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CIARAN LENNON: SECRET SPACE / OPEN-SECRET

BY

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INTRODUCTION (1)

Ciaran Lennon is an Irish artist who has produced a remarkable body of work over the past two decades. Despite this, discussion with some of my fellow students revealed that many of them had either never heard of Lennon or had only a cursory acquaintance with his work. Lennon has exhibited regularly, especially so in the past few years, and yet, though often shown, he appears in a sense, to be seldom seen. The reasons for this are not clear, no doubt the vagaries of fashion are partly to blame. Perhaps too, the absence of rhetoric and demonstrativeness in the work does not lend it a high profile. Whatever the reasons, Lennon's reputation to date has lagged well behind his achievements. In focusing on Lennon I hope to shed some extra light on the work of one of our most important artists.

I had several conversations with Lennon during the researching of this essay. These proved to be very illuminating, helping considerably towards my understanding of the artist's motivation and thought. I was also able to visit Lennon's studio, which allowed me to see again and reconsider some of the work I'd seen in various shows over the past few years.

INTRODUCTION (2)

The history of painting is the history of fabricating 'otherworlds'. Painting has been a window in the wall, a means to escape into realms beyond our bodily reality. To believe in painting, as Joseph Kosuth has written, "has meant that to be able to see a painting you have had to see the paint-on-the-painting and the paint-on-the-wall as being different in quite a special way" (Kosuth,1991, p.89). Ciaran Lennon is a painter who believes that seeing is believing. Kosuth is referring to the history of painting as a history of illusions. For Lennon though, illusions are not really the point. The point, rather, is to make something whole, an object complete in itself and capable of resisting facile associations; an object which can be seen , in a sense, for what it is.

The belief in painting as a 'window', as a means to escape into 'realms beyond our bodily reality' carries with it an emphasis on Cartesian duality ; on a recognition of the separateness of mind and body. During the twentieth century this philosophical position has become less sacrosanct than it had been in the past. Modern philosophical movements, such as Phenomenology and Existentialism question this duality and put forward a more holistic view. The Phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, attempted to describe the "genesis of man by the world and of the world by man" (Kearney,1986, p.73). Merleau-Ponty is placing an emphasis on a reciprocal relation between 'Man' and the 'World'. In painting, and in the arts in general , a strain has developed in tandem with this philosophical position, which attempts to create an object that throws the viewer back on himself, to create a reciprocal relation between 'viewer' and 'Painting'.In this relation a painting sheds its label as a 'painting' to become instead a 'thing', or a 'phenomenon' in the world.

A painting is a painting but a 'thing' is more enigmatic, the potential for autonomy is increased. The founder of Phenomenology Edmund Husserl, aimed to demonstrate how the world, "is an experience which we live", before it becomes an "object which we know" (Kearney, 1986,p.13) It is an attempt to engage this first-hand experience, the 'experience which we live', that provides the motive, (and the motif) for a painter like Ciaran Lennon.

It is interesting to view Lennon's work in relation to his forebears in the history of abstract painting. The deconstruction of appearances and the reconstitution of reality in abstract form was arguably the central preoccupation of Modernism. The position of abstraction within the current post-modern era is much less certain. Lennon though, believes that continuance and innovation remain possible. The development of abstraction has continued along two quite distinct routes; the broadly improvised, gestural and romantic, on the one hand, and the classical, linear and premeditated approach on the other. Wassily Kandinsky and Kasimir Malevich were the leading pioneers of the opposing tendencies.

Kandinsky's free-form improvisations seemed to confirm and celebrate the natural forces of nature. For Kandinsky, spontaneity and gestural expressiveness were paramount. Kandinsky's fellow Russian, Malevich, with what Donald Kuspit calls his 'geometrical mechanism', produced eloquent examples of the more 'mechanical' approach. Kuspit claims that,

"the conflict between Kandinsky's organicism and Malevich's mechanicism both equally sublime, ambitious, and absolutist in their claims, both claiming a monopoly on the inner necessity of art, is the driving force behind Modernist abstraction" (Kuspit,1986,p.42).

One of the major points of interest in Lennon's work is the extent to which it projects a new synthesis of abstract art, the extent to which the historical divide between 'organicism' and 'mechanism' is resolved. In light of this dialectic and with regard to the desire for a phenomenological aesthetic, or for a

painting as a 'thing', Lennon's work recalls Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, and among his contemporaries, artists like Robert Ryman, Sean Scully and Brice Marden.

It is difficult to place Lennon in an Irish context. It could be argued that during the past decade Lennon has been the most consistently interesting Irish artist working in the abstract genre; but more interesting than whom? His position as being, in some way, outside the terms of reference of his fellow Irish artists, makes him very hard to place. The organisers of 'A New Tradition', a recent series of exhibitions which chronicled Irish art of the 1980's, seemed to have this difficulty too. One of the series was devoted to Irish abstraction and yet they failed to represent Lennon either on the walls or in the accompanying catalogue. This was unfair to the artist and the exhibition as a whole, and also to the audience. It might have been very interesting to see Lennon in the physical context of his Irish contemporaries. A connection seen between Lennon and an artist of an older generation like Patrick Scott could have been interesting. Scott's discipline and simplicity might well have served as examples to Lennon. While his choice of scale and semi-sculptural panelling liken him to Sean Scully, more importantly, Lennon shares with Scully among others, an intense conviction in the transformational power of painting. That is, in the power of the materials and language of painting to convey a spiritual essence; the ability to use materials as a vehicle to the immaterial world.

Whatever about an Irish context some broader terms of reference might be useful. For many, I know, who encounter his austere canvases, the term 'Minimalism' comes to mind. There is no doubt that Lennon shares with many of the artists associated with Minimalism a belief in the importance of direct perception and the role of the audience in the realising of the work. If Lennon is a Minimalist though, it is primarily in the broader sense in which the term has come to be used, the sense in which any work containing a stylistic austerity and strict formal codes is characterised as Minimalist. He would echo perhaps, Carl Andre's assertion that Minimalism meant simply "the greatest economy in attaining the greatest end".(Baker, 1988,p.14).

Lennon invites us to perceive his paintings in a phenomenological way. By his efforts to "bring us back to the things themselves", as Husserl wished, before we objectify our experience in the light of previous knowledge, we are afforded the possibility of direct perception. In the current climate of post-modern cynicism this belief in a kind of primordial existence for painting may seem idealistic. Climates though, by their nature are transcient. Individuals, possessed of belief, are always capable of moving forward. The issue of continuance is important for Lennon: to link with other artists, both past and present, and to continue an exploration of what painting can be.

As an artist Lennon has demonstrated an unusual continuity of direction. His work has progressed within well defined parameters entailing an intense focusing on his major themes. The establishment of what he regards as a 'new figure', is of vital importance. Lennon cites Alberto Giacometti as an inspirational force in this pursuit. Coupled with his interest in 'figure' or 'body' is an ambition to create a 'new space': how to make a new space within an art-form which seems to have exhausted the parameters of both material and conceptual space. Overriding these essentially formal concerns, is a belief in spirit rather than matter, and the belief that articulation and perception of materials may lead to the realisation of the spiritual. Underlying all of Lennon's concerns is the importance of seeing. The work is grounded in the experience of seeing.

While Lennon's concerns have been analogous to some of the primary concerns of modernism, they have also been singular in the originality and conviction of his approach. There is a central theme running through all of Lennon's work, the appearance of a void around which he circulates, an empty space to which he is compulsively drawn. Lennon tells of how,

"As a child I was fascinated by the fact that I couldn't see myself. That everybody else could see the world with me in it and I could see the world with them in it, but each of us could never see ourselves" (Interview).

This dilemma, this 'seeing, not seeing and being seen', was Lennon's point of departure.



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fig.1. Folded/Unfolded (Black) 1972
(remade 1992)
Acrylic on cotton duck
9' X 75'.

CHAPTER ONE

BEGINNINGS (1)

In 1972 Lennon held his first one-man show. In the old Project Arts Centre on South King St., Lennon placed bales of stained canvas on the floor (fig.1.). These bales were partially unfolded and attached to the wall, revealing the stained surface of the canvas. Already, in his first show, Lennon identified what was to become a major theme in his work; the folded and the unfolded, the unseen becoming seen. Lennon was very conscious of the Greenbergian position that painting should be about colour and flatness. During the 1960's the influential American critic, Clement Greenberg, called for the programmatic exclusion of all elements not unique to painting. Greenberg's championing of artists like Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, and the sort of strictly reduced and self-referential paintings they produced, established a powerful dogma, which many artists and critics forthwith, felt obliged either to support or deny. With his 'unfolded canvas' paintings, Lennon was effectively challenging this dogma.

Paintings like Louis' 'Gamma Delta', where Louis has poured fluid paint onto the canvas, or Noland's 'Mach II', with its geometric bands of muted, stained colour, illustrate Greenbergian ideals. These artists devised methods of staining the canvas, of letting the paint soak into the fibres of the canvas and so becoming as one with it. This loss of identity, of the canvas as canvas, and the paint as paint, created an illusion, the illusion that paint and canvas were one. Lennon, with his unfolded canvas paintings, employed similar devices to Louis, but managed to avoid illusionism, and instead to, "reveal the identities of things as separate discrete images" (Interview). By pouring paint through the canvas pile, and then unfolding the top-most layers and attaching them

to the wall, Lennon was describing process and emphasising the separate materiality of paint, canvas and colour.

The clarity of intent and the sureness of execution shown in his first solo show, has proved a model for all of Lennon's work so far. Lennon had both responded to existing ideas and begun to develop an original model of thought and practice. The device employed in these early paintings, of placing the work in different parts of the location at once, partly on the floor, between the floor and the wall, and on the wall, both led the viewer into the space of the painting, and brought the painting into the space of the viewer. This was a crucial synthesis. This 'shared' space is the space which Lennon dealt with in all his subsequent work.

The architectural implications of the unfolded canvas paintings, (the physical relationship with, and the activating of the viewer in an interior space) were further developed in the late 70's. In a variety of locations, a series of specifically architectural installations were made. In the Bank of Ireland's Headquarters in Baggot St., Lennon devised an installation where characteristics of the building itself were employed to convey ideas about illusory space and real space, and the role of the spectator. A melange of devices was used: a large photograph of a scarce-tissue moth was placed on the 'marbled' wall. The moth displayed the camouflaging effect which allows it to become visually integrated with its environment. Lennon also painted a thirty by seven foot section of an outside wall black. The reflective exterior of the building's windows acted like a mirror, while from the inside the windows were clear and transparent. Lennon used the outside wall-painting as a picturing device: the black wall acted as a device allowing the viewer (passers-by) to see into the inside of the building. These are just two aspects of a complex installation that combined in a multi-media project. It employed painting, photography, architecture and printed text, in an attempt to suggest, "a kind of seeing that would not congeal to see objects" (Exhibition catalogue).

Continuing his interest in the role of the spectator, Lennon made an installation 'Veil', in the David Hendricks Gallery in 1979. The

gallery was divided by a polypropylene screen. One side of the gallery was illuminated with lamps and natural light, while on the other side the window was sealed and the room remained dark. From the dark side the screen was transparent while from the bright side it was opaque. People in the dark side of the room could see clearly into the bright side, while those on the bright side were seen, but could not see through the opaque screen. A small mirror was placed in the bright half of the room and could be seen clearly from the dark half, but though seen, no image was reflected. (the Dracula effect). There are echoes here of the concern with the 'seen and the 'unseen', of our ability to see the world but never to see the world with ourselves in it.

To some extent these concept-based installations can be seen as typical of their time. Typical, at least, in the sense that they explored materials and methods not traditionally associated with making art. The 1970's were characterised by a lessening of interest in the traditional mediums of painting and sculpture and the questioning of the role of art for a wider audience. In 1917 Marcel Duchamp sent a urinal to an exhibition, adding nothing to this commonplace and mass-produced object, except for the signature, 'R.Mutt', and a title, 'Fountain'. Duchamp's posturings and declarations and his use of 'readymades' like 'Fountain', helped to detach the concept of art from that of a specially created object. Instead of conceiving a work and employing his 'artistic' skills in order to make a significant object, Duchamp merely selected an already existing object and placed it in the new environment of a gallery or museum. These 'readymades' when first encountered, must have had people scratching their heads. The public is forced to ask itself whether the exhibit is a work of art at all, and thus, to question what a work of art is.

During the 1970's, movements like the Italian based Arte Povera and the largely American based Land Art, as well as many individuals, helped to bring about radical changes in artistic practice, and concepts of what art could be. It was largely in reaction to the relentless commodification of art, that many artists began to

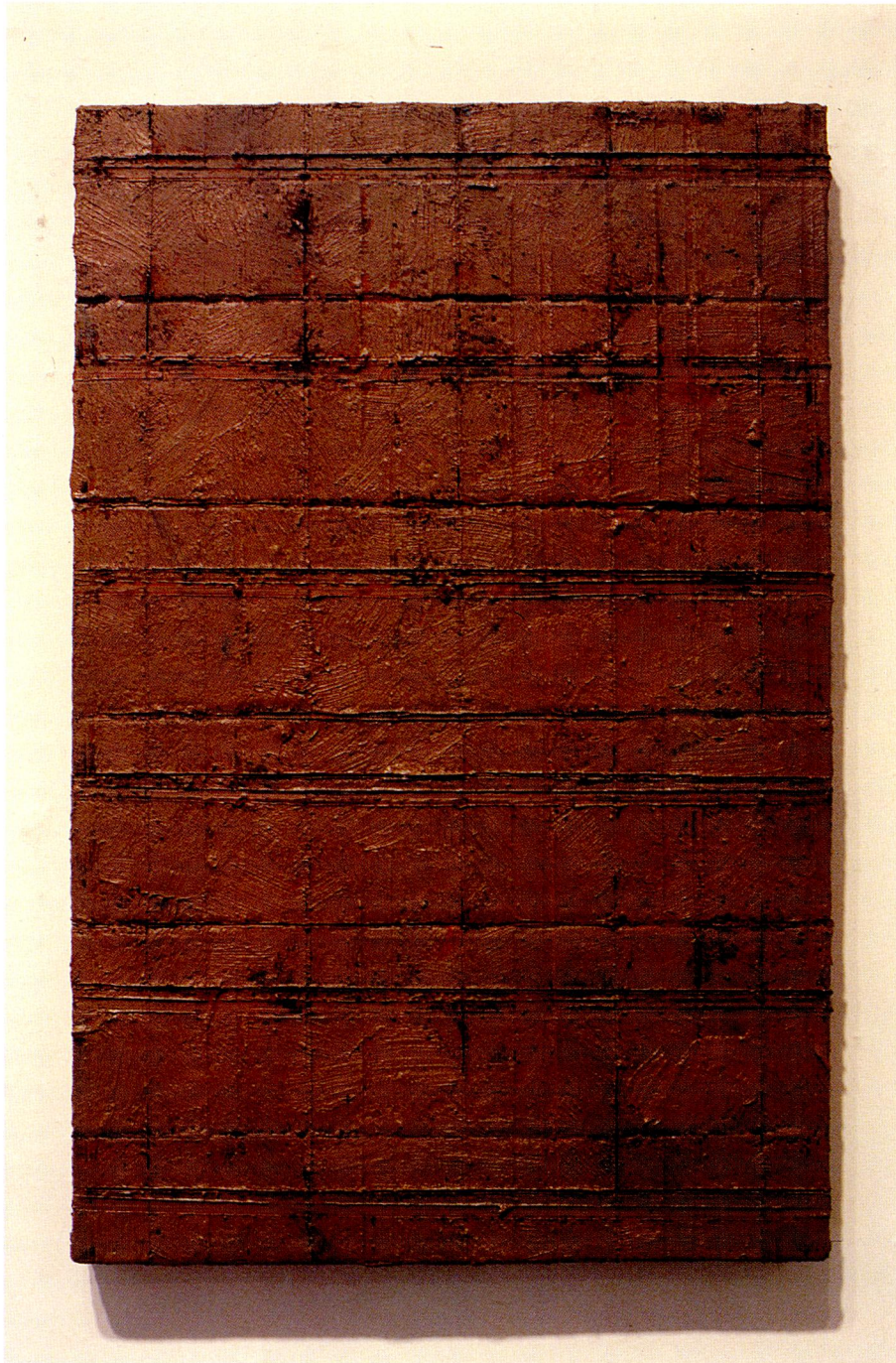


fig.2. M-DAY 1987
Oil on canvas
59" X 39".

make work which was transient and unmarketable, at least until photographs and documentation became marketable surrogates. Much of the work created at this time involved getting outside the traditional institutions and marketplace of the art-world and attempting to convey ideas directly to an audience. This new approach opened the way to a seemingly endless variety of strategies. In 1972, Richard Long went for a walk, traversing back and forth along a line in a remote area of Peru. Robert Smithson put down his paintbrush in favour of a bulldozer. The Bulgarian artist, Christo, wrapped 'Littlebay', a 1,000,000 square foot section of Australian coastline. The artist Joseph Kosuth, presented in a Los Angeles gallery, a series of 'Mounted definitions of nothing'. Probably the most significant figure of this era was the German artist, Joseph Beuys, who accepted full personal responsibility for any snowfall in Dusseldorf during February 1970.

(II)

Though 'concept' art continues, and has had an undoubted influence on our thinking about art, the past decade has seen a major swing back to traditional means. Though coinciding with the re-emergence of painting into the limelight, Ciaran Lennon's renewed interest in painting, produced works markedly different from the fashionable paintings of the time. While the newly celebrated painting from America, Germany and Italy, was mostly figurative, brash and 'hot', Lennon, on the other hand began producing paintings which were abstract, reserved and determinedly 'cool'.

Lennon's work has always been characterised by a kind of 'visual' silence. They seek to draw in the spectator in a subtle and undemonstrative manner. Lennon began to paint grids;(fig.2)"the grid is most expressive of the wordless, silent nature of painting" (Interview).When, in the early 80's, these paintings were first shown, Aidan Dunne entitled his review, 'Brutish Minimalism'.

He described the, "dense, clotted surfaces that managed to seem both austere and luxuriant" (Dunne, Sun Tribune). These paintings are chunky, the deep stretchers and densely layered paint assert their physicality. As they are examined closely a grid pattern emerges from the heavily worked surface. Grids tend to denote measurement. The Renaissance and Baroque periods saw the grid being used as a mathematical aid to achieve perspective. But, as well as defining or measuring space, grids also imply limitless space, grids are implicitly boundless. Grids go 'off' the painting, they suggest their continuance beyond the usual field.

In the same review Aidan Dunne remarked on how, "the surface remains very much the surface, there's no way into the picture space". These paintings don't invite us to look into or 'through' them, instead we are coaxed over the surface. This is a reversal of the traditional idea of the painting as a 'window', a window we look through into another world. There is a time factor here, the gaze moves across the surface, and in doing so contains both the, 'just seen' (past tense) and 'seeing' (present tense). Immediacy is very important, the viewer, absorbed by the movements of the eye across the painting's surface, is actively perceiving the work. We are being invited, in affect, to bring the painting into being.

This, bringing the painting into being, reminds us of Merleau-Ponty's attempt to describe the "genesis of Man by the world and of the world by Man" (Kearney, 1986, p.73), and his emphasis on a reciprocal relation between Man and the world; between viewer and painting. The desire, however, for this kind of direct perception, is not easily fulfilled. Works of art are rarely experienced as innocently as some artists might like. Art-works are almost always housed and presented within a particular and well established set of criteria; even 'concept' art tends to conform to this as the documentation of events takes on a greater importance than the events themselves.

This setting inevitably induces a set of preconceptions in the viewer. We rarely look at art without being aware of our intention to do so. This self-consciousness influences our perception. Notwithstanding this, art-works are attractive, attractive in the sense that they compel attention to themselves, to their singular presence.

Lennon, I think, shares with some of the artists he admires, the desire to dissolve the barriers to direct perception. Robert Ryman is an American artist who seems preoccupied with the raw-materials of painting. In his square surfaces covered with white paint Ryman presents us with pictures of raw-materials. The clarity of their constituents point to their essence as paintings, and yet, this very clarity and extreme simplicity affords them an autonomous completeness. Ryman tries to achieve matter-of-factness, as he puts it, "It has to look as if no struggle was involved. It has to look as if it was the most natural thing" (Storr, 1986, pg 212). The transparent clarity of Ryman's paintings helps viewers to shed their preconceptions of what a painting is.

Ryman's younger compatriot, Brice Marden, has also been engaged with questions of essence and direct perception. In an interview with Robert Storr he tells of his distrust of theorizing, "to see it so overloaded with ideas and explanations drags you down. It's like looking at it with stones around your neck" (Storr, 1986, pg. 66). Marden wants the viewer to approach his work directly, to experience his painting through direct seeing.

These artists share with Lennon, and with each other, a pre-occupation with the raw-materials, or the constitutive elements, of painting, combined with a belief in paintings transcendent possibilities. This is not quite the contradiction it may seem at first. The emphasis on the reciprocal relation between viewer and object, to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty, the genesis of the man by the painting and of the painting by the man, points to a notion of the transcendent as being within ourselves.

The physical 'body' of the painting asserts itself as a body while simultaneously containing transcendent possibility.

Earlier American painters like Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman also addressed issues of direct perception and transcendent possibility. Rothko wanted the viewer to have as direct an experience as possible. He always refused to explain his work, claiming that,

"There is a danger an instrument will be created which will tell the public how the pictures should be looked at and what to look for - while this might seem an obliging thing to do, the end result is paralysis of the mind and imagination" (Cernuschi, 1992 pg 66).

Newman, on the other hand, was quite happy to lead the viewer on. His provocative titles and regular pronouncements provided a particular context for his work. Newman sought to break down the barrier between his work and the viewer. His enormous, colour-saturated canvasses sought to engulf the spectator, for the spectator and the painting to become, in a sense, as one. Newman wanted to transport the viewer beyond the perception of the canvas and towards a more atmospheric and immaterial state.

The most important thing Lennon shares with these four artists (among others), Ryman, Marden, Rothko and Newman, is the desire to transmit, through an intense concentration of material presence, the immaterial essence of the world.

CHAPTER TWO

LINES ON THE BODY (I)

The 'material' presence in Lennon's work is both the artist's materials, canvas paint and so on, and a certain 'bodily' presence. There is a sense in which, in western society, we are inclined to see a person's body as being merely a vessel or a shell. The body is the visible exterior of the more important, but invisible, interior. The body is the container of the soul. When an artist makes a painting he is turning this concept inside-out. A painting contains the absent body of its maker. A painting, as such, is the physical residue of the artist's presence. In a painting we can see that which is not the body made manifest. We are made aware of the artist's absence (we see the painting but not the hand which made it), and at the same time, we see his presence, in the materials he has fashioned. Lennon's work is not submitted simply for the audience's approval. It always contains the promise of an exchange. There is an attempt to institute a dialogue between the work (their inert bodies) and the living body perceiving them.

In 1985, when the painted 'columns' began to appear, Lennon's work took on a more overtly anthropomorphic theme. The columnar paintings, with their sculptural mass and narrow, vertical aspect, established a specific analogy with the human figure. The issue of anthropomorphism is inherited from the history of sculpture. From the Greeks, through the Renaissance and up to modern times, the depiction of people, of the human body, has been the dominant theme of sculpture. Traditionally these sculptures played a symbolic role, by personifying the power of Church and State.

In our century, however, the human figure has appeared, more and more, as a pretext for exploring formal and philosophical questions, as Kenneth Baker puts it, "...metaphoric vehicle for thought about what it is to be a person" (Baker, 1988, p.80). Lennon talks of his ambition to create a 'new figure', and in this regard, how inspiring he finds the work of the Swiss sculptor, Alberto Giacometti. Looking at Lennon's austere, painted columns, I can see ghosts of Giacometti's intensely isolated and primordial figures. With these paintings Lennon is addressing a major twentieth century theme, and problem, man's lack of intimacy with, and understanding of the world around him, man's alienation.

In his essay on minimalist sculpture Kenneth Baker writes of this modern alienated condition as ".....not just a matter of the loneliness of mass society; it is a fiction of disembodiment in constant tension with our incarnateness" (Baker, 1988, p.79). Baker suggests that, through the experience of mass-media communications, we are being 'de-programmed' from reality. Representations of reality, television, film, sound-recording, become the dominant mode of our experience, we begin to value fantasy over facts. The sensory onslaught which is modern media, leads us to realms of seduction which anaesthetise us temporarily from the world of bodily reality. We become, in effect, disembodied, losing on the way an "awareness of human life as an embodied social process in which we can know something of the part we play" (Baker, 1988, p.79). One way of responding to this disembodiment process is to make an art which stresses direct experience of life rather than mediated views of it.

The air of sombre isolation which emanates from these vertical panels (what John Hutchinson calls their, 'grave, almost iconic presence') (Sunday Press 22.5.88), draws the attention like a magnet. These objects don't point to something else, neither to the artist, nor through themselves, to some transcendental realm.

The ambition inherent in these works is the desire to exist. Exuding a sense of human isolation, they at the same time insist on their own status as objects. They possess an existential matter-of-factness. Man-like, without being illustrative, the columns convey a strong sense of mutual dependancy. With their sense of solitude and interrogation we feel the charged experience of looking and being looked at. The viewer and the object become entwined, existing together in the act of seeing and being seen. The primacy of perception is what counts. The priority of seeing; what is seen is formed and clarified in the process of seeing.

The columnar paintings convey a striking synthesis of form and content. They contain both a formal and metaphorical resonance. Supporting overlapping layers of heavily brushed paint, the narrow, vertical stretchers are several inches thick. Lines through the painted surface expose underlying layers and colours. The thick stretchers mean the paintings stand forward from the wall. Some have bevelled sides which allows the viewer to see the front and sides of the painting simultaneously. The painted layers go right around the boxy stretchers, helping to emphasise the painting as object.

Seeming, initially, self-contained and austere, these paintings command their own space, it's a kind of 'body-space', where the viewer should not intrude. The viewer, though, must step over this threshold, you have to get close. As you get closer the underbody of the painting becomes visible through the scored surface. The 'body' has been cut. The increase in intimacy allows the painting to reveal its scars.

The anthropomorphic theme of these works calls to mind certain 'Minimalist' sculptors, especially artists like Walter De Maria and Richard Serra. A piece like 'Bed of Spikes', made by De Maria in 1969, with its flat base supporting rows of upturned metal spikes, can't help but make us body-conscious. Contact with the work increases our sense of physical danger and vulnerability.

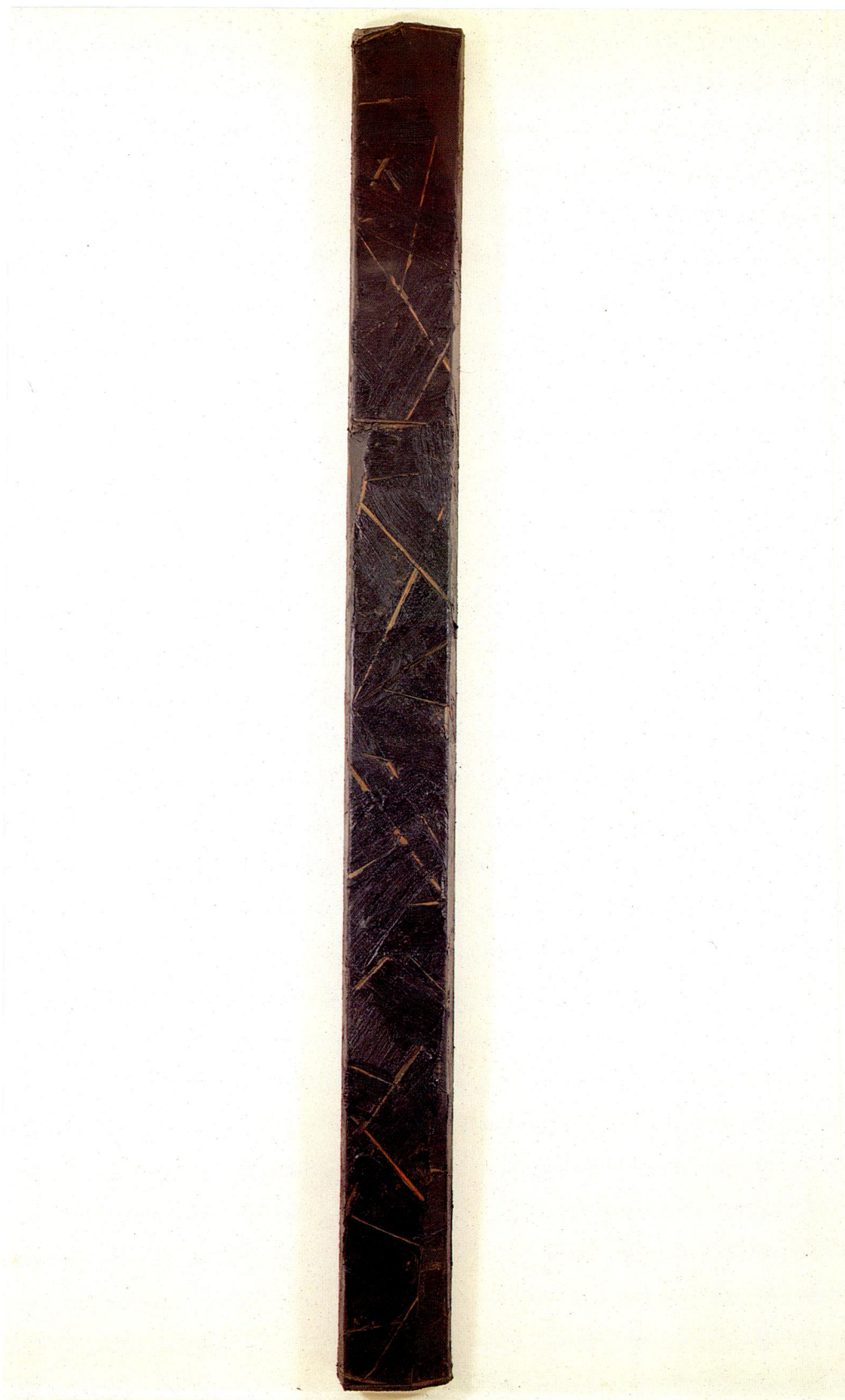


fig.3. M'LAI 1988
Oil on wax on linen on wood
8' X 8" X 3.25".

Serra, perhaps more subtly, is interested in our sense of our bodies. A piece like 'Stacked', also made in 1969, uses gravity as its only bonding agent. Pieces of scrap metal are precariously stacked into a tall, teetering configuration. If it falls or is disassembled it ceases to exist, the 'body' of the work exists in a precarious and temporary state.

The cuts in Lennon's paintings also remind me of Lucio Fontana's slashed and punctured canvases. Fontana made his monochromatic paintings three-dimensional, by literally cutting through the surface. Fontana's lacerations seem highly symbolic, the gesture of slashing is not merely a trace of activity on the canvas, it is an act of violence committed on the body of the painting. Brice Marden, one of Lennon's favourite painters, deals with the body in a much gentler fashion. Marden hangs his paintings low on the wall, so that they will confront the viewer, body to body. There is no drawn image in Marden's painting, instead, there is a feeling that the painting itself - its scale and its 'skin' - can act as a metaphor for the human body. The resonant depths of Marden's paintings are sealed by the waxy, skin-like surface. With Lennon the skin is broken.

One of these paintings is entitled 'M'lai', (fig.3), presumably a reference to the massacre of the M'lai villagers by American soldiers during the Vietnam war. The title, perhaps, points too directly to the violent metaphor of the painting. For me, if these paintings convey violence, it is of a very contained, almost clinical nature. The fissured surface and anthropomorphic form combine in a sort of formalised flagellation. These columns remind me not just of artists like Giacometti and Marden, but also of an artist from an entirely different epoch, Piero della Francesca. Piero, who sometime in the middle of the fifteenth century (the exact date is unknown) painted 'The Flagellation', for the sacristy of the Duomo of Urbino. This painting is remarkable for its ambiguity, and its extremely cool and formalised representation of Christ's torture.



fig.4. RANELAGH 1988
Oil on canvas
25" X 5.25" X 4".

(II)

As I suggested in the introduction Lennon's work shares some affinity with several so-called 'Minimalist' artists. The importance of direct perception and the importance of the audience's active participation in the realising of the work, aligns Lennon, to some degree, with a 'Minimalist' ethos. Lennon's work, according to Liberato Santoro, "mediates a perception of apparent simplicity and sustains the rigorous economy of a visual world that shelters the echo of Minimalism" (Santoro 1992,p.26). A problem, though, with being linked to Minimalism - not just for Lennon, but for the 'minimalists' themselves - is the inevitable preconceptions which attend any simplistic labelling. The term 'minimal' in its general usage is inclined to have a pejorative sense, as in, of minimal value, of minimal interest, and so on. Even in art-historical terms Minimalism has come to be seen by many as an ultimately barren and navel-gazing movement, valuable primarily for its role in inducing the superabundant eighties. Minimalism, was in fact a very positive force, and the economy of means combined with a fecundity of ideas, seems especially attractive from the vantage point of the present era of image-overload.

Whatever about the usefulness of labels it is true to say that during the 1960's, a group of mostly American sculptors, were united in certain aims. These aims might be described as a commitment to certain values, Kenneth Baker describes them thus, "a clear, contemplative vision, the recognition of illusions for what they are, and a love of physical reality for its own sake" (Baker 1988,p.22). Artists like Tony Smith and Donald Judd embraced the aesthetics of Industrial Fabrication.

They employed the techniques of mass-production to help free themselves from traditional ideas of artistic genius and the 'aura' of the unique, hand-made art object. The primacy of perception was what mattered. An object which referred back to its 'author' tended to lose its intrinsic value and become merely an expression of the artist's hands and personality.

Carl Andre engaged this problem by refusing to make sculpture in the usual sense, but concentrated instead on the simple arrangement of elemental materials. He has written about his desire to generate place, "a place in this sense is a pedestal for the rest of the world" (Baker 1988,p.138). His 'floor' pieces, consisting of arrangements of square metal tiles, are extremely modest and simple, they "are intended to give pleasure, nothing else" (Baker 1988,p.138). The simplicity of Minimalist work helped to raise questions about how art depended on its viewers. Bruce Nauman, for example, made work which necessitated the active participation of the audience. His 'Green light Corridor' (1970-71) consisted of a narrow passageway flooded with green fluorescent light. The audience did not look at this work, they experienced it. The passage through the corridor produced direct physical sensation. If Lennon's work 'shelters the echo of Minimalism' it is not simply in its stylistic austerity, but more importantly, it is in its avowal of certain values; a commitment to direct vision and experience and a belief in the primacy of perception over concepts, as Donald Judd puts it, "You can think about it forever in all sorts of versions, but it is nothing until it is made visible" (Baker 1988,p.24).

CHAPTER THREE

(SECRET SPACE / OPEN-SECRET) (I)

Drawing has always been a vital part of the creative process for Lennon. He remembers life-drawing classes in the NCAD of the early 70's, and how they were still characterised by an emphasis on academic principles; on describing as accurately as possible the figure/model in space. Though uninterested in this form of representation for its own sake, Lennon was always intrigued by a basic problem of drawing; of describing a three dimensional figure on a two dimensional plane. If a figure is drawn 'well' we can see both the side of the figure facing us and, through suggestion, the sides, or aspects of the figure beyond our field of vision. This problem, of depicting the 'unseen', is the theme running through all of Lennon's work.

For an artist interested in the 'objecthood' of art, drawings are inclined to be too flat. They lack the physicality of paintings. One day while making some drawings, Lennon, more or less absentmindedly, began to fold the piece of paper he was working on. All at once the drawing became more physical, and more importantly, the spatial relationships were totally transformed. The edges of the support (paper) were now at the centre and the centre at the edges. What Lennon came up with was a hidden space within the folds of paper. This description of the 'unseen' provided a literal depiction of what academic drawing tried to achieve through illusion.

The folded drawings proved an enormous catalyst. Folding, unfolding and the nature of materials and our perception of them were themes already manifest in the first showing of the 'stained bales of canvas' (fig.1).

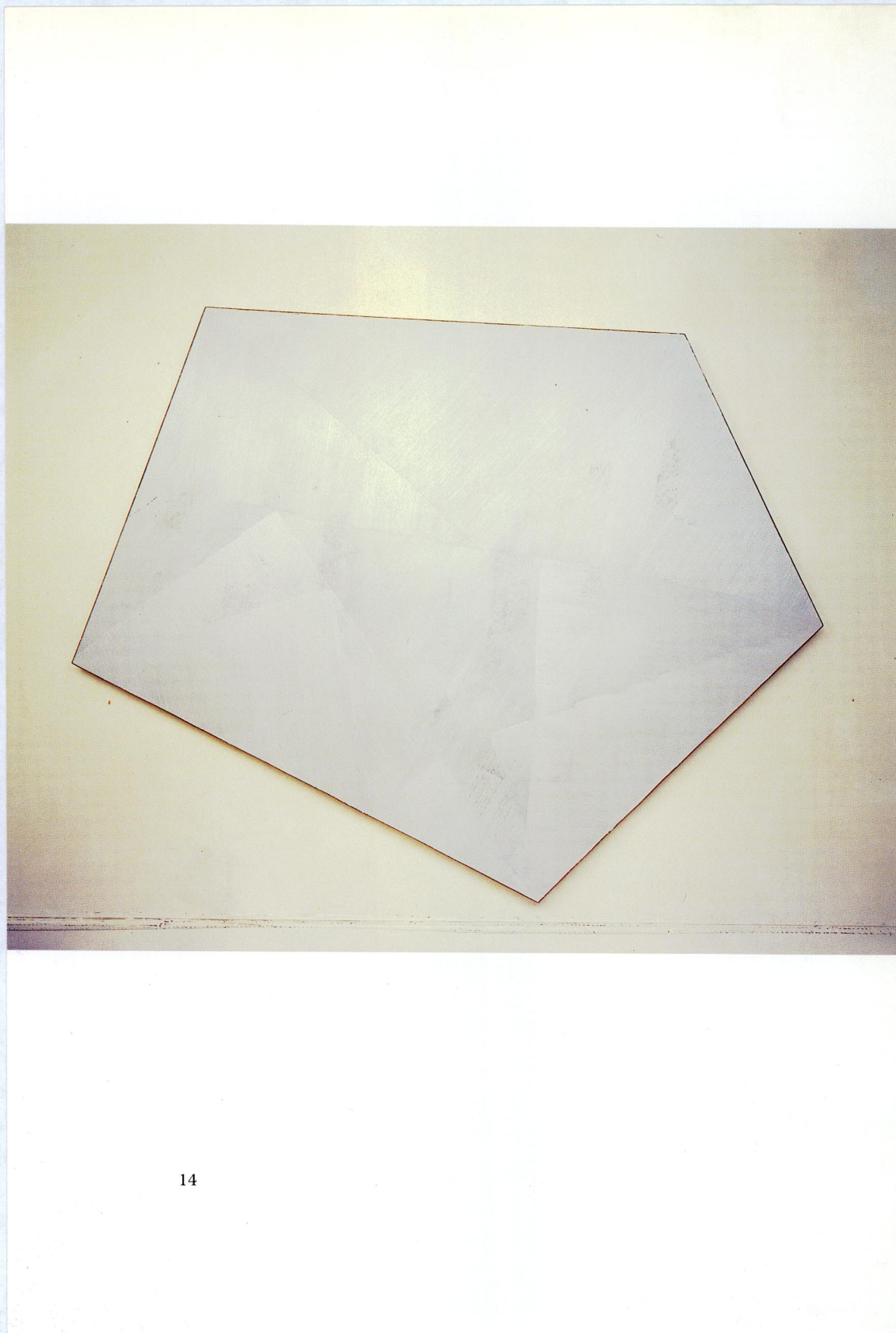
There is a sense of the artist coming back to his original ideas, but now developing them in a more fully realised manner. The drawings led to paintings. These 'folded' paintings can be seen as operating on several distinct and simultaneous levels. The folding of the paint, each plane of paint turning upon itself, acts as a device which draws our attention inwards. We naturally seek the unseeable. If we use the word 'wrapping' in place of 'folding' then the void upon which these paintings are premised becomes more 'visible'. To wrap is to at once conceal and reveal. A wrapped object is defined by the wrapping, we focus on its presence, though it remains invisible. John Hutchinson describes how, "...he turns each plane of paint upon itself, again and again, thereby constructing a compact weaving of self-contained interiority, a kind of womb of emptiness that is defined by the residue of carefully directed human activity" (Hutchinson 1990,p.7.).

This 'womb of emptiness', though, as the phrase suggests, is not a nullity, it is rather, in a paradoxical way, a fullness. To put this another way, fullness - or presence, is only truly conceivable in relation to emptiness - or absence. The void at the centre of these paintings acts like a magnet, our gaze is drawn inwards, towards emptiness. Once perceived, emptiness suggests its 'other', we are drawn to its parameters, to that which defines it. Writing about Barnett Newman, Harold Rosenberg writes that, "...emptiness is the indispensable ground against which all other qualities are brought into play" (Rosenberg 1965,p.62). Rebounding from emptiness, the gaze consumes what is present. The achievement of this state of emptiness, is an achievement of possibility; there is a new space to be filled. Lennon acknowledges that, "This space of emptiness, of potential, was itself a discovery of great importance to me" (Interview).

The folded space in Lennon's painting, the space which is intimated but concealed by the wrapped layering of the paint, is part of an attempt to create a new pictorial space. Notions of painted space have developed in various ways over the centuries. The Italian Renaissance saw the invention of linear perspective, a pictorial convention which persists to this day. For most ordinary viewers a painting will 'look real' or 'be like real life' only when a picture suggests depth by the mechanism of linear perspective. We can easily forget that this belief is only a few hundred years old. Prior to the Renaissance the organisation of painted space was very different. A Medieval painting was likely, for example, to contain figures which were relatively disproportionate, or events from different times on one pictorial plane. This, presumably, was seen as being quite natural and not necessarily out of sync with reality.

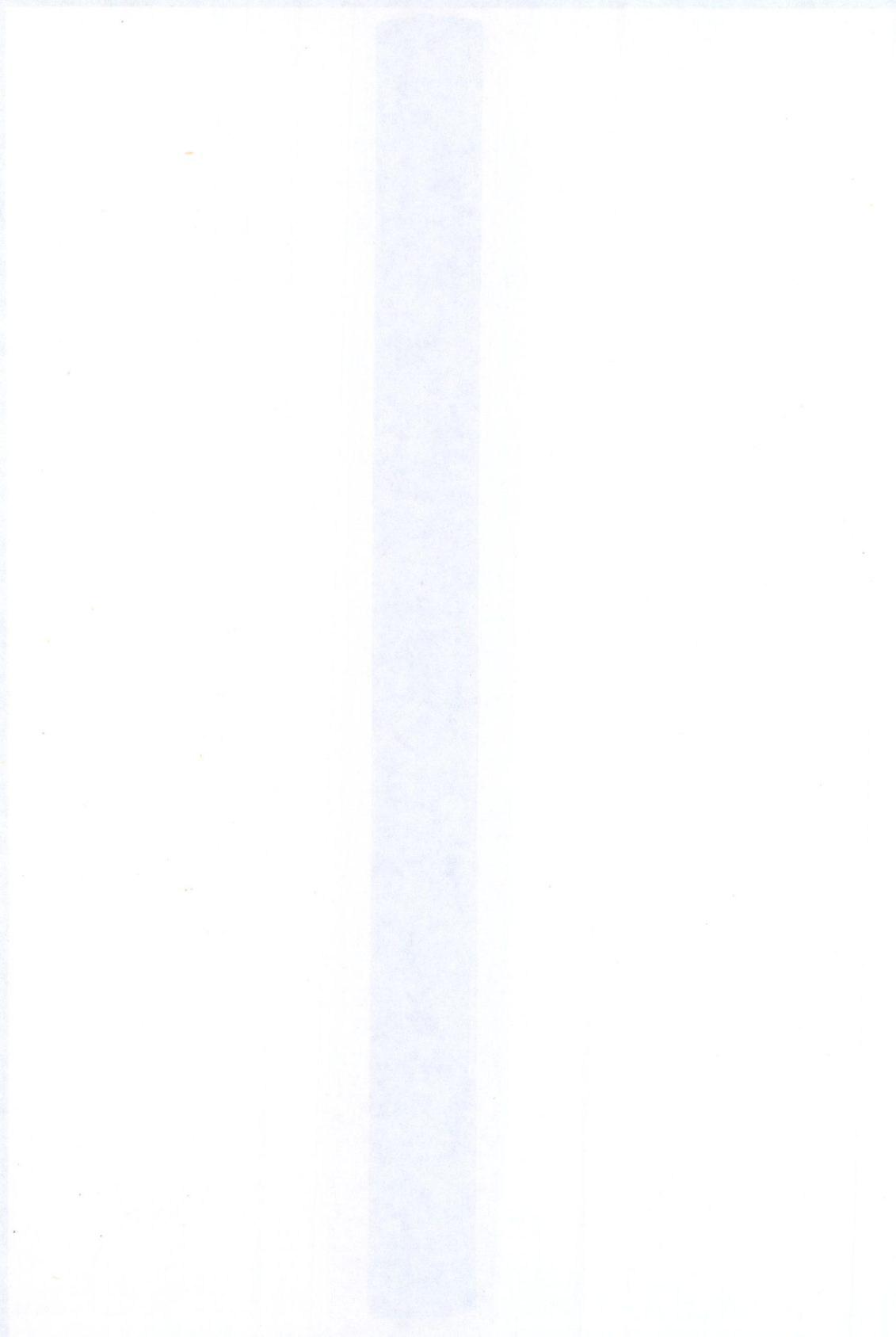
Since the Renaissance artists have been increasingly pre-occupied by the attempt to paint what the eye sees. Experiments in spatial perception and arrangement have been primarily focused on an attempt to paint nature as it is. But despite this focusing on the rhetorical language of representation the inevitability of individual interpretation persisted. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century were periods of intensified experimentation with spatial conventions. The French painter, Paul Cezanne, said of his work, "I have not tried to reproduce nature; I have represented here" (Crichton 1977, p.83). The subjectivity of the artist along with the constitutive elements of painting, exemplified by the tension in Cezanne between the emphasis on the brushstroke and the overall composition, were combining in increasing importance during this time.

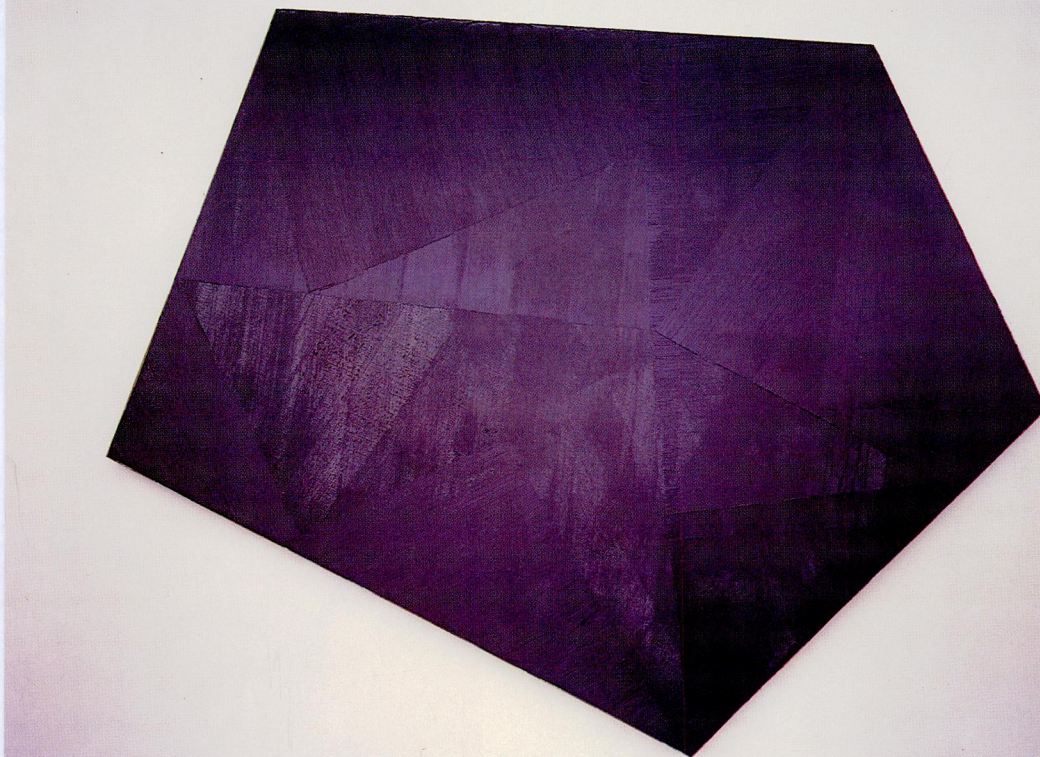
Until the twentieth century the need to create illusory space in a painting was never really questioned. As Modernism developed though, questions regarding depicted and actual depth, illusion and flatness, took centre stage.



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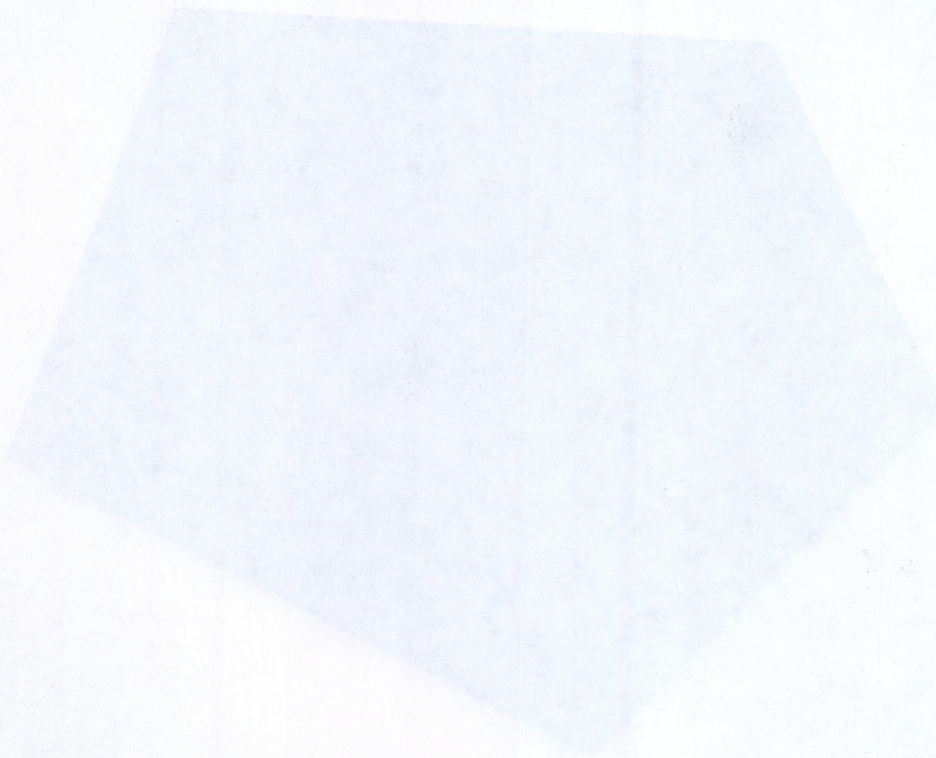
fig.5. ALCAZAR SERIES No.3. 1989
Oil on canvas
48" X 40" X 3".





15

fig.6. FIONA 1990.
Oil on canvas
80" X 106" X 3".



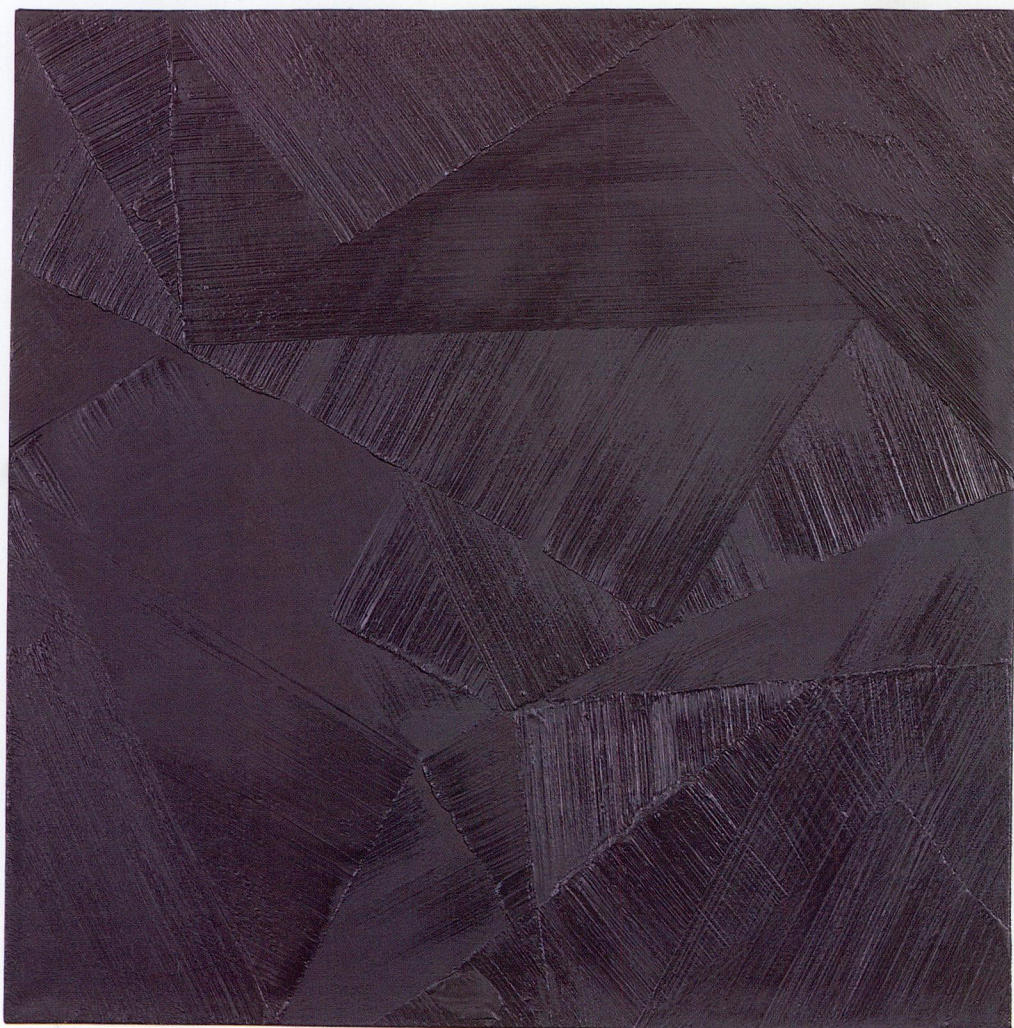
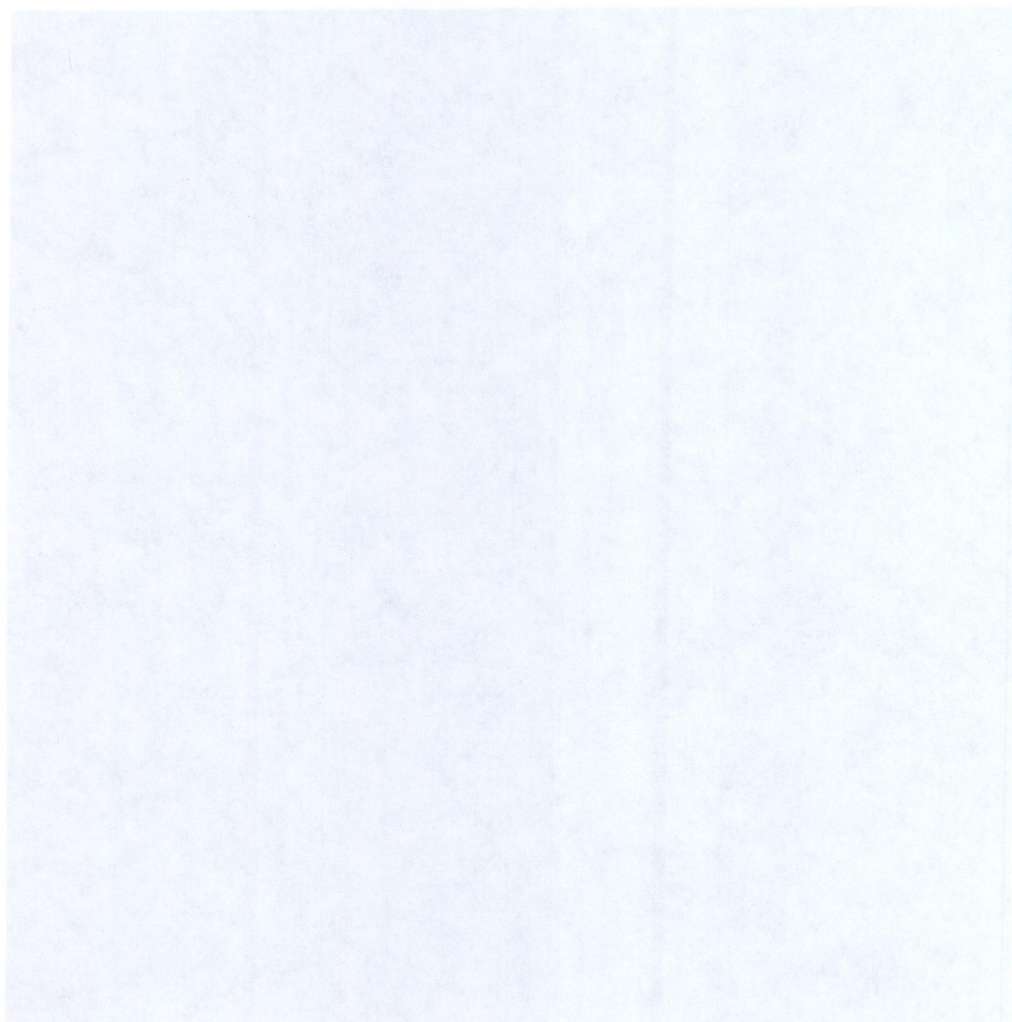


fig. 7. NIEBLA 1990
Oil on canvas
80" X 106" X 3".



Working in Paris around 1910, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, taking their cue from Cezanne, began to explore the manner in which objects existed in space. Early 'cubist' paintings emphasized space as something tactile and material. The normal spatial relationships of foreground, middleground and background, which helped to create the illusion of reality in traditional painting, were eliminated in favour of a different kind of reality; the 'plastic' reality of the painting itself.

Clement Greenberg had insisted that painting should be reduced to its most essential elements, that, "the irrducibility of pictorial art consists in but two constitutive conventions or norms: flatness and the delimitation of flatness" (Lynton 1980, p.245). Paintings, like those of Morris Louis, seemed to illustrate Greenberg's theories, Louis' poured-colour paintings, were all about simplicity, clarity and the avoidance of spatial illusion. I described in the first chapter how Lennon had responded to Greenbergian dogma with his unfolded canvas bales. Aidan Dunne has evoked Greenberg in relation to Lennon's folded drawings and described how Lennon comes up with,

"A hidden space within the folds of paper that make up the outward surface.....This could well be interpreted as a way of circumventing Greenbergian strictures about flatness and depicted depth by means of a technicality" (A.Dunne Sunday Tribune 21.10.90).

The hidden space in Lennon contains its own resonance, it is not merely significant in its 'circumventing of Greenberg'. What is important is the belief in newness, in fresh possibility.

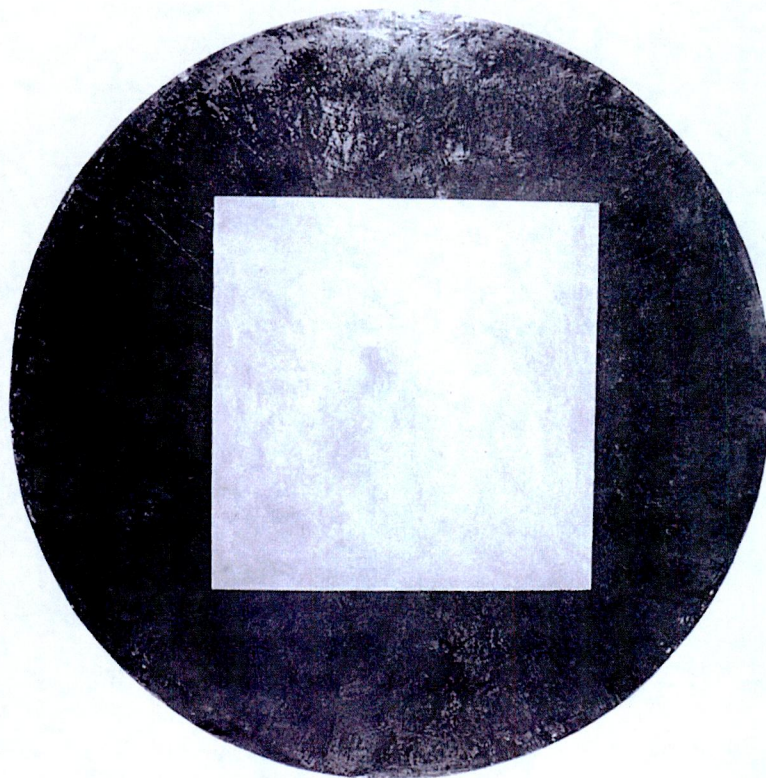
Considering the 'wrapped' field of Lennon's paintings, and responding particularly to the five-sided paintings (fig.5 & 6), which were developed from the folded-paper drawings, Liberato Santoro describes how, "the internal depth and spatiality produced by texture as in-folding form draw the eye into the field and invite it - engagingly and enigmatically - to interact" (Santoro 1992,p.27).

It is as though Santoro is imagining the viewer entering the painting and looking at it from the inside, the viewer becoming 'wrapped-up' in the work. In order to disengage, the viewer must subsequently unwrap, a counterpoint develops between this in-folding and un-folding. The centrifugal tension suggested by the pentagonal structure seems to draw the paint inwards, this force works against the desire to unwrap the surface, adding further to the narrative dynamic. The unfolding canvas bales from 1972 are forerunners to these works, but the unfolding now takes place in the mind of the viewer, the infolded space remains invisible, except that is, to the intuitive eye.

(II)

The most recent work to be seen in Lennon's retrospective at the Douglas Hyde Gallery was a painting titled (1/3/92B)(fig.8). Here is a painting refusing to be a window. This painting does not allow us to 'escape into realms beyond our bodily reality'. The gaze rebounds from this painting, turning the viewer back onto himself. Between the body of the viewer and the 'body' of the painting a kind of magnetic field is established. Within this field a vibration occurs as we are simultaneously repelled and compelled by its barrier-like mass and its darkly veiled surface.

The painting extends laterally across three panels, each eight feet high and six feet wide. The paint is black, with variations in tone being provided by light as it falls on the brushed texture. These brush marks have an epic quality. The brushstrokes are broad and precisely controlled. This is painting in a raw state. If paint is applied with a brush, why not convey this as simply and as grandly as possible. The painting is explicit in the way it conveys its making, and at the same time, deeply mysterious. We can insinuate ourselves between the folding layers of paint but we will fail to see the whole picture at once. The eyes traverse the surface but never penetrate. The dark veils gently shift, but the barrier remains.



BLACK HOLE 1975
Oil on canvas, 6' diameter x 2"

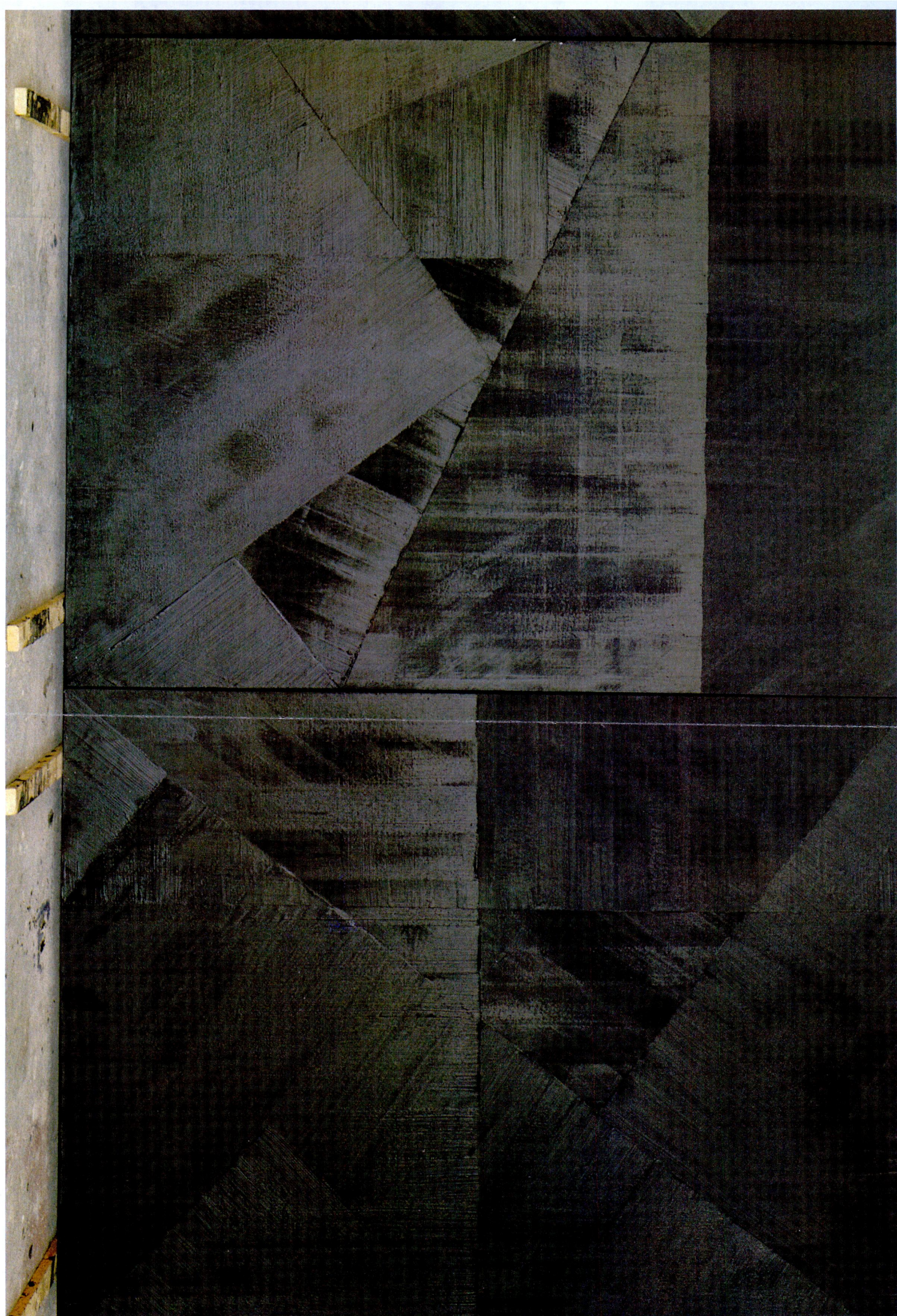
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fig.8. 1/3/92B 1992
Oil on canvas
8' X 16' X 4".



17

fig.8. 1/3/92B 1992
Oil on canvas
8' X 16' X 4".



Writing on how to recognise 'good art' the former curator of New York's Metropolitan Museum, Henry Geldzahler, insists that you must constantly visit museums and galleries in order to see the real work in a real place, because, "you can not learn from slides; slides are the history of images, not the history of art" (Herts 1985, p.116). This observation seems to especially apply to works like (1/3/92B)(fig.8). The size, scale and presence of this painting cannot be conveyed through a reproduction. It is only in a one to one relationship with the work itself that its sheer physicality and sublime aura can be experienced. The current trend of cynicism does not allow much credence for notions of the sublime, but here, as in certain other respects, Lennon remains convincingly unfashionable.

Responding to (1/3/92B)(fig.8), Jamshid Mir Fenderesky has written that, "this painting is in need of a consciousness cleansed from the stuff of history and unscored by the burden of memory", and goes on to assert that, "only Lennon can paint in the dark. He is the true visionary" (unpublished article). This kind of high-faluting response can seem melodramatic, but what is being emphasized again is the importance of direct perception. We are reminded of Husserl's notion of the world as "an experience which we live before it is an object which we know". This painting reminds us of the importance of the first hand experience of phenomena and encourages us towards acceptance of our experience without recourse to anecdote or illusion.

In making this enormous black painting Lennon connects with a trend in Modernism of monochromatic painting. Black and white have been particularly popular. Kasimir Malevich made the supposedly first monochrome when in 1919 he produced his ultimate 'Suprematist' work, 'White square on a white ground'. This was followed in the same year by his fellow countryman, Alexander Rodchenko, when he produced, in seeming reaction to Malevich, his own black-on-black painting.

Robert Ryman has been producing 'white' paintings since he first began to paint. Lennon admires the purity and absence of doubt inherent in Ryman's work, qualities, he feels, beyond most european sensibilities. Another monochrome painter, though better known as a sculptor, Richard Serra produces enormous 'drawings' made with black oil-stick, that like his sculpture, delight the eye with their open, but tough, simplicity. The interest in monochrome seems to be allied to a belief in purity and simplicity and an avoidance of the notion of 'art-as-self-expression', in favour perhaps, of as the American abstractionist, Al Reinhardt put it, "Art-as-Art-as-Art" (Daval 1989,p.189).

What is most affecting in Lennon's art, especially in his seeking to establish a 'new space', is the manner in which it is both hidden and revealed. Painting has always been about the belief that the visible contains hidden secrets. Lennon presents the visible and the hidden in a natural synthesis. In their methodological transparency the paintings portray their making, the visible record of their making evokes the space they contain while keeping that space hidden. If the visible contains secrets, in Lennon's case it is an open-secret; that which is manifest and that which is latent are simultaneous.

All painting consists of a duality, of physical matter and illusory space. The shifting of emphasis between one or the other of these aspects has been central to the historical development of the language of painting. In a sense Lennon seems to be attempting to resolve this dialectic. The open-secret of Lennon's painting is that the physical matter (paint, support) and illusory space (enfolded space) seek to affect a simultaneous presentation.

CONCLUSION

Lennon's work is serious and ambitious. Its formal strength and desire for transcendence, combined with its matter-of-factness, its status as object, are allied in an attempt to forge new territory for painting.

The tradition embodied and extended by this work, is a tradition which believes seeing (the contemplative gaze) and revaluation (the process of discovery) are interchangeable. These paintings have been stripped of demonstration and rhetoric; in their place there is presence. In a world where the clamour of noise and images, seeks to overpower our attention, these paintings contain an inner power, in which gentleness and silence prove more audible and poignant.

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