

THOMAS DOWNING (1928 – 1985)

Summer, 1960
acrylic on canvas
88 x 83 inches

Thomas Downing was an important Washington Color School painter, widely exhibited in the 1960s. He was included in Clement Greenberg's "Post-Painterly Abstraction" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1964, "The Responsive Eye" at the Museum of Modern Art in 1965, "Systemic Painting" at the Guggenheim in 1966, and in the 1970 "Color Field Painting" exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

In the catalogue for the 1990 exhibition "Washington Color Painters – The First Generation", Gerald Nordland wrote:

"In 1959 Downing painted a series of large canvases with sprinklings of small pale dots, often independent in the canvas ground, but also overlapping each other, creating an overall field of pulsing color...to utilize the expressiveness of pure color on the scale of New York painting. The small dots move in an amorphous drifting pattern, with the color close in key and soft in character. The canvas has a Pollock-like unity, but is clearly moving toward an independent color vision. It is unavoidable that comparisons be made between Downing's and Howard Mehring's overall paintings, since they were sharing a studio in the period. Mehring shows a more traditional and painterly feeling for the materials, and a more lyric sensibility. Mehring is closer to the New Yorkers, while Downing is more conceptual, pragmatic, emotionally disciplined and intellectual.

Downing moved rather quickly to larger dots disposed in a new structured system responsive to Noland's example, which coalesced in 1960-61. The new paintings were the result of a search for a neutral form to hold color, and the series continued for years, opening up unimaginable possibilities. Downing found pleasure in their execution, in the rhythmic and repetitive process, and "...the way a dot would isolate an instant of color and repeat it over a broad field, gave to color the equivalent of an electric charge... the surface would pulse and come alive." He went on to speak of the unsized canvas as being a part of the painting rather than simply a support for the pigment: "The absorbent surface made for a more sensitive and responsive surface which could take a drenching of paint and still remain fresh and in control... and the open porous weave of raw canvas kept light and air in the color no matter how dense or intense."

Downing was searching for a flexible format in which color could be free. "The grid in effect separated the color and allowed each one to work independently with greater clarity and intensity." These were the works he displayed in his first New York one-man show at Allan Stone Gallery, in 1962.

Gary Snyder/Project Space is pleased to handle the Estate of Thomas Downing.