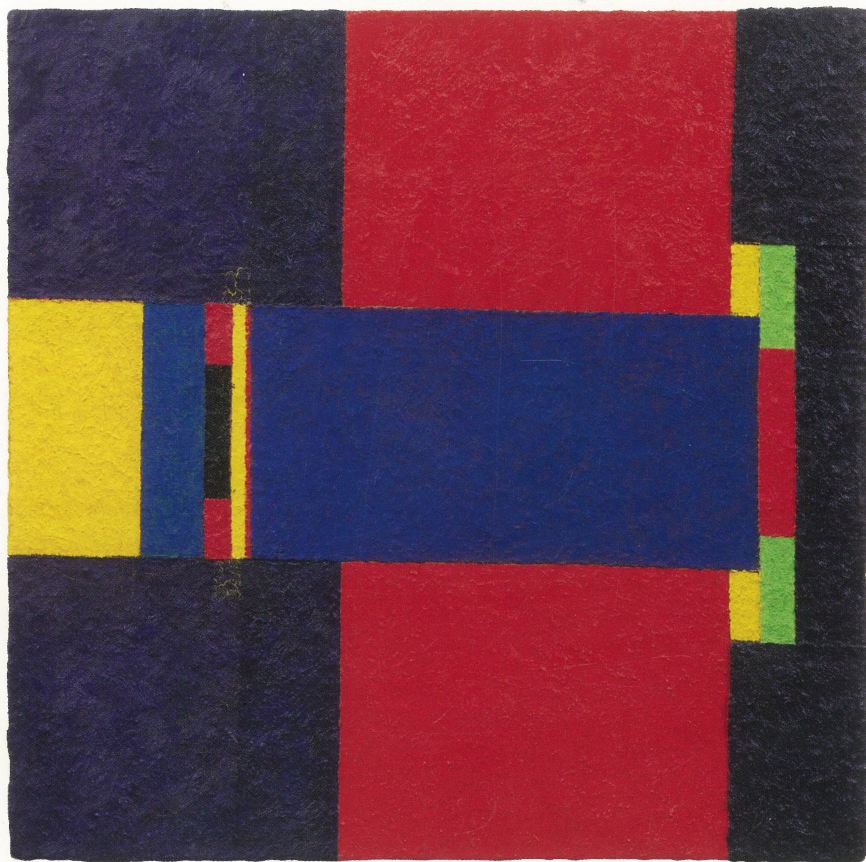


M

# COLOR AND TIME

*Paintings by Roy Newell*

*1956-2000*



*Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center*

*Steinberg Museum of Art, LIU Post*

# COLOR AND TIME

Paintings by Roy Newell, 1956-2000

Robert E. Harrist, Jr.  
Guest Curator

1 May – 26 July 2014

Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center  
830 Springs-Fireplace Road  
East Hampton, New York 11937

8 September – 15 November 2014

Steinberg Museum of Art, LIU Post  
Hillwood Commons, Second Floor  
720 Northern Boulevard  
Brookville, New York 11548

The exhibition and catalogue have been made possible by endowment funds from the Stony Brook Foundation, the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, and the Thaw Charitable Trust; an allocation from the SUNY Research Foundation, designated by Drs. Bobbi and Barry Coller; and a project support grant from the New York State Council on the Arts. The Ovitz Family Collection has generously underwritten the loan of five paintings from the collection.



Catalogue © The Stony Brook Foundation, Inc.  
Essays © Robert E. Harrist, Jr. and Richard Dupont

Designed and printed by Monarch Graphics, Inc., Central Islip, New York

On the covers: Cat. No. 2, *Untitled*, recto and verso.

# COLOR AND TIME

*Paintings by Roy Newell*

*1956 – 2000*

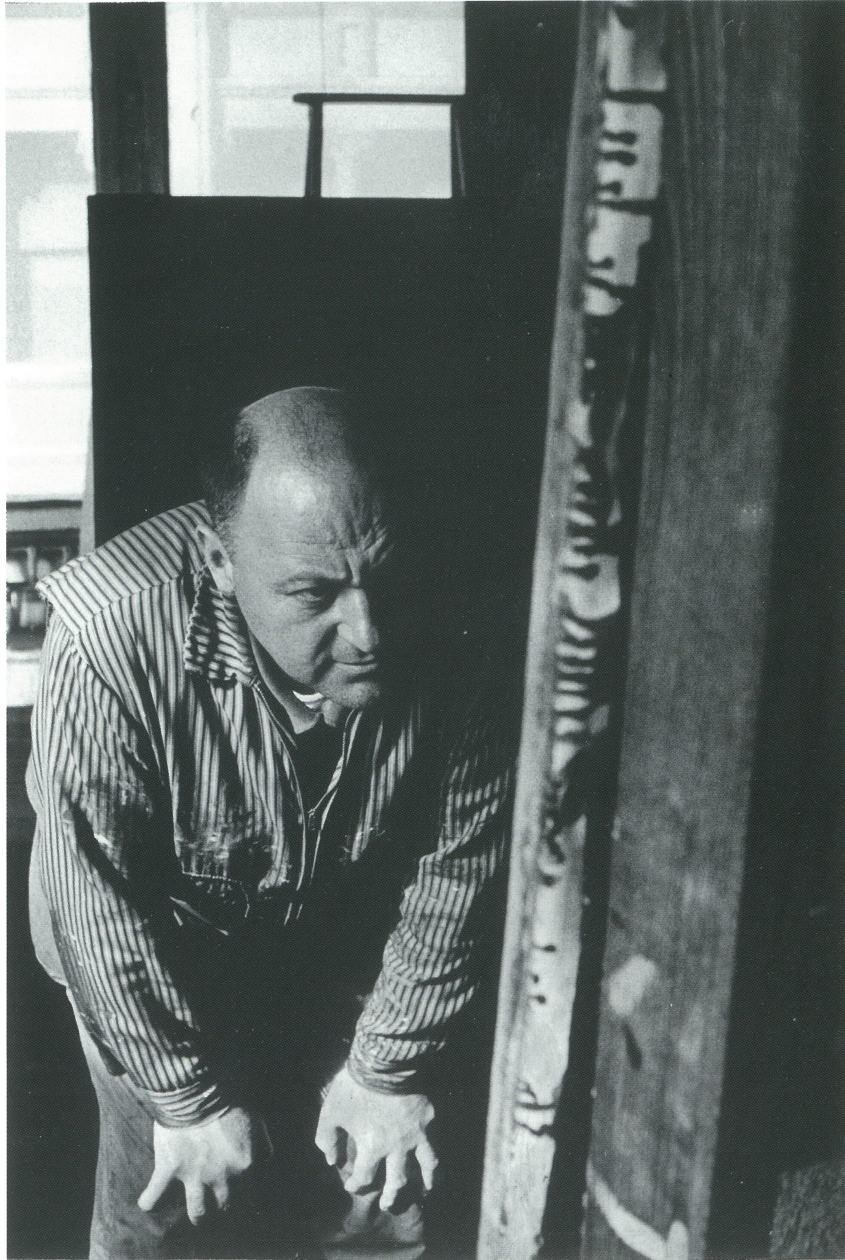
*Robert E. Harrist, Jr., Guest Curator*

*Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center*

*1 May – 26 July 2014*

*Steinberg Museum of Art, LIU Post*

*8 September – 15 November 2014*



Roy Newell looking at a painting in his studio, undated

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD Helen A. Harrison	Page 5 – 6
CURATOR'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS Robert E. Harrist, Jr.	7 – 9
COLOR AND TIME: PAINTINGS BY ROY NEWELL Robert E. Harrist, Jr.	11 – 31
ROY NEWELL: A RECOLLECTION Richard Dupont	33 – 35
CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION	37 – 38
ILLUSTRATIONS	39 – 66
ARTIST'S RÉSUMÉ	67 – 70
PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS	71



## FOREWORD

The canvas I began ten years ago I shall perhaps complete today or to-morrow. It has been ripening under the sunlight of the years that come and go. . . . It is a wise artist who knows when to cry “halt” in his composition, but it should be pondered over in his heart and worked out with prayer and fasting.

--Albert Pinkham Ryder

When I first saw Roy Newell’s paintings, in a 1986 exhibition titled “Private Geometry: Plane Radiance” at Dowling College in Oakdale, Long Island, I had never heard of the artist. I was then an art critic for the Long Island section of *The New York Times*, and my friend, the artist and composer Edvard Lieber, had urged me to review the show. I am most thankful to Edvard for that suggestion. Newell’s work captivated me aesthetically—the paintings are drop-dead gorgeous—and by their remarkable unity over a span of some 30 years. As I wrote then, I was “hard-pressed to think of another painter who has so ruthlessly expunged all traces of stylistic inconsistencies.” Ryder is the only other American who comes to mind.

Newell’s obsessive revisionism echoes Ryder’s working method; the statement quoted above, from Lloyd Goodrich’s 1959 monograph, could just as well have been uttered by Newell. In his insightful essay, the first comprehensive assessment of Newell’s achievement, Robert E. Harrist, Jr. points out that Newell identified with Ryder, and felt a psychic kinship with him. As further confirmation of the affinity, for several years Newell unknowingly occupied the Manhattan apartment that had been Ryder’s studio—a truly uncanny coincidence. It prompts speculation that Newell’s penchant for re-working paintings for years on end was validated and reinforced by Ryder’s spirit. Whatever the cause, the result is an oeuvre of singular richness and fascination.

Joan Ward's 1999 gifts of Roy Newell's *Glory I* to the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center and *Digger* to Long Island University's Southampton College laid the groundwork for the current exhibition. John Woodward, who exhibited Newell's work at his Gallery of Living Artists in 1996, knew that we have *Glory I* and put Bob Harrist in touch with me. Bob proposed the exhibition, and I was delighted when he agreed to organize it. I also appreciate the assistance of artist Richard Dupont and his willingness to contribute a recollection of his relationship with Newell—a combination of personal respect and professional admiration. Both he and Bob have given considerable time and effort to the project, for which I am sincerely grateful. Thanks to the enthusiasm of Barbara Applegate, director of the Steinberg Museum of Art at Hillwood Commons, on Long Island University's C.W. Post campus, we are able to share Newell's marvelous paintings with a wider audience. It is our hope that, "under the sunlight of the years that come and go," Newell will find his rightful place among the foremost 20th century American abstractionists.

The exhibition would not have been possible without the cooperation of the artist's estate, and we are indebted to his widow, Anne Cohen Newell, for agreeing to participate. I also want to thank the other lenders, especially the Ovitz Family Collection, which helped underwrite transportation and insurance costs. The exhibition and catalogue are supported by Pollock-Krasner House endowment funds from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, the Stony Brook Foundation, and the Thaw Charitable Trust; by an allocation from the SUNY Research Foundation, designated by Drs. Bobbi and Barry Coller; and by a project support grant from the New York State Council on the Arts.

Helen A. Harrison  
Eugene V. and Clare E. Thaw Director  
Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center

## CURATOR'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Completing the catalogue for this exhibition provides the occasion for thanking the extraordinary people I have had the pleasure of getting to know over the past four years as I have tried to learn about Roy Newell and his art. I am grateful above all to Anne Cohen Newell, whose patience in telling me about her husband and his life made the entire project possible. Her wit and extraordinary way with words have been an inspiration. I am grateful also to members of Roy Newell's family who have helped in innumerable ways, especially Barbara Gerolimatos, who spent many hours helping me find materials, and her husband Alan Brown, who offered much excellent advice. Roy's sister-in-law, Doris Brown, and his nieces, Phyllis Kaye and Sheila Milecofsky, also kindly took time to share their memories of him.

Richard Dupont, who knew Roy well, has been my guide in learning about Roy's art and has been my partner in planning this exhibition. His essay in the catalogue offers wonderful insights into Roy's habits as a painter from the point of view of another artist. Helen Harrison, director of the Pollock-Kranser House, wrote about Roy's paintings long before I had ever seen them. I am grateful for her enthusiastic response to the concept of the exhibition and her wise counsel in organizing it. Emily Walter, a superb editor and an old friend, spent much time improving my essay. Edvard Lieber was an inexhaustible source of good advice, information, photographs, and editorial suggestions. My thanks go also to Kent Minturn, an expert on Abstract Expressionism, who took time to read a draft of my essay.

It was the availability of photographs of earlier states of Roy Newell's paintings provided by Stephen Schlesinger, John and Kristine Woodward, Richard Dupont, and Edvard Lieber that enabled the reconstruction of some of his working methods offered in this catalogue. For the access to these photographs they gave me, I am truly grateful. Carolina Nitsch and Brian Rumbolo also have helped me gather information and photographs over the past several years. Mr. Dominic Cuchara sent me a copy of a film made by his late brother, James Cuchiara, that includes invaluable scenes of Roy talking about his paintings.

I never met Roy Newell, but the individuals I interviewed who knew him helped me get closer to understanding the man and his art. In addition to members of Roy's family and Richard Dupont, my informants included Jeff Bailey, Joseph Greenberg, Libby Lenz, Edvard Lieber, John Mendelsohn, George Prochnik, Irving Sandler, Stephen Schlesinger, Dr. and Mrs. Marc Weksler, Kristine Woodward, and John Woodward.

Robert E. Harrist, Jr.

New York

March 2, 2014



Roy Newell's apartment and studio, ca. 1995



Roy Newell in his studio, 1950s

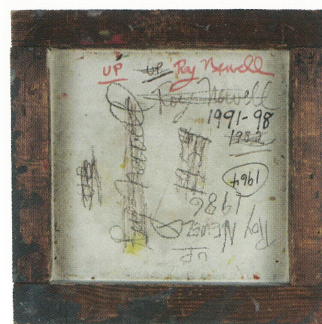
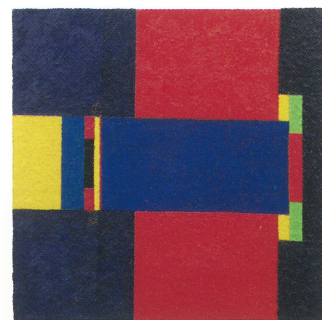
## COLOR AND TIME:

### PAINTINGS BY ROY NEWELL

Stepping into the Chelsea gallery where I first saw Roy Newell's paintings in the winter of 2010, I, like most people, knew nothing about this artist, who had died four years earlier at the age of ninety-two.<sup>1</sup> My response to the paintings, none of them very large, was immediate and intense. I loved their glowing colors and compositions made up of interlocking geometric shapes. I was fascinated by their surfaces, which resembled fine-grained relief maps of a colored lunar landscape. I loved also the way the paintings looked *old*. Although the top layers of paint were fresh and luscious, everywhere there were traces of earlier layers underneath; in some areas the pigment was so thick it resembled strips of felt. Overlapped by strata of red, blue, yellow and bright green, the edges of some of the unframed paintings exposed roughly-constructed wooden supports that looked as venerable as those of a Renaissance altarpiece.

One untitled painting, about 14 x 14 inches square, was displayed with a photograph of its back (Fig. 1, cat. no. 2), on which were written five dates ranging from 1959 to 1998, four Newell signatures, and the word "up" written in capital letters four times in three different positions. Several notations were crossed out. They confirmed what the painting itself hinted: that Newell had worked on it for a long, long time. The inscriptions revealed also that over a period of nearly forty years he had changed his mind more than once about the orientation of the composition.

Other works in the exhibition also had multiple dates that spoke of extended periods of time that Newell had devoted to them. Although most had been finished within the final decade of Newell's life, the paintings were a direct link to an earlier period in the history of art in New York, a period that now seems mythic and remote. Still active in his early nineties, Newell was a survivor from the world of walk-ups, unheated



1. *Untitled*, 1959, (1964), 1982, 1986, 1991-98  
Oil on board, 14 1/2 x 14 3/8 in.  
Signed and dated verso  
Private collection  
Recto and verso

studios, automats, bars, and long-defunct galleries that had given birth to Abstract Expressionism in the late 1940s and early 1950s. He was a friend of Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Philip Guston and an occasional drinking companion of Jackson Pollock. Newell was also a participant in panel discussions at the Eighth Street Artists' Club, usually known simply as The Club, along with Ad Reinhardt, William Baziotas, Harry Holtzman, and many others.

A desire fostered by my profession as an art historian (although one who specializes in the art of China) to know more about a painter whose work I found so enthralling led me to Anne Newell, the artist's widow. Anne was ninety-six years old when I first met her. During more than a dozen visits, this brilliant, witty woman told me about Roy and about their life together, from their early married days in the East 11th Street tenement known as Paradise Alley to their later years in Greenwich Village.<sup>2</sup> Like her husband a native New Yorker and the child of Jewish immigrants, Anne was a public school teacher, and it was her steady income that allowed Newell to devote all his time to his two passions--painting and, of all things, fishing. "Roy never held anything in his hand but a paint brush or a fishing rod," Anne told me.

Although Anne was devoted to him, Newell, I learned from interviews with others who knew him, was not an easy person to be around: he was gruff, self-absorbed, incapable of hiding his feelings, and often a heavy drinker. But he could also be generous and had a gentle side that belied his rough exterior. He also had a knack for getting to know unusual people. Among his acquaintances as a young man was the great electrical engineer and inventor Nikola Tesla, who spent his final years living in the Hotel New Yorker on West 34th Street. According to Anne, the two men shared a fondness for Wings cigarettes and for lemonade concocted in automats from water, lemons, and sugar, all free. Newell himself seemed to have stepped from the pages a Joseph Mitchell *New Yorker* profile; indeed, the artist was the subject of a "Talk of the Town" item by an unidentified

reporter who visited him in the apartment he occupied on West 15 Street that had once been the home and studio of the eccentric visionary painter Albert Pinkham Ryder.<sup>3</sup>

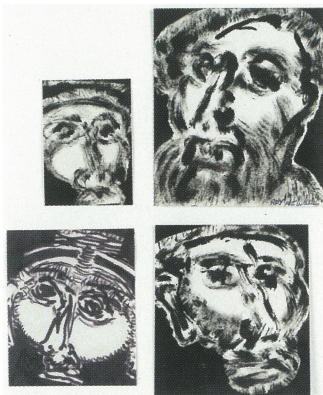
Newell's career as a painter burgeoned in the early 1950s, when he had solo exhibitions in several prominent Manhattan galleries and exhibited in many group shows. Critical response to his paintings was positive, but he sold few of them; fallings-out with gallery owners and would-be collectors were frequent and did nothing to help his career. According to Anne, "Roy could have written a book titled *How Not to Sell Paintings*." As old friends and former drinking buddies were becoming famous, Newell's career was on the wane. He was given one-man shows in 1952 and 1953 at the Hacker Gallery, but twenty years passed before the next, which was held at the Marshall Gorham Gallery. Newell himself attributed this falling off to his drinking.<sup>4</sup> Not all responses to his paintings were encouraging. Sometime in the early 1960s Clement Greenberg visited his apartment with a friend to see Newell's work. Although the two men spoke to each other in French, Newell and his wife understood them to say "not important." Solo exhibitions in 1983 at the Gallery Schlesinger-Boisante and in 1986 at the Visual Arts Center Gallery at Dowling College in Oakdale, New York, were favorably reviewed and attracted new interest. His best work, arguably, was from the final decade of his life, well after most artists of his generation were gone. As the dates inscribed on his paintings show, solo exhibitions he was given at John Woodward's Gallery of Living Artists and at the Earl McGrath Gallery in the late 1990s quickened the pace of Newell's revisions of paintings he had been working on for years. Colors became brighter, textures more varied, and geometric compositions more complex.

His much younger friend and fellow artist Richard Dupont, who curated the 2010 show in Chelsea and who introduced me to Anne Newell, told me that Newell described what he was trying to achieve in his work as "compression." The paintings in the current exhibition, shown in the

home of his colleagues Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, compress long passages of time in colors and shapes that Newell carefully reconsidered and repainted. Photographs published for the first time in this catalogue document some of these changes—the artist’s evolving ideas permanently transformed by multiple layers of pigment—and allow us to recover moments in Newell’s prolonged engagement with his paintings.

Roy Newell, whose original name was Reuben Nudelman, was born May 10, 1914, at 38 Ludlow Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The five-storey tenement building is still there, but the pushcart world of Russian and Eastern European Jewish immigrants in which he spent his childhood vanished decades ago. Today, Ludlow and nearby streets are filled with people speaking Cantonese, Mandarin, and Fujianese, not Yiddish, the language spoken by Newell’s parents and by virtually all their neighbors.

As an adult, Newell remembered his childhood as a time of hardship and unhappy family relations. The only toys he ever had, he said, were pieces of wood he picked up on the street.<sup>5</sup> When his wife once asked if he had any good memories of his early life, Newell’s answer was “None.” His father, Pesach, who used the English name Philip, and his mother, Yetta, were extremely devout. In the family, Anne recalls, “no ritual went unobserved.” Pesach hoped his son would become a rabbi, and the future artist was duly sent to Hebrew school. What Newell recalled of this training were ferocious rabbis quick to whack recalcitrant students. These memories may lie behind the scores of ink drawings Newell made over several decades that depict the head of a bearded rabbinical figure (Figs. 2, 3). Newell sometimes announced the drawing sessions that yielded these images by telling his wife, “It’s demon time.” He also made paintings of the same rabbinical type, only a few of which have survived. One of them, still in an early state, can be seen in a photograph of Newell in his studio in the 1950s (Fig. 4).



**2. *Untitled***, undated  
Ink on paper, sizes vary  
Estate of Roy Newell

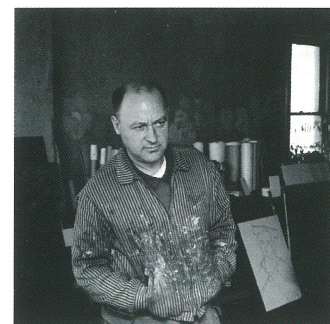


**3. *Untitled***, undated  
Ink on paper  
Estate of Roy Newell

In spite of, or perhaps because of, his parents' efforts to immerse Newell in Judaism, he distanced himself from religion for most of his life. In 1942 he legally changed his name to Roy Mayo Newell.<sup>6</sup> The only explanation members of his family have been able to give for this decision was that Newell felt the name Reuben Nudelman sounded "too Jewish" for someone hoping to make a career as an artist.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, Newell exhibited with Jewish artists groups in the early 1950s, and titles of paintings from this period, such as *Hallelujah*, *Ancestors*, and *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* conjure up biblical associations.<sup>8</sup> Among Newell's paintings on paper are several in bright colors done in a willfully naïve, childlike style that depict scenes of Lower East Side Jewish life (Fig. 5). Undated, they appear to have been painted in the late 1940s or early 1950s. On his deathbed, when asked by a rabbi how he wished to be buried, Newell responded, "Well, I was born a Jew and I guess I'll die a Jew."<sup>9</sup>

Newell spoke of escaping from his oppressive family environment by spending his youth in libraries and museums, where he educated himself, and by going to the movies. Early in his life he also developed a passion for the sea and for boats and enjoyed climbing up mounds of oyster shells from the George M. Still company on Pike Street to gaze at the East River. His one hobby as an adult was fishing. He made his own lures and fished from Steeplechase Pier at Coney Island as well as from chartered boats in Sheepshead Bay. His only trip outside the United States was to go fishing in Nova Scotia.

Little is known of how Newell supported himself during the Depression. For nine months he worked in the Civilian Conservation Corps, the New Deal program that employed young men at \$30 per month for unskilled labor and provided them shelter, food, and clothing. In his forties Newell claimed that he had spent ten years of his youth in the New York Public Library reading poetry.<sup>10</sup> On his application for a marriage license, filled out in November 1938, he listed his profession as "writer." An undated



**4. Roy Newell in his studio,**  
early 1950s  
Photo courtesy of Anne Newell



**5. Untitled,** undated  
Gouache on paper  
Estate of Roy Newell

poem titled “This Night, This Year”—one of the few by Newell to have survived—evokes Depression-era Manhattan:

The mute throbbing of the tenements,  
Where night is not a sleep  
But the tensed body’s tossing.  
(Whiskey dulls the aching brain,  
Puts you on that golden train  
Then once again the old refrain,  
“I got no job, I got no jane;  
Nothing but a load of pain.”)  
Here, between river and river,  
Night is the mocking mask  
Of tomorrow’s formless face...

Another poem, titled “The Kite,” recounts Newell’s boyhood longing to own a kite and the fact that his parents could not afford the 25 cents needed to buy one.

Although Newell never published a word, a letter from his father dated October 1, 1937, touches on his son’s literary ambitions and offers advice for an alternative career:

My Dear Son Reuben,  
Please bear in mind the words of your father, who has your welfare at heart. I heard that you are at present occupied in writing books. Please let me know what financial success has resulted from this occupation. I urge you very strongly that you go to the political club in your district and you should try to obtain a position for the registration and election period, and perhaps a permanent position. I wish you lots of luck. May the ALMIGHTY bless you and reward you with success. By virtue of the Holy Righteous Rabbi Louis Isaac Barthisev, may his memory be sacred.

Your father,  
Pesach

p.s. If you get the job and get married, I will give you the first \$100. This is my solemn pledge. <sup>11</sup>

Newell did not take his father's advice about looking for a job, but he did get married, and he knew it was the smartest thing he ever did. A friend remembers seeing him one day in Washington Square Park, where Newell spent a good deal of time. Out of the blue, he said, "I don't know what I'd do without my wife. I guess I'd just be a bum."<sup>12</sup> Newell's wife, Anne Cohen, grew up in Brooklyn (Figs. 6, 7). Her father, Samuel, ran a millinery shop on Clinton Street in Manhattan. It was there that she was introduced to Newell by a friend's brother. She immediately decided he looked like Rudolph Valentino and made sure to be places where she would encounter him again. Courtly he was not. One day when they were walking in the street and Anne took Newell's arm, he said "You can hold my pinkie instead." Newell's proposal of marriage was blunt: "So we'll get married."

In spite of the resistance of her family, who judged, more or less correctly, that he would never make much money, Anne Cohen married Roy Newell on November 26, 1938, at the Municipal Building in Lower Manhattan. This was followed by a Jewish ceremony a few weeks later on East Broadway. The couple's first home was in Paradise Alley, the courtyard tenement where Newell was living at the time of their marriage. In this building, populated by artists and musicians and later celebrated by writers of the Beat Generation, the Newells shared with other tenants a toilet down the hall from their apartment and a shower in the basement.

Anne's employment for thirty-nine years as a public school teacher and her utter commitment to her husband's career as an artist made it possible for Newell to devote himself to painting, although he did hold various jobs from time to time. During the Second World War he worked in a factory in Queens that produced optical devices for the military. In the 1950s he worked as a doorman for a few nights at a restaurant in Greenwich Village owned by his friend Vincent Montemora, who hung Newell's paintings on the walls. This short-lived employment led to a dispute with Montemora



**6. Roy and Anne Newell in his studio, ca. 1940s**  
Photo courtesy of Anne Newell



**7. Roy and Anne Newell in Washington Square Park, 1950s**  
Photo courtesy of Anne Newell

over his refusal to serve blacks, a policy Newell had ignored.<sup>13</sup> Another part-time job was nearly fatal: working as a temporary elevator operator in a nightclub called the Cobra Club, Newell was stabbed in the stomach. Taken to the emergency room at St. Vincent's Hospital, he underwent multiple surgeries that saved his life but required a slow, painful recovery.

Remarkably, for an artist who showed little interest in pedagogy or academic life, Newell spent the summer of 1968 teaching a studio art class at the University of Oregon in Eugene. He had been alerted to this position by Philip Guston, but Anne recalls that more than teaching the class it was the prospect of fishing for wild Pacific salmon that led Newell to take the job. He gave the students frequent assignments to paint outdoors and recruited one of them to drive him to fishing spots. When, through the efforts of Elaine de Kooning, Newell had a chance to teach in the Yale summer school, he passed up the opportunity and limited his teaching to occasionally filling in for instructors at art classes in New York.

Ad Reinhardt's drawing, *Imaginary Museum 1951 Modern Art in America*, depicts the history of art as a branching tree from which sprout leaves inscribed with names of various artists, from early times to his own day.<sup>14</sup> Featured among this whimsical foliage is a leaf bearing the name "Newell." That his name figures among those of other artists inscribed by Reinhardt—including de Kooning, Guston, Hofmann, Motherwell, and Pollock—testifies to Newell's early success as a painter and to his place in the art world of post-war New York, achievements that little in his early life could have foretold.

"Draw, you ape!" Such were the instructions Newell recalled being given in school when he was assigned to an art class.<sup>15</sup> He was put in the class, which included "everything from nitwits to gangsters," Newell said, "because he would not obey his father." This punishment appears to have been his first exposure to art and the beginning of his interest in drawing. But aside from this rough-and-ready art class in school and later life-drawing sessions at the Art Students League, he received no formal training



**8a. *Untitled***, ca. 1940s  
From the sketchbooks of  
Roy Newell  
Media vary, each sheet 9 x 7 in.  
Estate of Roy Newell

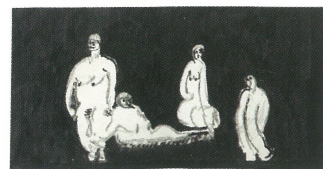


**8b. *Untitled***, ca. 1940s  
From the sketchbooks of  
Roy Newell  
Media vary, each sheet 9 x 7 in.  
Estate of Roy Newell

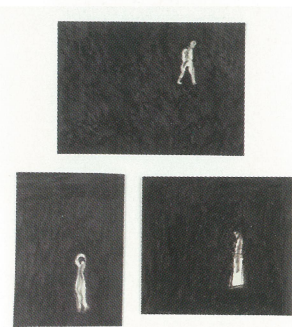
and habitually described himself as a self-taught artist.

Although Newell had given as his occupation “writer” on his marriage certificate in 1938, he had begun to paint two years earlier and had managed to set up a studio in his apartment in Paradise Alley.<sup>16</sup> None of his early paintings are extant, but his sketchbooks from the 1940s are full of casual drawings of street scenes around Washington Square, city buses, and people he met in bars and automats (Fig. 8a – 8b). There are also still-lives, nudes, self-portraits, and compositions in the styles of Picasso and Matisse. Although abstraction, not representation, came to be central to his work, throughout most of his life Newell continued to draw and to paint figures and faces. These images constitute a parallel artistic world in which the human body and the face were the focus of a private iconography. For many of his figurative works, most undated but ranging from the 1950s to the 1990s, Newell developed a distinctive technique of saturating finely textured paper with floods of jet black ink, leaving in reserve areas of untouched paper that form the bodies of voluptuous female nudes or tiny figures isolated against a field of impenetrable darkness (Figs. 9, 10).

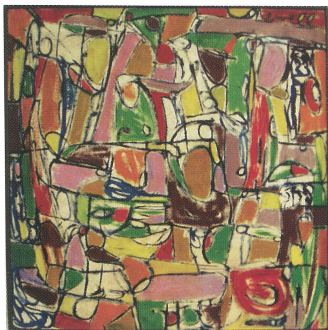
Newell claimed that he was discovered as a painter by J. B. Neumann, to whom he had carried some of his paintings in a shopping bag. Neumann, a prominent German dealer, had exhibited major Expressionist painters at his Berlin gallery before relocating in 1924 to New York, where he opened the New Art Circle gallery at 41 East 57th Street. Neumann liked Newell’s work and suggested that it would find a receptive audience in Europe. In 1951 he presented a group of Newell’s paintings at his New York gallery with work by two other artists, Elie Elderen and Howard Knotts. That same year, paintings by Newell appeared in a group show at the Charles Egan Gallery, at 63 East 57th Street, where Willem de Kooning had his first and second solo exhibitions. In the winter of 1952, Newell was given his first one-man exhibition at the Hacker Gallery and exhibited with Louise Nevelson and Harry Mathes at Gallery 99 in Greenwich Village. A critic described Newell’s paintings at Gallery 99 as “largely non-figurative



**9. *Untitled***, ca. 1960s-1970s  
Ink on paper  
Estate of Roy Newell



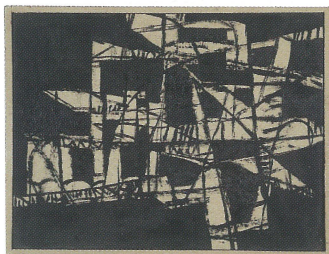
**10. *Untitled***, ca. 1960s-1970s  
Ink on paper  
Estate of Roy Newell



**11. *Memorial #3***, ca. 1952  
Oil on board, 21 ½ x 21 ½ in.  
Signed verso  
Estate of Roy Newell



**12. Roy Newell with one of his paintings**, early 1950s  
Photo courtesy of Anne Newell



**13. *Untitled***, 1953  
Oil on board, 9 x 11 ½ in.  
Signed and dated on verso  
Collection of Patrick Winburn

designs both fresh in color and in mood in which figuration is sensitively employed within a gently dynamic pattering.”<sup>17</sup> The few surviving paintings from this period—Newell destroyed many and others were ruined by poor storage—fit this description well. In *Memorial #3*, which is undated but was shown in Newell’s 1952 exhibition at the Hacker Gallery, irregular, loosely painted shapes of pink, green, red, and brown are outlined in black like panes of a stained glass window (Fig. 11). White ovals suggest the heads of figures emerging from the otherwise abstract composition. In the fall of 1953, in his second show at the Hacker Gallery, Newell exhibited a group of black and white paintings. A critic reviewing the exhibition wrote that Newell “attacks the white canvas like a blacksmith pounding on an anvil and produces thereby an impression of vigor that scorns grace.”<sup>18</sup> Most of Newell’s monochrome paintings from the early 1950s have disappeared, although several can be seen in photographs of his studio, and one, dated 1953, was sold recently at auction (Figs. 12, 13).

By the mid-1950s, in addition to his two solo exhibitions in New York, Newell had appeared in at least a dozen group shows, including the New York Artists’ Annual at the Stable Gallery in 1953 and 1954 and the 1953 Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting at the Whitney Museum, then located on West 8th Street. These were not only the most active years of his entire career in terms of exhibitions but also the years in which he was in close contact with artists of the first generation of Abstract Expressionists. As Jed Perl has written of this period, “Only when you look at what are too often described as the minor characters can you begin to understand the richness of the postwar scene.”<sup>19</sup> Willem de Kooning himself once observed, “It was *all* of the people who mattered.”<sup>20</sup> Although Newell did not achieve the fame of de Kooning, Kline, Pollock, or others he knew well, he was a part of the same community of artists in Lower Manhattan. Anne Newell remembers it this way: “The artists were very poor, but if somebody on the first floor got some sausage, those on the floors above got some as well.” The artists also shared more than sausages, thriving on

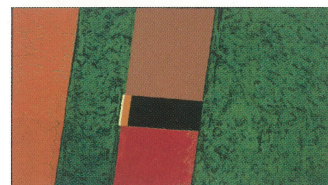
close daily contact, in studios and galleries and in places like the Waldorf Cafeteria and the Cedar Tavern, where shoptalk and aesthetic debates, often fueled by epic bouts of drinking, energized all who participated.

Among Newell's close friends during the 1940s and 1950s was Willem de Kooning, whom he met in the New York Public Library. Newell frequently visited de Kooning's studio and claimed to be one of the few people from whom the Dutchman would take advice about his painting. He also spoke of making visits to the studios of other artists in de Kooning's company. They shared non-artistic adventures as well. One night in Provincetown in the summer of 1949, the two friends, together with another artist, Joop Sanders, found themselves in jail. Although this picturesque town on Cape Cod, where Hans Hofmann ran a summer art school, had become a seasonal extension of the New York art world, Newell, ever the fisherman, was most excited about going there after hearing reports of giant bluefin tuna found off the coast. Accounts of the incident vary, but the basic story is clear.<sup>21</sup> After a long night of drinking, the three artists were walking along a beach and arguing about art history. Declaring that he was fed up with art history and threatening to drown himself, Newell suddenly stripped off his clothes and plunged into the water. De Kooning and Sanders stripped as well and did their best to wrestle Newell back to shore. They were arrested and jailed overnight. The next morning a judge dismissed the charges against them but ordered the men to get out of town.

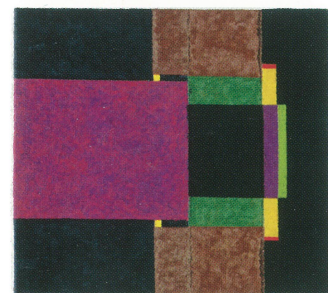
Several paintings in the current exhibition testify to Newell's friendship with both Willem and Elaine de Kooning, of whom he once painted a small portrait (Fig. 14). An untitled painting by Newell, dated 1961 (Cat. no. 4), hung in de Kooning's house on Long Island, to which Newell and his wife were invited but never visited.<sup>22</sup> *Elegy*, of 1984 (Cat. no. 17), was given in 1988 to the Guggenheim Museum by the de Koonings, who remained supporters of Newell's work throughout their lives. In a note to Newell dated November 13, 1987, Elaine wrote, "Bill and I love the two paintings by you that we see every day... With so much junk being shown in galleries



**14. *Portrait of Elaine de Kooning***, May 1973  
Oil on paper  
Estate of Roy Newell



**Cat. No. 4. *Untitled***, 1961

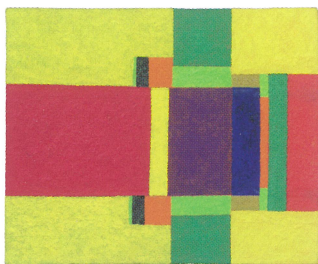


**Cat. No. 17. *Elegy***, 1984

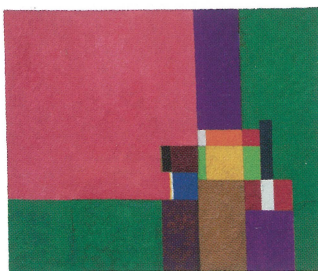
nowadays, it's a joy to know there are still a few true artists at work."<sup>23</sup> Joan Ward, the mother of de Kooning's daughter Lisa and a longtime friend of Newell and his wife, also owned two of his paintings, which she donated to the Pollock-Krasner House and Long Island University (Cat. nos. 14, 15).

A year after de Kooning's death in 1997, Newell completed a painting titled *Memorial for Willem de Kooning*, now in a private collection. *Memorial (Franz Kline)*, completed in 2000 (Cat. no. 23), pays tribute to another artist with whom Newell enjoyed a close friendship in the 1950s. Franz Kline was one of the artists Newell and his wife liked best. Anne says of Kline "His every word was to be treasured." Visiting an exhibition of Kline's work in the 1990s, Newell was moved to tears by one of the paintings and told a friend who had accompanied him that he still had a piece of canvas from the same roll.<sup>24</sup> Another friend, Philip Guston, was instrumental in Newell receiving a grant from the Longview Foundation in 1971. Newell was also acquainted with Jackson Pollock. One evening at the Cedar Tavern, Newell punched Pollock in the face. According to Anne Newell, Pollock had been drinking heavily and began to berate Franz Kline. This upset her husband and led him to throw the punch.<sup>25</sup> Apparently the two men were back on good terms immediately after the fracas.

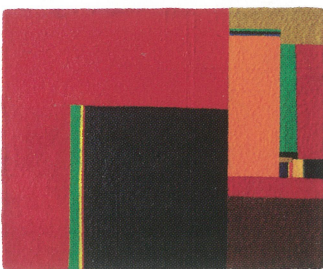
Beyond these informal interactions with other artists, Newell was a member of The Club, an organization founded in 1948 that held weekly meetings and social events at 39 East 8th Street and at other addresses and was for more than a decade a center of avant-garde ferment in New York. Although his rough manner and fondness for drink made him no different from many of the artists of The Club, Newell was not an ingratiating presence and was prone to speak his mind when silence would have been more prudent. Anne recounts that her husband was not beyond blurting out to a fellow painter, "That last show of yours was a stinker." Nevertheless, as Irving Sandler remembers, Newell was respected and admired, and he was "utterly serious at a time when being serious counted" during the heyday of The Club.<sup>26</sup>



**Cat. No. 14 *Glory I***,  
(1979-81), 1995



**Cat. No. 15 *Digger***, 1980-85

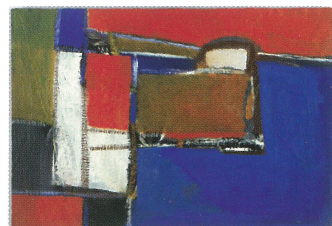


**Cat. No. 23 *Memorial***  
**(Franz Kline)**, 1988-92-2000

In addition to lectures by artists, critics, poets, and musicians, the preferred forum for debate and discussion at The Club was the panel discussion. Newell took part in at least three of these events. On April 21, 1954, he joined William Baziotas, Philip Guston, Harry Holtzman, Willem de Kooning, and Ibram Lassaw on a panel titled “Has the Situation Changed?” A week later, for further discussion of the same topic, Newell, Guston, Holtzman, and de Kooning were on the panel, along with Joan Mitchell, Frank O’Hara, Ad Reinhardt, Larry Rivers, and Franz Kline.<sup>27</sup>

Newell’s name does not appear again in Club records of panel discussions until February 26, 1960, when he joined Nastos Daphnis, Charles Duback, and Alice Mason in a discussion of “The Edge of Painting” moderated by Ilya Bolotowsky. This panel apparently focused on geometric abstraction, as all five participants were doing work at that time that incorporated rectilinear shapes defined by more or less clearly demarcated edges.<sup>28</sup> Newell’s appearance on this panel reflects the direction his work had taken: he had left behind the gestural brushwork and irregular shapes of his paintings from the early 1950s, as well as the monochrome palette of paintings he had shown at the Hacker Gallery. By the middle of the decade he was experimenting with freely brushed panes of color in irregular geometric compositions that would soon give way to the more precisely organized forms that became his artistic obsession (Fig. 15). Some of his paintings from the late 1950s and early 1960s were quite large (Fig. 16); a few that survive are over five feet in height, but Newell himself seems to have realized that these were less compelling than his small paintings, with their densely concentrated designs and accumulated layers of paint, which he claimed were the essence of his art, the products of “hand, eye, and brain.”<sup>29</sup>

Historically, Newell’s work grew out of artistic traditions that had their roots in the work of Piet Mondrian and Kasimir Malevich, though he evinced no interest in philosophical and social theories advanced by these pioneer abstract painters. And although he used recurring geometric relations, often



**15. *Untitled, Undated*,**  
ca. mid 1950s  
Oil on board, 9 ¼ x 13 ½ in.  
Estate of Roy Newell

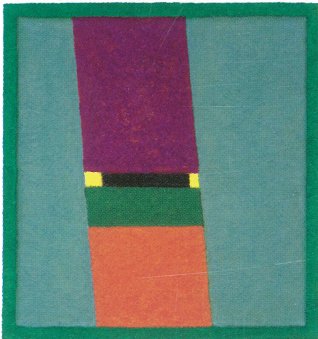
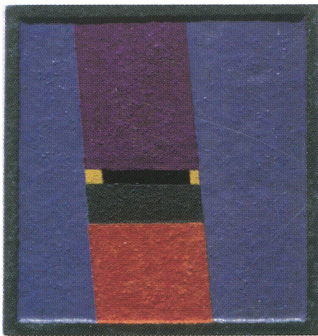


**16. Roy Newell in his studio,**  
1962  
Photo courtesy of Anne Newell

dividing compositions into shapes that recall the ratio of the Golden Section, he did not employ formulae such as the “themes” pursued by the American painter Burgoyne Diller. Newell’s geometric abstractions are related also to those of American artists such as Ilya Bolotowsky, Alice Mason, and Myron Stout. Harry Holtzman, a friend and follower of Mondrian, also developed an abstract geometric style in the 1930s, as did Ad Reinhardt slightly later. Whatever impact these artists may have had on his work, Newell said little about them. He once explained that unlike his paintings from the early 1950s, which were from a period when he was still figuring things out and which were social, made in communication with his peers, his later works were done alone, in isolation.<sup>30</sup>

Among the artists Newell spoke of most often were Puvis de Chavannes and Édouard Vuillard. Neither the dreamy arcadian realms nor the compact domestic interiors of these French painters would seem to have much to do with Newell’s abstractions, although the surface textures of paintings from late in Newell’s life bear a certain resemblance to those by Vuillard. The artist with whom Newell claimed he had the greatest affinity was Albert Pinkham Ryder. Only after having lived there for eight years did Newell learn that his apartment at 308 West 15th Street had been Ryder’s home and studio.<sup>31</sup> This coincidence was reported in the 1957 “Talk of the Town” item. It was Newell’s belief that he and Ryder were a lot alike. Both were fascinated by the sea and boats: “So O.K., he’s from New Bedford and I’m from the lower East Side, but we both got this notion of boats—where do they come from, where do they go?”<sup>32</sup> Newell also felt that he and Ryder shared more than an attraction to what he called “the watery realm.” Ryder was, Newell said, “a metaphysical painter like me.”

Newell did not explain what metaphysical traits he thought he shared with Ryder—perhaps it was simply a disregard for material things, something he did mention in the *New Yorker* interview. The two painters were alike in seeking to distill their compositions to essential elements, and



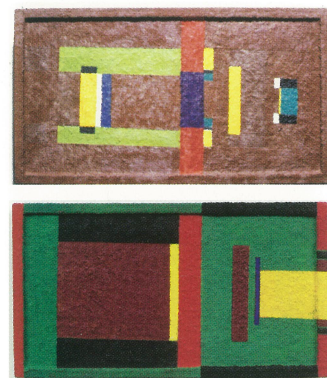
**17. *Shush II*, 1975 (ca. 1985)**  
Oil on panel mounted to  
wood, 6 ¾ x 6 ¾ in.  
Signed, titled, and dated  
on verso  
Private collection  
Above, 1983 state  
Below, final state

they both had the habit of returning to the same paintings over and over. Newell observed: “To get back to Ryder, he was nuts about reworking his material—so much so that one time when somebody commissioned a painting, he altered it so heavily that he didn’t have the nerve to open the door to the customer.”<sup>33</sup> Newell’s own practice as a painter during the second half of his life was identical. Any paintings he did not sell—that is, most of those he produced—remained accessible in his studio and were subject to constant revision. More than once he took paintings back from collectors to rework them and near the end of his life had to be dissuaded by a gallery owner from repainting one after it had been sold.

Although he was inconsistent in recording them, the dates inscribed on the backs of his paintings testify to Newell’s recurring campaigns of work, extending in some cases through several decades. Photographs showing various states of Newell’s paintings, like archaeological strata brought to light by excavation, reveal ongoing revisions of them and, even allowing for inaccuracies of color, yield insights into his methods.

Newell, in his simplest revisions, replaced one dominant color with another, as in *Shush II*, a painting that bears the date 1975 (Fig. 17, cat. no. 11). When it was exhibited in 1983 at the Gallery Schlesinger-Boisante, the dominant color left and right of the central multicolored band was dark blue. After the painting was purchased, Newell asked that it be returned to his studio, pointing out that “just one color is wrong.” He proceeded to repaint the background in a lighter blue tinged with green, not bothering to add the date this was done.<sup>34</sup>

But Newell rarely limited himself to changing just one color. *Dance* bears the dates 1987-95, though it was begun earlier and exhibited in 1983, in a completely different range of colors; as Newell continued to work on the painting, the chocolate brown of the earlier state was replaced by an intense green (Fig. 18, cat. no. 22). *Taurus*, dated 1963-96, also changed dramatically: instead of the murky gray and brown that dominated the painting as it appeared in 1983, electric greens and reds, as well as a



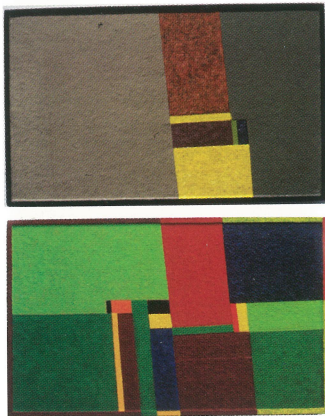
**18. *Dance*, 1987-95**  
Oil on board, 6 x 10  $\frac{3}{4}$  in.  
Signed, dated and titled verso  
Estate of Roy Newell  
Above, 1983 state  
Below, final state

newly complex geometry of shapes, energized what had been a somewhat somnolent work (Fig. 19, cat. no. 6).

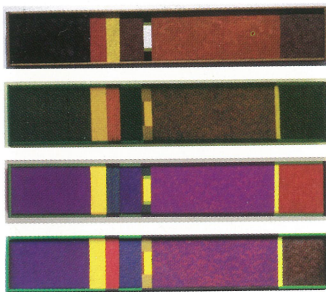
*Taurus*, like *Dance*, was also altered by Newell's decision to extend colors over the frames of the painting. He developed this device sometime in the 1970s and used it often in the final decades of his life. In some cases the colors on the frames, which he fashioned himself, continue those of the geometric shapes; just as often they complement or clash arrestingly. At the same time that colors were altered in these paintings, the layers of the Winsor and Newton paint that Newell favored grew ever thicker, at times creating areas in low relief. His subtly inflected brushwork produced varied textures within individual paintings, which also feature contrasting glossy and matte surfaces.

Although colors might seem to be effaced as others were painted over them, the artist once said that they were never completely gone, the quality of each new layer subtly inflected by those beneath it.<sup>35</sup> Colors also changed positions as Newell continued his work. In the 1983 Schelsinger-Boisante show, *Eldorado IV* (1981-1996), a long, horizontal painting, was dominated by brown hues that held a fascination for the artist (Fig. 20, cat. no. 16). "Let me tell you about brown," he once said in conversation with a potential buyer. "It's a very elusive color. You never know how it will react. It turns. It can change, be thin and tan, like mud. Don't take a brown painting." When it was photographed in Newell's apartment in 1995, *Eldorado IV* retained a large panel of brown with new areas of dark green; when it was exhibited the next year the painting had been newly brightened by bands of yellow and a red square. Without inscribing any further dates, Newell kept working on the painting, and at the time of his death, the brown had been restored, replacing the square of red.

Beyond reconsidering the colors and the geometric forms of his paintings, Newell also changed his mind about their orientation. When Anne Newell began to notice this, sometime in the 1950s, she asked about one of his paintings, "Which way is up?" Newell's response was typically



**19. *Taurus***, 1963-96  
Oil on board, 11 ¼ x 18 ½ in.  
Signed, dated, and titled verso  
Private collection  
Above, 1983 state  
Below, final state



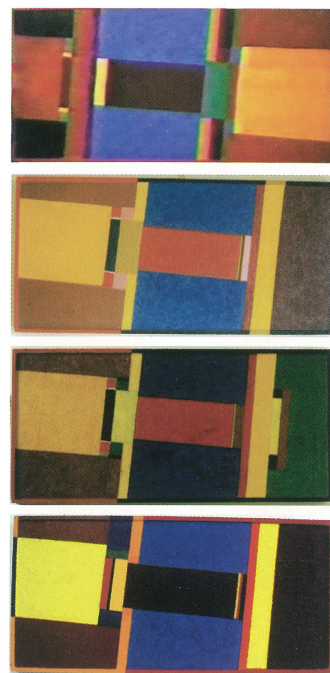
**20. *Eldorado IV***, 1981-96  
Oil on board, 5 ¾ x 34 ¼ in.  
Signed, dated and titled verso  
Ovitz Family Collection, Los Angeles  
From top to bottom:  
1983 state  
1995 state  
1996 state  
Below, Final state

gnomic: “What difference does it make? Up is down and down is up. Out is in.” But in fact, which way was up did matter to Newell. He made sure there would be no confusion by attaching hanging wires, titling and signing his paintings to show the correct orientation, and by writing “Up” or “Top” on the backs of many of them. When he changed his mind, hanging wires were moved and inscriptions modified accordingly.

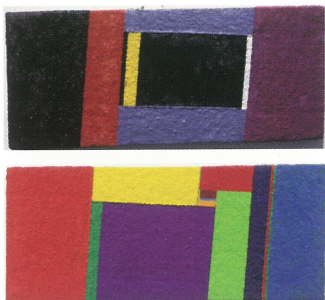
A short film and three photographs record two orientations and multiple changes of color and composition in a work identified only as *Untitled*, dated 1989-1995 (Fig. 21, cat. no. 24). In the film, made in Newell’s apartment in August 1990 by his friend, the painter James Cuchiara, the artist proudly holds the painting up for the camera, revealing a central blue panel separated by diagonal bars of color from a red rectangle on the left and an orange one on the right. A few years later, the painting had been turned upside down: the orange rectangle was on the left, the red one was gone, and various other adjustments of color and subdivisions of shapes had taken place. More changes followed before the painting was exhibited in 1996. Newell continued to work on the painting, replacing the original orange shape with a bright lemon yellow.

As startling as these changes of color and composition are, no less essential to understanding how Newell worked is recognizing how, in individual paintings, certain elements did not change. Repeatedly, in the paintings for which photographic documentation is available, it is possible to see that no matter how profoundly Newell altered a composition, no matter how thickly layers of paint were laid on, he retained geometric elements from one state to another. Photographs of two states of *Untitled*, which bears the dates 1977 and 1998, show that it was flipped vertically and its color harmony completely reworked, while the fundamental diagonal divisions of the composition stayed the same (Fig. 22, cat. no. 12).

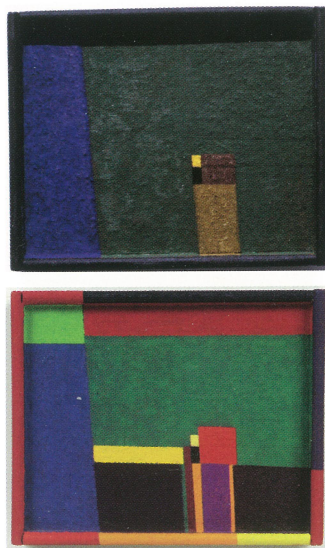
One of the most dramatically reworked of all Newell’s paintings is *Shush IV*, dated 1962, 1981-98. In 1983 this painting consisted of a field of dark green, a blue trapezoid on the left, a small central area of tan, brown,



**21. *Untitled*, 1989-95**  
 Oil on board, 11 ¾ x 24 ½ in.  
 Signed and dated verso  
 Private collection, New York, courtesy of Worth Art Advisory LLC, New York  
 From top to bottom:  
 Film still from August, 1990  
 1995 state  
 1996 state  
 Final state



**22. *Untitled*, 1977, 1998**  
 (*GRRR III*, titled marked out  
 on verso)  
 Oil on board, 6 ¼ x 14 ¾ in.  
 Signed, dated, and titled verso  
 Estate of Roy Newell  
 Above, 1983 state  
 Below, final state



**23. *Shush IV*, 1962, 1981-98**  
 Oil on board, 7 ⅜ x 9 in.  
 Signed, dated, titled verso  
 Estate of Roy Newell  
 Above, 1983 state  
 Below, final state

and black, and, like the beam of a lighthouse, a tiny patch of yellow atop a rectangular plinth of black (Fig. 23, cat. no. 5). By the time Newell was done, what had been a rather somber painting and its frame were covered by a festive, almost gaudy patchwork of colors. Although much brighter, part of the blue trapezoid survives, and the radiant yellow spot, nearly outshone by jazzy neighboring colors, remains exactly where it was, still supported by the small rectangle of jet black.

Meyer Schapiro, whose essays Newell avidly read, once wrote that although the forms in abstract painting have no reference to things in the external world, they call up “the painter at work, his touch, his vitality and mood, the drama of decision in the ongoing process of art.”<sup>36</sup> In Roy Newell’s paintings, the “drama of decision” often extended through decades. Decisions were reached slowly and deliberately, as forms laid out at one stage of work changed color, were painted out, enlarged, subdivided, or condensed. Each decision became the starting point for further revisions as Newell continued to work. Residual forms endured as fixed points from which he could explore new possibilities. As an artist, Newell was never in a hurry. He proceeded slowly and with deliberation, rethinking and revising compositions and building up surfaces to create the richness of color and velvety textures that define his mature paintings. He once told a fellow artist, “I can feel it when I’m getting near the truth of a painting.”<sup>37</sup> In his unremitting labor of getting near the truth, time itself, as much as his brushes and paint, was the medium of Roy Newell’s art.

Robert E. Harrist, Jr.  
 New York, 2014

Robert E. Harrist, Jr. is the Jane and Leopold Swergold Professor  
 of Chinese Art History at Columbia University.

- <sup>1</sup> This exhibition, shown January 16 to March 13, 2010 at the Carolina Nitsch Project Room, was curated by Richard Dupont and accompanied by an exhibition catalogue, *Roy Newell: The Private Myth* (New York, 2010).
- <sup>2</sup> Most of the biographical information about Roy Newell included in this essay is based on my interviews with Anne Newell conducted in 2010.
- <sup>3</sup> "Metaphysical Haunt," *The New Yorker* (March 2, 1957): 24-25.
- <sup>4</sup> Interview with Richard Dupont conducted by Anthony Haden-Guest, "The Inside Outsider Artist," *The Daily Beast*, January 14, 2010.
- <sup>5</sup> Newell speaks briefly of his childhood in a film titled "Three Artists" made by James Cuchiara in 1990.
- <sup>6</sup> Newell's friend Philip Guston also changed his name, which originally was Phillip Goldstein. Musa Mayer, *Night Studio: A Memoir of Philip Guston* (New York, 1988), 21-22.
- <sup>7</sup> Interview with Doris Brown, Newell's sister-in-law, March 13, 2013.
- <sup>8</sup> Newell was included in an exhibition titled "34 Jewish Artists" organized by the Atran Art Center of New York and shown in the Jewish Education Building in Chicago, February 15 to March 15, 1953, sponsored by the College of Jewish Studies and the Congress for Jewish Culture, Chicago Chapter.
- <sup>9</sup> Interview with Phyllis Kaye, July 18, 2013.
- <sup>10</sup> "Metaphysical Haunt," 25.
- <sup>11</sup> According to Anne Newell, who owns the letter, Newell's father did not speak English, and the letter presumably was translated from Yiddish. The name of the rabbi mentioned in the letter is inscribed on it in Hebrew. I am grateful to Professor Jeremy Dauber of Columbia University for his help in interpreting this letter.
- <sup>12</sup> Interview with Joseph Greenberg, June 8, 2010.
- <sup>13</sup> Montemora did serve black customers, but apparently special arrangements were required in advance. See James L. West III, *William Styron, A Life* (New York, 1998), 267.
- <sup>14</sup> See Robert Storr, *How to Look: Art Comics: Ad Reinhardt* (New York, 2013), 77. I am grateful to Alan Brown for calling this drawing to my attention.
- <sup>15</sup> "Metaphysical Haunt," 25.
- <sup>16</sup> "Contemporary American Painting (November 12 to December 10, 1951)," *Bulletin of the City Art Museum of St. Louis*, 36, no. 2 (1951): 32
- <sup>17</sup> "Art Exhibition Notes," *New York Herald Tribune*, February 15, 1952, 17.
- <sup>18</sup> *Art News*, November 1953.
- <sup>19</sup> Jed Perl, *New Art City: Manhattan at Mid-Century* (New York, 2007), 171.
- <sup>20</sup> Telephone interview with Edvard Lieber, July 8, 2013.
- <sup>21</sup> Edvard Lieber, *Willem de Kooning: Reflections in the Studio* (New York, 2000), 33. For Sander's account of this episode, see Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, *de Kooning: An American Master* (New York, 2004), 284.
- <sup>22</sup> Elaine de Kooning also owned a painting by Newell titled *Eldorado I* dated 1981. This painting was shown at the Schlesinger-Boisante Gallery in 1983. Telephone interview with Edvard Lieber, December 17, 2013.
- <sup>23</sup> Letter in the possession of Anne Newell.
- <sup>24</sup> Interview with John Woodward, June 7, 2010.

- <sup>25</sup> Interview with Anne Newell, April 19, 2010. Marshall Gorham witnessed the incident and reported it to his wife, Libby Lenz. Interview with Libby Lenz, June 23, 2010. Newell himself told John Woodward and Richard Dupont about his fight with Pollock. Interview with John Woodward, June 7, 2010; interview with Richard Dupont, January 28, 2014. This story recalls various others about Abstract Expressionists throwing punches at other artists or critics.
- <sup>26</sup> Telephone interview with Irving Sandler, September 3, 2010. A photograph of Newell at a Club gathering appears in Fred W. McDarrah, *The Artist's World in Pictures*, second edition (New York, 1988), 75. I am grateful to John Woodward for calling this photograph to my attention.
- <sup>27</sup> Philip Pavia, *Club Records 1948-1965*, Archives of American Art, New York. Microfilm reel D176.
- <sup>28</sup> Philip Pavia, *Club Without Walls* (New York, 2007), 175. On the persistence of geometric abstraction in this period, see Jed Perl, *New Art City*, 317-19.
- <sup>29</sup> This was a phrase used by Anne Newell in an interview of April 20, 2010.
- <sup>30</sup> Interview with John Woodward, June 7, 2010.
- <sup>31</sup> From the late 1940s until his death, Newell lived in or near Greenwich Village and also maintained studios at various addresses in the area. One studio comprised two joined windowless closets in a building on 14th Street. When Anne suggested that he needed better light to paint, Newell replied, "It's O.K. I'm used to nothing." After several years in the space on West 15th Street, he worked in a large studio on 18th Street near Broadway that had once been the cutting room for a garment factory. A rent hike drove him out in the mid-1970s, when he began to do most of his work in an apartment in the Chelsea housing complex known as Penn South where he and Anne moved in 1975 and where he lived for the remainder of his life.
- <sup>32</sup> "Metaphysical Haunt," 25.
- <sup>33</sup> Newell almost certainly saw the retrospective of Ryder's paintings shown at the Whitney Museum in 1947. His comments about Ryder likely were based on the catalog for the exhibition by Lloyd Goodrich. Compare, for example, Newell's account of Ryder's working habits with this passage from Goodrich's catalog: "He worked long over his pictures, often keeping them in his studio for years, painting on them intermittently, constantly enriching and refining them, bringing them nearer perfection of tone, color and form relationships." Lloyd Goodrich, *Albert P. Ryder* (Exh. cat. Whitney Museum of American Art, 1947), 23. This passage could describe perfectly Newell's own methods. Newell's admiration of Ryder was shared by many of his contemporaries, including Jackson Pollock, who claimed that Ryder was the only American painter who interested him. See Elizabeth Broun, *Albert Pinkham Ryder* (Washington, D.C., 1989), 176-77.
- <sup>34</sup> Telephone interview with Edvard Lieber, December 16, 2013. Throughout his career, Newell made series of paintings with the same titles numbered sequentially, such as *Rise* (three versions), *Eldorado* (five versions), *Old Man Dancing* (six versions), and *Lifelines* (six versions). In some cases, the paintings are compositionally related. Several of the *Shush* series, for example, display tilted central panes against a background of a different color. In other cases there is no discernible visual connection among paintings bearing the same titles.
- <sup>35</sup> Interview with John Woodward, June 7, 2010.
- <sup>36</sup> Meyer Schapiro, "On the Humanity of Abstract Art," in *Modern Art 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, Selected Papers* (New York, 1978), 229.
- <sup>37</sup> Newell made this statement to Edvard Lieber on June 27, 1988. Telephone interview with Edvard Lieber, February 7, 2014.

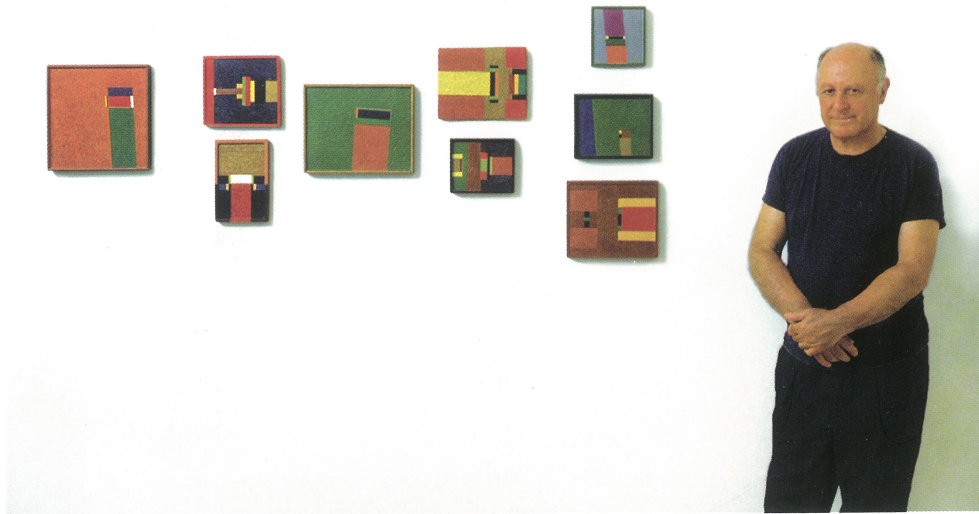
## ROY NEWELL: A RECOLLECTION

Roy Newell was 81 when I met him in 1995, and I was 27. He invited me into his studio from time to time to see his paintings. After a while, I began to come by regularly. I would help him move things around, but most of the time he just wanted to talk and look at the paintings. In the eleven years I knew him, he never started a new painting. He repainted his small works endlessly. One month I would come by to see a room full of electric blues and violets, only to return a month later to the same works in ruddy browns and oranges. Frustrated, I constructed a stack of freshly primed new panels in sizes that he specified. They remained unused forever. Over many years, I came back often (and enough) to see the paintings evolve, and to begin to understand their importance both to him and to painting in general. He was endlessly fine tuning, and they were developing incrementally, almost imperceptibly, like mineral deposits, into distillations of his intentions.

He worked in his apartment, usually sitting on a small chair and resting the painting in his lap or sometimes placing it in front of him on another small wooden chair.

The space resembled something between a tackle shop, a bodega, and a Parisian salon. The walls were completely covered by his small, gem-like abstractions, which had been arranged intuitively over many years into a rhythmic choreography.

He used the old (high pigment count) Winsor & Newton oil paint, and squeezed it out of the small tubes directly onto his brush. He usually applied the color without mixing. He had a substantial supply of the paint stacked up in huge piles of boxes throughout his apartment. He painted every day, and was supported and cared for by his wife, Anne, who is one of the most extraordinary people I have ever met. She enabled his passions, and never wavered in her irreverent wit and good humor despite decades of what she referred to as “Roy’s black cloud.”



Roy Newell in his exhibition at Dowling College, 1986

Roy could be extremely charming, but also very disagreeable. A child of the Great Depression, he was both highly sensitive and very raw. To me, Roy was a window into a time long gone by. His memories were vivid colorations of the key characters—Bill and Elaine de Kooning, Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock, Philip Guston, and others. We would sit on a park bench or in a Chinese restaurant in Chelsea, and he would recount evenings at the Cedar Tavern. It was an education. His best friends were de Kooning and Kline. It would seem nothing had changed, in many ways, between then and now. “Only make friends, no enemies,” de Kooning would often say to Roy. Roy paid no attention.

In the 1950s, Roy had a few very successful years. When things started to cool down he started drinking more. For him and many of his fellow artists, the drinking was on a level well beyond “heavy.” When they had money, they bought paint, and cigarettes, and booze. One day, they were all sitting at the nickel-bowl-of-soup cafeteria where they ate lunch, and Franz Kline drove up in a new Ferrari that Roy believed he had just traded to a collector for paintings. In the context of their formative years during the Depression, it symbolized a level of success that was almost unimaginable, and that Roy would never achieve. What made matters worse was that when the other painters were pioneering the “big painting,” Roy shifted his scale dramatically. He consciously abandoned the grand gesture and the epic canvas in favor of a hermetic and subtle approach. He admired Albert Pinkham Ryder, Vuillard, Bonnard, and Cézanne. Sometime in the mid 1960s he destroyed many of his early paintings. His work went quietly out of fashion.

The next two decades saw very little involvement in the art world. Roy began to withdraw from his friends. Elaine and Bill de Kooning continued to champion his work, but few others paid attention. He slid into an alcoholic stupor from which he was eventually able to pull himself twenty years later. During all this time of isolation, Roy was still painting. For Roy, art became a private mythology. His daily practice was the nourishment against the famine of oblivion. He worked on the same group of some 50 paintings for five decades. To my knowledge, these finished works represent one of

the most extreme examples of sustained attention in the history of post-war painting. Each small painting has thousands of hours embedded in it. They are compressions of both time and emotion. A lifetime of shifting daily moods and inspirations both buried and revealed in color and touch.

Despite Roy's very limited exhibition history, whenever he did show, he received great critical response. This was enormously vindicating for him. In a 1986 half page *New York Times* review of Roy's solo show at Dowling College, Helen A. Harrison wrote:

The long-term, single minded pursuit of a narrow, self-imposed esthetic discipline is rare among visual artists, most of whom undergo the periodic changes in style or viewpoint that we associate with a developing career. Those uncommon few who commit themselves to an approach at once so clearly defined and so personal that it seems to exist outside of time exert a special fascination, especially on the imaginations of their fellow artists. As Morandi represents the ideal "painter's painter" for the gestural realists, so we might think of Roy Newell as a paragon for the geometric abstractionists.

Roy's next show ten years later was a comprehensive retrospective at John Woodward's Gallery of Living Artists in New York City. Two years after that, Roy showed again in New York at Earl McGrath Gallery. This show was also reviewed in *The Times*. Holland Cotter wrote, "Mr. Newell's palette is bright but complicated and holds some audacious surprises: passages of brown and flesh-pink, for instance, carry anatomical associations of a kind found in the work of certain younger abstract painters today."

Lastly, of Roy's highly successful 2010 posthumous show at Carolina Nitsch Project Room in Chelsea, Roberta Smith wrote in *The Times*, "This exhibition will introduce many people to the vehement, transcendent geometry of Roy Newell, an all but unknown painter who died in 2006 at 92. It also expands the perimeters of the New York School with a solid, sudden jolt."

A jolt indeed—this show at the Pollock-Krasner House will once again give the public a chance to see these extraordinary works. It will also put Roy's paintings in the historical context they so richly deserve, and shed light on an alternative history of the New York School.

Richard Dupont

January 2014



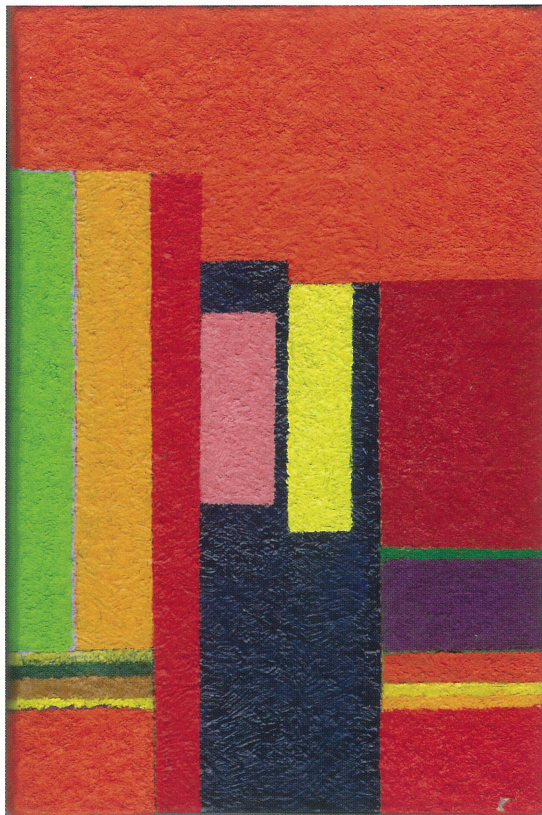
Installation of "Roy Newell: The Private Myth,"  
Carolina Nitsch Project Room, 2010



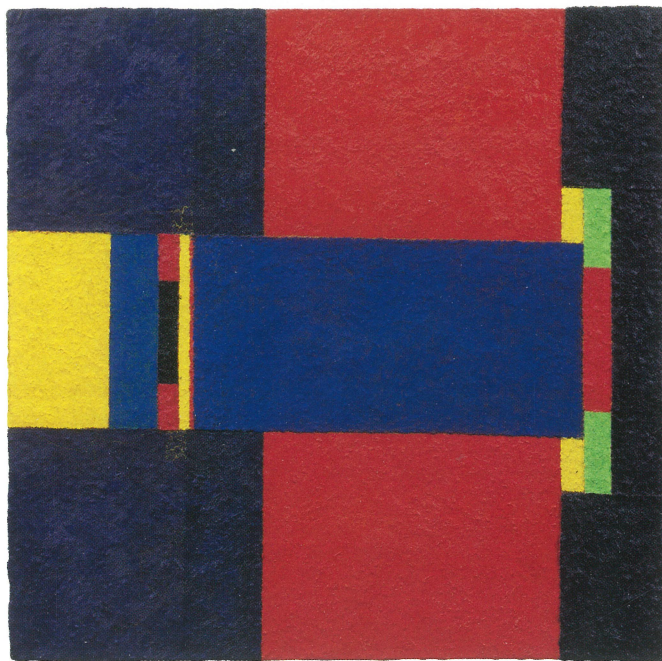
## CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

1. *Untitled*, 1956-98  
Oil on board, 9 x 6 inches  
Signed and dated verso  
Collection of Earl McGrath, New York  
*Shown at the Pollock-Krasner House only*
2. *Untitled*, 1959, (1964), 1982, 1986, 1991-98  
Oil on board, 14 ½ x 14 ⅜ inches  
Signed and dated verso  
Private collection
3. *Shush I*, (1960), 1970, (1997)  
Oil on board, 10 ¼ x 11 ¾ in.  
Signed, dated and titled verso  
Estate of Roy Newell
4. *Untitled*, 1961  
Oil on masonite, 12 x 22 in.  
Signed and dated verso  
Private Collection
5. *Shush IV*, (1962), 1981-82  
Oil on board, 7 ⅜ x 9 inches  
Signed, dated and titled verso  
Estate of Roy Newell
6. *Taurus*, 1963-96  
Oil on board, 11 ¼ x 18 ½ in.  
Signed, dated and titled verso  
Collection of Arthur and Elizabeth Martinez
7. *Untitled*, 1969  
Oil on board, 16 ⅝ x 12 ½ in.  
Signed and dated verso  
Ovitz Family Collection, Los Angeles
8. *Old Man Dancing IV*, 1970, 1981-97  
Oil on board, 6 ½ x 10 ¾ in.  
Signed, dated and titled verso  
Estate of Roy Newell
9. *GRRRH-II*, 1971-83-98  
Oil on board, 6 ⅛ x 20 ¾ in.  
Signed, dated and titled verso  
Estate of Roy Newell
10. *Entrance II*, 1972 -8- 98  
Oil on board, 8 x 12 inches  
Signed, dated and titled verso  
Estate of Roy Newell
11. *Shush II*, 1975 (ca. 1985)  
Oil on panel mounted to wood, 6 ¾ x 6¼ inches  
Signed verso  
Private collection
12. *Untitled*, 1977, 1998  
(GRRR III, marked out on verso)  
Oil on board, 6 ¼ x 14 ¾ inches  
Signed, dated and titled verso  
Estate of Roy Newell
13. *Untitled*, 1979 -96, 98  
("Old Man Dancing II" written in pencil on verso)  
Oil on board, 12 x 12 inches  
Signed verso  
Estate of Roy Newell
14. *Glory I*, (1979-81), 1995  
Oil on wood panel, 8 ½ x 10 ½ inches  
Signed and dated verso  
Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, East Hampton, NY  
Gift of Joan Ward
15. *Digger*, 1980-85  
Oil on board, 11 x 13 inches  
Steinberg Museum of Art at Hillwood, LIU Post  
Gift of Joan Ward

16. *Eldorado IV*, 1981-96  
Oil on board, 5  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 34  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches  
Signed, dated and titled verso  
Ovitz Family Collection, Los Angeles
17. *Elegy*, 1984  
Oil on wood panel, 12  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 13  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches  
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum,  
New York  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Willem de Kooning, 1988
18. *Untitled*, 1984  
Oil on wood panel, 6 x 11  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches  
Signed verso  
Private collection
19. *Untitled*, 1985-1998  
Oil on wood panel, 11  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 4 inches  
Signed and dated verso  
Agnes Gund Collection, New York
20. *Eden*, 1986  
Oil on board, 11 x 35 inches  
Signed, dated and titled verso  
Ovitz Family Collection, Los Angeles
21. *Duo*, 1987  
Oil on wood panel, 8  $\frac{5}{8}$  x 4  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches  
Signed verso  
Private collection
22. *Dance*, 1987-95  
Oil on board, 6 x 10  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches  
Signed, dated and titled verso  
Estate of Roy Newell
23. *Memorial (Franz Kline)*, 1988-92-2000  
Oil on board, 20  $\frac{1}{8}$  x 16  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches  
Signed, dated and titled verso  
Collection of Tony and Deb Clancy
24. *Untitled*, 1989-95  
Oil on board, 11  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 24  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches  
Signed and dated verso  
Private collection, New York, courtesy of  
Worth Art Advisory LLC, New York
25. *Lifelines*, 1995  
Oil on board, 10  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 9 inches  
Signed, dated and titled verso  
Ovitz Family Collection, Los Angeles
26. *Untitled*, 1997 (90)  
Oil on board, 17 x 17 inches  
Signed and dated verso  
Estate of Roy Newell
27. *Untitled*, 2000  
Oil on board, 15 x 12 inches  
Signed and dated verso  
Estate of Roy Newell
28. *Untitled*, 2000  
Oil on board, 10  $\frac{1}{8}$  x 15  $\frac{7}{8}$  inches  
Signed and dated verso  
Ovitz Family Collection, Los Angeles



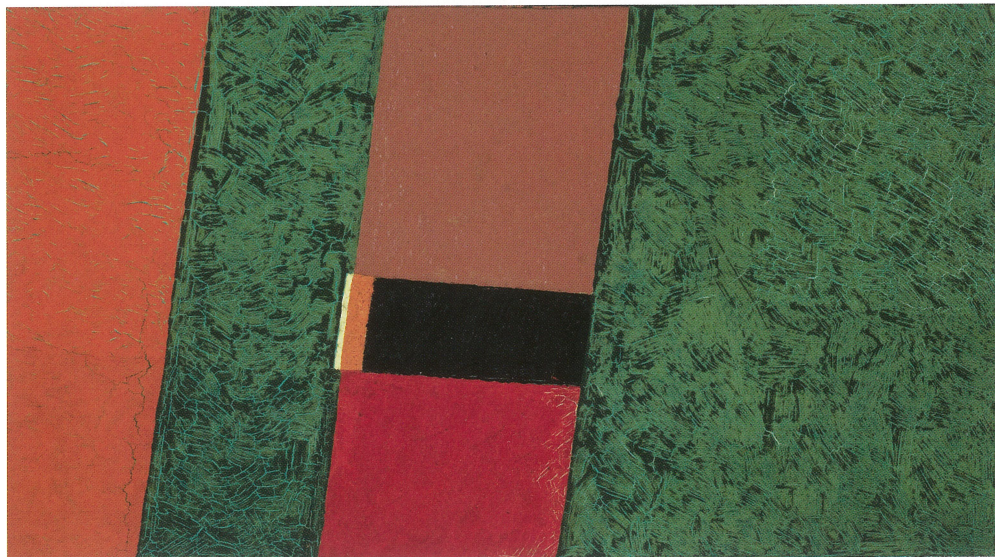
Cat. No. 1 *Untitled*, 1956-98



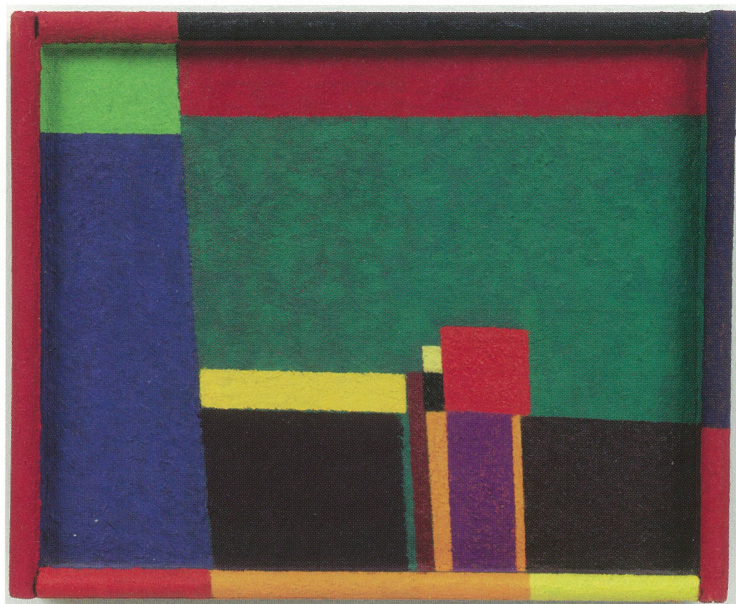
Cat. No. 2 *Untitled*, 1959, (1964) 1982, 1986, 1991-98



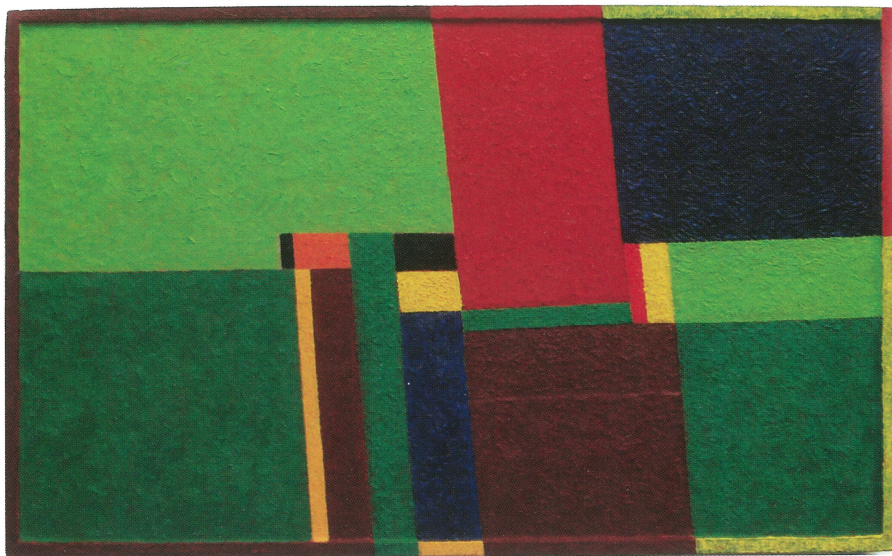
Cat. No. 3 *Shush I*, (1960), 1970, (1997)



Cat. No. 4 *Untitled*, 1961



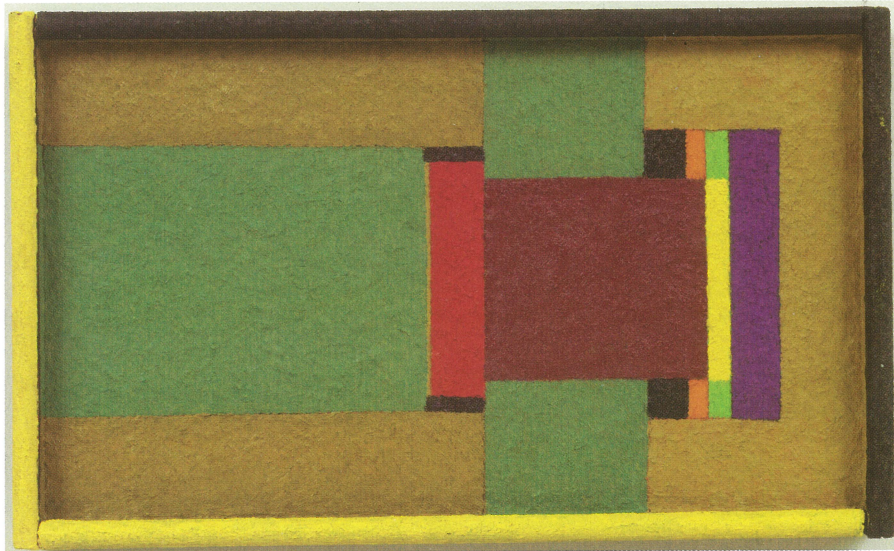
Cat. No. 5 *Shush IV*, 1962, 1981-82



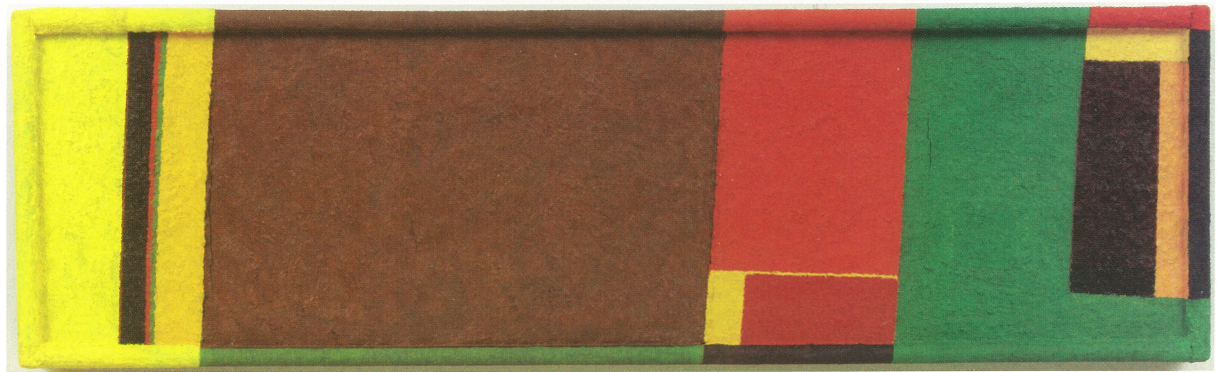
Cat. No. 6 *Taurus*, 1963-96



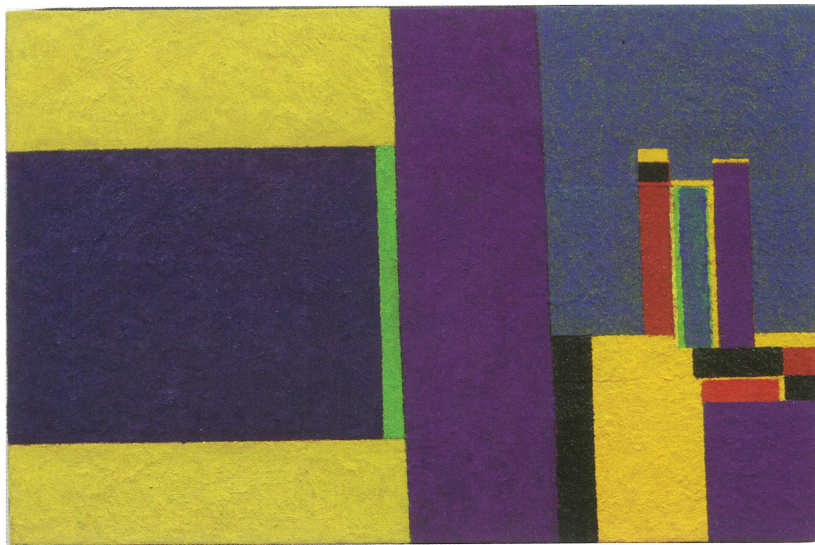
Cat. No. 7 *Untitled*, 1969



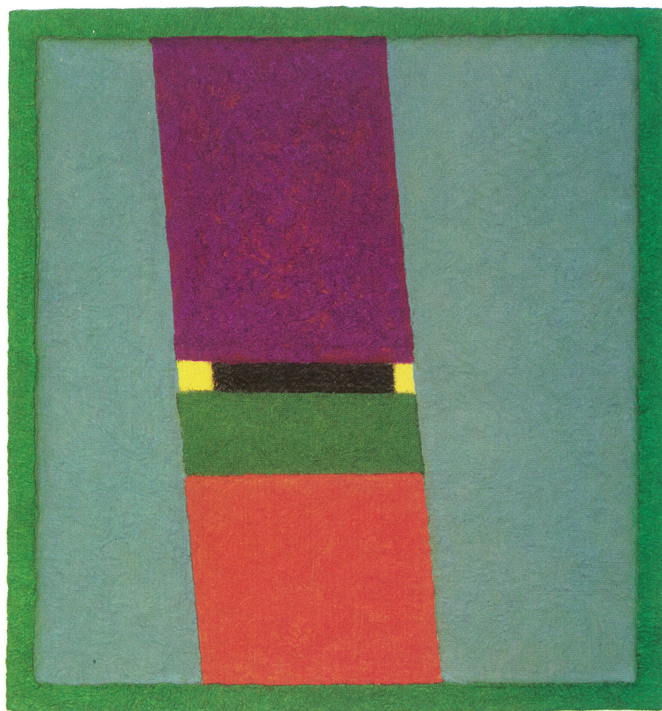
Cat. No. 8 *Old Man Dancing IV*, 1970, 1981-97



Cat. No. 9 *GRRRH-II*, 1971-83-98



Cat. No. 10 *Entrance II*, 1972-8-98



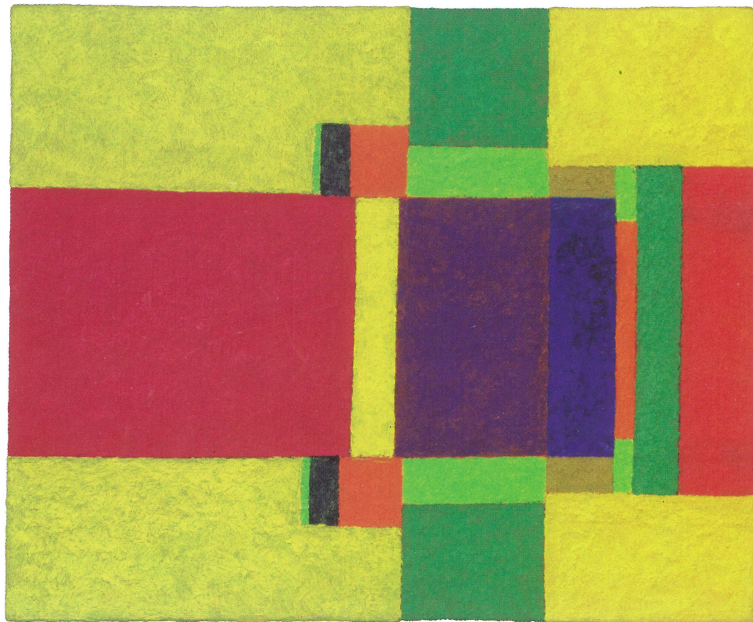
Cat. No. 11 *Shush II*, 1975 (ca. 1985)



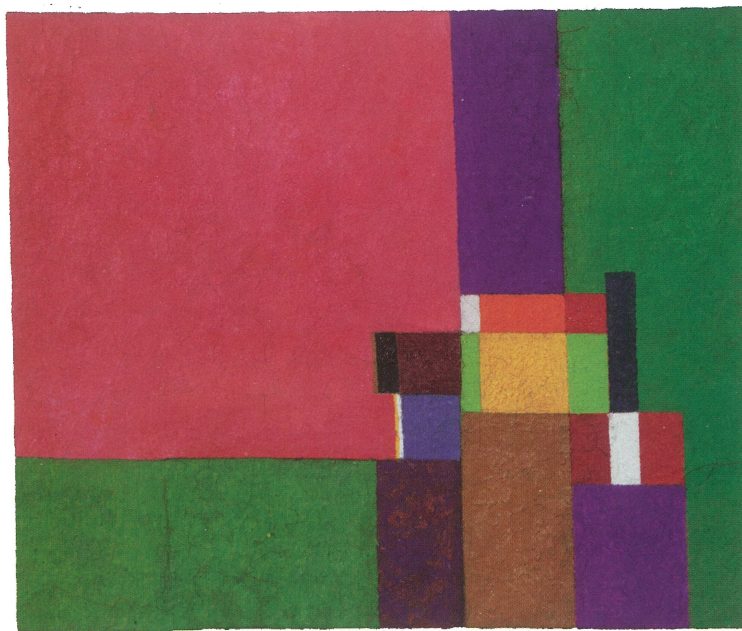
Cat. No. 12 *Untitled*, 1977, 1998



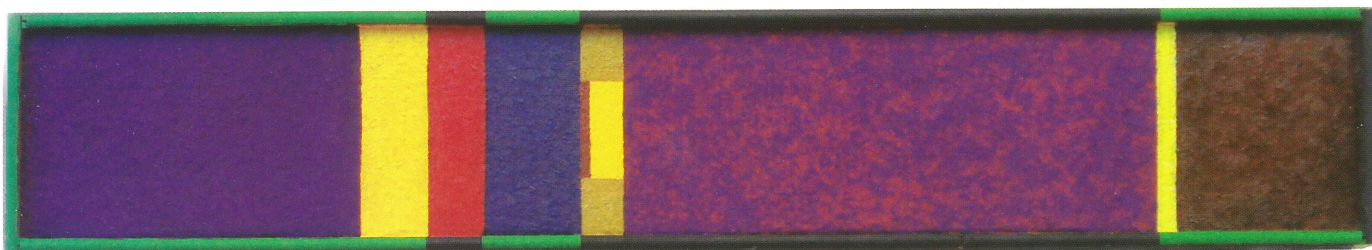
Cat. No. 13 *Untitled*, 1979-96, 98



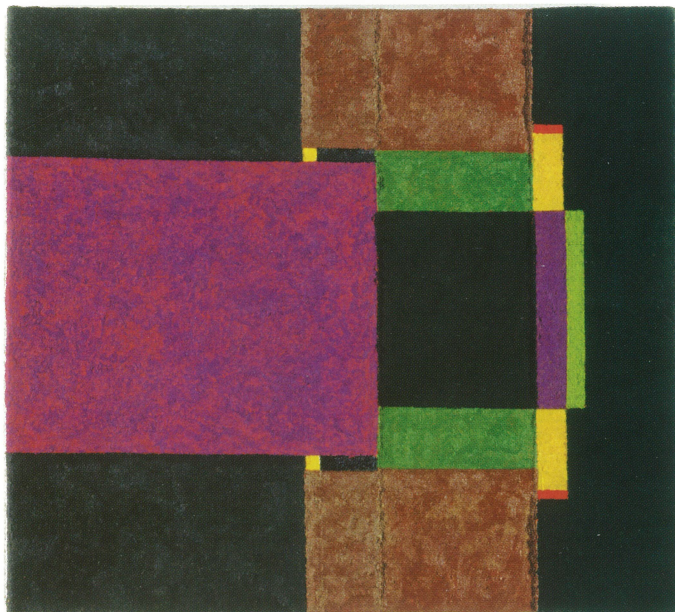
Cat. No. 14 *Glory I*, (1979-81), 1995



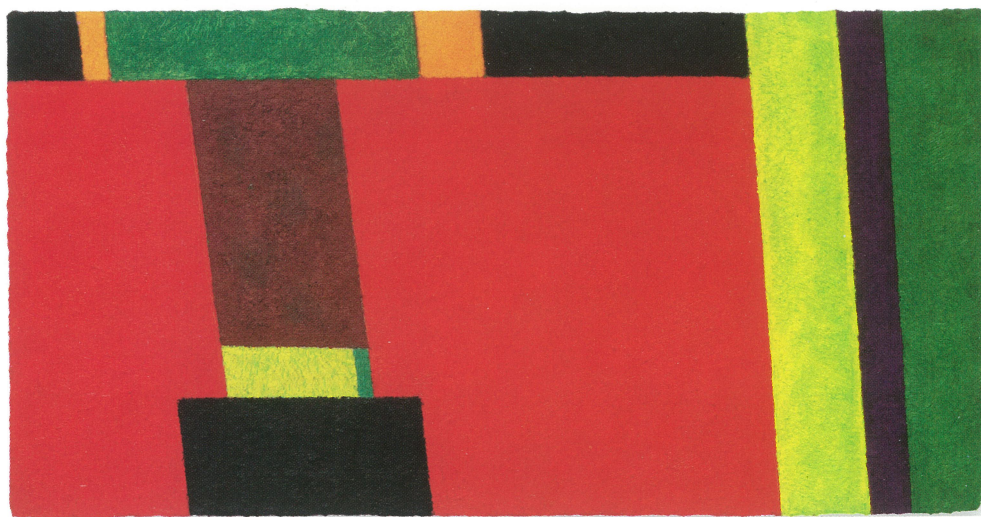
Cat. No. 15 *Digger*, 1980-85



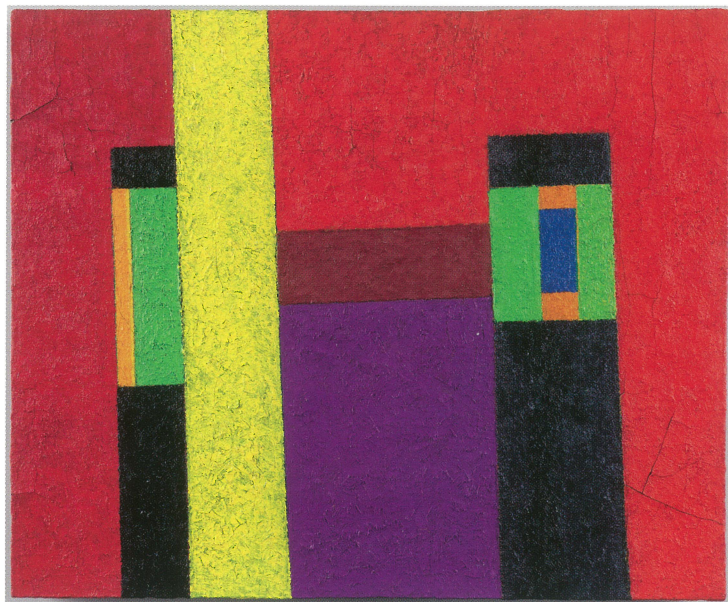
Cat. No. 16 *Eldorado IV*, 1981-96



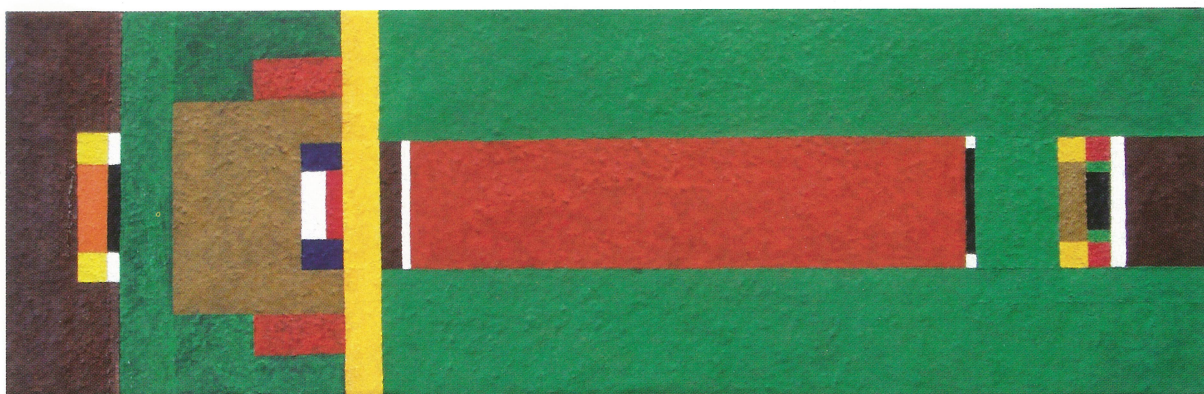
Cat. No. 17 *Elegy*, 1984



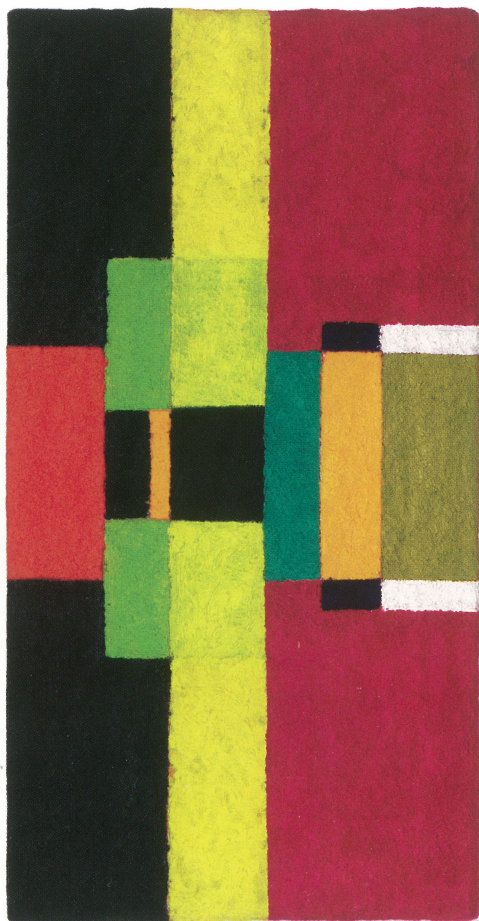
Cat. No. 18 *Untitled*, 1984



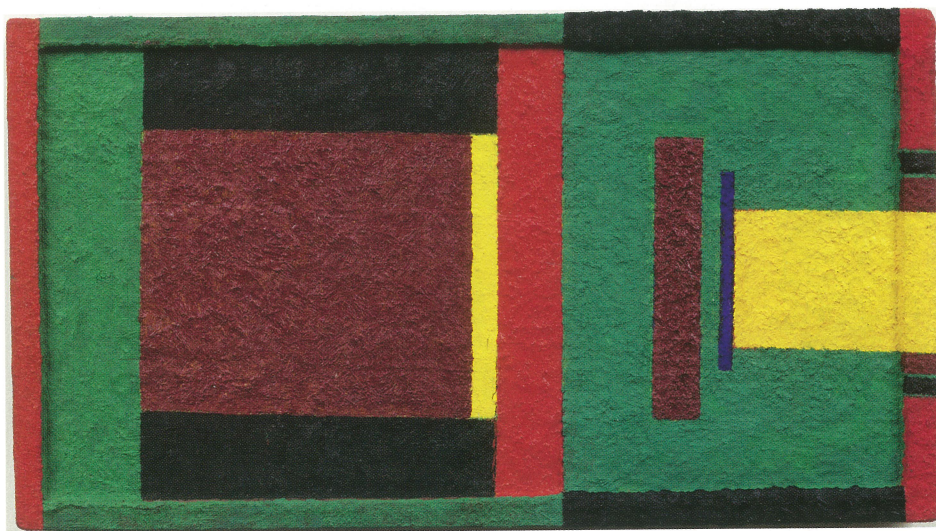
Cat. No. 19 *Untitled*, 1985-1998



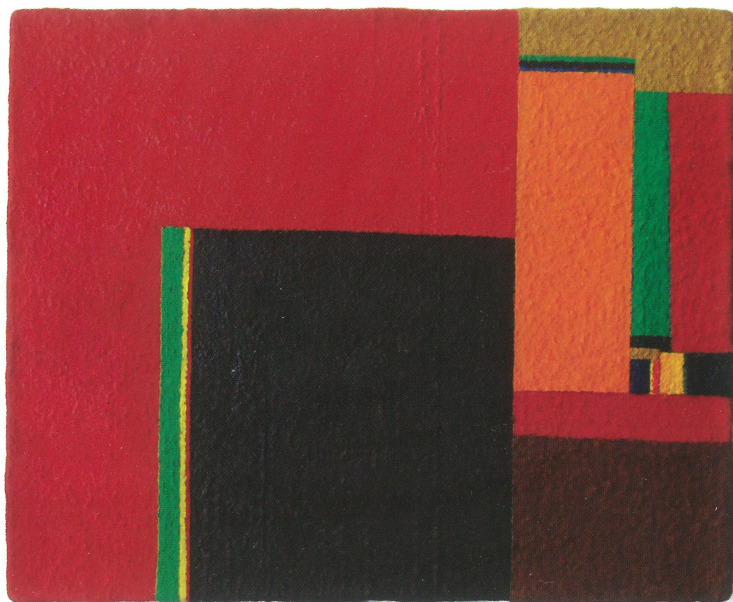
Cat. No. 20 *Eden*, 1986



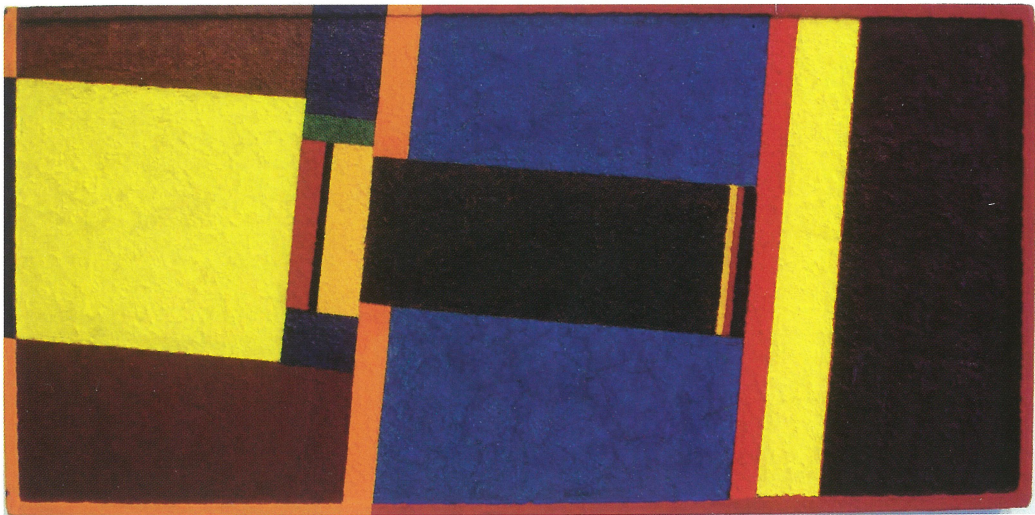
Cat. No. 21 *Duo*, 1987



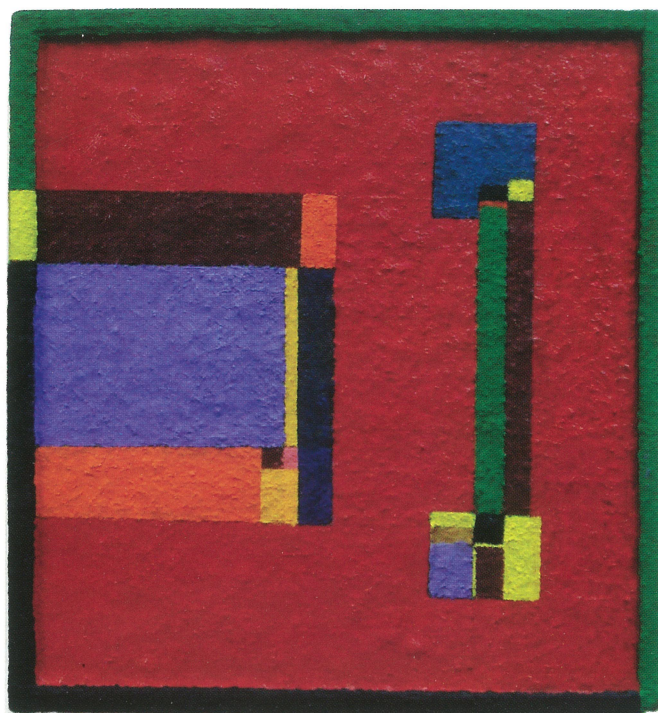
Cat. No. 22 *Dance*, 1987-95



Cat. No. 23 *Memorial* (Franz Kline), 1988-92-2000



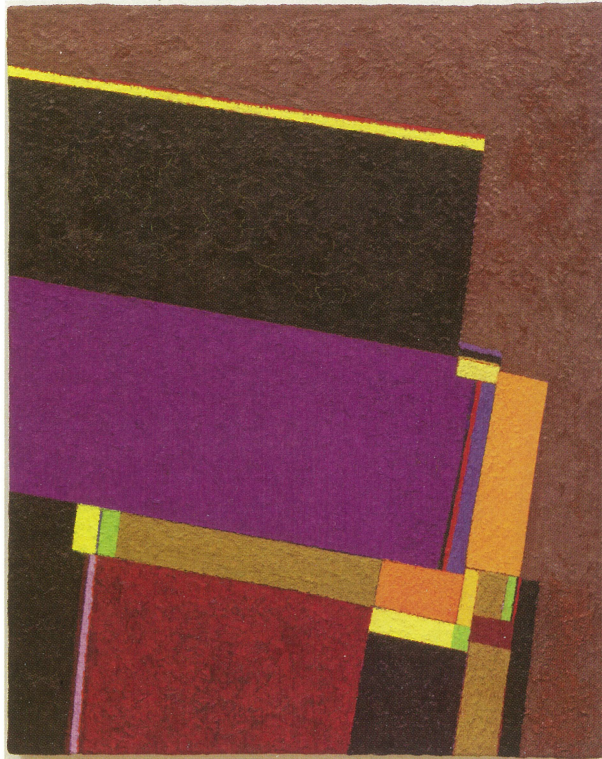
Cat. No. 24 *Untitled*, 1989-95



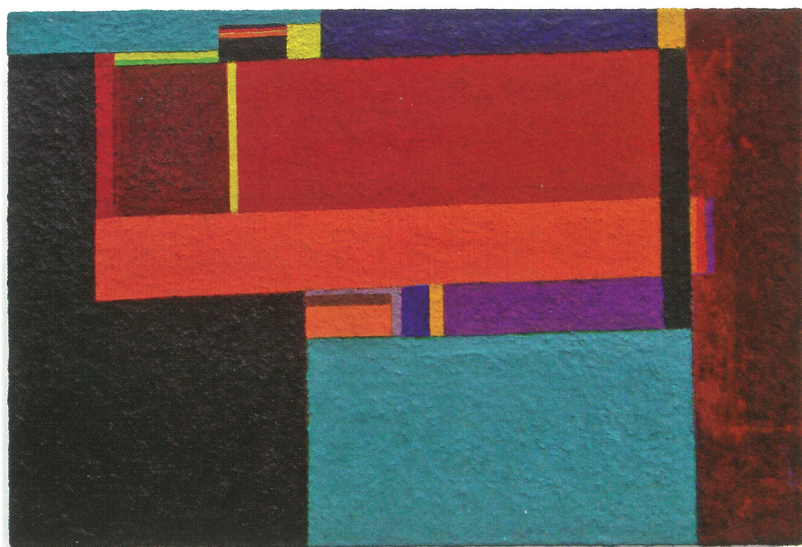
Cat. No. 25 *Lifelines*, 1995



Cat. No. 26 *Untitled*, 1997 (90)



Cat. No. 27 *Untitled*, 2000



Cat. No. 28 *Untitled*, 2000

## ROY NEWELL

May 10, 1914 - November 22, 2006

Lived and worked in New York City

### SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2010 "Roy Newell: The Private Myth," curated by Richard Dupont. Carolina Nitsch Project

Room, New York

2000 "New Paintings," Earl McGrath Gallery, New York

1998 "Old Man Dancing-Expanding the Edge," Earl McGrath Gallery New York

1996 "Lifelines: 1955-1995," Gallery of Living Artists, New York

1986 "Private Geometry: Plane Radiance," Dowling Gallery Visual Arts Center, Oakdale, NY

1983 "Roy Newell: Private Geometry," Gallery Schlesinger-Boisanté, New York

1973 "Roy Newell: 1959-1973 Paintings," Gorham Gallery, New York

1953 "Move: Exhibition of Black-and-White Paintings by Roy Newell," Hacker Gallery,

New York

1952 "Roy Newell Paintings," Hacker Gallery, New York

1950s Amel Gallery, New York

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2010-11 "complete concrete," Museum Haus Konstruktiv, Zurich

2005 "Spring Group Show," Earl McGrath Gallery, Los Angeles

2003 Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA

2002 "Summer Group Show," Earl McGrath Gallery, New York

2001, Group Show, Gary Snyder Fine Art, New York

2000 "Summer Group Show," Earl McGrath Gallery, New York

1998 "Group Show, Part I and II," Earl McGrath Gallery, New York

1997 "Turning the Corner: Abstraction at the End of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century," curated by Wayne

Dynes, Hunter College, New York

1993 "Paintings," Gallery Schlesinger, New York

1992 Gallerie Hopkins-Thomas-Custot, Paris

1988 "Plane Geometry: Geometric Abstraction in America, 1930-1960," Robert Schoelkopf  
Gallery Ltd., New York

1984 "Petit Format," Camillos Kouros Gallery, New York

1971 "Joan Orlowski, Roy Newell," Richard Minsky Bookbindery-Gallery, Forest Hills,  
New York

1971 Jacobi Gallery, New York

1959 "Independent Artist's 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Exhibition," Lower East Side Neighborhoods  
Association, St. Mark's-on- the-Bouwerie, New York

1958 "Independent Artist's 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Exhibition," Lower East Side Neighborhoods  
Association, St. Mark's-on- the-Bouwerie, New York

1954 Nebraska Art Association Sixty-fourth Annual Exhibition, University Galleries,  
University of Nebraska, Lincoln

1954 "Exhibition 34 Jewish Artists," Arlington-Fairfax Jewish Center, Arlington, Virginia,  
Jewish Education Building, Chicago

1953 Nebraska Art Association Sixty-fourth Annual Exhibition, University Galleries,  
University of Nebraska, Lincoln

1953 Annual Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture, Stable Gallery, New York

1953 "Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting," Whitney Museum of  
American Art, New York

1953 Group Exhibition, Charles Egan Gallery, New York

1952 "Three Artists" (Louise Nevelson, Roy Newell, Harry Mathes), Gallery 99, New York

1950's "New Talent Series," MoMA Restaurant, Museum of Modern Art, New York

1951 "Contemporary American Painting (Feeling the Pulse of 57<sup>th</sup> Street)," St. Louis City Art  
Museum, St. Louis, Missouri

1951 "Three Artists," New Art Circle, J.B. Neumann, New York

1951 Group Exhibition, Charles Egan Gallery, New York

1951 Annual Exhibition, The Jumble Shop, Greenwich Village, New York

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Smith, Roberta, "Roy Newell: The Private Myth," *The New York Times*, February 11, 2010
- "Roy Newell," *The New Yorker*, February 8, 2010
- Wei, Lilly. "Roy Newell at Earl McGrath," *Art in America*, June 1998, p.96
- Mendelsohn, John. "Color Reigns Supreme," *Art Net*, June 1998.
- Cotter, Holland. "Roy Newell," *The New York Times*, May 29, 1998.
- Newhall, Edith. "Make it Newell," *New York*, May 18, 1998.
- Dynes, Wayne R. *Turning the Corner: Abstraction at the end of the 20th Century*, Hunter College of the City University of New York, 1997.
- Paumgarten, Nick. "Grumpy Old Artist Gets His Due," *New York Observer*,  
February 24, 1996.
- Harrison, Helen A. "When a Period Lasts a Lifetime," *The New York Times*,  
August 31, 1986.
- "Private Geometry Paintings," *Arts Magazine*, 1984.
- Guleck, Grace. "Roy Newell," *The New York Times*, December 30, 1983.
- Kramer, Hilton. "Roy Newell," *The New York Times*, May 26, 1973.
- "Memory of the Future," original ink and wash drawings by Roy Newell, unique copy bound  
by Richard Minsky, 1971.
- "Metaphysical Haunt," *The New Yorker*, March 2, 1957.
- Art News*, November 1953.
- "Three Artists" (Louise Nevelson, Roy Newell, Harry Mathes), *New York Herald Tribune*,  
February 15, 1952.
- "Feeling the Pulse of 57<sup>th</sup> Street," *St. Louis News*, November 1951.

## AWARDS AND ASSOCIATIONS

- Longview Foundation Grant, awarded by Phillip Guston. Michigan Art Center,  
Kalamazoo, MI, 1971.
- 8<sup>th</sup> Street Artists' Club, New York.

## SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Dorothea Carus

Tony and Deb Clancy

Jean Cohen

Estate of Elaine de Kooning

Estate of J.B. Neumann

Estate of Robert Bolt

Estate of Willem de Kooning

Harrison Ford

Agnes Gund Collection

Seymour Hacker

Edvard Lieber

Arthur and Elizabeth Martinez

Earl McGrath

New York University Art Collection

Ovitz Family Collection

Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, East Hampton, New York

Stephen L. Schlesinger

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Steinberg Museum of Art at Hillwood, Long Island University

Anthony C. Stout

Dr. and Mrs. Marc Weksler

## PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

Richard Dupont: Pages 9, 35, Fig. 20 (1995 state)

Edvard Lieber: Page 32, Cat. Nos. 11, 18, 21

Joerg Lohse: Front cover, Figs. 1, 2, 3, 5, 8a, 8b, 9, 10, 14, 15, Cat. Nos. 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12,  
13, 19, 22, 26, 27, back cover

Gary Mamay: Cat. No. 4

Roy Nicholson: Cat. No. 14

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum: Cat. No. 17

Steinberg Museum of Art at Hillwood, LIU Post: Cat. No. 15

Courtesy of Anne Newell: Pages 2, 10, Figs. 4, 6, 7, 12, 16

Courtesy of Carolina Nitsch Project Room: Figs. 11, 20 (final state), 21 (final state), Cat. No.  
6, 7, 16, 20, 23, 24, 25, 28

Courtesy of Dominic Cuchara: Fig. 21 (film still)

Courtesy of Earl McGrath: Cat. No. 1

Courtesy of Gallery Schlesinger: Figs. 17, 18, 19, 20 (1983 state), 22 (1983 state),  
23 (1983 state)

Courtesy of Stair Gallery Fig. 13

Courtesy of Woodward Gallery: Figs. 20 (1996 state), 21 (1995 state, 1996 state)

Elaine de Kooning  
P.O. Box 1437  
East Hampton, NY 11937

Nov 13, 87

Dear Roy,

Bill and I love the two  
paintings by you that  
we see every day and  
are happy that Edward  
will be picking up  
another one for us.

With so much junk being  
shown in galleries nowadays,  
it's a joy to know there are  
still a few true artists  
at work.

Many thanks  
and Love from Bill and  
Elaine

Reproduced courtesy of the Estate of Elaine de Kooning



\$10.00  
ISBN 978-1-4951-0942-3  
5 1000 >

9 781495 109423