

## Doug Ohlson, 73, Painter Of Grand, Vivid Abstracts

By ROBERTA SMITH

It could be said that Doug Ohlson's determination to be a painter came out of the blue. He was born in the middle of the Great Depression in Cherokee, Iowa, 50 miles east of the Missouri River. His father, a farmer and the son of a Swedish immigrant, expected his three sons to carry on the family tradition.

But Mr. Ohlson had other ideas, inspired in part by a plentitude of flat terrain and open sky that was extreme even in a region known for them. In a catalog essay on Mr. Ohlson, the art historian E. C. Goossen noted the possible effect of the changing sky during the unending chores of farm life on the artist's passion for color. "One can imagine yellowish pink and green dawns, blue noons, and red-orange sunsets that swiftly slide from purple to black," Mr. Goossen wrote, "a frequent and spacious enough panorama to last a lifetime."

By the time Mr. Ohlson died on June 29 at 73, after a fall in front of his loft building on Bond Street in Manhattan, he had fulfilled his determination with considerable effectiveness, making abstract



Mr. Ohlson was a farmer's son.

paintings that experimented intuitively with the color spectrum regardless of fashion. His death was announced by Hunter College, where he had taught for 35 years.

Mr. Ohlson's work astutely fused aspects of Abstract Expressionism, Color Field painting and Minimal Art on a grand scale; his paintings sometimes measured as much as 23 feet across. The staple of his formal vocabulary was repeating vertical bars that seemed, increasingly, to levitate before clouds of vibrant contrasting color.

Born on Nov. 18, 1936, Mr. Ohlson attended Bethel College in St. Paul and served three years in the Marines before earning a degree in studio art from the University of Minnesota in 1961. By that time he was already painting abstractly on a large scale.

After graduation, Mr. Ohlson immediately headed to New York. He studied briefly with the abstract sculptor and painter

Tony Smith at Hunter College until his money ran out, at which point he worked briefly as Mr. Smith's assistant. He began teaching at Hunter in 1964.

In 1964, Mr. Ohlson's work was included in "8 Young Artists," an exhibition organized by Mr. Goossen at the Hudson River Museum. That year Mr. Ohlson also had the first of seven solo shows at the Fischbach Gallery. In 1968, he was included in "The Art of the Real: 1948-1968," an exhibition organized by Mr. Goossen at the Museum of Modern Art that traced the geometric strain of American art over several generations.

Mr. Ohlson's early work featured hard-edged shapes and separate repeating panels. In the 1970s he softened the edges of his forms, added brushier backgrounds and returned to single canvases, although later compositions often gave the illusion of separate panels. He also progressed with some especially beautiful paintings of rows of closely spaced fuzzy orbs of color that he called "nodes," which seem to pay tribute to the work of Mark Rothko, a continuing influence.

Mr. Ohlson exhibited in New York regularly with Susan Caldwell Inc. in the late 1970s and early '80s and after that with the Andre Zarre Gallery, most recently in 2004.

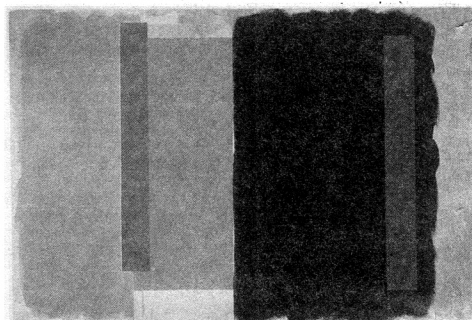
Surveys of his work were held at Bennington College in Vermont in 1982 and at Hunter College in 2000. His work is represented in numerous public collections, including those of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Brooklyn Museum.

Mr. Ohlson's first marriage, to the painter Jane Kaufman, ended in divorce. He is survived by his wife, Michele Toohey, and a sister, Beverly Flentje, of Payson, Ariz.

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*Inspired by the vistas of his native Iowa, an artist used color on a large scale.*

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As "Peep Show" (1993) suggests, many of Doug Ohlson's paintings included vertical bars set off by large fields of color.