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The Three Bands: An Artist Replies

by **Ronnie Landfield**

In a review of Ronnie Landfield's recent exhibition at Stephen Haller Gallery in these pages by David Cohen, and in a comment on that article by Scott Bennett, it was suggested that the color field painter should be ready to discard a trademark idiom in his works, the band of solid color that appears often at the base of his compositions. By way of reply Landfield offers an essay he wrote this summer in Santa Fe that gives the background to these bands.

The first stain paintings of mine that had hard-edge bands on the bottom all generate from the late summer of 1969. The bands served three major purposes for the meaning and expression of my paintings at the time.

I was invited to have my first one-man show at the new David Whitney Gallery at 53 E. 19th Street in Manhattan in October 1969. The inaugural exhibition at the gallery in September 1969 was a group show and mine was to be the first one-man show. In August 1969 after returning to New York City from a trip to California I painted "Sunday Afternoon", 108 x 168 inches – a stained landscape with thick, and free-wheeling abstract pours of opaque, linear, colors, thrown across the main body of stained abstract landscape and a wide yellow band across the bottom of the painting. In the yellow band I splattered and splashed acrylic paint so as to create a kind of abstract calligraphy in the band. The painting is now in the permanent collection of the Museum of South Texas, Corpus Christie.

Prior to my trip to California that July I had made a major series of "Pour" paintings and "Sunday Afternoon" was initially a continuation of that series. However as

I contemplated the state of painting, the state of the world and my sense of what it was that I wanted to say as an artist; I saw "Sunday Afternoon" as the beginning of something radically new and in my own voice as an artist.

One of the paintings that immediately followed was "Diamond Lake", 108 x 168 inches. "Diamond Lake" redefined the art of painting.

That painting is a stained landscape with a hard-edge violet band across the bottom and soft and pale stained colors across the top. The top reads as sky, the stained mid-section in the body reads as landscape and the violet band at the bottom serves a threefold function.

In response to the criticism lodged by Donald Judd that painting was dead because it was illusionistic and was a lie because it didn't own up to its objecthood; I decided to move the art of painting forward by redefining it via its own past. By creating new paintings that were illusionistic, pictorial and anti-object. In response as well to the demand by Clement Greenberg that painting be unified, – one thing – one way – I was determined to create a new type of painting that was in keeping with my view of my generation incorporating several philosophies of art-making into my paintings at once. A simile in music might be folk-rock; or the separate sections in a song like "Hey Jude". Moving forward by looking backward. Consequently I distilled my new work beginning with "Diamond Lake" into foreground – middle ground – and back-



Ronnie Landfield, Sunday Afternoon, 1969. Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 168 inches. Museum of South Texas, Corpus Christie

ground sections. The hard-edge bands serving as foregrounds. Initially they were particularly high – almost taking up the bottom third of the picture. The purpose was to project out to the viewer, creating a literal fore-

ground. While the main stained body drew the viewer in with multiple layers of thinned colors, and the sky at the top evoking infinite space.

By aggressively creating physically powerful, cutting edge, abstract paintings that evoked nature – landscape – and foreground, middle ground and background, I was sending a message to artists and art lovers alike in contradiction of Judd's dictums.

By combining hard-edge areas with stained areas I was directly addressing Greenberg's proscribed limitations by essentially changing the priorities of picture making to express and evoke the sometimes contradictory truths of modern life as I perceived it.

The second and perhaps more important underlying meaning of the hard-edge bands in my paintings was the necessity to express the truth of life. The landscape, stained sections of my paintings evoke nature, freedom, wilderness, and the bands include the man-made element that defines our lives in today's world. Architecture, roads, buildings against nature, telephone lines, electric poles, set against the virtual lack of true wilderness in today's world. Even as we drift from canyon to canyon as I used to do in the wilderness of Utah and other places we are proscribed in our lives with appointments and responsibilities, and limits – the bands are metaphors for that essential truth of our lives...



Ronnie Landfield, *Diamond Lake*, 1969. Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 168 inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Philip Johnson

The final meaning of my use of the hard-edge bands was perhaps the most important, certainly one of the most important aspects of my work. I am an admirer of American abstract expressionism, characterized by large scale, aggressive, brash, and matter of fact, in

your eye, surfaces and color. Perhaps those descriptive elements defined some of American culture in the late 1960s and 1970s. I am also an admirer of the history of art.

We were engaged in war in Southeast Asia, and I opposed that war. I was opposed to our aggression against a small, helpless country like Vietnam and throughout that region of the world. My stained landscapes have their roots in Song Dynasty Chinese Landscape painting, characterized by flatness and the depiction of a wide range of terrain at once. Song Dynasty Landscape painting is the beginning of all landscape painting predating the art of the west by a couple of centuries. A visual characteristic of Chinese landscape is the presence of geometric chops, adding the calligraphic signature of the artist as well as calligraphic written poetry; often those paintings on silk were bordered on both sides. The colors and subtlety of those Chinese landscape paintings were stained into the silk fabric reminiscent of the subtlety and color of stain paintings.

My bands are my version of those artist chops. The size and scale of my paintings being aggressive, and evocative of abstract expressionism. Hofmann, Rothko, and Pollock (see "Portrait and A Dream") being important inspirations, for duality and the psychological language of color and scale. In the first stain, band paintings that I made in the late summer of 1969 several including "Rain Dance" I, II, III, and IV as well as "Elijah" (108x55 inches, US State Department), and "Any Day Now", (108x93 inches, Whitney Museum of American Art), there are drawn and painterly lines – my version of calligraphy in the hard-edge bands, further identifying with Chinese landscape in my own terms. The size, brightness, and aggressive surfaces of my paintings are unmistakably western, but the format and iconography is unmistakably eastern. The reflection and respect for eastern philosophy being also a major inspiration for my work as an artist in the 1960s. My stain band paintings serve as a marriage between east and west. Creating a philosophical unity of east and west being an important aspect of one of the most important issues of our lives...