

Budd Hopkins on Budd Hopkins

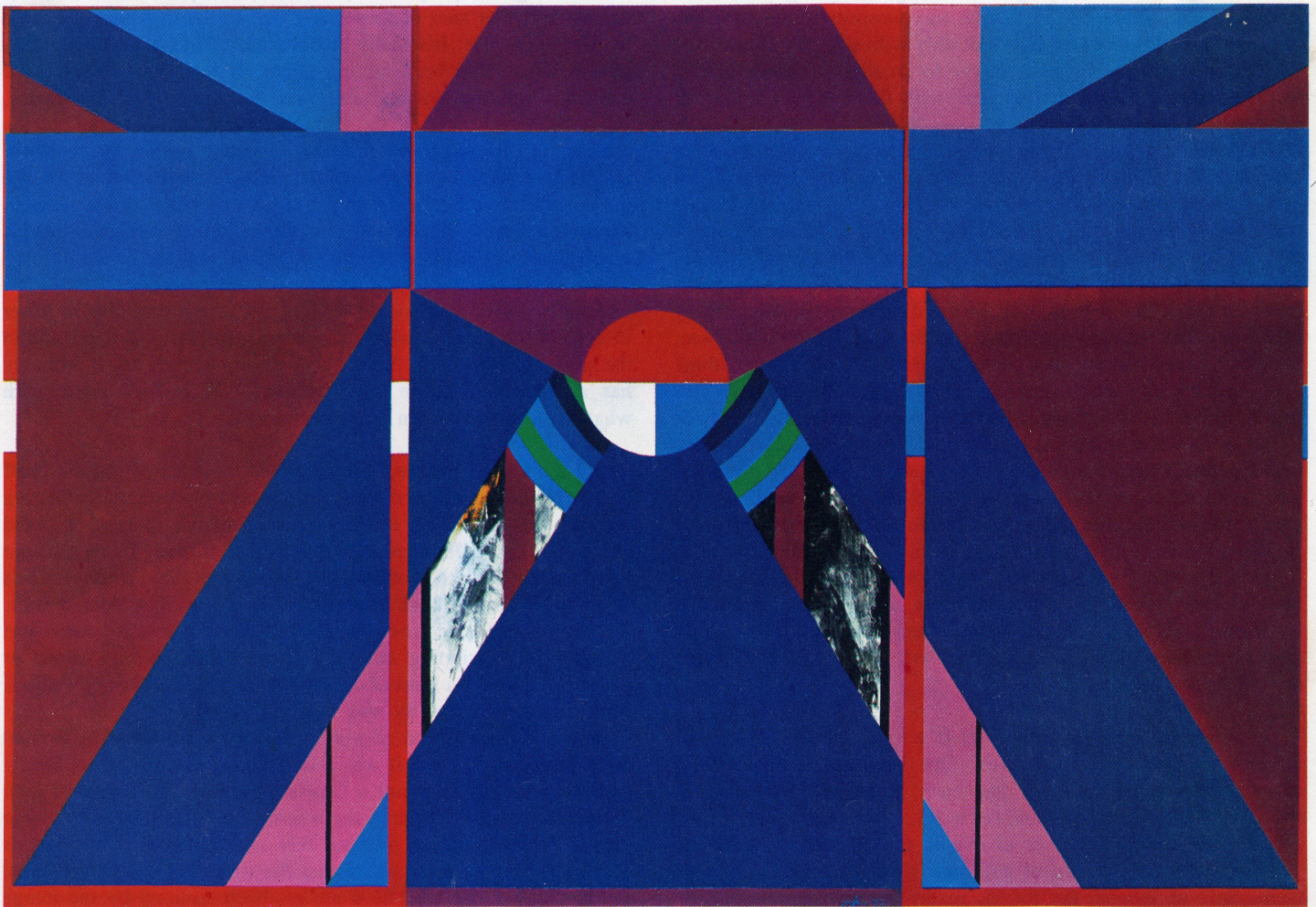
The best thing that's happened lately in the art world is that nobody talks about movements anymore. We finally realize that to say Picasso was a Cubist or Miró is a Surrealist or Rothko was an Abstract Expressionist is to say very little. Those critical generalizations and categories have blocked rather than aided our vision. Art now seems, again, personal, idiosyncratic and specific, and the structure of movements becomes so much social history.

The desire to fit an artist into a movement is a desire to reduce him, to make him controllable—a red pin on an art-historical map. If you weren't reducible that way, you could find yourself left off the map altogether, or in an ambiguous limbo like Bonnard, who is neither Fauve nor fish in the conventional modern art texts.

Below, *Mahler's Castle*: o/c, 98 x 140", 1972 (William Zierler).

Opposite, *Aquarius III*: o/c, 80 x 68", 1971 (William Zierler).

I came to New York in 1953, straight from Oberlin, all fired up about Abstract Expressionism, but also deeply involved with Mondrian. Motherwell had come to Oberlin in 1952, and had talked to us about both esthetic situations. Rather than viewing Mondrian's work as a closed, absolute stylistic system I saw it as an emotional territory that was perfectly habitable. I think that Léger also viewed it that way in the twenties, and that Al Held does so now. I didn't see AE as a formal system either, but as another equally habitable emotional territory. My work has been partly involved in a synthesis between these positions. In a personal way I understand Cézanne's remark about doing Poussin over after nature—it was a bringing together of possibilities that produced



a richer whole. Monet was always an Impressionist ("Just an eye . . ."), but Cézanne was that and something else. The acceptance of *systems* within the work—not just *system*—is very much where I've been all along, and why it was hard for critics to assign me to a specific red pin on the map.

Formalist criticism always seemed to me to substitute one tidy, closed system—two-dimensional flatness—for another, older absolute system—consistent, illusionistic deep space. My paintings involve both flatness and the illusionistic. Illusionism is something you can't get rid of anyway. If you put a mark down on a bare canvas it does two things: it suggests an object with a particular contour floating in white space; and it also suggests the flatness of the canvas itself. It physically picks up the weave of the canvas. You can no more paint a picture that isn't illusionistic than you can paint a picture that doesn't suggest flatness. The two things are going to coexist in every work. The only thing that's different between Hopper's space, Miró's space and Jackson Pollock's space is that each one has his personal pressure on these two elements, and achieves his own harmony between them. There isn't any right or wrong to be legislated about this or any other aspect of a painter's particular mix of solutions to the problems of painting.

One of the reasons, I suppose, for the presence of a central form in my work—it's been a circle for some years now—is that I am committed to the idea of hierarchical composition. I think this is an essential art principle—it really underlies the way we perceive the world. It's a question of what's important and what isn't. The face is more important than an elbow, and the sun is more important than a twig to a primitive, to an animal, to us. We *see* the face before we see the elbow. Structuring a work according to the hierarchical principle imbeds it very directly and immediately in our lives. I guess that's a difference between my work and a lot of sixties work, when it was sufficient to create something like that black box in *2001*—something that spoke only of its strangeness, of shaping or counting, of having been artificially created. Stella, for all intents and purposes, eliminated any sense of scale or hierarchy and dealt only with size. By eliminating any internal structuring from larger to smaller, or from central to marginal, he forced you to deal with the thing as a kind of object, like that black box.

Works like that are interesting on an intellectual level, but they're extraordinarily difficult to fit into one's life. Barney Newman, for one, was desperately interested in making his paintings fit into one's life. Mondrian too was involved in trying to get the paintings into the bloodstream. He even thought you'd be a better person, a more moral person, for having encountered them. Newman had that idea too. I like that attitude. I would rather feel I was making something that changed people's lives, that really dealt with them, than feel I was making just another object that one had to think about because one hadn't seen objects like it before. I'm interested in art providing both thought *and* values. Which brings me back to the hierarchical thing again. When you compare a Tiepolo and a Titian, the Tiepolo is conceived nonhierarchically. Its parts are almost interchangeable. It's kind of homogenized, so that each area of the painting has the same emphasis and inflection, whereas the Titian clearly involves a range of distinctions from the most important to the least important areas. A Cézanne or a Seurat is hierarchically composed; a late Monet is not, I think a case could be made that works of art which emerge as major are those which are more hierarchically composed. This is fundamentally an anthropomorphic idea.

From another point of view, art is a visual metaphor for the way we experience our lives. Our lives are extraordinarily complex. Think of the roles that each of us can play simultaneously: artist, parent, husband (or wife), lover, voter, subversive, carpenter, dreamer, observer of events on the moon, listener to versions of a war, student of god knows how many things, dope fiend, doer of income tax forms, reader of newspapers, and on

and on. Our experience is different from that of a nineteenth-century man, quantitatively as well as qualitatively. We have to hold more thoughts and more territories together in our heads than anyone dreamed of a hundred years ago. For me, simple art is a kind of cop-out, though an attractive one. I feel very strongly about creating an image that's clear, ordered and instantly legible. But it's also got to be explorable, rich in nuance and surprises, and the sum of all sorts of seemingly contradictory situations. I'm willing to take a hell of a lot of risks.

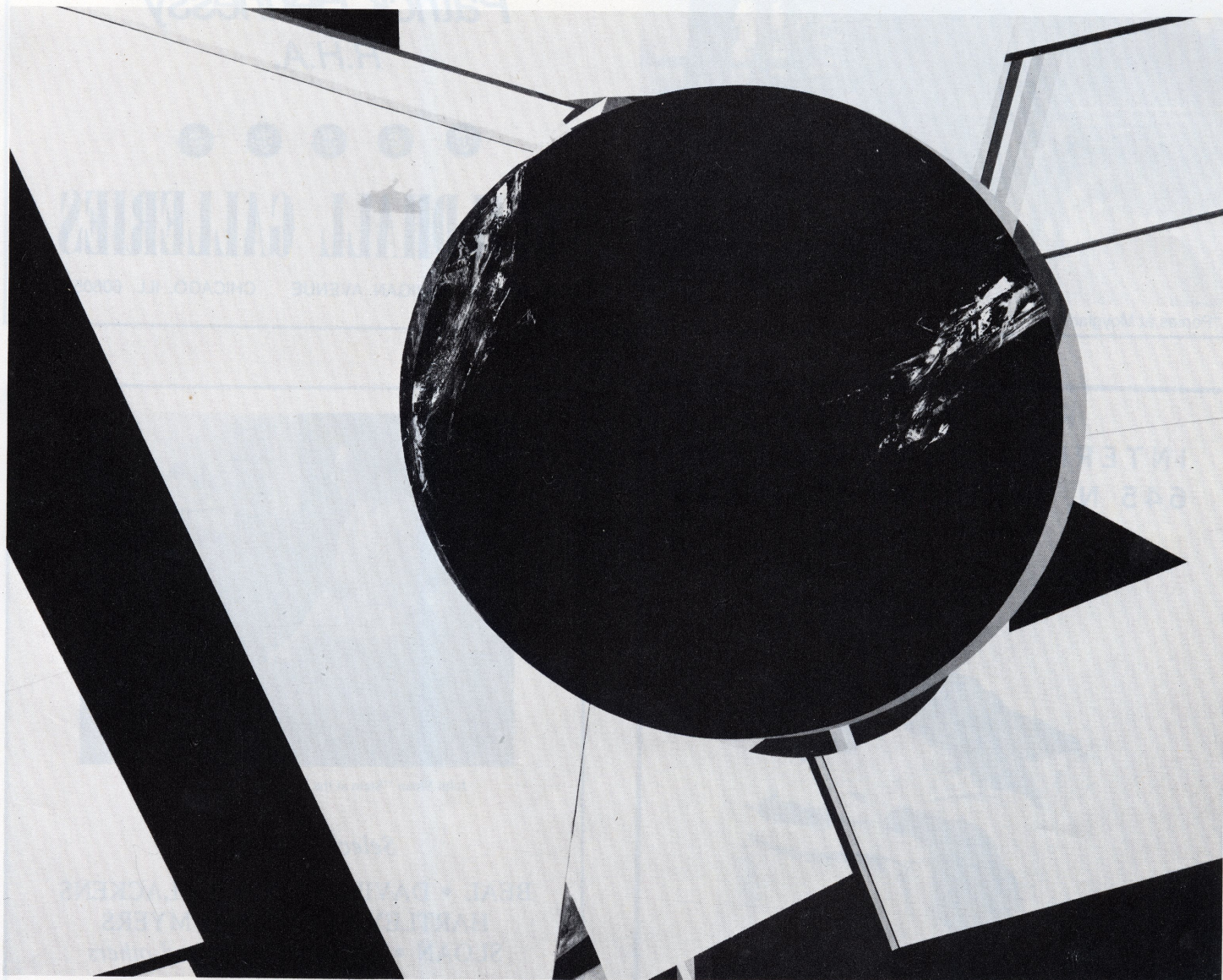
A sixties idea that interested me was the idea of treating the canvas as a literal field, so many inches high by so many inches wide. I got into this idea by accepting some absolutely symmetrical elements in each work, like a set of stripes at each side of the field, repeating each other in mirror image, or a diagonal which divides the field absolutely in half. Being a Gemini, I ran against the logic of that system a completely arbitrary series of forms, like a huge off-center circle, or set of irregular, inconsistent stripes. Logic and illogic had to hold their own in the same field; the supporting conceptual overview had to be reconstituted in the viewer's mind. I hope I've stretched a few heads along the way.

Another coexistence that's almost as constant in my work is the presence of both black and white and color. I have this feeling that each has its own expressive effect, and that each system resonates in opposition to the other. Matisse's greatest paintings—like the *Moroccans* or the late huge cut-outs—all depend on large amounts of pure black and white working with and against fantastic color, the two systems working in tandem. I'm involved, too, in the things that happen when a system of strong primaries coexists with a system of muted, subtle, close colors. The ideal thing is to make, say, a pure blue and yellow, paralleled by pure black and white, work with muted blue-greens and gray-blues paralleled by a range of close, murky grays. You have to hold a number of kinds of contrasts, color and tonal ranges together in a very complex tension.

The thing that people first seem to pick up on when they see my work is that area of loose, A-E painterliness within the more hard-edge context. It's really just one more kind of polar contrast, like the ones I've been talking about. It interjects unsystematic elements into the system, and in a symbolic way, I suppose, suggests the presence of the irrational within the rational, or the presence of the unknown elements of nature within the world of architecture and the planned and the plotted. It even creates a sense of speed that's different from the quality of speed of the striped, hard-edge forms. It's bound into the painting, though—tonally, coloristically, and by arranging itself into vaguely banded movements which parallel the directions of the hard-edge forms. It's extremely useful as a spatial device, because it can bind together in a fluid way planes which can seem separate and fixed within the hard-edge structure. Also, like everything else I do, it probably has an obsessive cause and function, and I don't argue with whatever claims its own inner necessity.

One thing, I believe, that separates the wheat from the chaff in abstract art, is that all of the wheat—substantial, affecting abstract art—is fueled by powerful obsessive images. I could almost get into a Jungian archetype situation here, I suppose, but I believe that Rothko is obsessive in a way that, say, a Sam Francis never is; or that Pollock is obsessive in a way that Noland isn't. When it isn't fueled from somewhere down below by some sort of universally gripping image, it only seems, like a Noland or a Francis, to reach a level of decorative beauty. Rothko and Pollock start at that level and fly way beyond.

In the fifties a friend of mine told me something that Rothko once described to him. It was a childhood memory of his family and relatives talking about a Czarist pogrom. The Cossacks took the Jews from the village to the woods and made them dig a large grave. Rothko said he pictured that square grave in the woods so vividly that he wasn't sure that the massacre hadn't happened in his lifetime. He said he'd always been haunted by the image



Gemini III: o/c, 78 x 100", 1971 (Williams College Museum of Art).

of that grave, and that in some profound way it was locked into his painting. Though I knew Rothko for years, I felt that this was too personal a subject to ever broach to him myself. The point is that our response to his painting, on some subliminal level, involves our sensing his feelings about that rectangle. It's one demonstration of the greatness of his work and the power of its obsessive imagery.

On this point, there are two kinds of problem-solving abstract painters can get into. One is the result of adopting somebody's esthetic system, and trying to ring changes on it, and the other—my case—is finding myself stuck with a range of obsessive material that has got, somehow, to be expressed and harmonized. If the former kind of painter accepts, say, the formalist esthetic, and agrees that painting is only about the flatness of the support and about color, then his problem becomes how to apply some sort of pigment in a way so that it stays pretty flat, has color, a few interesting surface variations, and avoids looking like an Olitski. My kind of problem is that I *need* a central image, a circle, and I need it to be opposed by other situations, and that they *have* to include both the free and the geometrical. I don't really *know* why. When someone asks me why the circle rather than a square

(which, in fact, it once was) or some other form, it's like being asked why you married this woman instead of that woman; every answer seems to be beside the point.

I've been thinking a lot lately about the idea of architecture. I'd like my paintings to have the qualities of great buildings—solidity, order and clarity. I sometimes judge work by imagining how it would fare if you set it up on the Acropolis next to the Parthenon—whether it would still look like anything. *Guernica* would look great. So would Kline or Brancusi or Mondrian, but I can think of a lot of people who would be pretty badly damaged.

Someday I would like to plan an architectural environment and the paintings for it, to be a kind of secular temple. My interest in painting triptychs has behind it, on some level, the desire to invent modern altarpieces for some as yet undefined secular religion. I suppose its values would involve mystery for its own sake, and order, and an establishment of harmony out of present-day cacophony. Maybe to some extent every lasting modern artist is busy making icons for his own private religion.

The preceding article has been adapted from a conversation with April Kingsley; the questions have been deleted from the text or recast as part of the artist's response.