

GARY SNYDER Project Space

howard mehring (1931 – 1977)

Throughout his career, Howard Mehring was a leading figure in the group of artists known as the Washington Color School, though he differed from them in his preference for using geometric forms in his compositions. A native Washingtonian, Mehring was an art major at Wilson Teachers College, where his student teaching was supervised by Leon Berkowitz, one of the founders of the Washington Workshop Center for the Arts. He also studied painting at the Workshop and later joined the faculty, which included Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Gene Davis.

In 1955, Mehring received his M.F.A. from Catholic University, where he studied with Kenneth Noland. Soon afterwards, they traveled to New York, seeing the large abstractions of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and visiting Helen Frankenthaler's studio. Many Washington artists went to see her work, in which she used a new technique: staining. This called for the artist to pour pigment onto raw canvas, allowing the fabric to absorb color so that the pigment and support became one. The Washington artists' interest in Frankenthaler's staining technique and in the loose, overall compositions of the abstract expressionists, became catalysts in the development of their own styles. Initially, Mehring used veils of color, creating lyrical works with rich tonalities suggesting ambiguous space behind the surface. An underlying geometry exists in his compositions, and this became more pronounced in his later paintings, for which he is best known. Vibrant colors, in combinations that dazzle the eye, fill sharply defined, hard-edged shapes. Unlike his fellow Washington Color School artists, Mehring opted to paint more thickly, capitalizing on interplays of colors and shapes. He often set off stippled or marbled monochrome shapes against solid fields of color, creating vigorous and compelling compositions.

From the mid-1950s through the 1970s, Mehring's art was exhibited extensively in Washington. In 1964, through the patronage of collector Vincent Melzac, Mehring gave up teaching to devote himself exclusively to his painting. At the same time, Clement Greenberg, the noted art critic and kingmaker of artists, included Mehring in his exhibition "Post Painterly Abstraction" at the Los Angeles County Museum. The exhibition was seen in museums across the country, building audiences for the artists whose work was shown. In 1965 Mehring had his first solo show at a New York gallery, followed by other exhibitions in major museums, for example, the Guggenheim Museum, the Jewish Museum, and the Whitney Museum in New York, as well as others in cities across the United States and abroad.

In 1968 or 1969 Mehring abruptly ceased painting, and for the rest of his life he made only drawings. In 1977, The Phillips Collection exhibited Mehring's drawings concurrently with a major retrospective of his paintings at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Mehring died three months later.