course beyond that in many other things. . . ."²⁵ Physical immersion in the sea—in that intense blue water of that storied cave on the Amalfi Coast, a

combination of liquid and light—had a deep effect on the artist. He cited the experience often in his interviews and writing. In an artist's mind this type of recitation of a formative moment can become something told by rote, its meaning depleted, but for Berkowitz it was this genuine openness and absorption of a physical and visual experience, this exposure to light and water and air and weather and their collaborative role in combining to produce a perceived color, that was cardinal to his painting.

Berkowitz also often cited Vermeer as a key influence on his work. This may seem surprising, to find a commonality between Berkowitz's vast spreads of modulating colors and the magically honeyed light and quietude of life in Vermeer's images of Baroque Delft. Berkowitz noted that he examined Vermeer's surfaces:

[I] took a magnifying glass and I studied the edge of his figures where they existed in light, and he had broken the edges. But this was not true of de Hooch or any other artist of the period. Well, you know, I felt this was true before I found out. I almost cried. But certain artists, for them color has been a language. Turner for example.²⁶

It was the way that Vermeer resolved issues of adjunct form through minutely blurred outline, and the subtle release of a dependence on drawing, that had an impact. And the scale and atmospheric mastery of Turner was surely a great influence on the artist, especially the diaphanous, unfinished, later pictures that resemble



mother of pearl in Turner's translation of invisible, moisture-laden air into creamy oils. The important exhibition of such work at the Museum of Modern Art in 1966 has long been cited as having an impact on American abstract painters, and Turner's idea of the sublime had taken firm root in American post-war practice.²⁷ Turner's *Keelmen Heaving in Coals by Moonlight* of 1835 and *The Dogana and Santa Maria Salute, Venice* of 1843 were both in the National Gallery of Art collection by 1961, and the British artist, art historian, critic, Phillips Collection curator, and Turner expert, Lawrence Gowing (1918–1991), who curated the show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1966, delivered a fine eulogy at Berkowitz's memorial service in 1987. He recalled numerous conversations with the painter on British Romanticism.²⁸ A picture such as the glorious *Merlin #2* (p. 45) reveals such debts. Gowing generalized about Berkowitz's works, noting that "colors coexisting in equal intensity generated the temperature for fusion. Crimson-pink and orange-pink, for example, burning together against a residue of fragile bird's egg blue," a description that could easily refer to *Merlin #2*, or *Big Bend II*.

To make paintings that deal with thresholds of perceptibility and subtleties of light and color, Berkowitz



developed a method that involved the use of oil paints and turpentine in washes. As his former assistant, the artist Robert Hite, described it:

He would flow the mix onto the canvas flat and then control the flow by turning the painting upright to get the color where he wished. He used a wide array of oil color but I remember he would pay top dollar for certain hues, particularly a translucent rose. . . . Leon developed a technique of covering the painting surface in tissue paper to control the speed of the color flow which gave more time to control the placement of the color. The multi-wash process allowed him to layer over a white sized canvas to best create a luminous color field.²⁹

Using large brushes, Berkowitz would apply a mixture of roughly ninety percent turpentine and ten percent oil to the paint surface, then dry it off thoroughly using rags and hair dryers (fig. 4). He would repeat this in a series of thirty or even forty pigment layers. The results are certainly Color Field pictures, as art history understands that wing of Abstract Expressionism, but they do not operate in the same way as Rothko's hovering





Fig. 5 Leon Berkowitz, *Coronation*, 1979. Oil on canvas, 96 × 76 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Corcoran Collection (Museum Purchase, William A. Clark Fund), 2015.143.27

Fig. 6 Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Keelmen Heaving in Coals by Moonlight*, 1835. Oil on canvas, 36 5/16 × 48 3/4 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Widener Collection, 1942.9.86

parallelograms of color clouds in that Berkowitz's transitions are seamless between hues. And while they seek to bodily envelope the viewer, they do so through a resistance to depth and resolution and a gentle expansion of tones beyond the four sides of the support, unlike the edged monochromatics in Newman's work, with their transgressive zips, intensely saturated hues, and dependence on internally spreading scale to physically surround the viewer. Berkowitz's pigments were not sprayed on and they have not seeped into the fibers of the canvas as in work by Frankenthaler and Louis. They remain gestural—with the pigment entirely brushed on—without the commanding ethos of the traceable *Ab Ex* physical struggle with the surface. These paintings are deeply meditative, such as the masterpiece *Coronation* (fig. 5), now in the collection of the National Gallery of Art having been transferred from the defunct Corcoran Gallery of Art, at whose linked School of Art Berkowitz taught for decades.³⁰ These paintings are luminous, suffused with energetic illumination. They are the pictorial equivalents to what James Turrell (b. 1943), Doug Wheeler (b. 1939), and Olafur Eliasson (b. 1967) have achieved in their architectural light environments but without the sleight of hand of fabricated walls, recessed lighting, fog machines, or shepherding viewers through space. Long before, Berkowitz had achieved a

similar sense of unknowingness, of disrootedness, of the slippage of the senses through pigment modulation and “pseudo-horizons.”³¹

Leon Berkowitz wrote well about his art, and such essays are worth seeking out.³² He inspired numerous artists through his teaching, including the sculptor Scott Burton (1939–1989) who wrote an important review of his show at the Corcoran Gallery in 1969.³³ His career and oeuvre is ripe for study. As J. W. Mahoney wrote of the artist's final show, at Baumgartner Galleries in 1986, Berkowitz “perceived—and managed to convey—the genuinely spiritual implications of color, as the very breath of an infinitely inspired creation. . . his color has attained a full and independent life.”³⁴ Berkowitz himself retained a full and admirable independence of spirit and style throughout his career. He died on August 17, 1987, less than a month before his seventy-sixth birthday.

Jason Rosenfeld
Penpont, Scotland
August 20, 2019

The author would like to thank John Dietsch, James Mahoney, Harry Rand, Robert Hite, Caroline Donadino at the Archives of American Art, and the team at Hollis Taggart for their support in the writing of this essay.

Notes

1. C. R. Leslie, *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable, Esq., R.A.* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1845): 277.
2. Leon Berkowitz, excerpt from a projected autobiography, *Berkowitz* (unpublished).
3. Now the Indonesian Embassy. The Workshop eventually moved to 1300 New Hampshire Avenue, then run by the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and since 1957 home to the National Society Colonial Dames.
4. Kern ran the radio station. americanradiohistory.com/Archive-BC/BC-1947/1947-02-03-BC.pdf
5. Built in 1898 by Harry B. Davis and Snowden Ashford, since 1974 the classical revival building has housed the Duke Ellington School of the Arts. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duke_Ellington_School_of_the_Arts
6. Leon Berkowitz, interview by Julie Haifley, *Archives of American Art*, June 5, 1979.
7. Leon Berkowitz, interview by Julie Haifley, *Archives of American Art*, July 17, 1979.
8. Located at 15 East 57th Street. "Willem de Kooning: Paintings on the Theme of the Woman," March 16–April 11, 1953.
9. On April 4, 1953. See "Biography/Chronology" at morrislouis.org
10. See John Elderfield, *Pittura/Panorama: Paintings by Helen Frankenthaler 1952–1993* (Venice, IT: Museo di Palazzo Grimani and Gagosian, 2019).
11. "Retrospective de Kooning 1935–53," Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, April 21–May 8, 1953, and then at the Washington Workshop from June 14–July 3.
12. Haifley, *Archives of American Art*, June 5, 1979.
13. See Jason Rosenfeld, *Ben Wilson: From Social Realism to Abstraction* (Montclair, NJ: The George Segal Gallery at Montclair State University, 2017).
14. Greenberg's book on Matisse would be published by Harry N. Abrams in 1953. See the works in *Looking Into Color: The Paintings of Leon Berkowitz* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Arts Museum, 2007), pp. 7–8.
15. As in *Enter* of 1957, reproduced in *Looking Into Color*, p. 9.
16. Haifley, *Archives of American Art*, July 17, 1979.
17. For the Washington Color School see Sue Scott, *Washington Color Painters: The First Generation* (Orlando, FL: Orlando Museum of Art, 1990). suescott-gallery.com/programs/texts/Washington-Color-Painters-The-First-Generation/; Gene Davis, "Starting Out in the '50s," *Art in America* 66, no. 4 (July–August 1978): 88–94; and Keith Morrison, *Art in Washington and the Afro-American Presence: 1940–1970* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Project for the Arts, 1985).
18. Haifley, *Archives of American Art*, June 5, 1979.
19. Haifley, *Archives of American Art*, June 5, 1979.
20. On Downing see Sarah K. Rich, *Thomas Downing: Washington Painter* (New York: Gary Snyder ProjectSpace, 2007).
21. Haifley, *Archives of American Art*, July 17, 1979.
22. Published in *The Bridge* (Paris: Black Sun Press, 1930).
23. See Peter Schjeldahl, "New York Letter," *Art International* 13, no. 6 (Summer 1969): 64, on Newman, and Schjeldahl, "New York Letter," *Art International* 13, no. 7 (September 1969): 70–74, on Berkowitz.
24. Haifley, *Archives of American Art*, July 17, 1979.
25. Haifley, *Archives of American Art*, June 5, 1979.
26. Haifley, *Archives of American Art*, July 17, 1979.
27. Lawrence Gowing, *Turner: Imagination and Reality* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966) and see also Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).
28. "A Celebration of the Life and Career of Leon Berkowitz," Memorial Service at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, September 14, 1987. Transcript via the Baumgartner Galleries.
29. Robert Hite, email message to author, August 19, 2019. See also footage of Berkowitz painting in his upper-floor studio at 2003 Kalorama Road, NW, from 1986, "Painting the Color of Light," narrated by Jan Thompson Goldsmith: youtube.com/watch?v=Ha-mmbBI3VE&t=22s
30. Berkowitz gave this picture that name after a woman remarked that it reminded her of Fra Angelico's *Coronation of the Virgin* (c. 1430–1432) at the Musée du Louvre, Paris. Haifley, *Archives of American Art*, July 17, 1979.
31. See Harry Rand, "Leon Berkowitz," *Arts Magazine* (June/Summer 1985): 15.
32. See Leon Berkowitz, "Speak-easy," *New Art Examiner* 14, no. 3 (November 1966) and *An Exhibition of Current Painting by Leon Berkowitz: The Sound of Light* (Syracuse, NY: Everson Museum of Art, 1973).
33. Scott Burton, "Color It Berkowitz," *ARTnews* 68, no. 1 (March 1969): 32–33, 72–73.
34. J. W. Mahoney, "Leon Berkowitz: Baumgartner Galleries," *New Art Examiner* 14, no. 1 (September 1986): 51–52.





WORKS

Untitled

1963

Oil on canvas

48 × 59 ¾ inches





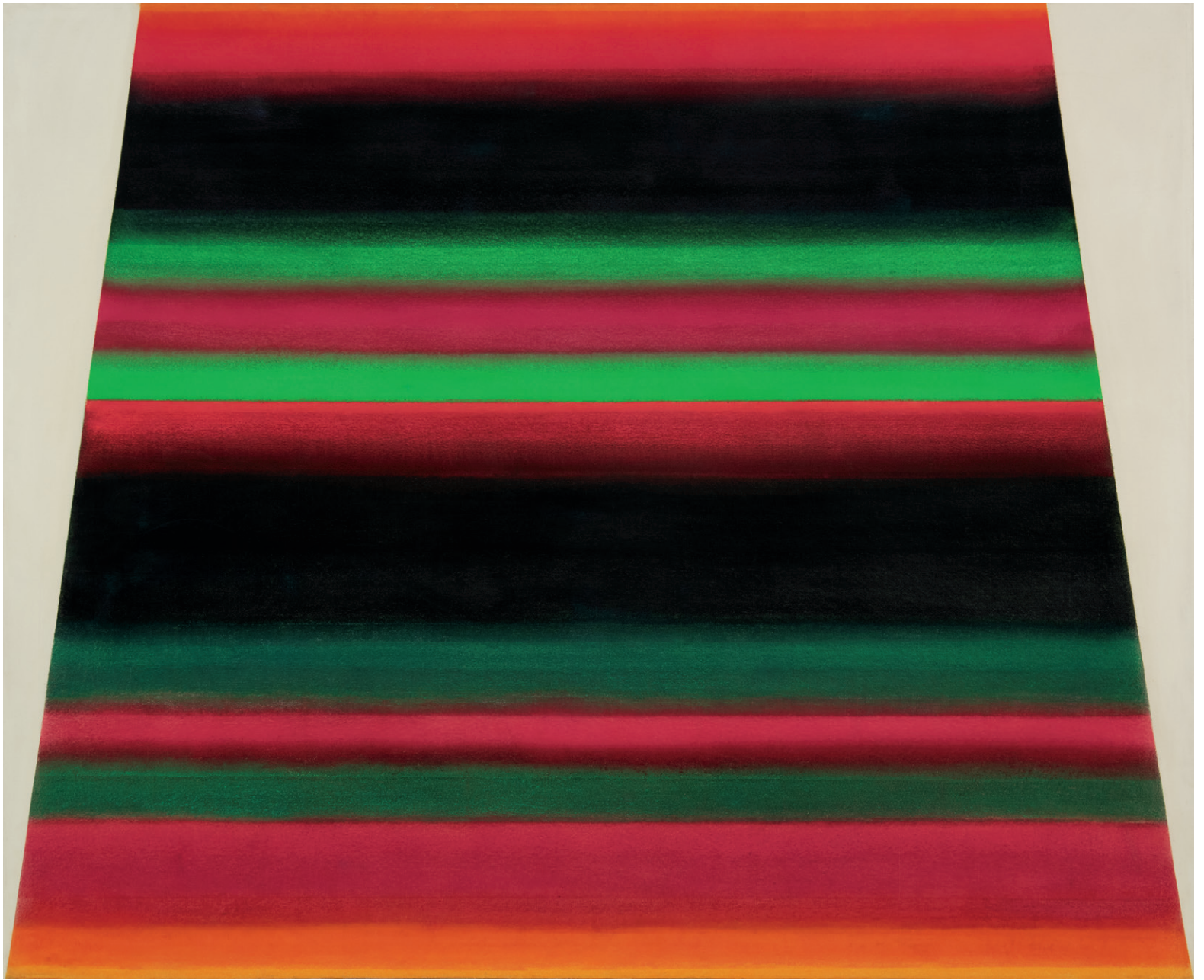


Galilee

1965

Oil on canvas

55 7/8 × 68 inches



Duality #15

1970-71

Oil on canvas

90 × 52 1/8 inches



Unities No. 12

1971

Oil on canvas

44 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 84 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches



Unities #16

1972

Oil on canvas

84 1/4 × 60 1/4 inches



Unities #31

1973

Oil on canvas

64 × 86 inches



34

Envelope #2

1974

Oil on canvas

44 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 67 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches

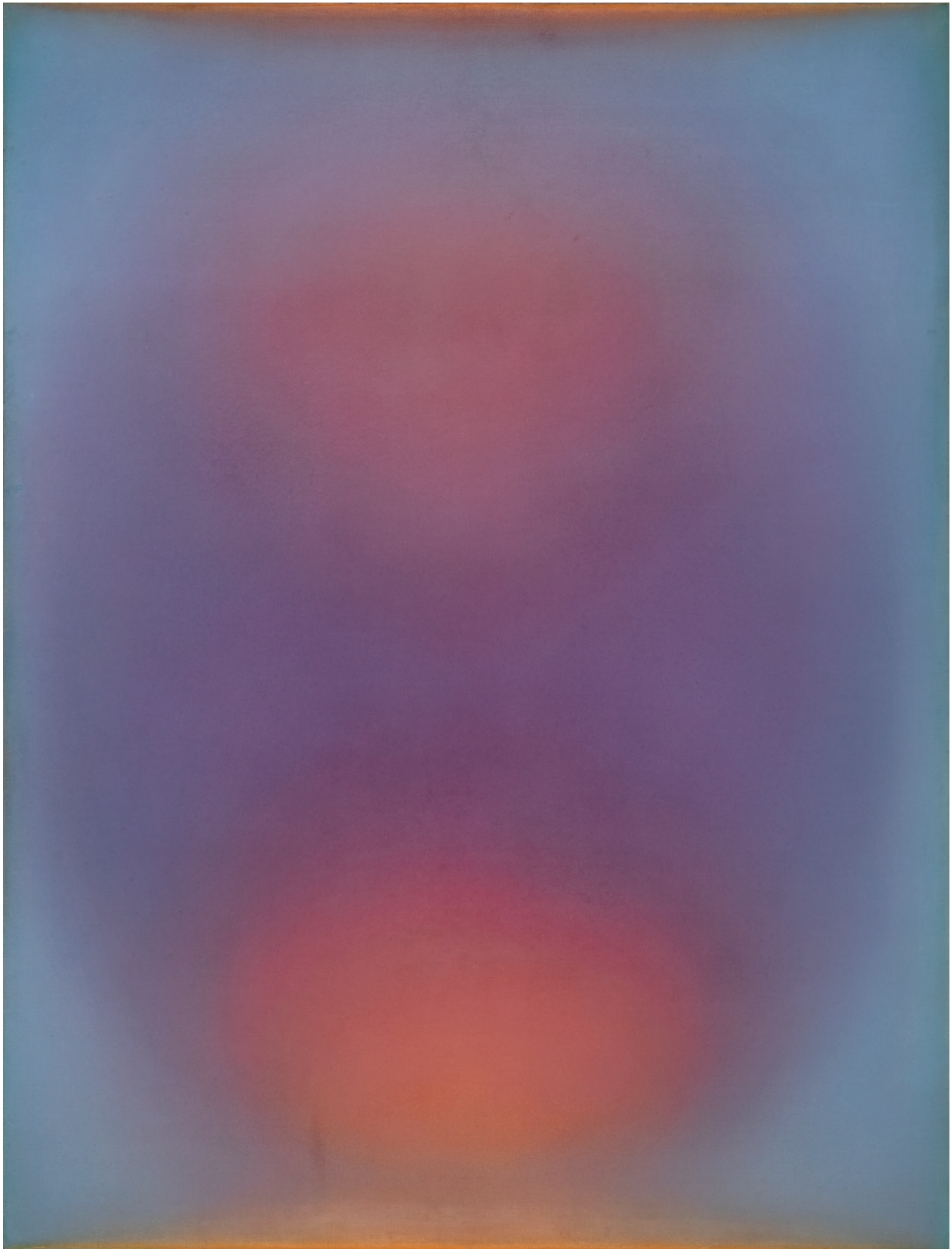


Big Bend No. II (Double Violet)

circa 1976

Oil on canvas

100 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 78 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches



Transition

1979

Oil on canvas

100 × 82 inches



40

Tantric I

1981

Oil on canvas

87 × 111 inches



44

Merlin #2

1984

Oil on canvas

72 × 90 inches



The Pool II

1976

Oil on canvas

110 ¼ × 58 ½ inches





CHRONOLOGY

1911

Leon Berkowitz is born on September 14 in Philadelphia. His father and mother are Hasidic immigrants from Hungary and Berkowitz is the second youngest of eight children. He attends public grade school and high school, where his artistic talents are encouraged.

1935–1937

Berkowitz meets and marries poet Ida Fox. The couple is introduced through a mutual artist friend in Philadelphia. At the time, Berkowitz is studying art and education on a scholarship at the University of Pennsylvania.

1941

Berkowitz takes classes with Harry Sternberg at the Art Students League, in New York City, during the summer session.

1942

Berkowitz receives a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Pennsylvania. After graduation he takes a Civil Service exam and moves to Washington, D.C., where he is briefly assigned to the Department of Justice. Berkowitz decides to pursue teaching and secures his first position as an art teacher in a public high school.

1943–1945

Berkowitz serves in the U.S. Army during World War II. Stationed at Camp Lee, Virginia, he works as an art therapist for psychiatric patients.

1945–1956

Berkowitz and his wife, Ida, return to Washington, D.C. Along with Helmuth Kern they found the Washington Workshop Center for the Arts, an organization that fosters community participation and offers educational programs in the arts. Berkowitz serves as Program Director and Ida as Managing Director. One of the goals of the Washington Workshop is to integrate the arts—including theater, dance, and visual art. The Center becomes an incubator for local artists including Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Thomas Downing, and Howard Mehring, who become known as part of

the Washington Color School Movement. Berkowitz continues teaching art at Eastern High School and Western High School.

1949

Berkowitz and Ida travel to Mexico and he studies briefly at Mexico City College.

1953

The Washington Workshop hosts a retrospective of Willem de Kooning's work. Berkowitz meets Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Sidney Janis, Franz Kline, and Clement Greenberg during frequent trips to visit New York City galleries.

1953

Berkowitz holds his first solo exhibition, at the Watkins Gallery in Washington, D.C.

1954

Berkowitz exhibits in the group show *Abstractions: New York and Washington Artists*, along with Morris Louis, Gene Davis, Irene Rice Pereira, and Theodoros Stamos at the Barnett Aden Gallery in Washington, D.C. Berkowitz receives a teaching sabbatical and he and Ida move to Mallorca, Spain for the year. The isolation allows him to focus on his painting and he creates a series entitled *In-Spaces of Land, Sea and Sky*.

1956

The Washington Workshop closes due to financial difficulties.

1956–1964

Berkowitz and Ida spend extended periods of time in Europe including a total of two and half years in Wales, and trips to London, Italy, Greece, and Jerusalem.

1963–1964

Berkowitz exhibits work at New Art Center Gallery, London, and at Rina Gallery in Jerusalem. During a period in Paris he studies at the Académie de la Grand Chaumière.

1969

Berkowitz's first solo museum exhibition *Recent Paintings by Leon Berkowitz* opens at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. He is also included in *The Washington Painters: 17 Artists from the Capital Area*, along with Gene Davis, Sam Gilliam, Paul Reed, Alma Thomas, and Howard Mehring, among others, at the Ringling Museum in Sarasota, Florida.

1969–1987

Berkowitz joins the faculty of the Corcoran School of Art and continues to teach there for the remainder of his career.

1970–1971

The Berkowitzes live in SoHo, New York City, for a period.

1972

Berkowitz is featured in the exhibition *Selections from the Aldrich Museum Collection and the Invitational Showing of Paintings on Paper*. He also debuts his *Unities* series at Pyramid Gallery in Washington, D.C.

1973

Berkowitz participates in *Flowering Form*, organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida, along with Paul Jenkins, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Gene Davis, Sheila Isham, and others.

1973–1974

Berkowitz exhibits his iconic *Unities*, *Triptych*, and *Twelve Tribes of Israel* series in the traveling solo exhibition *Leon Berkowitz: The Sound of Light* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art and the Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York.

1977

A major solo exhibition *Leon Berkowitz: Big Bend Series* opens at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., and travels to the Chicago Arts Club.

1979–1980

Ida dies in 1979. Berkowitz meets artist Maureen Stark at an art event and the two marry the following year.

1985

Berkowitz is appointed the David Kreeger Chair in Painting at the Corcoran School of Art.

1985–1987

Berkowitz's paintings are presented in annual solo exhibitions, *Beyond Color* (1985), *Algonquit* (1986), *Luminosities* (1987), and *Unities* (1988) at Baumgartner Galleries, Washington, D.C.

1987

Berkowitz dies on August 17 in Washington, D.C. The Corcoran Gallery of Art honors him with a presentation of his *7 Lights* series and a eulogy by artist and art historian Sir Lawrence Gowing, former Deputy Director of the Tate Gallery, London.

EXHIBITIONS AND CHRONOLOGY

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1953 Watkins Gallery, Washington, D.C.
 1956 Watkins Gallery, Washington, D.C.
 1962 Bishop's Palace, St. David's, Wales, United Kingdom
 (with poet Ida Fox)
 1963 Scott Rader Commonwealth, Wollaston, England
 (with poet Ida Fox)
 New Art Center Gallery, London
 1964 Rina Gallery, Jerusalem (with poet Ida Fox)
 1965 Mickelson Gallery, Washington, D.C. (with poet Ida Fox)
 1966 Esther Stuttmann Gallery, Washington, D.C.
 1969 Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.,
Recent Paintings by Leon Berkowitz
 A. M. Sachs Gallery, New York
 1970 Guelph University, Ontario, Canada
 1972 Pyramid Gallery, Washington, D.C.
 1973 Klingpitcher Gallery, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
 Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.,
Leon Berkowitz: The Sound of Light
 1974 Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York,
Leon Berkowitz: The Sound of Light
 1975 Museum of University of Iowa, Iowa City
 Chapman Kelley Gallery, Dallas, Texas
 1976 Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., *Seven Lights*
 1977 The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.,
Big Bend Series
 Chicago Arts Club, *Big Bend Series*
 National Academy of Science, Washington, D.C.
 Middendorf Gallery, Washington, D.C.
 Chapman Kelley Gallery, Dallas, Texas
 1978 Hodgell Hartman Gallery, Sarasota, Florida
 Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida
 Virginia Miller Gallery, Miami, Florida
 1979 B. R. Kornblatt Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland
 1980 Jacksonville Art Museum, Florida
 Middendorf/Lane Gallery, Washington, D.C.
 1982 Middendorf/Lane Gallery, Washington, D.C.
 1985 Baumgartner Galleries, Inc., Washington, D.C.,
Beyond Color
 1986 Baumgartner Galleries, Inc., Washington, D.C., *Algonquit*
 1987 Baumgartner Galleries, Inc., Washington, D.C.,
Luminosities

- 1987 Tilghman Gallery, Boca Raton, FL, *Leon Berkowitz,
 Robin Rose, Rick Beaulieu*
 1988 Baumgartner Galleries, Inc., Washington, D.C., *Unities*
 1989 Baumgartner Galleries, Inc., Washington, D.C.
 2007 Washington Arts Museum, Washington, D.C.,
Looking Into Color: The Paintings of Leon Berkowitz

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1949 Mexico City College, Mexico
 1950–54 The Workshop Center for the Arts, Washington, D.C.,
Faculty Shows
 1954 Barnett Aden Gallery, Washington, D.C., *Abstractions:
 New York and Washington Artists* (with Morris Louis,
 Gene Davis, Irene Rice Pereira, and Theodoros Stamos)
 1957 National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian
 Institution, Washington, D.C., Baltimore Museum of
 Art, Maryland
 1958 Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
 1960 Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
 1964 Mykonos Art Gallery, Greece
 1966 Jewish Community Center, Washington, D.C.,
Washington Collects Washingtonians
 1967 Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.,
Corcoran Biennial
 1968–70 American Federation of Arts, Traveling Exhibition
 1968 Smithsonian Institution, Museum of Natural History,
 Washington, D.C., *The Art of Organic Forms*
 1969 Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida, and Loch
 Haven Art Center, Orlando, Florida, *Color in Control*
 (with Josef Albers, Ilya Bolotowsky, Gene Davis,
 John Ferren, and Morris Sander)
 A. M. Sachs Gallery, New York
 Ringling Museum, Sarasota, Florida, *17 Artists from the
 Capital Area* (with Gene Davis, Sam Gilliam, Paul
 Reed, Alma Thomas, and Howard Mehring)
 Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield,
 Connecticut, *Highlights 1968-69, New York Art
 Season* (with Pierre Alechinsky, James Christensen,
 Dan Flavin, Eva Hesse, Doug Ohlson, Morris Sander,
 and Richard Serra), Jacksonville Art Museum, Florida

- 1970 A. M. Sachs Gallery, New York
Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland, *Washington: 20 Years* (with Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Gene Davis, and Jacob Kainen)
Flint Institute of Arts, Michigan, *Second Flint Invitational*
- 1972 Baltimore Museum, Maryland, *Annual Trustee Selection Show*
Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, *Inside Philadelphia* (with Josef Albers, Fernando Botero, Christo, Joseph Cornell, Willem de Kooning, Jim Dine, Arshile Gorky, Hans Hofmann, Robert Indiana, Jasper Johns, Franz Kline, Roy Lichtenstein, Miró, Robert Morris, Robert Motherwell, Louise Nevelson, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Rauschenberg, Ad Reinhardt, David Smith, and Mark Tobey)
- 1973 St. Petersburg Museum of Fine Arts, Florida, Loch Haven Art Center, Orlando, Florida, and Lemoyne Art Foundation, Tallahassee, Florida, *Flowing Form* (with Morris Louis, Sam Francis, Helen Frankenthaler, Paul Jenkins, James Brooks, and Friedel Dzubas)
- 1974 Pratt Institute, New York, *Recent Abstract Painting*
Adams Davidson Galleries, Inc., Washington, D.C., *Washington Invitational*
Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida, *Contemporary Religious Imagery in American Art* (with Fernando Botero, Arthur Dove, Adolph Gottlieb, Nancy Graves, Laurie Lipton, Louise Nevelson, Barnett Newman, Irene Rice Pereira, and Mark Tobey)
- 1978 Art Sources, Inc., Jacksonville, Florida, *Six Contemporary Painters* (with Richard Anuszkiewicz, Paul Jenkins, Robert Natkin, and David Solomon)
- 1979 Hodgell-Hartman Gallery, Sarasota, Florida
B. R. Kornblatt Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland
McKissick Museum, Columbia, South Carolina
Middendorf/Lane Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 1984 The Art Barn, Washington, D.C., *Color as Light*

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Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, Michigan

Kohler Foundation, Inc., Wisconsin

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Oklahoma City Museum of Art, Oklahoma

Phoenix Art Museum, Arizona

Princeton University Art Museum, New Jersey

Ringling Museum, Sarasota, Florida

Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

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Front and back covers: Leon Berkowitz, *Merlin #2*, 1984, detail (p. 44)

Page 2: Leon Berkowitz in his studio, August 1985.

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Page 4: Leon Berkowitz in his studio, May 1987.

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Pages 16–17: Leon Berkowitz moving a painting in his studio, 1973. Photograph by Kerby C. Smith, www.kerbysmith.com

Page 48: Leon Berkowitz in front of his home in Washington, D.C., 1973. Photograph by Kerby C. Smith, www.kerbysmith.com

