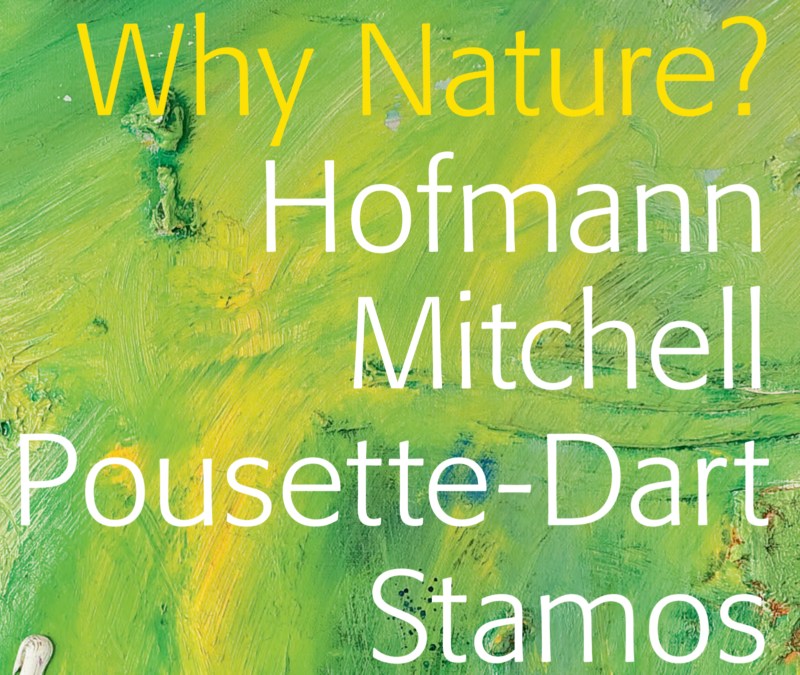

Why Nature?

Hofmann Mitchell Pousette-Dart Stamos

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Hofmann
Mitchell
Pousette-Dart
Stamos

October 30 through December 6, 2014

Essay by Robert S. Mattison

HOLLIS TAGGART GALLERIES

958 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10021

To Sam Hunter (1923–2014)
Scholar, mentor, and friend

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Acknowledgments

Evocations of the natural world have long provided an aesthetic and intellectual umbrella for some of the most important art works produced during the mid-century and post-war era. Although this is not widely discussed today, we need only to look back to contemporary critics and curators alike to see how truly attuned they were to the deep connection between abstraction and nature. They talked about it, wrote about it, and debated about it. Such landmark essays as Clement Greenberg's 1949 "The Role of Nature in Modern Painting," and Frank O'Hara's "Nature and the New Painting" of 1954 offer illustration of the very currency of this subject. The 1958 exhibition *Nature in Abstraction at the Whitney Museum of American Art, curated by John I. H. Baur* further reinforced the heightened rapport between the natural world and the aesthetic realm.

Critic and scholar Dr. Robert S. Mattison examines this very subject in his well-considered essay for the present exhibition catalogue by focusing on the symbiotic relationship of nature and abstraction at mid-century through the lens of four celebrated artists: Hans Hofmann, Joan Mitchell, Richard Pousette-Dart, and Theodoros Stamos. Dr. Mattison delivers an insightful discussion of the widespread "return to nature" as it related to contemporary cultural milestones. As Dr. Mattison discusses, many artists working at this time set up countryside studios and schools that focused on the overarching importance of the natural world in art. They created works that clearly reflected the contemporary moment and revealed a keen attunement to radical advances in science and exploration. They responded to such developments as the expansion of the American National Parks and interstate highway systems and the burgeoning ecological movement.

Creative luminaries were not just observing the natural world, but working in procreative manners that paralleled the generative forces of nature and the evolving landscape. Such artists as Joan Mitchell, for instance, negotiated the tenuous balance between the internal and external forces of nature in mid-century compositions like *Untitled* (1957). Nature and the personal experiences nature aroused in her informed her aesthetics well beyond the 1950s. The dynamics of nature and all of its associative properties found full expression in such later symphonic master-

pieces as *Faded Air I,* a work featured in this exhibition to highlight Mitchell's unwavering commitment to exploring and distilling the many realms of nature.

We are grateful to the many collectors who have helped to bring this project to fruition by generously sharing their prized works of art with us. Our gratitude also extends to a variety of colleagues in the field including: Miles McEnery of Ameringer | McEnery | Yohe; Laura Morris, Archivist, at the Joan Mitchell Foundation; and Jason Savas and the Stamos Estate. We also wish to thank the Richard Pousette-Dart Estate for their contributions to this project. Additionally, we would like to acknowledge Dr. Mattison's research assistant, Mirielle Vasselli.

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The dedication and commitment of our team at Hollis Taggart Galleries was instrumental to the success of this exhibition. We wish to acknowledge Debra Pesci, Director; Martin Friedrichs, Director of Contemporary Art; Ashley Park, Research Manager; Samara Umschweis, Director of Imaging and Web, and registrar Daniel Weiner worked tirelessly on the many complex details of this exhibit. Our gratitude extends as well to Jessie Sentivan, who diligently oversaw the myriad aspects of catalogue production, and to Russell Hassell, whose visual expertise informs all aspects of the catalogue at hand. Finally, we thank John Dreyer of Spire Press for his work on this beautiful publication. We hope that this exhibition will help bring to light the importance of the natural world for American abstract artists, and invite our viewers to discover with us the traces of nature in these beautiful works.

Hollis Taggart , President
Stacey Epstein, Director

Why Nature?

Robert S. Mattison

America's identity has long been bound to its landscape. As this country was being defined during the early 19th century, it was called the "New Eden." It was said that Europe had the history and civilization but America had nature, and the first important grouping of American artists was the Hudson River School which paralleled such nature poets as William Cullen Bryant. The focus on an "American nature" fed into the work of George Inness (fig. 1), Winslow Homer, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, and Albert Pinkham Ryder as well as the philosophy of the American Transcendentalists. In the course of the twentieth century, nature continued to inspire American artists as modernism ushered in greater engagement with the concept of abstraction.

In the years immediately following World War II, there was a dividing line. On one hand, the underlying forces of nature could be seen as terrifying, a belief engendered by the atomic bombs unleashed at the end of the war and subsequent testing of even more destructive nuclear weapons. On the other hand, the natural world was regarded as restorative. It provided a respite from the tensions of the Cold War and promised rejuvenation after the destructive years of the 1940s. America had emerged the only participant in the World War without extensive damage to its homeland. Groundbreaking advances in the natural sciences, especially the burgeoning ecological movement, popularization of America's national park system, and emphasis on direct contact with nature by social and political luminaries all encouraged this viewpoint.

FIG 1
George Inness, *Spring Blossoms,* Montclair, New Jersey, ca. 1891. Oil and crayon or charcoal on canvas, 29 x 45¼ inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of George A. Hearn, in memory of Arthur Hoppock Hearn, 1911 (11.116.4)

During the 1950s, ideas about the regenerative powers of nature were shared by a number of American artists working in abstract modes. The four major figures in this exhibition—Hans Hofmann, Theodoros Stamos, Richard Pousette-Dart, and Joan Mitchell—each drew inspiration from nature in a different and highly innovative manner. Their artistic interests in the context of cultural, political, scientific, ecological, and gender issues must be considered relevant to the greater zeitgeist of the period.[1]

In a 1956 exhibition review, art critic Dore Ashton put the situation succinctly: the artists "have come to grips with the most difficult problem of today: how to suggest without describing the significance of human experience in the world of nature."[2] In *Search for the Real,* Hofmann's widely read treatise, the artist wrote emphatically, "Nature: the source of all inspiration. Whether the *artist* works directly from nature, from memory, or from fantasy, nature is always the source of his creative impulses."[3] Around 1953, Stamos composed a significant lecture titled "Why Nature in Art" which was subsequently given at numerous museums and universities.[4] That lecture begins, "Why nature in art is the large question I have been trying to answer for a long time. As I dwell and work with this broad subject, it grows into the problem of the what, how and why nature in art." In a similar spirit, Mitchell recalled, "I paint from remembered landscapes that I carry with me—and remembered feelings of them, which of course become transformed, . . ."[5]

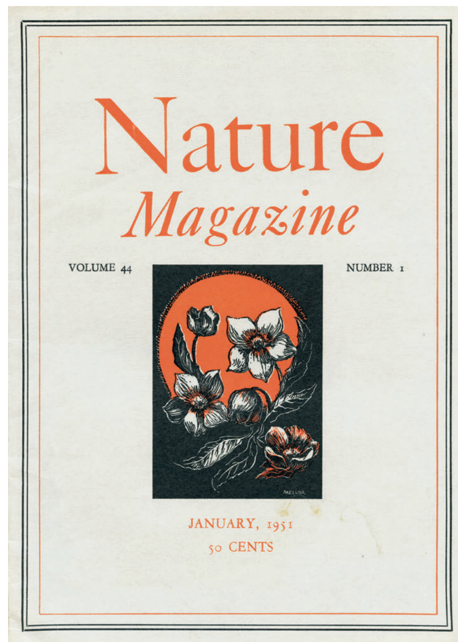


FIG 2
Cover of *Nature Magazine* 44, no. 1 (January 1951) © Natural History Magazine, Inc., 1951

FIG 3
Sketch of DNA structure, originally appeared in *Nature* 171 (April 25, 1953), pp. 737

For the artists, awareness of the history of "American nature" was combined with the burgeoning natural sciences during the period (fig. 2). The journal *Nature* has called the 1950s the "golden age" of biology, stating, "In terms of scientific advances, it was biology's turn to take centre stage from physics . . ."[6] The decade began with the discovery of DNA in 1953 and also featured the detection of the first protein structure in 1958 (fig. 3). The development of the electron microscope and the hybridization of crops also belong to this era. These breakthroughs were highlighted in the popular media as keys unlocking the secrets of the natural world. Together with biology, the fifties was an important age for geology and premiered environmental determinism, mapping the ocean floor, and widespread acceptance of the theory of plate tectonics. Increasingly detailed maps of star systems were made during the decade. In October of 1958, Sputnik 1 was launched, and its flight could be seen all around the earth. That same year, David Finkelstein published the theory of Black Holes expanding the concept of the universe beyond all previous expectations.

Profoundly tied to the artists' involvement with nature was the beginning of the ecological movement. While that movement sprung to the forefront in the 1960s, its origins lie in the fifties. Nature conservancy was founded in 1950, and the organization Resources for the Future was established in 1952 with the purpose of fostering "a better understanding of and conservation of natural resources for the public interest."[7] President Dwight D. Eisenhower's State of the Union Address in February 1953 had safeguarding natural resources as a major theme, and in July he addressed Congress on the preservation of natural resources "not only for this but for future generations," a speech widely publicized in the nation's newspapers.[8]

In 1950, The American Museum of Natural History, which had long been frequented by modern artists, announced its "revival" after the war years with the opening of the Felix M. Warburg Memorial Hall of New York State Environment. That hall was dedicated to the natural environment, and its theme was "familiar landscape" (fig. 4). In the words of the museum's annual report of 1951, "The new hall . . . departs from previous tradition in that it attempts to deal with

FIG 4
Installation view of Felix M. Warburg Memorial Hall of New York State Environment, The American Museum of Natural History, New York

the totality of nature from the geological past of the landscape to its present-day life, . . ."[9] The hall featured stunning new dioramas of New York State regional environments in their seasons and manifestations, and the new direction of the museum was described as "a turn toward ecology."

The National Park System was greatly expanded after World War II, and the enlarged National Highway System made those parks easily accessible. The highway system featured the construction of "parkways," so that one could travel at leisure through scenic vistas and enjoy the landscape en route. The Garden State Parkway connecting southern New Jersey to the New York metropolitan area was among the most notable examples constructed during 1950s. Overall, fifty-three million people visited the nation's parks and forests in 1956. Experiencing America's natural wonders had become a national obsession (fig. 5).

During the 1950s, celebrated environmentalist Rachel Carson gained public prominence. Her first book *The Sea Around Us* (1951), a poetic account of ocean life, was on the *New York Times* Bestseller List in non-fiction for thirty-one weeks. Carson's warnings about the dangers of manmade chemicals were tempered by her belief that correct actions could restore environmental harmony. As one example of the rising popularity of ecological issues, *Life* magazine featured her essay "Life at the Edge of the Sea" in its April 14, 1952 issue. Carson's evocative discussion of the procreative and abundant character of nature along America's shorelines filled the core of the magazine. The article adjoining hers was titled "World's First Atomic Artillery: Army Chief Collins Unveils Deadliest Gun." During the post-war era, such stark contrasts were apparent to the artists and the public at large.

Furthermore, a series of widely viewed nature films shot in America's forests and prairies by Walt Disney signaled the rising prominence of nature in popular culture. Such "packaged nature" for the general populace is a strong indication of fascination with the natural world that dominated the period. In fact, the National Audubon Society gave Disney a medal for his role in conservation in 1955.

FIG 5
Yellowstone National Park WPA Poster, ca. 1938, created for the Department of the Interior, National Park Service. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

During the late forties and fifties, New York–based artists began to spend more time in country studios. Arshile Gorky led the way in 1942 during his first summer in Connecticut, where he did studies from nature and redirected his art toward biological forms. By 1945, Gorky had moved his full-time studio to that area, and soon the fluidity of his paint application became emblematic of the fecundity he discovered in nature. Gorky's sensitivity to the natural world was particularly admired by Stamos, who wrote in the notes for his lecture "Why Nature in Art" that Gorky "threw his head in a grass patch and came out dazzled by the effects of fireflies, grasshoppers, dew and ants." Stamos continued, "I cannot think of a better example of an American artist's continuing growth in search and realization of nature."[10] Mitchell also regarded Gorky as a lodestar for her work. In the words of her biographer, she fell in love with his "tense and sensuous canvases."[11]

In 1946, Jackson Pollock, whose drip paintings provided a standard to be watched by all ambitious American artists, moved to The Springs, Long Island. In the Pollock literature, the influence of rural Long Island on his art has not been adequately investigated. Lee Krasner recalled that she and Pollock would sit for "hours gazing into the landscape without exchanging a word."[12] Pollock's close friend, artist Herbert Matter suggested, "The paintings were his rocks, his trees, his earth. Art was his landscape."[13] Sculptor Tony Smith, another close friend, stated, "I think that his feeling for the land had something to do with his painting canvases on the floor."[14] Pollock himself once referred to his work on a canvas as "gardening" its surface.[15] For Pollock the rhythms of the water, earth and sky as well as the seasonal cycles provided a con-

FIG 6
Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30),* 1950. Enamel on canvas, 105 x 207 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. George A. Hearn Fund, 1957 (57.92)

nection between the internal workings of the subconscious and larger forces of the world. Pollock's monumental drip painting *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)* of 1950 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art; fig. 6) is one key example. Thus, Pollock's first encounter with Hans Hofmann during which Hofmann advised him to work from nature and Pollock famously declared "I am nature" takes on new meaning. Rather than a solipsistic response, Pollock may have been declaring his belief in the profound connection between himself and the larger forces of the natural world.

Pollock's relocation to The Springs was part of a larger movement of New York artists into closer contact with the natural world either during extended summer periods or year-round. Hofmann lectured at the Thurn School of Art in Gloucester, Massachusetts in 1933–34; then opened his famous Provincetown summer studio and art school on Commercial Street, which ran from 1945 through 1958. In 1951, Pousette-Dart left New York City because the building that housed his studio on East 56th Street faced demolition. First in the countryside of Sloatsburg, New York and then from 1958 onwards in the richly wooded environment of Suffern, New York, he rediscovered a deep affinity for the natural world that informed his paintings, drawings, and photography for the remainder of his career.

By 1948, Stamos was making extended excursions to the North Shore of Long Island collecting rocks and shells and watching the flow of the tides and atmospheric effects at sunset. In 1961 he moved to a studio/home designed for him by Tony Smith in East Marion, Long Island where he commented that he wished to "live on the horizon of the mind and the coast."[16]

FIG 7
Philip Guston, *Voyage,* 1956. Oil on canvas, 73¾ x 78⅜ inches. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y. Gift of Seymour H. Knox, Jr., 1957 (K1957:4)

Mitchell spent the summers of 1953 and 1954 in the Hamptons during which time she experienced the devastating autumn hurricane of 1954. That event revived memories of violent storms that she had seen over Lake Michigan as a child. Mitchell's time in the Hamptons was followed by trips to Provence and other areas on the Mediterranean, and she eventually settled in the French countryside in the town of Vétheuil. More direct contact with nature was also sought by de Kooning, Frankenthaler, Philip Guston, Grace Hartigan, James Brooks, Norman Bluhm, and many others of the era.

The art that resulted from such extensive involvement with the natural world shares some common characteristics. Similar to Guston's *Voyage* (1956; fig. 7), the works tend to be light-filled and often feature rich coloration. The paintings are expansive, frequently having no center and no clear framing edges. As opposed to the larger, more aggressive, brush marks of earlier Abstract Expressionist works, the brushstrokes tend to be smaller and balanced against each other, creating flickering optical effects. The illusion of depth is often apparent; the surfaces of the paintings are not prioritized over optical recession. Suggestions of organic forms, landscape references, horizon lines, water patterns, and celestial configurations are sometimes apparent. The works often evoke a calm and meditative mood. While these characteristics hold true for many works of the era, they are not universal. The more tumultuous paintings of Joan Mitchell are a notable exception. As a whole, the painters did not explore such environmental challenges

as the use of pesticides, but they looked to nature's cycles as self-healing and as restorative forces for human beings.

The painters' experiential and optical involvement with the natural world differed dramatically from interpretations of nature in the midst of World War II. During that time, the nascent Abstract Expressionists imagined nature as a primitive force that inspired fear and awe. Forties works by William Baziotes, Barnett Newman, Pollock, Mark Rothko, and the work from this period by Stamos captured their belief that nature was ruled by Darwinian forces of "survival of the fittest," and they expressed a "fascination with the primitive and primordial in nature."[17]

During the fifties, critics recognized in American abstract artists the heightened significance of nature, albeit different from the viewpoint in the middle of World War II. Clement Greenberg led the way with his 1949 essay "The Role of Nature in Modern Painting" where he proclaimed, "The best modern painting, though it is mostly abstract painting, remains naturalistic in its core, despite all appearances to the contrary. It refers to the given world both outside and inside human beings."[18] However, because Greenberg was rapidly developing his reductive theory of painting, he soon lost interest in art that accepted spatial illusions and did not feature highly simplified structures.

Poet and critic Frank O'Hara, who was close to many New York painters during the fifties and often paraphrased their viewpoints in his essays, wrote "Nature and the New Painting" in 1954. There, O'Hara took a broad approach and referenced painters practicing different degrees of abstraction, including Robert De Niro, Elaine de Kooning, Jane Freilicher, Grace Hartigan, and Wolf Kahn. In the essay, O'Hara's intent was to differentiate paintings that simply provided "anecdotes about nature" from works that "observe the structure of artistic effort as a metaphor for the structure of nature itself."[19] O'Hara was responding specifically to the term "Abstract Impressionism" that had been newly coined to group artists of the fifties whose work contained nature references. O'Hara referred to French Impressionist paintings as "lightweight" and emphasized that the current search for underlying principles in nature owed much more to Paul Cézanne and to Arshile Gorky, a viewpoint emphatically shared by the artists. He concluded, "To place an Impressionist painting next to a late Gorky would be to see the difference very clearly" (figs. 8 and 9).

During the mid-fifties, the term "Abstract Impressionism" became the major focal point for art critics. Elaine de Kooning's 1955 essay "Subject: What, How or Who?" referred to the "Abstract Impressionists (who outnumber the Abstract Expressionists two to one, but, curiously, are seldom mentioned.)."[20] The next year, artist Louis Finkelstein wrote "New Look: Abstract-Impressionism" as a feature essay for *Art News* citing nineteen artists. A particular justification for connections between the abstract art of the fifties and Impressionism became the 1956 arrival of Claude Monet's three monumental panels the *Nymphéas* at The Museum of Modern Art.[21]

What Finkelstein and the other critics failed to take into account was that the artists had already formed their styles by 1956. Before that date, Monet's 20th century works were not well represented in New York, and Impressionism was little regarded by the contemporary New York artists. In statements by artists ranging from Hofmann to Mitchell, Henri Matisse, Cézanne, and Gorky played much more significant roles. In my view, the repeated use of the label "Abstract Impressionism" was a red herring that drew critical discussion away from the larger social, ecological, and political issues that were associated with the artists thinking about the structures, principles, and processes of nature itself in the context of their art.

In the critical literature, the term “Abstract Impressionism” soon became one used to demean the art and artists it described. These painters were often viewed as part of a second generation of Abstract Expressionists who were no longer concerned with the profound emotions described earlier by Mark Rothko as the tragic and timeless. The artists were often called “hedonistic.” Art historian William Rubin, soon to become the chief curator of painting and sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art, wrote, “I have sensed in the last few years a trend away from the dynamic Abstract-Expressionism of painters like Pollock and de Kooning toward a more passive, detached, and meditative art of sensations.”[22]

Such criticism misses the deep connections with the natural world that inspired many of these artists and permeated the period. The criticism also suggests gender prejudices. Many of the artists who comprised this generation were women. In addition to Mitchell, they included Elaine de Kooning, Frankenthaler, Hartigan, Krasner, and such lesser known figures as Perle Fine. Some critics suggested that the more lyrical work of this era, whether made by men or women, was weak as opposed to the more muscular paintings made by such artists as Pollock and Franz Kline. These critics relied on gender stereotypes as a way of undermining the significance of the art. They ignored the generative richness of the art made by men and women, a fecundity that was based on the artists’ experiences of the natural world.

Hans Hofmann insisted, “Life does not exist without movement and movement does not exist without life.”[23] Hofmann’s understanding of the generative forces of nature was essential to his art. His concept centered on the dynamics of creative activity: spatial tensions and the forces and counter-forces required to bring artistic forms to life. He was fascinated by the dualism of the three-dimensional world and the physicality of the two-dimensional picture surface

FIG 8
Paul Cézanne, *Montagne Sainte-Victoire,* ca. 1904–05. Oil on canvas, 25 x 32½ inches. Kunsthaus Zürich, Switzerland. Acquired 1946

FIG 9
Arshile Gorky, *Waterfall,* 1943. Oil on canvas, 60½ x 44½ inches. Tate, London. Purchased with assistance from the Friends of the Tate Gallery, 1971 (T01319)

combined with the expansive role played by color. Hofmann often called this pictorial energy "push/pull." The term does not merely reflect formal tension within his paintings, rather, it embodies a worldview.

Hofmann's descriptive and carefully constructed landscape drawings executed in Europe during the 1920s are only minor predecessors to the expansive vision of his American works. After settling for summers in Provincetown in 1935, his works became dominated by luminosity and energy. *Landscape* (1937; pl. 1) suggests a distant view that has been made intimate through the dynamic movement in every paint passage. Areas of sea blue, green, and sandy yellow have been applied with a scrubbing motion of the brush. Red paint marks proliferate like brightly colored floral heads and tie together the entire composition. Hofmann was particularly fond of his wife Miz's garden because of the vibrant colors of its flowers. *Landscape* provides an important precedent to abstract works that evoke nature during the 1950s.

One of Hofmann's greatest pleasures was driving to the beach each evening to watch the sunset and marvel at the visual power of sunlight. In *First Sprouting* (1961; pl. 4), Hofmann creates a painterly equivalent for the generative and life enhancing power of the sun. In the upper part of the canvas, layers of broadly brushed yellow and white pigment capture the sunlight's ability to nourish life. Globular areas of green paint to the right side are metaphors for swelling plant life, and they extend into the brown earth below. In this context, the thin vertical paint strokes in white, yellow and green, which are simultaneously vital and fragile, embody growing

things nurtured by the light above. Years of observing and thinking about nature left a lifelong imprint on Hofmann. In his later life he stated, "I bring the landscape home in me."[24]

Theodoros Stamos' art shows continuous involvement with the natural world, but his changing perception around 1950 is emblematic of the shift that took place for much of his generation. Stamos' work of the 1940s is concerned with myth-making. The earlier paintings suggest deep undersea worlds as metaphors for the unconscious. There, creatures that the artist invented vie for power and engage in primal struggles. In *Three Kings* (1949; pl. 16), Stamos alternately applies paint and sands down the surface of the Masonite board to suggest a deep watery environment. Three cellular presences align themselves like primordial royalty, and the central creature which resembles a squid dominates the other two.

Stamos had already read extensively in geology and other natural sciences during the 1940s, but he saw these disciplines through the eyes of Jungian archetypes and the tribal narratives found in such books as Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. He was also interested in Darwin's notion of "survival of the fittest" and in natural theology. In 1947, Stamos made a trip to the Pacific Northwest and was astonished by the natural beauty of that area. He also met Mark Tobey whose lyrical drawings and paintings were informed by his careful observations of nature on the West Coast. Soon after his return, Stamos began to make frequent trips to the North Shore of Long Island. There, his observations of the flow of the seasons and the play of light on the water replaced his imaginings of primitive rituals.

At the end of 1948, Stamos made his first trip to Europe. He recorded his interest in Monet's *Nymphéas* at the Musée de l'Orangerie, as noted above, an unusual early discovery for his generation. He also admired the work of Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard. During the European voyage, Stamos visited his ancestral homeland in Greece and was struck by the light-filled and open character of its landscape. Shortly after returning to America, Stamos met Hans Hofmann and referred to him as a "grand old man with great knowledge." All of these influences came together in *Greek Rug Mountain Laurel* (1953; pl. 17). There, the softly brushed surface is vibrant with reflected light. The gestural marks are slow paced and balanced. To the left side feathery brushwork captures the essence of plants with new blossoms set in bright outdoor light. The right side suggests light passing through a window to an interior space. The entire painting exhibits serenity and receptivity to the visual experiences of the world.

Stamos' sensitivity to light and atmosphere is the essence of *Grey Field* (1960; pl. 18). In this painting the grey passages are actually composed of rose, forest green and powder blue. This atmospheric rendering is set off by the fragility of a few sensitive green brush marks and the vertical bands to the left side. Beginning in the late 1940s, Stamos developed an interest in Asian art. He was particularly interested in the subtle depictions of a vast and harmonious universe found in Song Dynasty (960–1279) landscape paintings. These influenced his creation of open fields of color as metaphors for the ephemeral and enigmatic character of nature.[25] While Stamos was close to Rothko at this time, his sensitivity to atmospheric phenomena varies from the moody, symbolic colors and the a priori veiling of forms found in the work of Rothko.

Richard Pousette-Dart interpreted the universe as a network of intricate forces, a flow of energy that can be communicated through the touch of the brush. He has written that his paintings reflect life as a "continuum with infinite possibilities."[26] Early in his life Pousette-Dart

During the 1950s, Pousette-Dart created a series of nearly monochrome paintings titled *White Paintings* which reflected a changed sensibility. These paintings are covered in white pigment, which gives them a light-filled character opposite of the dark mysterious atmosphere of *Palimpsest*. The artist then scratched the surface with pencil leads creating a freely dispersed calligraphy on an open field which implies a profusion of veiled organic forms.[28]

In the 1960s, Pousette-Dart developed paintings as fields of energy and for the most part abandoned figurative references. *Byzantine Night* (1964–65; pl. 11) suggests the radiant night sky as a unified presence with no focal point. Pousette-Dart had long expressed his feelings of oneness with the forces of the cosmos. While that sensibility may be traced to his long-held fascination with science as well as transcendental and Asian philosophy, Pousette-Dart's paintings of the 1960s were also created in the context of the Space Race. The artist despised Cold War competition between America and the Soviet Union but was captivated by such scientific concepts as Black Holes and the idea of humans venturing into space for peaceful purposes and for the acquisition of knowledge. During this period, Pousette-Dart also developed a deep interest in the otherworldly and light-filled character of Byzantine mosaics which his paintings resemble. The glittering domes of San Vitale in Ravenna or Hagia Sophia in Istanbul conjoined the artist's vision of an expansive night sky.

Summer Presence (1965; pl. 12) returns to earth and is a brilliant example of Pousette-Dart's approach to nature as an energy field. The artist reduced his brush strokes to small flecks of color. These were rubbed down to translucent thinness and over-painted in repeated sessions to build up a surface permeated with light, giving the painting an appearance of inner radiance that in various modes would dominate much of the artist's later oeuvre. The glowing flecks of paint suggest expansion beyond the work's edges, and they embody the profusion of nature during the summer season. The paint marks refuse to coalesce into a clear image; they suggest a vaguely defined orb above a triangle or a pathway into undefined depth. In either case, the effect is simultaneously concentrated and diffused. In this regard, Pousette-Dart's choice of "presence" in the title is revealing. It calls forth total attention to the moment through an overwhelming feeling that is experienced but not clearly defined, and it speaks simultaneously to the authority of nature as a presence. In his journals, Pousette-Dart wrote, "Nature is a great doctor—fantastically healing. How wonderful she mends and overcomes the cruel and ruthless wounds man continuously, insensitively and non-caring—inflicts upon her."[29]

Joan Mitchell's art is based on the transformation of nature through her particular memories and moods in a personal manner that Pousette-Dart avoided. The turmoil that Mitchell found in nature was a focal point of Irving Sandler's 1957 essay on the artist, "Mitchell Paints a Painting." Based on his conversations with the artist, Sandler wrote, "It seemed as if the hurricane that struck East Hampton in the autumn of 1954 invaded the picture. Since her early childhood lake storms have been a frightening symbol both of devastation and attraction, and the sense of tempestuous waters appear frequently in her work. Miss Mitchell painted four hurricane paintings based on this experience in 1954."[30] Sandler's analysis reveals essential feelings and emotional techniques that Mitchell drew upon throughout her career. Even when Mitchell's canvases are less overtly stormy, they suggest a personal interpretation of the natural world that is quixotic and unstable.

FIG 11
Chaim Soutine, *Landscape with Trees in the Wind,* ca. 1919. Oil on canvas. Fundação Cultural Ema Gordon Klabin, São Paulo, Brazil

Mitchell was legendary in the art world for her difficult personality. Many colleagues, close friends, and casual acquaintances have commented on her quixotic personality and moodiness. When Mitchell speaks of carrying "nature inside of her," the connection between her art and temperament can justifiably be cited. Art historian Linda Nochlin has written perceptively on this issue in her essay "Joan Mitchell: A Rage to Paint." Nochlin suggests that Mitchell's "rage" was not just a matter of individual temperament but a case of "gender rage," the feeling of having been slighted in the art world because she was a woman, a response shared by other women artists. Mitchell, however, used these sentiments as a productive force yielding the emotional intensity that is characteristic of her art.

Mitchell's work has been mistakenly connected with that of Claude Monet, partly on the basis of the critical fondness for the term "Abstract Impressionism" as discussed earlier. In addition, Mitchell founded her studio in the French town of Vétheuil; a small building on her property was once briefly occupied by Monet. In fact, Mitchell's art has more in common with the quivering late landscapes of Cézanne and the tumultuous brushwork that she admired in van Gogh's art. Mitchell's more turbulent works are particularly close to those of Chaim Soutine, especially the paintings he made in Céret from 1919 until 1922, works that capture through his personal temperament the violent winds of the mistral which twisted trees into abstract shapes and were said to drive people mad.

Among artists of her generation, Mitchell was moved by the potency of nature that she found in Gorky's paintings, particularly his late and emotionally dark compositions. In her works,

Mitchell used color for its evocative quality as did Gorky, and she transformed Gorky's sweeping brushstrokes into more abbreviated staccato rhythms. As a young artist, Mitchell only lasted in Hans Hofmann's painting class for one day. But Hofmann recognized the power of her emotional reworking of nature and was especially supportive of her work, singling her out for special praise during the 1953 Stable Annual.[31]

The turbulence in Mitchell's work can be found in abundance in *Untitled* (1957; pl. 6). There, the white ground favored by Mitchell is beset with powerful brushstrokes in brown pigment that suggest the tree limbs thrashing about in a violent wind. To the upper right, those brush marks have been wiped down using rags connoting branches visually blurred by movement in the wind. The powerful brown strokes establish a loose grid which is broken by slashing marks of magenta paint which careen in several directions. Markings in blue and yellow and act like tendrils loosely binding the composition together and splashed and dripped pigment appears throughout the composition.

The large diptych *Faded Air I* (1985; pl. 7) is a powerful and important work in Mitchell's oeuvre. The activation of the white ground and the character of the brush gestures potently connect *Faded Air I* to Mitchell's signature works of the late 1950s and early 1960s. The moody character of this painting differs from the more lyrical compositions of the 1970s and early 1980s. In *Faded Air I,* the artist unleashed the full range of her gestural brushwork which varies between assertive and fragile. In a similar manner, some colors are vibrant while others are darkly expressive, and several nearly fade away before our eyes. The paint application varies from impasto to delicate transparency. Rills of paint run freely from Mitchell's marks indicating the role that intuition plays in her painting methods.

Faded Air I's multi-panel format is used in some of Mitchell's finest later works. The configuration challenges the viewer to make relationships between the parts and encourages us to understand that the artist's compositional decisions have evolved through a prolonged and thoughtful process. Mitchell commented that this painting is related to her observations of dying sunflowers and to her feelings for decay in nature. As such, *Faded Air I* is a meditation on the cyclical character of nature; it captures both the energy and fragility of life.

While Mitchell, Pousette-Dart, Stamos, and Hofmann differ in their approaches to depictions of the natural world, the common desire to interpret their physical environment manifests in the vocabulary of each artist. These visionaries sought, not simply to picture nature, but to understand its structure and meaning. Their abstract and painterly modes encouraged them to delve into nature's underlying principles and to explore the rich fecundity of the natural world. They and others of their generation found a sense of renewal in nature, one deeply rooted in the contemporary moment. Their approach to the natural world was inquisitive, contemplative, and hopeful. In today's world, which is partly defined by ecological concerns, such optimism may prove valuable.

Notes

1 These connections are germane to other well-known figures of the era, including Helen Frankenthaler, Philip Guston, Lee Krasner, Milton Resnick, and Bradley Walker Tomlin.

2 Dore Ashton, "The Age of Lyricism," *Arts and Architecture* 73, no. 3 (March 1956), 14.

3 Hans Hofmann, *Search for the Real and Other Essays*, edited by Sara T. Weeks and Bartlett H. Hayes, Jr. (Andover, Mass.: Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, 1948), 76.

4 The unpublished and undated text was given at various universities and museums during the 1950s among which were: Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute (1953), Bennington College, Hunter College, The Phillips Collection, and Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (1954). The text was first published in *Theodoros Stamos 1922–1997: A Retrospective* (Athens: National Gallery and Alexandros Soutzos Museum, 1997), 460.

5 Joan Mitchell in John I. H. Bauer, *Nature in Abstraction: The Relationship of Abstract Painting and Sculpture to Nature in Twentieth-Century American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1958), 75.

6 "History of the Journal *Nature*: Timeline," www.nature.com/nature/history/timeline_1950s.html.

7 Hans Huth, *Nature and the American: Three Centuries of Changing Attitudes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 194.

8 Ibid., 195.

9 *The American Museum of Natural History Eighty-Second Annual Report, July 1950, through June, 1951*, 8–10.

10 Stamos, "Why Nature in Art," 461.

11 Patricia Albers, *Joan Mitchell: Lady Painter* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 128.

12 Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Pollock: An American Saga* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1989), 517.

13 Ibid., 540.

14 B. H. Friedman, *Jackson Pollock: Energy Made Visible* (New York McGraw-Hill, 1972), 163.

15 Catherine Craft, *An Audience of Artists: Dada, Neo-Dada, and the Emergence of Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 130.

16 Quoted in Hans Dichand, "A Visit to Lefkada," *Theodoros Stamos: The Dark Paintings* (Zurich: Turske & Turske, 1985), 10.

17 Jeffrey Weiss, "Science and Primitivism: A Fearful Symmetry in the Early New York School," *Arts Magazine* 57, no. 7 (March 1983), 81–87.

18 Clement Greenberg, "The Role of Nature in Modern Painting," *Partisan Review* 16, no. 1 (January 1949), 81.

19 Frank O'Hara, "Nature and New Painting," *Folder* 2, no. 1 (1954–55), 11.

20 Elaine de Kooning, "Subject: What, How or Who?," *Art News* 54, no. 2 (April 1955), 62.

21 Louis Finkelstein, "New Look: Abstract-Impressionism," *Art News* 55, no. 1 (March 1956), 36–39, 66. The best overall summary of the period is Irving Sandler, "The Colonization of Gesture Painting" in *The New York School: The Painters and Sculptures of the Fifties* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 46–58. The most sophisticated study of the possible influence of late Claude Monet on the New York School is Michael Leja, "The Monet Revival and New York School Abstraction," *Monet in the 20th Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 98–108.

22 Rubin as quoted in Leja, "The Monet Revival and New York School Abstraction," 106.

23 William C. Seitz, *Hans Hofmann with Selected Writings by the Artist* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1963), 11.

24 Cynthia Goodman, *Hans Hofmann* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), 77.

25 Robert S. Mattison, *Theodoros Stamos: A Communion with Nature* (New York: Hollis Taggart Galleries, 2010), 35–36.

26 Robert S. Mattison, "Richard Pousette-Dart: In the Context of Abstract Expressionism," *Richard Pousette-Dart: The New York School and Beyond* (Milan: Skira, 2005), 51.

27 Ibid., 49.

28 See Joanne Kuebler, "Concerning Pousette-Dart," *Richard Pousette-Dart* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1990), 41. These white paintings may relate to Pousette-Dart's interaction with Mark Tobey who created delicate tracery in his "white writing" works. The development of nature-based abstraction on the West Coast is another area of investigation.

29 Richard Pousette-Dart, Journal #258. Richard Pousette-Dart Papers, New York.

30 Irving Sander, "Mitchell Paints a Picture," *Art News* 56, no. 6 (October 1957), 70.

31 Judith E. Bernstock, *Joan Mitchell* (Ithaca: Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University 1988), 28.

Catalogue

Hans Hofmann (1880–1966)

PLATE 1 Hans Hofmann *Landscape,* 1937 Oil on panel 30 x 36 inches

PLATE 2 Hans Hofmann *Landscape,* 1940 Oil on panel 30 x 36 inches

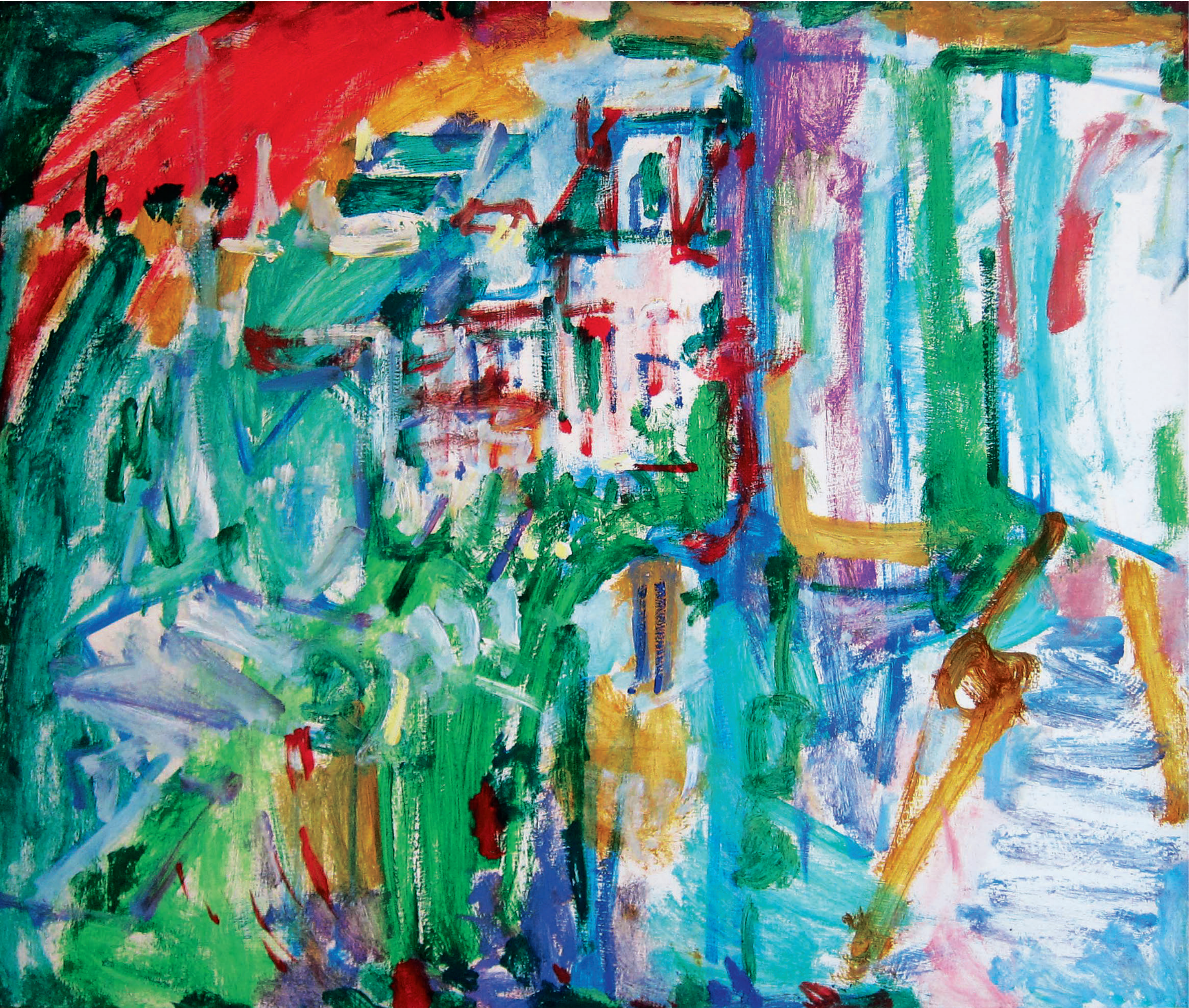


PLATE 3 Hans Hofmann *Sunburst,* 1942 Oil on panel 30⅛ x 35⅛ inches Private collection

PLATE 4 Hans Hofmann *First Sprouting,* 1961 Oil on canvas 40 x 50 inches Private collection

PLATE 5 Hans Hofmann *Aquatic Garden,* 1960 Oil on Upson board 96 x 48 inches

Joan Mitchell (1925–1992)

PLATE 6 Joan Mitchell *Untitled,* 1957 Oil on canvas 39¼ x 31¾ inches Private collection

PLATE 7 Joan Mitchell *Faded Air I,* 1985 Oil on canvas 102 x 102 inches Private collection

PLATE 8 Joan Mitchell *Untitled,* ca. 1967–68 Oil on canvas 29½ x 24½ inches

Richard Pousette-Dart (1916–1992)

PLATE 9 Richard Pousette-Dart *Sea Forms,* 1937–38 Oil on panel 8½ x 19¼ inches Private collection

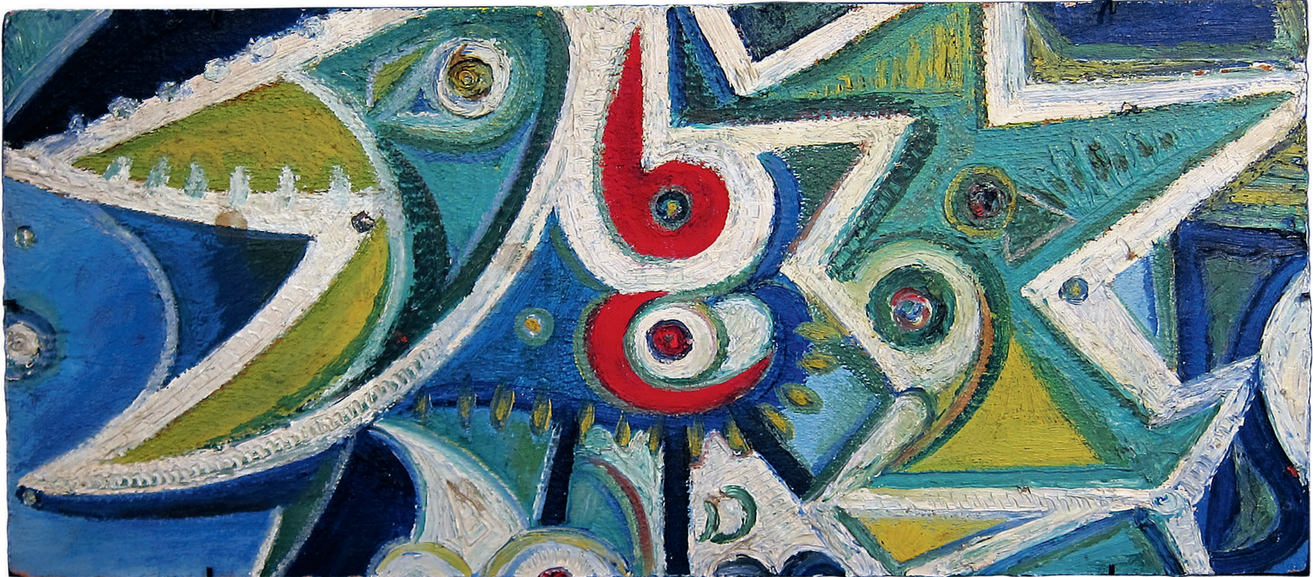


PLATE 10 Richard Pousette-Dart *Palimpsest,* 1944 Oil on canvas 49½ x 43⅛ inches Private collection

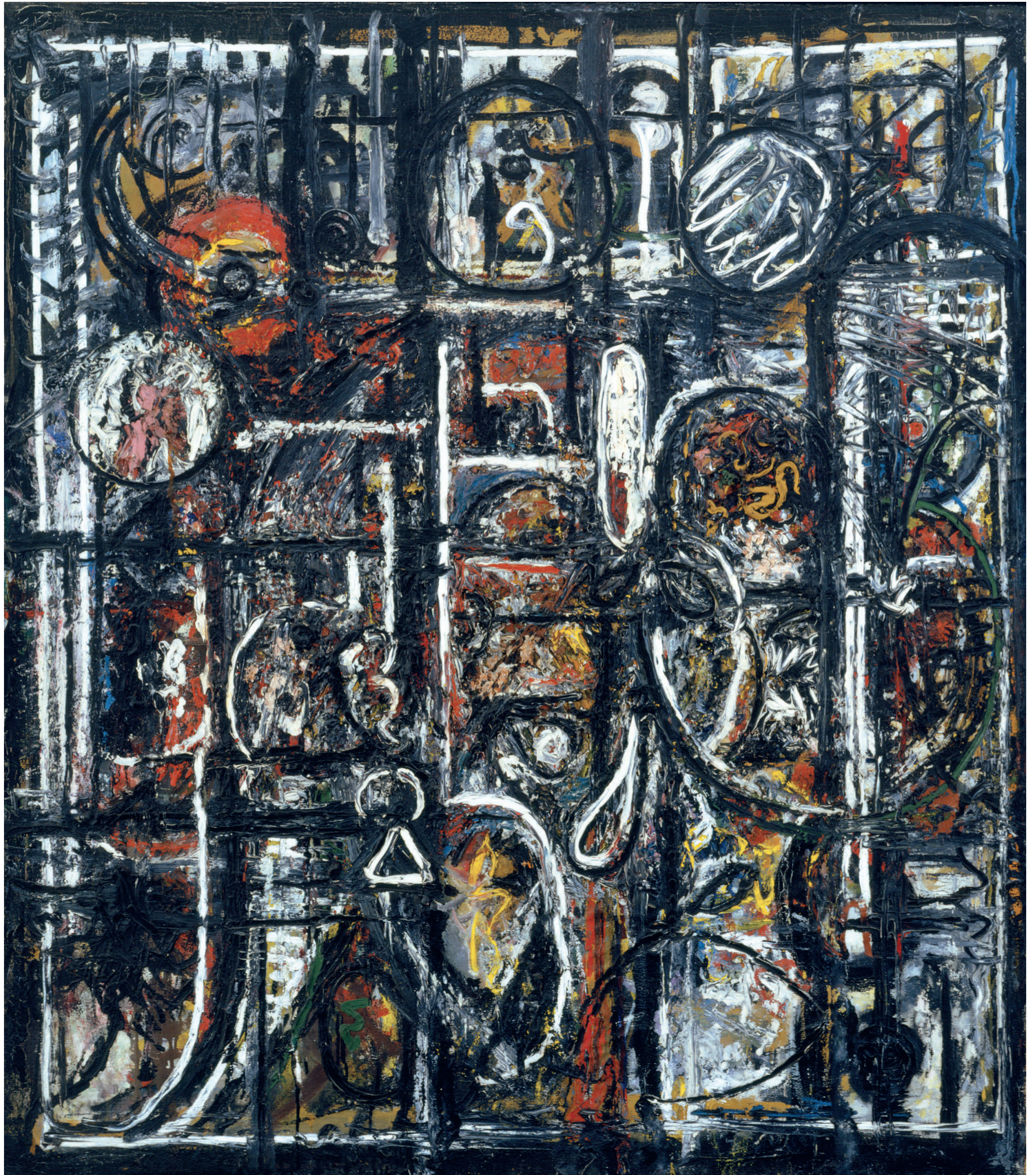


PLATE 11 Richard Pousette-Dart *Byzantine Night,* 1964–65 Oil on panel 23 x 31 inches Private collection

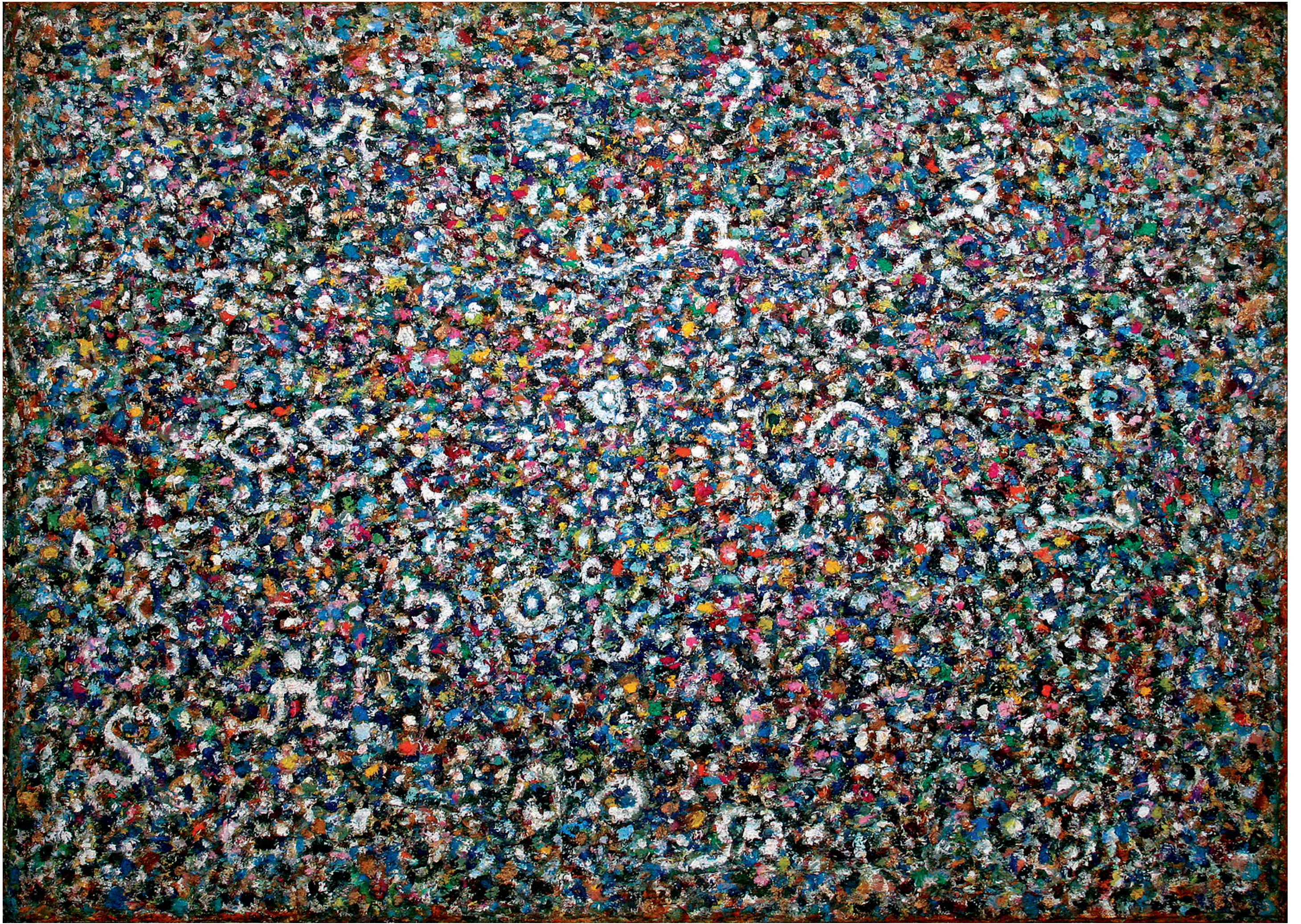
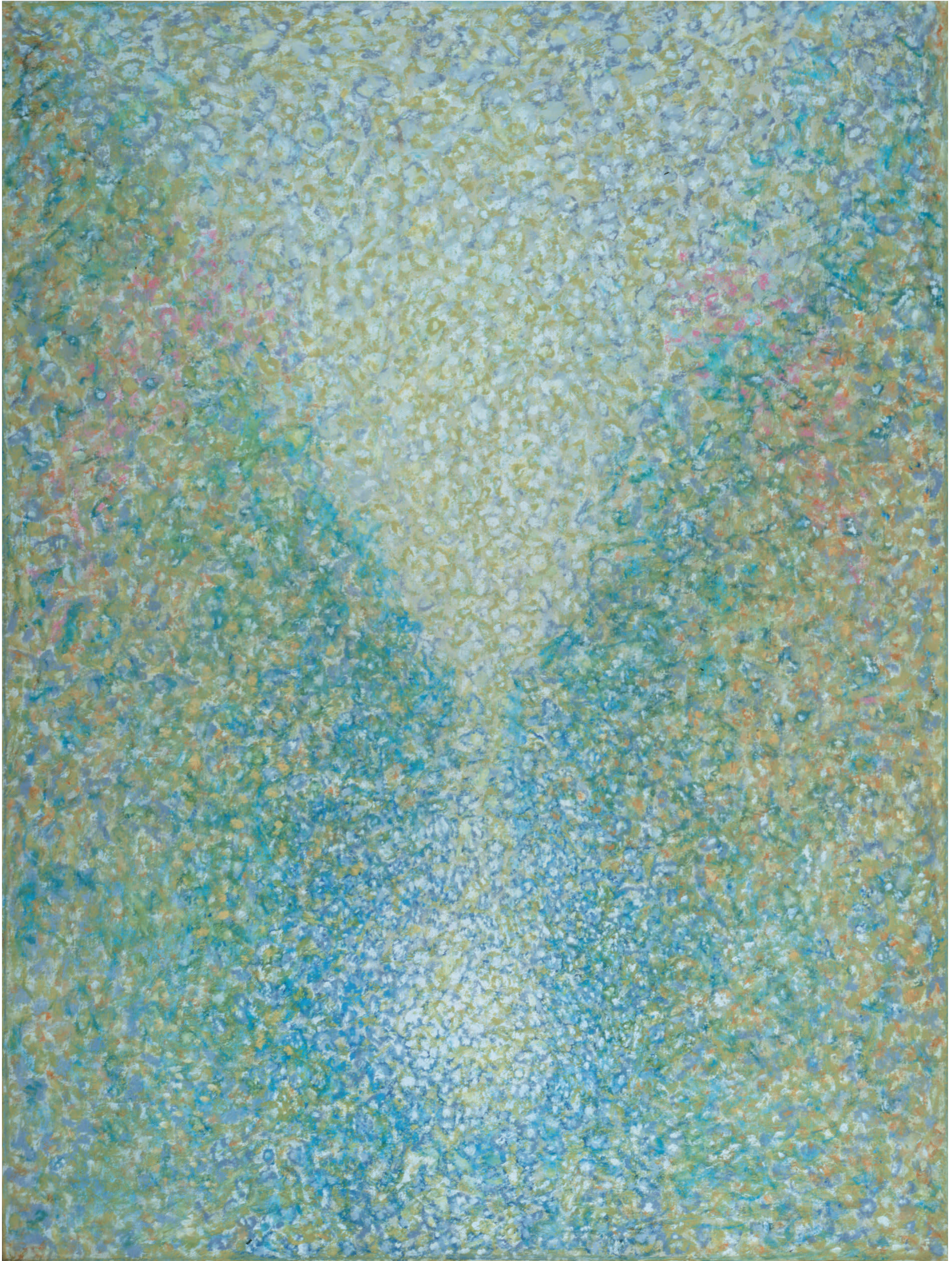


PLATE 12 Richard Pousette-Dart *Summer Presence,* 1965 Oil on linen 40 x 30 inches Courtesy of Richard Pousette-Dart Estate



Theodoros Stamos (1922–1997)

PLATE 13 Theodoros Stamos *Untitled,* 1946 Watercolor and ink on paper 29½ x 21½ inches

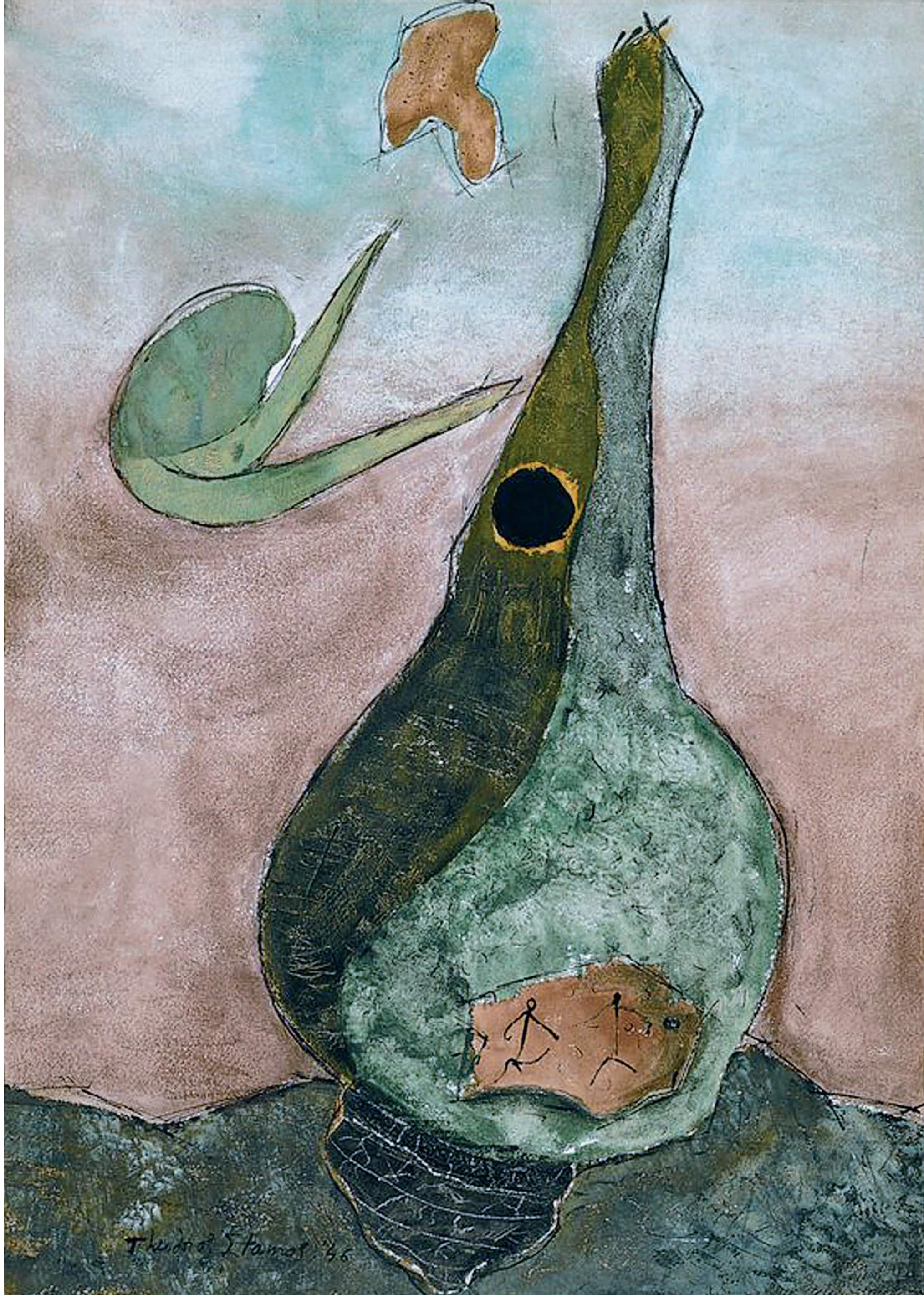


PLATE 14 Theodoros Stamos *Farewell,* 1946 Watercolor and ink on paper 19 x 25½ inches

Theodoros Stamos '46 "Farewell"

PLATE 15 Theodoros Stamos *What Nature Does,* 1946 Watercolor and ink on paper 19 x 25½ inches

PLATE 16 Theodoros Stamos *Three Kings,* 1949 Oil on Masonite 29¾ x 38 inches

PLATE 17 Theodoros Stamos *Greek Rug Mountain Laurel,* 1953 Oil on canvas 37 x 48 inches

PLATE 18 Theodoros Stamos *Grey Field,* 1960 Oil on canvas 60 x 70 inches

PLATE 19 Theodoros Stamos *Sun Box—Tundra,* 1964 Oil on canvas 71 x 47 inches

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