

ALEXANDER LIBERMAN

PAINTINGS

APRIL 1964

BENNINGTON COLLEGE, VERMONT

INTERVIEW

LAWRENCE ALLOWAY

AND

ALEXANDER LIBERMAN

FEBRUARY 1964

A: *Do you believe in cropping as a legitimate procedure for making paintings?*

L: No, I think it destroys the value of what has been done. Whatever emotional involvement there is gets negated by an intellectual judgment that destroys the creative statement by falsifying it; art becomes a left-over from photography, where everything is so easily cropped. You know, the one purist in photography, Cartier-Bresson, never allows his pictures to be cropped. Everything has to be in there; whatever the eye has seen has to remain. It's extraordinary how photographs are over-purified by the elimination of what seems objectionable, whereas what seems objectionable is really what makes the document original. I think that, in painting, the act of cropping a work of art reduces it to one's conventional conception of what a work of art should be. What seems troublesome may be in fact the stimulating part of the painting.

A: *Does that mean that all your paintings are done in an area which you keep from beginning to end?*

L: Yes. I never crop, and my intense trouble is that whenever I work on a given piece of raw canvas I use all the visible area and sometimes that extra inch on the border that you have to lose for stretching turns out to be a very essential part. So, for me it's a matter of completely filling up an area.

A: *You seem to have more stylistic reach than is customary at the moment in New York with its stress on one image art.*

L: I don't think I believe in a unity of style. I think style is a superficial part of the creative process and that what counts is to be involved, as Plato says in a conversation with the soul. The important thing is to arrive at one's inner image structure, if I could call it that. If one can find it after having created a vacuum so as to eliminate all superficial influences, I believe that a deeper image will keep reasserting itself, reappearing, which may then be called style because of the repetition of this inner obsession.

A: *When you shifted from doing Hard Edge paintings to the kind of painting you are doing*

now, were you conscious of change or of some kind of inner continuity which links the two ways of working?

L: Although I had been working with Hard Edge, there had always been a secondary line of looser and freer drawings and, sometimes, sculpture. This search sometimes strengthened the so-called harder image, but progressively as I worked I had the feeling that maybe it was an impoverishment. I mean what's called precision may only be neatness which is a form of tidiness that holds one back from the adventure of discovering within disorder greater truth.

I believe, too, that much creativity is conditioned by technological means. I discovered duck canvas in huge rolls, and the possibility of using Liquitex and plastic paints, with their abundance because of the use of water. They permitted a generosity of statement that I found was not possible in the more precise media. Also, perhaps, more attention should be paid to the apparently unpleasant elements: 'dirt,' uncleanness.

A: *Do you now equate freedom with the more gestural character of your work, compared to the degree of finish which marked your earlier work? Do you see this as a move from not-freedom to freedom?*

L: Well, I think you put your finger on the human problem, because I think to paint, or to be involved in painting, is to affirm one's existence which has no validity without freedom. Within the realm of one's canvas or sculpture I believe that the individual can sense the total limits of freedom. There must be, within freedom, always a notion of limit, but I feel now that Hard Edge painting limited too obviously the experience of freedom; in a curious way the freedom was secret, hidden beneath the calm flat areas. I have a feeling that more of life and art can be experienced within the so-called accident for the reason that we cannot pre-conceive life. We cannot envision all that's in us.

A: *If what the artist reveals by his art is the unique situation he is in, you need knowledge of the life of the artist, not only the individual work that happens to be before you; or do you think the order and the affirmation I've heard you speak of can be embodied in a single work?*

L: I don't think they can ever be embodied in a single work. I think it's a continuing trace, like a snail going over a stone, a track in time. I have a feeling that Monet's series were perhaps more important than any individual painting of Monet's and I have a feeling that one

just has to paint, paint, paint, to multiply the chances of—well, it's a difficult word to use, but multiply the chances of—revelation. But that's not the point. I mean, justify the existence of the work. What remains, and the only thing that counts, is the work itself and that can only exist through quantity. Now the element of quantity I think is terribly important and, as a result, I do not believe in the concept of masterpieces. I think that out of the sum total of an artist's work there may be, later, one work judged better for some reason—I wouldn't know what reason—but in an artist's involvement I think all works are similar in value.

A: *All the works by one artist?*

L: Yes. I totally disagree with the judgment that such and such is his greatest work. I think all works by a given artist are of equal value.

A: *This is not like Marcel Duchamp, who was trying to be destructive of the concept of the masterpiece. Rather you are diffusing the notion of the masterpiece over the whole life?*

L: Yes, exactly, though I wouldn't say the word 'masterpiece,' because I think the concept of a masterpiece makes one's whole existence divisible into summits, whereas my belief is that the whole creative existence is the indestructible fact.

A: *What are the limits you experience when you are in the painting situation?*

L: A necessity to destroy what I see becomes operative, which I feel as a form of erasing. I used to erase through geometry and now I attempt to erase through quickness and spontaneity. Instead of the so-called impersonality of geometry, I use speed, if possible, to instill the process of disconnecting the mind. A different approach may give better results, because I believe that one of the great problems is to withdraw from the millions of superficial imprints that surround one. I mean television, photography of paintings, movies, newsprint—life around us.

A: *When you throw the paint in an unpredictable way, is it done in one or do you find that you come back to it and do it again? Is there a kind of editing process to be gone through?*

L: Some of these media that I'm using on the canvases seldom permit correction, so working has to be a total commitment. One of the things that I have to solve in my own creative work is to arrive at the point where the thing looks like a thing. I don't want to say it looked beautiful because that's not the question, but then one had to take one's whole life,

which is that thing one is working on, and risk its total destruction for a superior need of reaching a certain unknown. I mean the process of revelation: the painter wants to see what he was not supposed to see, maybe. One must risk total destruction and without this risk I don't think one can maybe reach what one tries to reach.

A: *Although your painting depends so much now on gesture, it looks to me very different from what gesture painting meant in New York a few years ago when everybody was doing it.*

L: Well, I'm afraid I am really very unknowledgable about other artists' work or what went on in their minds. I don't think anyone can truly judge, but my impression, and this was a revelation for me, is that some of the freest abstract work was done from prepared sketches. I went to a collector's house and there were two works that I thought the essence of liberation and freedom and then I found in the hallway two tiny sketches closely related to the big paintings. This meant that the finished works of art were really copies of the true original gestures. I have a feeling that it is more important to create directly, to get involved directly in the canvas, and especially with media that do not permit correction. I have a feeling that somewhere I am still pursuing the clear statement made in one piece. I believe that one has to destroy all concepts of composition and I feel that, although Pollock destroyed the traditional concept of composition, which was a structural one, he introduced a new composition, which was a rhythmic one. It is a new form but is still related to esthetics (a sort of codification of the beautiful) and maybe one can go beyond style or composition or so-called forms. I don't know what "form" means.

A: *How about the practice of yours of what, maybe, we could call, multi-style, because you operate in a number of apparently formerly contrasted areas.¹ Do you find any other artists who have this kind of a range?*

L: Well, I don't know. I think most artists have been free. One shouldn't be building an image, in my judgment. One should be pouring out one's visual impatience. I don't know how to call it in any other way.

I don't know what other artists have done. I have always been stimulated by the abundance of the Renaissance when artists were architects, poets, sculptors, and I think our civ-

¹L. was formerly a strict Hard Edge painter (smooth surfaces, firm boundaries, optical color); he is also a sculptor (flat and economical pieces and garrulous [unexhibited] junk sculpture).

ilization has tended to restrict the talent of the artist in order to label him more easily, like any other commodity, and I think artists must not become a commodity, subject to outside pressures. I think one of the problems of sticking to one's image is that it becomes an economic consideration; this is the commodity that was put on the market and if it changes, like a brand product, the customers won't take it. It is better to be freer through another job, in order to be free to do exactly what one wants to do, and I have kept a job in order to be free in one's realm of art.

A: *Have you anything else to say about Pollock?*

L: I immensely admire him and he continues always to satisfy me, but I just regret that he hasn't got for me the awesomeness of Michelangelo. I mean, Michelangelo has an awesomeness that is insurmountable, and I feel Pollock was very close to it, and my great sorrow is that he died so young. I have a feeling that if he had lived he would have carried it beyond the point where he left it and as we were saying, it's a question of the whole life. My prayer for every artist is to be able to live out his full life because I think it's towards the end of one's artistic life that one is truly liberated from many earthly torments and one really knows that one is going to die, and one is free to dare. This is the case of Titian or Matisse or many other artists.

A: *In your new work you use gesture and the visible track of accidents and this seems to me to be as far as you can get from a project that once entertained you, which was to have your work executed manually by other people. The work was created by you as a concept and then fellows carried it out. Now it seems to me your new work does not and could not exist conceptually before you start to work on it.*

L: Of course not. The whole purpose of the experiment with the work being executed by others was to demonstrate the process of pre-thinking, to see if it could result in a valid work of art, but whatever the result was, in the final analysis there is an impoverishment in the element of the discovery and the ability to change in the process of work. You lose the extraordinary revelations that happen within execution and it is a blind artist indeed who does not feed upon them. They are stages set for visual revelations that could be seized upon. This is the real thing of the creative process. A painting is an area set for destruction, but only after one has pursued a certain constructive

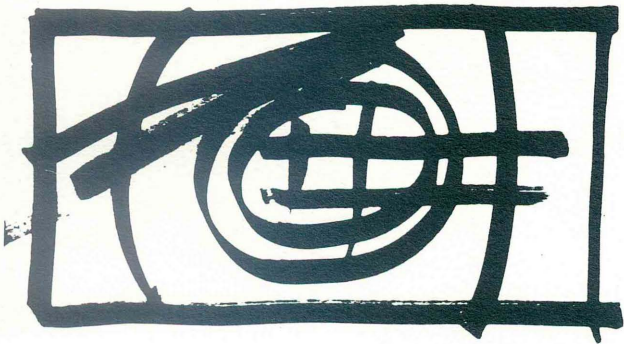
process. One just doesn't destroy the first stroke that one does. I think the first mark put on a blank canvas dictates the whole picture and I think the picture, in a way, is already finished with that first line or the first spot. What I mean is that from that moment on the artist has to hit the right notes all the way, because I think that one spot has conditioned the picture and that is a thing that cannot be given to anyone to execute.

A: *If the first spot sets the picture, does this mean that art has a formal inevitability about it, or would you say that there are in fact a multitude of possible futures for the picture following from that first spot, and that the artist's job is either to find the single solution to the problem posed by that first spot or to follow with rigor one of the possible courses which that spot introduces. One or many futures?*

L: I sometimes have an awful feeling when I put down the first spot that I am pursuing an error all the way, but I still pursue it because in a curious way what I thought was an error sometimes ends up by leading me towards totally unexpected realms. I have a feeling that one spot, the first spot, forces us to live within that painting a certain way.

The fascination of painting is that we can break out, but that spot, that damn spot, will be there and we can never forget it. We can struggle against it and maybe the struggle, the desire to correct the error of the first spot, is what gives us certain chances of discovery. Once this first area is put down, or any area is touched on the canvas, the second area or the second movement is absolutely conditioned by the first trace and from that point on there is a constant feedback of information. The rims or edges of the first spot must in some mysterious way create urges or awaken urges and desires. It's this involvement, not structural but which could be called gravitational and, perhaps, emotional, but corresponding to a feeling of necessity that has its own sort of logic.

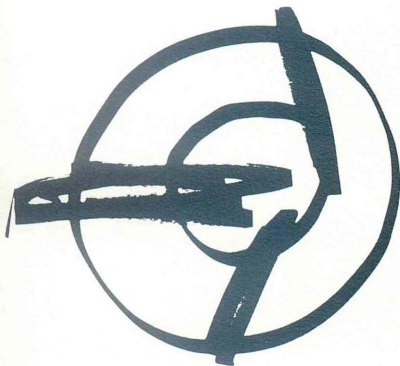
Maybe my paintings have become freer because of my work in sculpture. Sculpture has in it the necessity for structure, a certain logic of mass, and the ability to stand. I have a feeling that once this has been removed from my needs by sculpture, painting is the freest medium. It has absolutely no requisites for anything to be able to stand, anything to be up in a certain direction. The all-directional fluidity of color on the plane of the canvas seems not to have been fully explored.



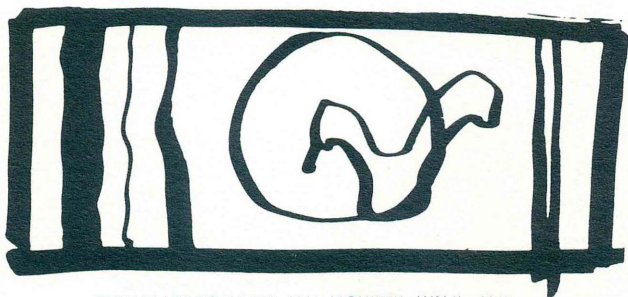
RED SPLASH, 1964. LIQUITEX, 114½" x 155"



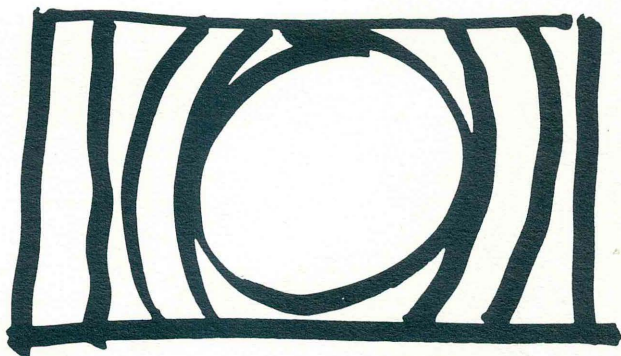
BLUE SPLASH, 1963. LIQUITEX, 80" TONDO



YELLOW SPLASH, 1963. LIQUITEX, 80" TONDO



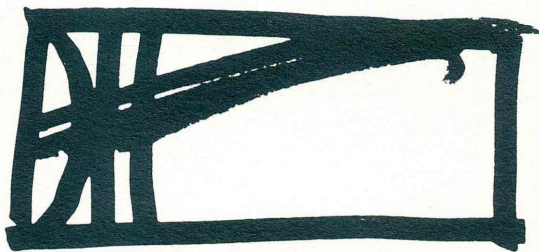
FROM BLACK TO WHITE, 1964. LIQUITEX, 111½" x 236"



BIG BLUE CIRCLE, 1963. LIQUITEX, 111½" x 202"



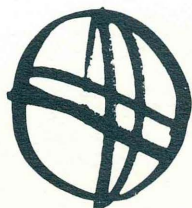
RAW END, 1963. LIQUITEX, 102½" x 198½"



ORANGE SPLASH, 1963. LIQUITEX, 82" x 165"



RED FADING, 1964. LIQUITEX, 82" x 165"



YELLOW CROSS, 1964. LIQUITEX, 50" TONDO