

HOWARD MEHRING (1931 – 1977)

Untitled, c. 1959
magna on canvas
86 1/4 x 86 1/4 inches

Howard Mehring is known as one of the central Washington Color School painters. In 1961 Kenneth Noland brought Clement Greenberg to Mehring's studio, where Greenberg saw Mehring's recent all-over paintings. Greenberg would eventually choose three of Mehring's paintings for the "Post-Painterly Abstraction" exhibition at the 1964 Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Mehring also exhibited in the 1965 exhibition "The Washington Color Painters: Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Gene Davis, Thomas Downing, Howard Mehring, Paul Reed", at The Washington Gallery of Modern Art. In 1966 he was in "Systemic Painting" at the Guggenheim Museum.

In the catalogue for the 1977 retrospective of Mehring's work at The Corcoran Museum of Art, Jane Livingston wrote the following;

"Between 1955 and 1965 an episode took shape within the boundlessly vital efflorescence of recent American art, known as the Washington Color School. Its existence lay in the hands of a few young painters based in the Capital. Its chief protagonists were Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland; in addition, Howard Mehring, Thomas Downing, Gene Davis, Paul Reed, Leon Berkowitz and one or two others, working in this city with a continual eye on New York and their precursors in Abstract Expressionism, developed a circumscribed "school" of painting. It was a painting style which seemed full-blown, exhilaratingly expansive, frankly acknowledging the raw materials of the craft – large unprimed canvases, blunt or translucent colors deployed in broad configurations, color not painstakingly built up but spontaneously released into porously receptive surfaces...

The qualities which most profoundly separate Howard Mehring from his peers, and particularly from Noland, Davis and Downing, are precisely the imponderable qualities in his painting which might be stated as a paradox: the work is at once more lyrical, more poetic and metaphorical and gestural, than theirs, and less ingratiating, less decipherable, more perverse – and thus finally, often inscrutable. Mehring has never been simply a practitioner of painting; the element of sheer exercise in his growth as a painter doesn't interest him. The thread of something discordant or even self-destructive that weaves through the oeuvre seems to have been finally even more difficult for the artist to come to terms with than it is for the observer. Yet it is this unmistakable if ambiguous emotional undertone in the work which gives it its extraordinary esthetic power and its undeniable uniqueness."

Writing about his paintings in 1960, Mehring wrote:

"In these paintings form is reduced and simplified in order to let color come through as the primary expressive element of the picture. This is in direct opposition to action painting where the color was often reduced to allow movement first priority. I want a released, open feeling. I want a natural feeling and I want the painting to fit in, as it were, into the space around it, to discharge into it.

Color is used to establish a momentum which produced this feeling of discharge. I have attempted to paint out tensions in the picture rather than to construct a picture with them in the traditional manner."