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News from Bennington College

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An important exhibition of paintings by New York artist Doug Ohlson will open in the Suzanne Lemberg Usdan Gallery at Bennington College Sunday, May 9.

Assembled by guest curator E.C. Goossen, the exhibition will feature more than thirty paintings in a twenty-year survey of Ohlson's work from 1962 to 1982. In installing the show and preparing its catalogue, Goossen has been assisted by several Bennington graduate students who are working with him this term. They are David Beitzel, Jeffrey Curto, Richard Jordan, Anne Sofield and Darryl Zeltzer. The exhibit will remain through May 27; the gallery is open to the public Monday through Friday from 1 to 5 p.m.

Ohlson is considered one of the most refined and subtle colorists of this period. Early in his career he found the means to clarify the structure of his paintings in order to emphasize the internal relationships between color and form and to arrive at the true essence of the emotional possibilities of color.

Born in Cherokee, Iowa, in 1936, Ohlson has exhibited since 1959. A major painting has just been purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; other works are owned by the Brooklyn Museum, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

Ohlson's most recent solo exhibition took place earlier this year at the Susan Caldwell Gallery in New York. An exhibition titled "Dark Thoughts: Black Paintings" was shown in 1981 in the Kristan Murchison Gallery in Dallas

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and at Brooklyn's Pratt Manhattan Center Gallery.

Goossen curated an Ohlson show in 1964, part of "Eight Young Artists." In 1968-69 "The Art of the Real: USA 1948-1969," organized by Goossen for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, included Ohlson's work, and it went on to tour in Paris, Zurich and London.

Ohlson was a visiting summer artist at Bennington in 1978 and has held similar positions at Swarthmore College, the Brooklyn Museum School of Art, the University of Iowa and Parsons School of Design.

E.C. Goossen taught at Bennington in the late 1950s and early 1960s, producing 21 exhibitions, each of which has become part of the history of the period. More recently, he curated a Helen Frankenthaler show at Bennington in 1978.

He serves on the faculty of Hunter College, City University of New York, from which he is on sabbatical.

Goossen has written recently about Ohlson's work:

"Propelled to New York in 1961 because that was where one could see what the problems were and what some of the solutions might be, Ohlson became engaged in the difficult dialogue immediately. His first and erstwhile influence...was the early black and white work of Franz Kline...[who achieved] a kind of pictorial biography of the struggle between black and white in which the physicality of the paint was relied upon to remind the viewer that this was indeed a painting, not an anecdote."

"In these 'Idea' paintings...of 1962 Ohlson had developed a blocky sort of form and a spatial division that was not Klinesque and it was these particularities he carried over into his decidedly hard-edged work of 1963..."

"...having learned how to make a 20th century painting...Ohlson was now in a position to move into the second great venture of modernism, the control and exploitation of color."

"From 1965 through 1969 Ohlson worked out of his reliance on the

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solutions of others...mostly by discovering his own peculiar sense of color and ways of placing simple, non-obtrusive shapes...within the rectangular field of the canvas ...A number of the pictures of this period include the joining of separate panels...To get them off the conventional wall...he devised a pair of cubes joined at one corner and placed groups of panels on each of the eight surfaces. Each group was related to the others in an enlarged color spectrum... As one proceeded around this structure the build-up in the visual memory as similar to the way a Bach fugue builds in the ear..."

"Whereas Ohlson had moved in his previous paintings from sharply delineated contrasting color to more harmonious interchanges through close values, in 1970 he began to use a circular sprayed spot on a pre-painted surface... In the late '70s Ohlson gradually developed a new kind of composition based on the introduction of articulated colors around a rectangle...Many of these pictures are too light-sensitive to be shown well in public spaces, like many of those by Reinhardt and Rothko...They are tough pictures because they do not easily reveal their complexity or relieve the viewer of his responsibility to appreciate nuance."

"Often the pictures from 1977 on have an 'open' edge or corner to release the eye from the intense absorption of color that it experiences as it travels back and forth across the canvas...Ohlson's control of color, arrived at by intuition rather than scientific theory, is always part and parcel with the compositional means he has selected at each stage of his evolution..."

"...In the latest paintings of 1982...there is a new opening of the surface by an interruption that constitutes a species of inverse drawing...a shift in the mood in which the density of darkness...is proved and relieved by a stroke of light. What this tells us about where Ohlson is going is probably of less importance than that he goes to the masters for instruction rather than to the art scene."