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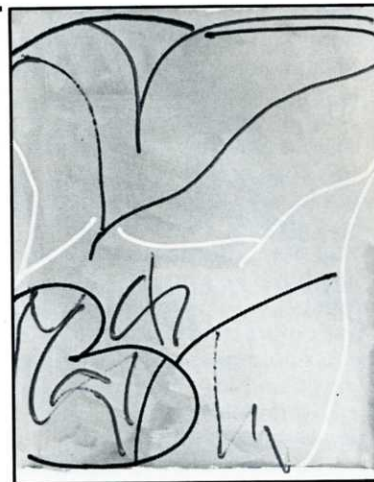
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DIALOGUE: CONVERSATIONS WITH RAY PARKER AND DOUG OHLSON

JON HUTTON

From their Midwest origins to present Hunter College faculty positions, Ray Parker and Doug Ohlson have many common experiences and personal and professional connections, as well as certain shared aesthetic concerns.



Ray Parker, *Lines on Blue*, 1979. Oil on canvas, 24½ x 30". Courtesy Betty Cuninghame Gallery.

Doug Ohlson, *Red Variation*, 1979. Oil on canvas, 52 x 54". Courtesy Susan Caldwell Gallery.

No friendship would seem more natural than that of painters Ray Parker and Doug Ohlson. From Midwest origins to present Hunter College faculty positions, their common experiences and personal and professional connections, as well as certain shared aesthetic concerns, have encouraged a continuing dialogue that has now spanned some twenty years.

Conversations with each of them on the occasions of recent exhibitions at the Susan Caldwell Gallery (and of Parker's two shows at the Betty Cuninghame and the Joe Grippi Galleries) suggested to me that a joint exploration of their ideas and observations would be both stimulating and illuminating. In three taped sessions in one or the other of their studios, our discussions touched a wide range of topics, including reviews of their careers, personal reminiscences of artists and exhibitions, technical aspects of their work, working methods, ideas about color, drawing, composition, movement, space and scale, sources and the question of content, time and memory, analogies with music, problems of verbal description, and others.

On Color

JH: Both of you seem to have consistently made color a primary issue, if not *the* primary issue, of your painting. How would you characterize its role in your work?

RP: I never thought about color.

DO: You stole that line from Rothko.

RP: (Laughs) That is a story, it's true, but I don't think I stole it from him. I answered his questioning me by saying that I was interested in color—in the "stroke" or "all-over" paintings, as we used to call them in the early '50s, where I made many, many colors drifting and crossing each other, whereupon he said, "I am not interested in color." I think he didn't want to be committed to saying that he was a color painter, suspecting whatever that might come to be as a label. I thought at the time I saw his work, that late night in his studio, that there wasn't much more to his painting than color, because he'd make a totemic format so simple that it contained nothing else than those slightly ragged, bulging shapes which were colored and often scumbled with more color.

DO: He didn't just naturally come up with wine-red and a kind of brown on a covered-up cadmium red surface. That didn't *just* occur.

RP: Nor do you in your painting—

DO: Absolutely not. I struggle with it.

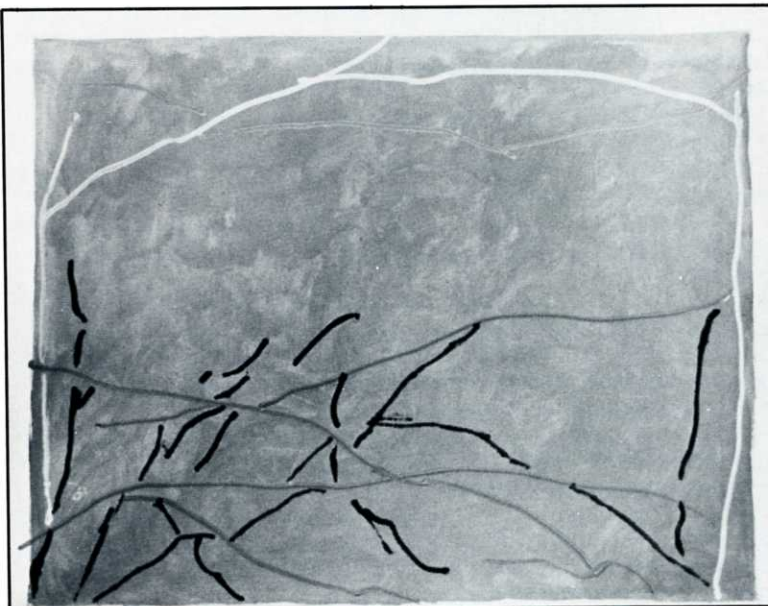
RP: But I really don't struggle with color. I don't think about it. It's an easy way of getting out of the question of color, not to think about it.

DO: "Think about it" maybe isn't the right phrase, but you see it, right? You put it down, you see it, and on occasion you change it, and that's thinking about it, right?

RP: You say this should be more purple.

DO: Whatever. It doesn't mean you sit around and think about color. That's a lie! I can't imagine it. What would you think about? (Laughs)

RP: Ulfert Wilke and I had this discussion in which we decided that all reds go together. More recently he said in a letter to me



Ray Parker, *Lines on a Gray Background*. 1980. Oil on canvas, 48 x 60". Private Collection. Courtesy Betty Cuninghame Gallery.

that he'd decided all colors go together, with which I agree and which I've done for a long time now. It doesn't make a bit of difference whether it's green or purple. If a painting looks good after you've made it, then it's good and not because of the combinations Albers thought about, for instance.

JH: What sorts of influences did other artists have on your own approaches to color?

DO: I think the person who started me thinking about it, visually thinking about it, was an Algerian-French painter who studied at the Beaux-Arts named Freddie Munoz. So it comes from *school*. Color was something you put down to define an area or possibly spatial usage, those sorts of things. I guess the Beaux-Arts in those days was involved in sort of an Impressionist position. I would set up some color situation, but not really thinking about it as color. Munoz would say, "You can't use black," for instance, and he'd show different ways that you could use a viridian or a phthalocyanine blue or Prussian blue, something that would enact the role of black but that would take a different spatial connotation. He didn't want them repeated either. His idea of course was to make the space weave in a color sense. That probably had a lot of effect on me.

JH: Ray, when you began the "simple paintings," were there issues current in other artists' work that started you in that direction?

RP: No, my work was original in that regard, that I did not think about anybody else but was just trying to make color be or say something by itself. Those isolated spots of color came to me

just by staring at the empty canvas. Color came to me in my mind's eye. I spread it out until it came into fullness of volume or a sense of reality, and I stopped there. Any colors would be all right, it seemed to me.

JH: Can you trace the way structure or form in different phases of your painting has related to the colors you've chosen?

RP: I never did draw and then color, as in children's drawing books—of the wrong kind. Even in my earliest works the line was always in and out of it; it was both free and delineating and was contrapuntal to the color. In my stroke or all-over painting the form was made entirely by the tool, in this case by the brush. I would have a left hand full of fifteen brushes with different colors, and I would take one and make marks, take another one and make marks, take another one and make marks, backwards and forwards, over and over and over, so that there eventually developed elaborate shifting rhythms, posed over and against one another.

The range of colors was always wide open, a matter of immediate unplanned process, so that they came about in surprising juxtapositions. I had to keep tempo there, to keep going so that I didn't fall out of the rhythm of the doing of the painting. Out of that came the rhythm of the final result in form. But I had no idea or theory at all about color or choice of colors. There were so many that they can't be named. In the simple paintings it was not the interaction of colors, between one spot and another, in the canvas that was important. It was the distinctiveness, the identity of the color—whether or not you could, however it was mixed, name it, as a decorator might name a certain kind of blue-green "sea green."

JH: There were occasions where, rather than one pure color creating a presence, there was an interior interplay between different colors.

RP: Within the form, yes. Sometimes the color was relatively flat and uniform, but sometimes it was mixed up, that is, wet-in-wet, so that you had an effect not of scumbling but rather as though the canvas was itself a palette where things were being mixed, but not thoroughly—changing.

JH: Certain colors would seem to give a viewer more of a sense of weight and volume than others. Was that something you felt as you worked the form out?

RP: No. The objective was only color. Amounts of color differed as one color and then another came into fullness and gained presence. I once made a list of words which critics used, such as "boulders" or "clouds" or "lozenges," attempts on their part to tell the reader something about what the paintings looked like. Some described them as light, others saw them as heavy or sweet, it would seem.

I moved away from simple painting, away from the limitations I had imposed as regards color alone, away from quiescence toward a freedom of movement, the curvilinear style, in which the following of the form in its twistings or undulations introduced again a sense of rhythm. This freedom developed into the line paintings—colored line on white—made by the paint being squeezed out of a tube. From that I moved into colored grounds on which I used line. I still do that. Then I started once again to make areas of color *with* line, within and without.

JH: Doug, how has color affected form in your work or vice versa?

DO: That's a hard one, too. For instance, there are certain amounts of yellow that one can get by with, depending, and it bugged me at some point as a notion. I ended up with a 22-foot painting that was all yellow. I mean, I know it's too much yellow, but—(laughs). There are things—they're visual—that certain people try not to do: put blue in the upper right-hand corner, right? (Laughs) Putting yellow in a corner *always* is difficult. It gets away from you. You try *not* to; then on the other hand you get bugged with that idea, so you just try and do it to see if you can get by with it. Is that an answer?

JH: Perhaps what I'm getting at is some sort of contrast in your respective approaches to color. Ray, in the simple paintings, forms weren't ordered, even conceptualized before you applied the paint. Doug, I think there's been a difference, certainly, in your work throughout.

RP: The difference he's pointing to is just that in your work you decide upon the *ending* of the color more, probably, than I did in those simple paintings.

DO: Generally speaking, that's true, yes. I would want to always be able to take liberties with that and do, I think, but there is a container. Sometimes it's too tight for my wishes. Depending on how the painting goes, sometimes it gets really *very* tight. There's a different way of finding the container. Some people find it through free-form, as Ray does—immediate reaction (snaps fingers) to it. It's all complicated. Other people prefigure a kind of container and try to confuse that container, which is sort of what I do, I think. And the container isn't the same all the time. Depending on the hue or the intensity, it has to be different. I don't know the theory for that at all.

JH: So the only differences you'll admit regarding color are differences in your means of developing the "containers" for the colors?

DO: The basic aesthetic is pretty much a shared one. What comes to me are more the similarities than the dissimilarities.

RP: Say more about that.

DO: Well, I mean the obvious, overt means of *production* are dissimilar, but the notions behind them aren't. I don't sit down and figure out a color any more than you do.

RP: I know you don't, but you keep watching it while you're working.

DO: *Fiddle* with it, yes, fiddle with it. So there's a basic difference.

RP: Only with regard to that, I would say. My work is done all at once, without the opportunity to make any changes or corrections in the painting. It's like jazz in that sense.

JH: Once a note is out of the horn, it's played.

DO: Nothing's hard and fast. You see, Ray and I both lie. I would rather never touch one again, and he would say that he never would either. But he does, and I do. Artists set up these rules, but they don't always abide by them. If they did, they wouldn't be artists, probably.

RP: It was Charmion von Wiegand, I read somewhere, who in the last year of Mondrian's life was supposed to have said, upon looking at one of his paintings, "You've broken all the rules." He just looked at the painting, then looked at her and said, "First comes the painting, then come the rules." All art, it seems to me—poetry, jazz, you name it—that's how it comes about.

On Minimalism

RP: The remark was made in an earlier discussion that both Doug and I had been minimalists before the word was used in the 1960s to describe a kind of painting which was very reduced in elements of form.

JH: An extreme purist view of course might be that "minimalist painting" is itself a contradiction in terms, that paint is an attribute of the object that unavoidably prompts associations—emotional associations, references to nature and so on. Sculpture, on the other hand, can arguably concern itself exclusively with structure and can be created anonymously according to plan, as by any of those who could send their specifications to a foundry and have the object made by a disinterested craftsman.

RP: That's like Moholy-Nagy's telephoning a painting forty years ago. He did a lot of drawing on graph paper, and all he needed to do on the phone was to give the coordinates of the figure that he had devised and name the colors from a color chart. Among the European Constructivists there were at least two groups of people who felt that painting could be so objectified that a group of people could make a painting together. You used the word "anonymous"; they did not sign paintings with an individual signature. They could all discuss what they were doing and make a work of art, and it would perhaps be given the name of their group. The purists and the minimalists did try to knock out the artist's hand. They were also somewhat (I use the word loosely) politically involved with trying to react against Expressionism. So although I made paintings in the late '50s that were as simple as having one not round, not exact, not square, not nameable form, only one color, the edge might have been a little ragged or a little sharper, a little crisper, a little softer at certain points. This they regarded as hand and therefore too personal or too romantic.

JH: On their terms "minimalism" would not have applied.

RP: —to those "simple" paintings, which, it seems to me, were in some cases much more minimal than theirs.

There were very few minimalist painters who were able to

work with more than two or three, at most four, colors, unless they put them in the form of stripes, straight or concentric, therein trying to get away from rhythms and intervals. If one made all of the stripes the same interval and changed the colors, there nevertheless infallibly occurred groupings of darks or lights or warm or cold colors which made hills and valleys of the form and *were* involved with interval, and therefore with some sense of selection, of passages.

You can do it in drawing, as Agnes Martin did, if you make just a kind of penciled grid, for example, the most all-over possible. But the moment you get involved with color, unless you make one half red and the other blue, same intensity, same value, it's pretty hard to put a third color anywhere—unless you get into drama, into design.

DO: I think of Barney's answer, *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?*, a painting I admire, by the way.

I do have a thought about words here. People always use "design" in the pejorative because of the rise of schools teaching design, which means "put this here and that there, and it's going to *look* good."

RP: Tasteful arrangement.

DO: But that's not what "design" really means.

RP: It's like the word "organization" in some sense, is it not?

DO: Maybe, but in a really *grand* sense. All artists are designers, and design is not simple. If you're a good designer, why, there couldn't be any better, could there?

JH: It can have an implication of coldness, perhaps, if it's used to describe a complete pre-ordering, where execution can only be methodical or mechanical, where experimentation in process is precluded.

RP: It's at least a two-step process, in any case, because it involves, as you suggest, planning and doing or thinking and making.

DO: But you can put them right together, as in Pollock.

RP: Yes, or as you do. It's like Cézanne's insisting that one should draw and color at the same time.

JH: But it's really a matter of aesthetic. There are paintings throughout the history of art which we recognize as works of "genius" that were carefully plotted out and then colored.

RP: Don't art historians sometimes try to explain the idea of composition in the Old Masters by drawing triangles and rectangles through a series of heads or arms, like in, say, *The Death of Socrates*, showing that an underlying structure was arranged beforehand?

JH: Sure, or there are many revered "masterpieces" in which the basic structure was dictated by the patron or by convention. In a "Madonna and Child with Donors," for example, the relative weights of visual elements and the triangular composition were almost traditional prerequisites of the subject. In that case, art was didactic and had to be easily recognizable and immediately comprehended. The point is that the artist's "genius" could enter in different ways and at different stages.

RP: So in all of that painting there was *design*.

DO: It's *not* a bad word.

JH: When it would be used negatively, perhaps, is when there's nothing more to commend the work *than* its design.

RP: —than its purpose in a commercial sense, as might be performed by people who wished to fit into that attitude or category for those patrons who liked that kind of thing.

DO: I got kicked *out* of one of the early Minimalist shows. My painting was three panels of raw umber, and down in the lower right-hand corner of the third panel was a square, roughly, of a kind of blackish gray.

RP: And why was it rejected?

DO: Too romantic. (Both laugh.) They sent the painting back.

RP: There was also once a show at the Guggenheim called "Systemic Painting," a term which would imply a tautological following of some predetermined structure. I did briefly do serial painting in a tic-tac-toe pattern, nine squares within a square. Within that container, I could make a sunny day or a painting that had to do with mud and tar and gravel. There was a tremendous range of possibilities. But my idea there was merely a take-off on the idea of minimalism. A lot of people urged me to go on with it, to make more and more of them, but it seemed to me not to be necessary.

DO: Others did sets of paintings, stripes of six or eight colors,

for instance, just rearranged, every possibility, which then ended themselves. They were interesting within that precept. If somebody was really interested in that, they should have had every one of the set and that would have been the painting. Those could be good ideas, but ideas don't make paintings. They're just ideas.

RP: I have always thought that a painting is "presentational." It's something that's made or given to you to do. It's not kicking out everything that you can get out and presenting what's left over.

DO: I don't think less is necessarily more. That idea of irreducibility really becomes in some way or another an absurdity. You can't bring anything to it of your own experience. That's why I don't like just the *term* "minimalism," although I in some way thought I was a card-carrying member.

RP: —with a low number.

DO: Maybe. (Both laugh.) I was certainly involved in, to some degree, the minimalist aesthetics, the truth to materials, back to basics, that sort of thing. I would say that there's never been anything else *but* that qualified reductivist notion, truth to *essentials*. I really believe in it. If you can put it down in three panels of umber with one gray square and have it called too romantic, I think that's *incredibly* good.

RP: Well, I don't mind too much the fact that the minimalists didn't accept me because I had ragged edges or a sense of touch and surface, and I suppose that you were probably not really hurt by not being accepted—

DO: Sure, I was upset. It doesn't matter now, but it *did* then.

JH: You've still been considered a minimalist by some, even given that sort of experience.

DO: Sure, and I think it's OK. I really don't care about those labels. The reality is actually in the canvases, and all that other stuff is just that other stuff.

RP: That quote, "Less is more," was first used in criticism, to my knowledge, by a good writer in Los Angeles, the late Jules Langsner, in 1959. It was applied to my painting. It's never been absent in some sense or other from writing about reductivist or minimalist painting since. But I still think the idea is what you present, Doug, not what you give as your limitations, in format, for example. What's there is there—that's what's important. It's not important what's *not* there.

JH: Yes, or it's not important what label is affixed to it. Those critical "isms" seem generally to have come after the fact. I think there is some truth to the notion that writing, through the '60s particularly, influenced the way many artists went about their work. However, the terms that came into usage never could be pinned down that way, and it's still true as the debates continue about modernism, post-modernism, pluralism, etc. Unless a group gets together, decides among themselves what are to be the precepts of their art, issues a manifesto where everything is written down, then I don't think you can hold—

DO: Everything *is* written down. Everything's written down on the canvas, you see. I would almost opt for a world without words (laughs), because everything else is probably somewhat political.

RP: It's true, I think, if they form a group they get more attention.

JH: Perhaps.

RP: There have been a lot of good artists who were involved with manifesto-making and so on.

DO: Very momentary, though, and often quite juvenile.

JH: Would it be accurate to say that the reductivist tendencies that you've both exhibited, which have at least some features in common with what we've come to know as "minimalism," have been means of focusing on specific issues within your work?

RP: Yes, as my attempt to make paintings which were only one color was a focusing on color alone, on the whole.

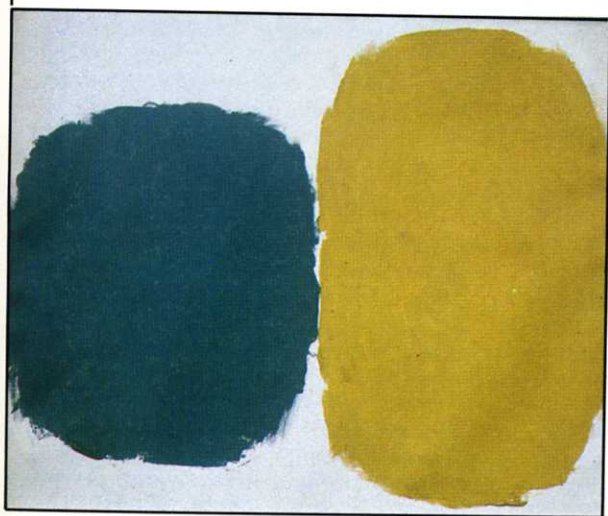
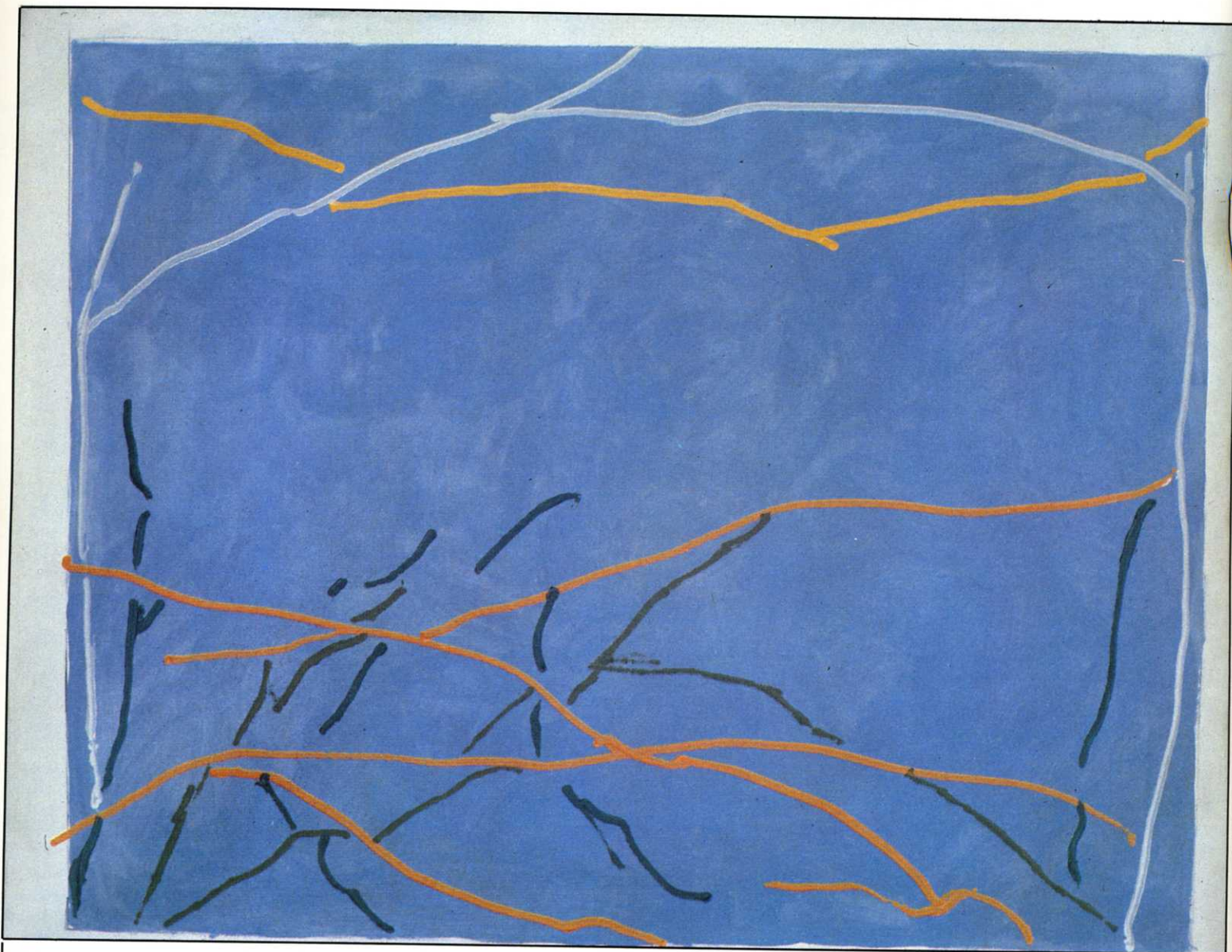
DO: I think it's back to that thing about truth to the subject—

RP: —and it's back to my idea of presenting, rather than cutting out, rather than reducing.

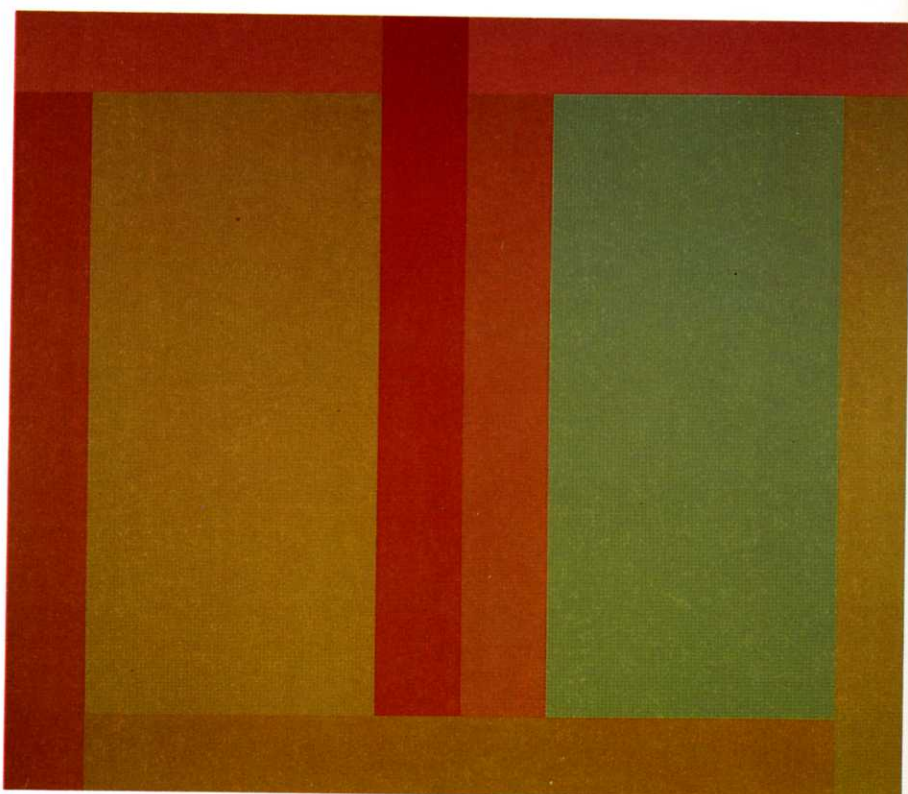
DO: It's just truth to the subject, material, experience, content, all those things that you can get *into* it without doing something else, which would be illustration.

On States of Mind while Working

JH: Ray, you've said that when you paint you're almost in a trance-like state.



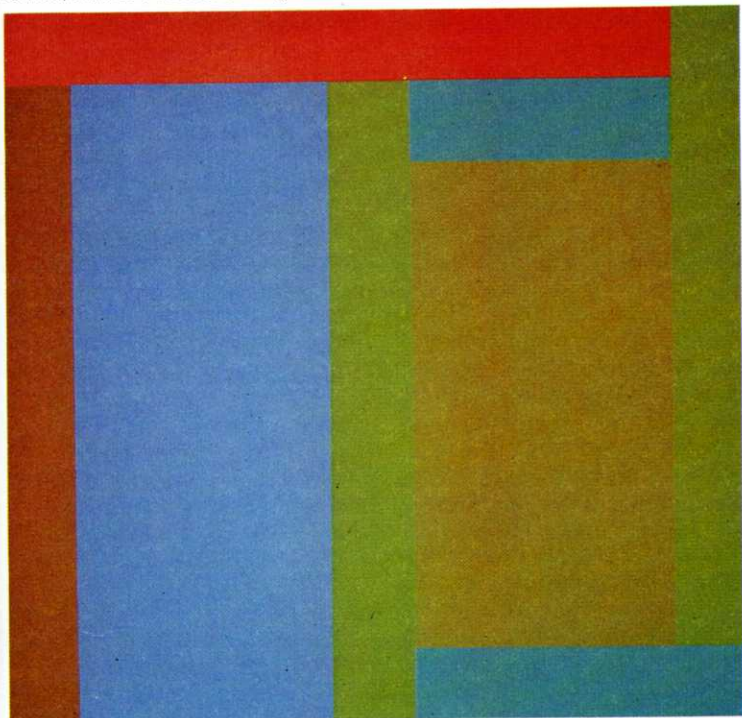
Ray Parker, *Two Color Fields*, 1961. Oil on canvas, 33½ x 40".
Collection Roger de la Burdè. Courtesy Susan Caldwell Gallery.



Doug Ohlson, *Hand Trembler*, 1978-79. Oil on canvas,
65 x 75". Private Collection. Courtesy Susan Caldwell Gallery.

◀Ray Parker, Lines of a Gray Background, 1980. Oil on canvas, 48 x 60". Private Collection. Courtesy Susan Caldwell Gallery.

Doug Ohlson, P.S., 1980. Oil on canvas, 54 x 56". Collection Roger de la Burdè. Courtesy Susan Caldwell Gallery.



RP: It's that your mind is not elsewhere in any sense at all. You're not thinking about women or about the baseball game. You're not listening to music, and you're so absorbed in staring at the painting and moving within it that you stay *in* it. If you fall out of that state of attention, if you for a moment become conscious or begin to think about what's right or wrong with the painting, then you enter another state which is too conceptually aware. You are apt to attempt to fix the painting up or to make it better, which destroys the reality of the transaction between your own attitude and that surface with which you're dealing.

DO: I've sometimes gone through many hours of not knowing the time that's passed. I use the TV often as company. The best company I have is a baseball game, because you don't have to follow it. You get a blast of excitement once in a while, and you sort of realize something else is going on. Sometimes it's over, and I don't know who won. You do get a little hypnotized. I've spent hours mixing color, for instance, "fiddling with it," and I disappear in that. There are a lot of aspects of painting that are tedious, laborious, kind of dumb work.

JH: Ray, your involvement with a canvas is a relatively short, intensively concentrated period.

RP: It might be an afternoon, or it might be a few days, but you're quite right.

DO: But I believe in exactly the same thing. It's just because of drying time. I believe in the Van Gogh idea: you go out and catch that moment, nail it down and that's it. I think of it as a diary. You don't go back and erase November 18 because it was a bad day. (Laughs) You could erase it, but you didn't erase the day. I work the same way. It's just a different time scale. You put down a color, you react to it. You put down another one, you react to

that. For me it might take a lot longer because I have to wait for one color to dry, sort of like old-fashioned painting, just stretched out and slow motion. *And* I don't know about keeping the sense of the moment in those. That's what seems to work, though. I mean the mood doesn't change that much. I wanted in the early '70s to do those paintings where the mood *did* change. Never did. Wasn't one day, then another day; it was like the same day.

On Accidents

RP: You could say there's a similarity between us in that we both are very much aware of materials and how they're used in relation to what we wish to have—if we can find it—in the completed painting.

DO: To keep it as real as it can possibly be without forced associations or—

RP: —extenuating circumstances, accidents in facture.

DO: It's not about the phenomena of what happens per se, spilling stuff around and saying, "Look at that wonderful effect."

JH: In terms of materials, you know what the effect will be before you begin.

DO: One puts it down to find out.

JH: Yes, but in terms of paint on canvas, you know how it's going to behave.

DO: Well, you learn. I'm still learning. Viridian, if you put it on thick, weeps. Oil comes out of it again. That's a mistake. It needs white, it needs some mediator. The blues I'm just looking into. I don't know what they're going to do yet.

JH: But you experiment beforehand, you do studies. There won't be any major accident in the process of—

DO: There might be, but one doesn't count on it.

RP: I'd quite agree with that. I don't think there are any accidents in my painting, though.

DO: But you might get a break every once in a while.

RP: Things unexpected may happen. If they're wanted, it's OK, but if they're unwanted, then it's an accident. I wouldn't say you could know how to control everything prior to the doing of it.

On Content

JH: What, if anything, has your Midwest background contributed to your work?

RP: For me, the Midwest was a cultural vacuum. I didn't know anything at all except jazz, which I first heard on the radio in a high school drug store hangout. There was an 11:30 p.m. broadcast of big bands from the Chicago ballrooms, what they used to call "The Wire." I remember this night in 1940—it was Count Basie, and it knocked me out.

DO: I tend to think about things in a psychological way, so I would say that it certainly had to have its effect; but whatever that has been would be so subliminal, so hard to pin down, that I wouldn't know what it was. I do remember that time in 1975 we drove from Iowa City up to Aurelia across that staggeringly cold flat land at eighty miles an hour. Those things have got to get under your skin somehow. There are things that one somehow or another brings to bear from experience, both painting experience and lived experience, and that's what I think is content. Basically my inclinations are formal and learned. The content is something else. That's the part I don't know about and can't talk about.

RP: The source of art is everywhere. One's experience doesn't come out in a painting in the form of subject matter, like you'd paint farm life because you grew up on a farm. The whole of experience—

DO: —which could be looking at a dandelion—

RP: —or looking at a Mondrian painting—comes out in a way which can be totally abstract.

JH: And these influences, if you want to call them that, may not even be intelligible to you.

DO: Of course not.

JH: Or you might agree once someone with perhaps a more objective eye has pointed them out to you.

DO: They're legion. They're all valid. As a painter, I'm not a viewer of my own work. I do it to try and figure out what I'm doing. There's that great French writer, Robbe-Grillet, who said, "Admitting I have nothing to say, I only wrote it down to see what I meant." (Laughs) I think that's pretty close, don't you? I would

paraphrase it and say I do something that might or might not feed something else that maybe is on my mind, unconsciously or whatever, and then I'm stuck with it. That's what I did. I may look at it to see what it means, but I'm too close to it to know what it means anyway.

JH: Does your reading of the content of a work change over time?

DO: I really don't know. Some other time I might see what I meant, and some other time I might see that I had something to say or didn't have something to say. Again, I'm not my own audience. I find it very confusing.

RP: But if you listen to a piece of music once and again and again—same recording, say—it does not change, but *you* change. You hear different things in it on one occasion than you did on another—more, sometimes less.

DO: I'm really not that interested in my own work that much after the fact. It's what I *do*.

JH: You don't pull your old things out from time to time just to look at them?

DO: It's happened on occasion, by chance. I once was supposed to pull out a canvas to show somebody to explain a point, and I thought I knew right where it was. I got it down and unwrapped it. It was the wrong canvas, just happened to be of similar proportions, and it looked good to me. I hadn't seen it in maybe ten years. I kept it out a long time.

RP: —and enjoyed it. That's one of the great things about a *good* painting. It comes back to life in ways that you did not expect, like a good piece of music. I haven't heard Beethoven's *Opus 131* for years, but I'll bet you when I hear it again, it'll mean something different and something more than when I played it a lot. Then, too, you can do something that seems to you a mess, and maybe it's the mess which makes the painting powerful. The paintings you like so much may be overly self-conscious and therefore weaker. I found that to be true in college. A number of drawings that I made seemed at the time to be disappointing; others I thought were pretty good. If I went through them on another occasion, the ones I thought were disappointing were the more powerful. We all make mistakes in art as in life. Sometimes the mistakes are *not* mistakes.

If there is anything human about works of art, I think it is their truth to the human condition, which is certainly not any kind of Platonic ideal. Our philosophy has grown far, far—by centuries—ahead of any of those conceptions of perfection or even of "progress" in a Hegelian sense. Things don't get better. I don't think there are things that are better or worse, except as time might tell eventually. Certain things seem to keep one's attention repeatedly under differing circumstances—candlelight or daylight, whatever—mood, frame of mind, approach. I think all of those peripheral circumstances affect response, but they don't affect the original thing.

JH: Doug, do you acknowledge any symbolic content in your work?

DO: I'm sure it's there. I don't know what it is.

JH: You described the time you set out to do four canvases of the seasons. That's probably as close as you've come to having a reference to nature which could be described as direct.

DO: Or as *mood*.

JH: OK. But those paintings didn't come about.

DO: No. As much as anyone wants to be a totally abstract artist, which I would want to be, those other things just don't go away. They stay there.

JH: Writers have occasionally used landscape analogies in discussing your work.

DO: I either don't see it or refuse to see it, but I don't deny it.

JH: Ray, in your talk at Princeton you spoke of censoring out things in a work that you feel will provoke unwanted responses, wrong associations.

RP: I think of that as one of the goals of abstract painting.

JH: But certain responses surprise you still.

RP: I think I've used the word "dismaying."

DO: You can do nothing, and somebody's going to see something in it.

RP: Of course that's like the Rorschach test, "projection."

DO: One thing that does trouble me a bit: when the curves get too active, they always start to suggest—anatomy perhaps—

RP: —like in Matisse.

DO: —or *apples*.

RP: Certain kinds of lines give certain kinds of impressions.

DO: All vertical and horizontal doesn't duck it, because some people read landscape, some people read architectural themes.

RP: It's not easy. I've been at it for quite a few years now.

DO: Naturally one does it that way.

RP: You mean it's in one's nature to imitate nature in some sense.

DO: I think so.

JH: In John Berger's recent book, *About Looking*, there's an essay on Courbet which discusses the rock formations—

DO: The source of the Loue?

JH: Right, how the structure of that landscape, that area of his personal experience, shows up even when the subject does not, the way the color or darkness appears in bands.

DO: I went to London just to see the Courbet show. He's one of the real *real* painters. *Awful*.

JH: The show was awful?

DO: No, they're just rough, real paintings. That's the content. If we could get into it *somehow*, I really think the interesting ideas *are* content and style. I'm not sure they're even separable. John Russell wrote a review in the *New York Times* Book Section, which was very, very good, about the problematic area of Harold Rosenberg's writing about art, which was that he was always so involved with content—what it meant—he could never deal with what it looked like.

I don't think any good artist ever did it so it would look good, that simply. I know content is something that's impossible to talk about—but "looks" or "looks good"—that doesn't mean *anything*. I went to a guy's studio once. He dragged out these paintings, and I was forced to say something, so I'd say, "That's pretty strong." He'd say, "Isn't that a beauty?" and then he'd pull out something else. He'd say, "Isn't that terrific?" I thought, "This guy doesn't know what it's about—at all." "Isn't that a beauty?" (Laughs)

RP: I wouldn't say that what you want is a constant surprise. You want a sense of completeness and beauty and aesthetic. Yet as in music—Mozart, for example—you can't predict how the melody's going to go. Name a good musician. You can't tell what's going to happen with Charlie Parker. With few exceptions, great artists don't do the same thing twice. If they do, it's with full awareness of quoting themselves and putting it in a different context. It becomes different enough to be renewed.

JH: Do you often quote yourself?

RP: I hope not, but on the other hand I'm certainly not able to get outside of myself. If I see one of my paintings, I know it's mine, and very likely a lot of other people do too, but that's not my intention. My intention is rather to make something beautiful, exciting, fresh.

On Certain Formal Aspects of Recent Works

JH: Ray, you've said that Constructivism, as it has continued in America, involving concepts, materials, and forms which are given (as a French curve) a recognizable, impersonal shape, might be used as a compositional element. Is Doug then a Constructivist when he uses a geometric form which preexists?

RP: His form does *not* preexist. I've never seen forms like those which Doug makes. The only similarity between his work and some earlier forms of painting is that there is "geometry" in straight-edged forms, a straightforward way to make containers for color.

DO: Just because something's a rectangle, I don't think that means it's geometry. No one thing prefigures any other set of things. "Geometry" would imply some system or equation—certain notions of the Golden Section, for example, or the Fibonacci series. You wouldn't make an area a bit larger because you needed more red. That wouldn't be in the formula.

RP: Yes, but you certainly do. Your work contains *innumerable* surprises, so you're not—

DO: No, I'm not involved with geometry at all. My first show, I was reviewed, pretty much of a one-liner, which said, "His geometry is simpler than the kind we learned in high school." I never knew what was meant by it. It could have meant it was real good (laughs), or it could have meant it was dumb kid stuff.

JH: So, granted there's no formula involved, you do make paintings in which the structure and forms relate to, actually make

direct reference to, the rectangular shape of the canvas.

RP: Why does Doug make forms vertical/horizontal? There are a lot of painters who use geometrical forms which are not related to the edges of the canvas—David Diao, Al Held,—

DO: Why do you think, Ray? I'm not sure I have an answer off-hand. The relationships I suppose are almost too obvious to be stated, almost dumb.

RP: Don't you want it to be obvious enough that one no longer thinks about arrangement, about directions in the old-fashioned sense of composition? You don't *arrange* form, you make it as it comes to your head and you try it out and you alter in the process.

DO: Yes, and of course some paintings grow out of other paintings. There's a canvas in my studio which is about three years old. I kept it out until very recently; I don't know why. At some point I realized how much some of my newer paintings have been trying to fill out that idea, so I guess it hung around for a purpose. I'm still hoping for a time when it all gets put together. It goes back and forth. It doesn't just go in some linear progression.

I think the basic thing about my paintings now—but it's true of you, Ray, it's true of numbers of people—is to not have them be what they used to call "slice of life" paintings.

RP: Yes, but in your case it's not a slice of the Bauhaus, either, or Constructivism.

DO: No, I think there's no Constructivism in it whatsoever.

JH: Do you see a progression in your most recent work of using more colors, more forms, more complex structure? Is that the direction it seems to be taking at the moment?

RP: You can answer that simply by saying "Yes."

DO: I don't see it, though. I don't think it's the case, no.

RP: I can *count* the colors. I can count the different forms, and there are greater numbers of them than there were at earlier times in your painting.

DO: Well, yes, I can count too, but—

JH: Is there more movement? Any discussion about the eye being led around a painting tends toward academic analysis; I know your work isn't arrived at in any academic fashion; but just from a point of view of one's experience of the work, there is movement created through the structure and through the color combinations that is more complex than it once was.

DO: Well, there's "complex" and there's "contemplative." The exterior of that canvas (points to a student still life of the '50s) is not unlike the sense of these (recent canvases).

RP: I have talked with more than one artist about the idea of maturity along this line, that there is a thread of your work which is *you* all the way from the first thing to the last. Baziotis, in his somewhat *mystico* hushed manner, once told me, as though it was a secret, "An artist is mature when he returns to the place where he began."

JH: Doug, this brings up an observation you made earlier about Ray's current work, that you now see perhaps a synthesis of ideas and approaches developed at different stages of his career.

DO: I see it with a kind of clarity that I don't see occurring very often. There were line drawings in '49 and the stroke paintings. Then there were the area paintings, what he calls "simple." I'd change that word. I don't think they're simple paintings. Then the area got interspersed with those floating forms, which started to deal a bit with positive/negative, activating a ground, activating the total canvas, but had something to do with the stroke, because they were forms that had edges.

RP: —and were curvilinear.

DO: Then the "exterior" started to go back inside, didn't touch the edge any more. You made the area more idiosyncratic, coupled it and put in lines, either bordering or intersecting, *activating* it, which is what happened in, say, the double black one that was in the last show. In terms of the thought process, it is a combination of all of those points of view.

RP: It's not as though I did this for a while and then that for a while and then went backwards and synthesized the early with the late.

DO: I understand. It's not conscious.

RP: It's not even *there*. Those two blacks are nowhere *near* the simple paintings.

DO: I think it is there. What can I say?

RP: You mean the two blacks in that last show with lines in them are like—

DO: —a mustering together of several different points of view over certain periods of time.

RP: And does that equate with synthesis?

DO: Yes, I think so.

RP: The concern always has been single, to make something present or real, whether it is area or line.

DO: OK, let's play it back. You have color-area alone, line alone. Both could be—

RP: —put together, and that's a synthesis.

DO: Not an *ideal* synthesis. It *is* putting the two together.

RP: Didn't you think the lines changed the simple forms greatly?

DO: Sure. In that painting, the black one, the reserve and audacity of the line are what pull it off, as far as I'm concerned. Sometimes the lines go overboard, but this one was like some incredible sustained suspense. The reserve makes the tension much greater.

RP: "Reserve" is all right, but it's also mixed up with fear, with an early psychological attitude on my part about "What can I do about this situation without confounding it?" So I've got just enough line to destroy the simple idea, it seems to me, and that's the opposite of synthesis.

DO: I don't think so at all. I don't have any stake in the word, by the way, if you find a better one. The fact is, of course, they're not the same paintings. You couldn't put lines on that (points to a "simple painting") and pull it off.

RP: No, I couldn't.

DO: So it isn't the *same* with something *added*. It's pulling a couple of ideas together. They're different paintings, but there's a history and tradition behind the way that they're built up. That's what I meant about synthesis. There's a sense of following a thread of thought, an emotional/formal/visual thread, and building on it.

JH: Ray, you said earlier, "I have no interest at all in being anything but frontal or, in some cases, recessive. I like a lot of air in paintings." Can you explain what you meant?

RP: I have yet to see a painting which succeeds at being flat, because, as Doug has remarked, whenever you put anything on a canvas it changes the situation, so that you have an illusion of space and depth. We used to talk about "frontal painting," meaning that the forms were perhaps forward of the literal surface of the painting.

JH: Were the forms imagined as parallel to the plane of the canvas?

RP: Yes, I'm not involved with any kind of pseudo-perspective, as a rule, nor am I with modeling or with changes in value, which are supposed to indicate illumination, to any great degree; but when a painting is finished, I may find myself seeing, as I said, certainly *air*. You could go up to one of the forms in a simple painting with the feeling that you might be able to put your arms around it. In some cases I find areas of the painting to be forward of the surface and others to be back. I like the illusion of space and depth. I don't try to organize or orchestrate it. It's not a question of "This is far, that's near," no "push and pull," to borrow a phrase Hofmann used in teaching.

JH: When you say "I like a lot of air . . ." does that also imply that you would never want your forms to feel locked in by the—

RP: —carpentry of the structure.

JH: Is there a hierarchy then? Do the forms become freer than the ground on which they're painted?

RP: Unlike the simple paintings, I think in my recent work the ground and the colors are equally positive.

JH: Yet the colored forms seem to have almost a freedom to move.

DO: Ray's really trying to learn about figure-ground interchange, in the basic academic sense of the word.

RP: It's about time, don't you think, considering my age, painting for 35 years?

DO: It's felt out as one goes along. People think you learn how to do something, and you can continue to do it.

RP: Then you've got it for all time.

DO: That's not the truth. You keep trying to learn every time you do everything you do. Otherwise, why do it?

RP: Every morning is a different day.