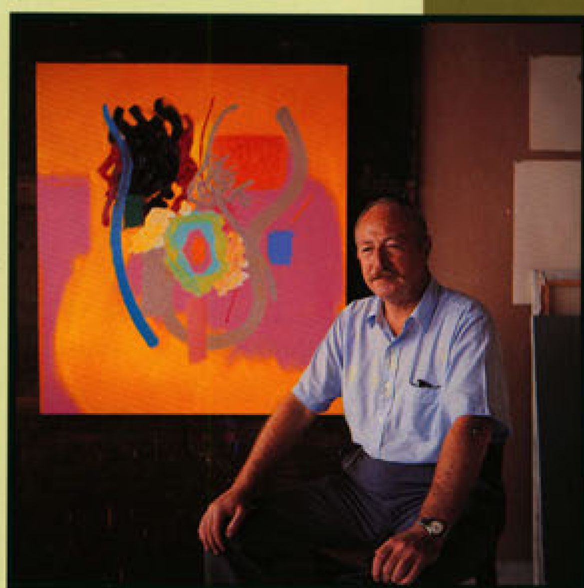
The Abstract Spirit

John Ferren (1905-1970)



The Abstract Spirit: John Ferren (1905-1970)
A three-part exhibition surveying the career
of a pioneering American abstractionist

Formative Years: The 1930s in Paris and Spain
Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center
Telephone: [516] 324-4929
East Hampton, New York
5 August – 30 October 1993

Images from Nature: The 1950s
University Art Gallery
Telephone: [516] 632-7240
State University of New York at Stony Brook
7 September – 23 October 1993

Color Abstractions: The 1960s
The Godwin-Ternbach Museum
Telephone: [718] 997-ARTS
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Foreword

Surveying the artistic achievements of John Ferren is like following the progress of modern abstract art itself, from its origins in Europe through its translation into an American idiom and subsequent proliferation as an international language with numerous regional dialects. As this exhibition and publication demonstrate, Ferren's career represents in microcosm many of the larger concepts and trends that proved decisive in the first six decades of this century. Irving Sandler's personal memoir of Ferren as a friend and colleague and Ann Gibson's astute analysis of his aesthetic and professional development provide the appropriate context for interpreting and assessing his contributions.

Fascinating as his life and career unquestionably are, however, Ferren is more than a subject of art-historical interest. The three distinctive bodies of work that comprise this trilogy prove that the high quality of his ideas about art is matched by the beauty and integrity of his visual expression.

We are deeply grateful to Mrs. John Ferren for her many contributions to the success of this project; Rae's enthusiastic and efficient cooperation made it a pleasure to work with her. Katharina Rich Perlow has also been generous with her resources, both as the agent for the Ferren estate and as a lender in her own right. We wish to thank her and the other lenders for their participation, and to express our gratitude to Ellin Burke of the Whitney Museum of American Art, Elizabeth Levine of Elizabeth Levine & Associates, Alicia Longwell of the Parrish Art Museum, and Pamela Tippman of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, for their contributions to exhibition research and loans.

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Introduction

Irving Sandler

I met John Ferren in 1954 at the Artists Club, where the New York School gathered on Friday nights to debate, dance, and drink. Ferren loved the talk, and indeed arranged the Club panels in 1955. I replaced him as program chairman, but he remained active in Club affairs, one of the few artists of the older generation who did.

1

In a conversation we had in 1957, he recalled: "We were interested in ideas, not in playing art politics or meeting the right people." A recurring topic of discussion was the existential role of the artist. "What was the commitment of the artist and to whom?" For Ferren, "a deep personal commitment is the only social reality."[1]

Ferren was wonderfully convivial, although he never let his geniality get in the way of his discerning intellect. His colleagues disdained conventional society and its stifling mores in the Eisenhower era and in this sense were rebels. But within this group, Ferren was a gadfly, quick to point out hypocracies, always in an even-tempered, soft-spoken manner, puffing gently on his ever-present pipe. Indeed, he looked anything but a maverick, more like a professor (and he was that as well as being an artist) with jacket and tie, his mustache neatly trimmed.

Ferren loved to puncture pretensions and would particularly needle friends who claimed to have some privileged insight into the purpose, meaning, and destiny of art. He once told me that when he first went to Paris, where he lived from 1931 to 1938, he encountered Picasso and Braque in a café in one of their rare meetings. Now, he would get *the message*, perhaps even *the secret* of modern art! He moved close and overheard Picasso say: "Now Georges, that's not the way to put in plumbing." At another time, Ferren recalled that he dreamt he had "solved painting. I woke up and wrote it down. In the morning I found the paper. It said, '76 Green'."[2]

Ferren also twitted his colleagues on their pretentious claims to being avant-garde, after Abstract Expressionism had become "established" – and he was one of the first to recognize that it had.[3]

For Ferren, making art was a kind of "pilgrim's progress," a perpetual search for "personal truth which can be more than personal."[4] And that truth could only be found in the intuitive process of painting. Most of his colleagues in the New York School shared that belief. But many spurned the role of the mind, which they presumed would get in the way of feeling. Not Ferren, who cherished ideas. He

stood opposed to the often anti-intellectual tenor of Artists Club discourse. One of the most damning epithets that could be hurled at an opponent was that he or she was a German professor. As if in reaction to this, Ferren once invited genuine professors of philosophy to speak at the Club and he himself introduced them and moderated the discussion. One of the participants, Arthur Danto, detailed the many ways an image composed only of a horizontal line in its center could be interpreted. This was not the kind of existential art talk usual at the Club and for some time the audience listened in stunned silence. It exploded when the discussion turned to what the color red might signify metaphysically, and the panel was furiously denounced. Ferren expected this, of course, and always benign, puffing on his pipe, kept the peace. But it was clear to those who knew him that he was making a point and relished the hubbub.

Ferren was troubled by the lack of intellect not only in Abstract Expressionist discourse but, even more, in painting, rejecting the idea that "brains hamper a real artist."[5] He was convinced that unbridled spontaneity was yielding painting that was outworn and academic. This led him in 1956, at a time when it was very unfashionable, to introduce a conceptual component – a contained, symmetrical, geometric infrastructure – into his impulsive Action Painting. In a review of his so-called "vase" paintings in his 1958 show, I wrote that the "controlled and intellectual [and the] spontaneous and the emotive are the components of a dialectic – an attempt to synthesize a classical ideal with a romantic quest. The struggle to maintain equilibrium is compelling."[6] The next time we met, Ferren said, smiling and puffing his pipe: "Well yes, I guess I am a Zen Methodist."

Despite his often critical stance, Ferren was always supportive of his colleagues, and they appreciated it. Exemplifying his concern for artists was an act of his in World War II.[7] A member of the OWI, he entered Paris in advance of the Allied armies. The first thing Ferren did was to make his way to Picasso's studio to ensure that he was safe.

2

NOTES: 1. Notes of a conversation with John Ferren, New York, 21 May 1957.

2. Notes of a conversation with Ferren at the Cedar Street Tavern, New York, in the late 1950s.

3. In a statement in "Is There a New Academy?," *Art News* (September 1959, 39), Ferren spoofed academic Action Painting, which he described as having "a certain speed limit – 325 miles per hour. Black and white, of course, with possibly one other color, providing that it is dirty," etc. He also chided his colleagues who had lapsed into academicism: "You don't have to worry about those commitments you made in the old days; somehow, your revolutionary status is preserved intact and is, in fact, fortified by every award, prize or sale."

4. Notes of a conversation with John Ferren, New York, 21 May 1957.

5. John Ferren, Statement, "Is There a New Academy?," 58.

6. I.[rving] H. S.[andler], "John Ferren," *Art News*, November 1958, 14.

7. Ferren was one of the few avant-garde artists to serve in the armed forces during World War II, and it is likely that his four years working for the Army set back his career.

Green Abstraction, 1933.
Oil on canvas, 25 1/2 x 35 1/2 inches.
Catalogue number 4, exhibited
at the Pollock-Krasner House
and Study Center.

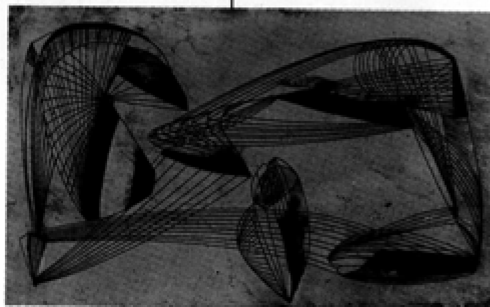
"Mind Is Not Banished and Neither Is The Heart"
John Ferren and the Dangers of Classical Abstraction

Ann Gibson

John Ferren knew that explaining and elucidating the avant-garde, especially the abstract expressionist avant-garde, was a "tribal taboo left to wives and critics."[1] And perhaps for good reason. As he noted, ambiguity is much safer. But with the caveat that he was for ambiguity insofar as it was necessary for the comprehension of the poetic act, he admitted – and you can hear the sigh in the sentence – "my own (fatal?) impulse is toward clarification."[2]

Clarity, however, was not at the top of the agenda in Ferren's circles. As an almost-charter-member abstract expressionst (he joined the Club in its second year),[3] Ferren was an anomaly. He frequently told interviewers that he was the only abstract expressionist who hadn't been on the WPA. This wasn't exactly accurate, since Dorothy Dehner, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Ethel Schwabacher, and Theodoros Stamos were among those who hadn't been on it either. But the point Ferren wished to make by this assertion – namely, that he hadn't gone through the initiation rites common to most of the abstract expressionists – was germane.

Raised on a series of Indian reservations in southern Oregon, southern Idaho, Washington and northern California (his father was in the Indian Service, which was then under Army jurisdiction), Ferren was a loner with inclinations that indicated a certain analytical and poetic bent. In high school he took up ham radio, read voraciously, and for two years, as an usher, attended every performance of the symphony. He taught himself to play the piano and thought about becoming a musician.[4] But he went to work instead for the telephone company, began stonecarving around 1925, and soon was carving tombstones and decorative stonework for a living. It was a good living, too, and by 1929 Ferren had saved enough to go to Europe. He stayed for a short time, then came back to the U.S., but in 1931 he returned to Paris and stayed in Europe for eight years.[5]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Here is where Ferren really parted company with his future colleagues, including other abstract expressionists like Clyfford Still, Jackson Pollock, Reuben Kadish, and Philip Guston, who had also grown up in the West. Not only was Ferren unaware of the plastic arts until after high school, but he also went directly from California to Paris. Until the late thirties, New York was for him only a way-station.

When Ferren arrived in Paris, however, he seemed to be making up for lost time. He did not just meet the Parisian avant-garde, he was close to them, notably Jean Hélion, Piet Mondrian, Joan Miró, Picasso (whom Ferren helped stretch the canvas for *Guernica*), Barbara Hepworth, and Ben Nicholson.[6] The list suggests Ferren's leanings toward classical abstraction at that time. Although he said to one interviewer that "Paris in the thirties was too intense to isolate any particular influence," he also added that "the only one who really did influence me was Kandinsky, and he was only there in the latter part of my time there."[7] Ferren was referring not to Kandinsky's earlier expressionistic paintings, but to his hard-edged biomorphic style, whose influence can be seen in *Green Abstraction* (cat. no. 4). Painted in 1933, the canvas shows that Ferren had already learned much from Kandinsky prior to their actual meeting.

Perhaps through being exposed to numerous well-developed and fully theorized styles, Ferren evolved a certain informed independence in his own work. Although he came to think that Mondrian was "perhaps *the* great painter of our time," and as he noted of himself, his early work in Paris was "pretty strict, very hard-edge," his first notable success was with an art form not much like anyone else's. He attracted widespread notice with a group of plaster bas-reliefs (fig. 3, for example) that he exhibited and sold from his 1936 and 1938 shows at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York. Matisse wanted more of them for the new season – the plasters sold well and Ferren's paintings didn't – but as Ferren recalled, he didn't want to make more plasters, so he and his dealer parted ways.[8] His painting at this time was evolving into rounder, more organic forms.

During his time in Paris Ferren felt closer to Hélion than to anyone else, "although I had a deeper space and a much more elaborate color" than Hélion did, Ferren said, recalling that "Hélion and I saw a good deal of one another."[9] A dues-paying member of the Abstraction-Création group organized in 1931 to combat surrealism, Ferren produced writings "that would clarify the abstract position and poke holes in the surrealist position." With Hepworth and Nicholson, Ferren thought surrealism's 17th century painting techniques were retrogressive, although he later noted that the surrealists' idea of the unconscious was a powerful influence on him.[10]

Ferren's alliance with the Abstraction-Création group arose out of inner conviction and in accord with a certain personal taste for precision, but also from a developing awareness of what we would now call the "constructed character" of artistic reputations. "The French really had no regard or cared much about Kandinsky," he observed, "or Klee." Concerning the critical evaluation of painters, even French ones considered to be past masters in the thirties, Ferren noted that "you never saw any painting by Monet. Bonnard was still alive but we never saw his work. . . . He was old hat at the time. Impressionism was something that Cubism had to destroy." Ferren also remarked: "In the café you didn't mention Bonnard."[11]

Ferren's observations gave him a sense of proportion and distance when he became involved with the New York School. He was in certain respects a middleman at the Club, organizing panels and moderating many of them. But this meant that, "in other words, my own opinions were seldom expressed. I was good at the legal aspects of bringing out two sides of an argument," he concluded.[12] Ferren's ability to articulate both sides of a question also made him seem more in control, less ruled by his impulses. "He was always

suspect for the 50's because he was thought to be too refined, too genteel and a little glib," as the critic Louis Finkelstein wrote in retrospect.[13] His Paris experience made him unable to believe that success was due entirely to a disembodied kind of merit, or that quality was absolute. "Good in the modern way is not good in the conservative way," he wrote in 1948. An important question, he stated, is: "Good for whom, when, and why?" Although he concluded by advising the mature artist not to compromise, but to "be on one side of the fence or the other and . . . so state – to himself and the public,"[14] his sense of relativism eventually proved to be a handicap, for it kept Ferren from wholeheartedly embracing any faction of what became known as abstract expressionism.

Ferren joined the New York avant-garde by happenstance. On a visit for his 1938 Pierre Matisse exhibition, and following the collapse of his first marriage, Ferren's passport was cancelled due to the onset of World War II and he found himself in New York without friends, without support and feeling rather lost. In order to hone his skills he set about learning Renaissance painting techniques, although the works he produced were never exhibited. Understandably sensing that he was out of place, and still draftable at age 38, he applied to the Army, which turned him down because he had no formal education, and the Navy, which rejected him as "an abstract painter and therefore possibly subversive." Finally, through a friend, he was hired as a civilian employee of the Office of War Information, where he served as Chief of Publications for the Psychological Warfare Division.[15]

4

Following his discharge from duty in 1946, Ferren began to move his art back into abstraction. His work included a series of mothers and children in a linear style with loose brushwork, followed by a less cubistic series of expressionistic landscape abstractions based on his summer trips back and forth from New York to his summer home in Brentwood, Los Angeles. By 1950, with canvases such as the large and generously-brushed *Figuration* (fig. 4), Ferren's work *looked* New York School. This was not, for Ferren, an opportunistic jump into a style that didn't suit him. As he had proven with the plasters and as he would prove again with his "vase" series, Ferren could not be swayed by the winds of either fashion or success when their direction was counter to his own. After the war, as he still recalled in 1968, he "thought that abstract expressionism was the only vital element in New York at that time."[16] In the late forties and early fifties, "I took the abstract expressionist experience quite seriously," he said. "I mean I did start, you know, in front of the canvas, with nothing in my mind at all."[17]

Yet, surely based on his experience of the vagaries of success among the Parisian avant-garde, Ferren began to question whether abstract expressionism was a style, a process, or an attitude:

> I think that the whole abstract expressionist movement that *I* was in at least was a far larger movement, taking in many more aspects of it than come out the other end of the horn, somehow. . . . I still can't see that, say, Rothko or de Kooning belonged to the same club. And I don't belong to the club of either one. . . . It wasn't a style, it wasn't a way of working; it was an attitude toward art and the artist and his place in society.[18]

Ferren's doubts were probably increased, if not engendered, by his experience with his "vase" paintings in the mid fifties (see *The Vase*, 1956, fig. 2). Following the abstract expressionist dictum to paint from instinct, intuition, and need, Ferren claimed that the centralized image "just obsessed me, and I worked more and more on it and then one day it just kind of took the form of a vase."[19] But the "vase" paintings gave Ferren trouble from the start. It took not only the artist but also his friends Nicolas Carone and James Brooks to talk Eleanor Ward into putting them into his second show at the Stable Gallery. "She said they looked like jukeboxes and she couldn't show them," Ferren recalled.[20]

"The fact that I was doing recognizable form was a shocker at the time," Ferren believed. "I was treated as a traitor to the cause by many of my friends."[21] The difficulties were evident even in the rhetoric of Dore Ashton's positive and thoughtful review, in which she compared the static imagery in Ferren's vase, pitcher, cup, and chalice paintings to the "fearful symmetry" of Blake's "tyger, tyger, burning bright." Her reservations about the work are evident, however, in her description of his line as "nervous, at times preposterous," her observation that he "uses garish metallic paints extensively, braving the dangers of vulgarity," and her assertion that he "dared to centralize his image and come dangerously close to banality."[22]

This experience with colleagues and critics seems to have galvanized Ferren's sense that abstract expressionism was becoming set in its ways. He began to doubt that either large fields of unbroken color or apparently unrestrained gestural strokes were a guarantee of good painting. His response was expressed with tongue-in-cheek sarcasm in his statement for a 1959 *Art News* article entitled "Is There a New Academy?" Casting himself as a fictitious "hot" artist, he reported that he had just received three calls from Europe begging for his "real gutsy" American things. Naturally the Europeans wanted black and white canvases, "with nothing 'painterly' about them. That is something that they know all about over there" he quipped, adding, "and we don't here and, therefore, of course, shouldn't try for it."

"Didn't we say that our idea was no idea?" he continued, regarding the characteristics of the new academy. "After all, we made floundering an art form and we are loved all over the world for it; our academy is very keen on this." As the culmination of several increasingly reductive compositions, the climax comes

following a nap when, "panting and sweating," the artist covers the canvas with a single color, "very sensuous, as one color usually is," to arrive at a painting that is "all act, all spirit." "I know that some other guy painted a one color picture," he admitted in a mock-defensive tone, "but his had texture." And anyway, he insisted, "I can drip and slash with the best of them."[23]

One might ask how Ferren differentiated his own work from that of the "academy" he skewered in *Art News*. His paintings dating from this period, such as *Greenock* (cat. no. 31), *Image: Dog Walker* (cat. no. 34), and *Tandil* (cat. no. 35), seem to offer the viewer both color field and gestural experiences. In an interview with Dorothy Seckler in 1965, he explained where his heart lay:

> Color has always been my thing, and this . . . the mystique of the time held against me. Early abstract expressionism had to be somber, black and white, you see. . . . People close to me would say, 'Ferren, if you'd just paint black and white everything would go fine for you.' I never would. . . . Color demands control. You can't slap the colors on over one another. . . . So the color always kept a certain element of discipline in my work. Which at that time made certain elements of it look fairly tame I would say. I was not one of the red-hot brush throwers.[24]

"I do think that at bottom the classic is probably the dominant factor and I think it takes a man maybe a lifetime to find that out," Ferren told Seckler.[25]

In 1963-64 the U. S. Department of State sent Ferren to Lebanon for a year to promote American culture and, as he understood his role, to counter the dominant French influence in the visual arts.[26] The assignment freed him from full-time teaching for a year and he found that, although English was widely spoken in Lebanon, the artists he met there thought in French. He had a wonderful and highly influential year – one which clarified the direction of his work toward pure form and color. When he returned home, his painting became far flatter and more hard-edged than anything he had done since Paris. He began painting what Louis Finkelstein called mandorlas – that is, almond-shaped forms (see *Pace*, 1965, cat. no. 36, *Yellow One Yellow*, 1966, cat. no. 44, and *Trio*, 1967, cat. no. 49). Although the mandorlas are symmetrical, the bands around them are not. The intense colors interact in accordance with the principles of simultaneous contrast but they produce neither "op" vibrations nor afterimages. For Finkelstein the major structure of these paintings lay in the rhythms of their concave and convex forms. He asked Ferren which came first, the color decisions or the drawing, with its successive arcs of apparently concentric bands whose centers describe revealing proportions, such as the Golden Section. Ferren said that color and drawing were completely intertwined.[27]

A year earlier, Ferren had told Dorothy Seckler that he liked complexity, but complexity in unity – as demonstrated by his pre-Lebanon paintings, with their combination of firm and loose areas which he called a "dialogue effect." This thought, appropriate to Ferren's whole career, makes Finkelstein's conclusion seem a judicious one: "Ferren's own contention, that he is interested in color, finally occupies the center of one's vision of him, and he does not have to be an Abstract-Expressionist. . . . Mind is not banished and neither is the heart."[28]

NOTES: 1. John Ferren, "The Ideas of the Avant-Garde," *L.L.A. Newsletter*, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y., The Paul Klapper Library, Summer 1958, n. pag. The lecture was published in *Arts* 33:2 (November 1958), 24-25, 68, as "Epitaph for an Avant-Garde," a title Ferren said was chosen by the magazine and whose negative implications did not represent his intentions. John Ferren, interview with Ruth Gurin, 28 October 1964, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C. (hereafter cited as AAA/SI), 7.

2. Ferren, "Epitaph," 24.

3. For an account of the Club and a list of its early members, see Irving Sandler, "The Club," *Artforum* (September 1965), repr. in *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*, ed. David and Cecile Shapiro (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 48-58.

4. John Ferren discusses his early years in an interview with Paul Cummings, 7 June 1968, AAA/SI, 2-12.

5. Gurin interview, 2.

6. John Ferren, interviews with Dorothy Gees Seckler, June 1965, AAA/SI, 5, 7; and Gurin, 6. As Ferren noted to Cummings (12), he wasn't in the expatriate world – he didn't know Hemingway or "the New York people."

7. Seckler interview, 7.

8. Cummings interview, 22.

9. Seckler interview, 10; Gurin interview, 10.

10. Seckler interview, 10; Gurin interview, 7.

11. Seckler interview, 7, 8.

12. Cummings interview, 37.

13. Louis Finkelstein, "John Ferren's Mandorla," *Art News* 65:4 (Summer 1966), 34.

14. John Ferren, letter to the editor, *Magazine of Art* 41:7 (November 1948), 276.

15. Cummings interview, 26-27. Through his various connections in Europe, Ferren had developed fine French, passable Spanish, and rudimentary Italian which, with his experience in polemic writing in support of abstract art, made him an effective partisan for the Allies in the European theater.

16. Cummings interview, 37.

17. Seckler interview, 21; see also "Epitaph for an Avant-Garde," 25.

18. Cummings interview, 22.

19. Seckler interview, 28.

20. Cummings interview, 36.

21. Seckler interview, 28, 29.

22. Dore Ashton, "Art," *Arts & Architecture* 74:3 (March 1957), 9.

23. John Ferren, "Is There a New Academy? Part II Answers from: Friedel Dzubas/John Ferren/Alex Katz/Michael Loew/Raymond Parker/Milton Resnick/Richard Stankiewicz/George Sugarman/Jack Tworkov," *Art News* 58:6 (September 1959), 39, 58, 59.

24. Seckler interview, 24.

25. Seckler interview, 41.

26. Information supplied to the author by Rae Ferren, 15 June 1993.

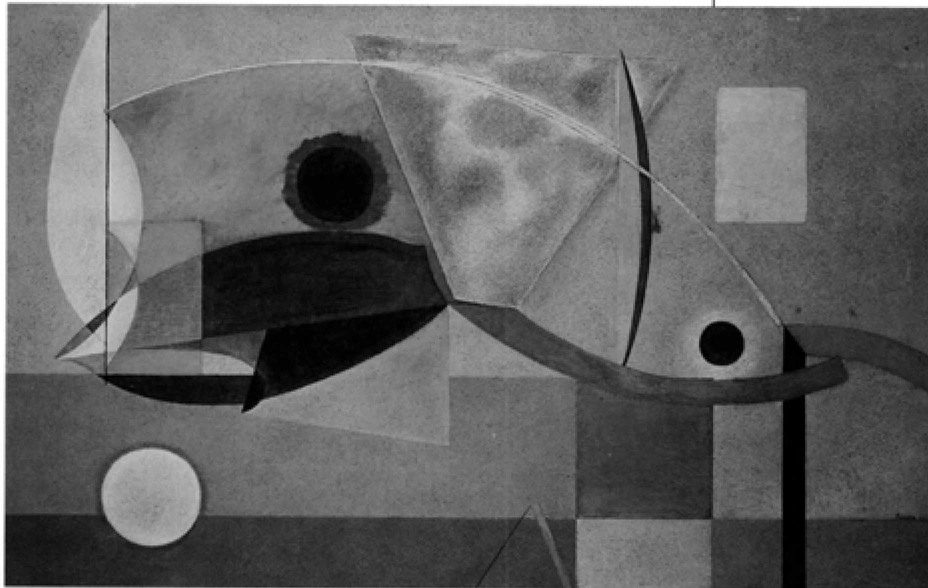
27. Finkelstein, "John Ferren's Mandorla," 34.

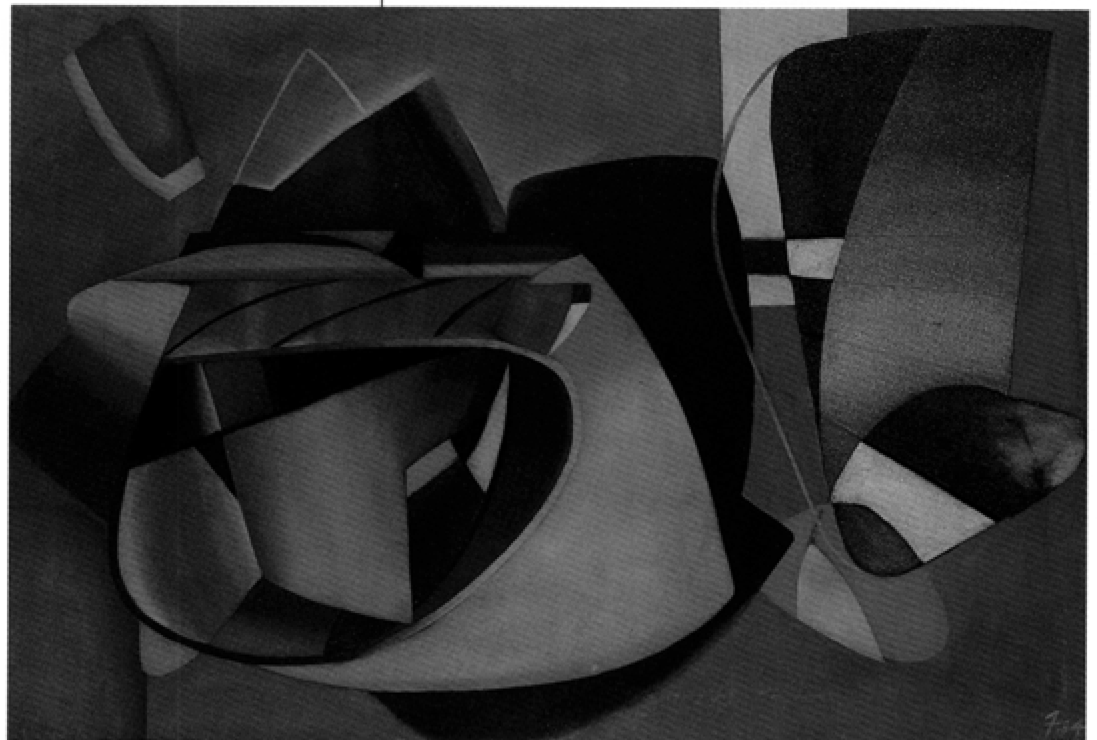
28. Ibid, 66.

Untitled, 1952.
Oil on canvas, 32 x 48 inches.
Catalogue number 19,
exhibited at the University Art Gallery,
State University of New York
at Stony Brook.

Formative Years: The 1930s in Paris and Spain
Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center

1. *Paris Yellow*, 1932. Oil on canvas, 22 1/2 x 36 1/2.
2. *Mallorca*, 1932. Oil on canvas, 22 x 36.
3. *Grazioso*, 1933. Oil on canvas, 25 3/4 x 21 1/4. Lent by Rae Ferren.
4. *Green Abstraction*, 1933. Oil on canvas, 25 1/2 x 35 1/2.
5. Untitled, 1933. Watercolor on paper, 3 1/2 x 5 1/2.
6. Untitled, 1933-34. Oil on canvas, 21 1/2 x 27 1/2. Lent by Katharina Rich Perlow.
7. *Mallorca*, 1934. Watercolor on paper, 9 x 11 1/2.
8. Untitled, 1934. Watercolor on paper, 8 1/2 x 11.
9. *Composition*, 1934-37. Oil on canvas, 42 x 62. Lent by Katharina Rich Perlow.
10. Untitled, 1935. Oil and sand on canvas, 19 1/2 x 24.
11. Untitled, 1936. Watercolor on paper, 16 x 12.
12. Untitled, 1936. Watercolor on paper, 9 x 12 1/2.
13. *Sea Forms*, 1937. Woodcut, 14 1/2 x 14 1/2.
14. Untitled, 1936. Oil on wood, 13 1/4 x 22 5/8. Lent by Rae Ferren.
15. *Study on Blue*, undated. Oil on pressed board, 9 1/2 x 13. Lent by Rae Ferren.


cat. no. 2


cat. no. 9

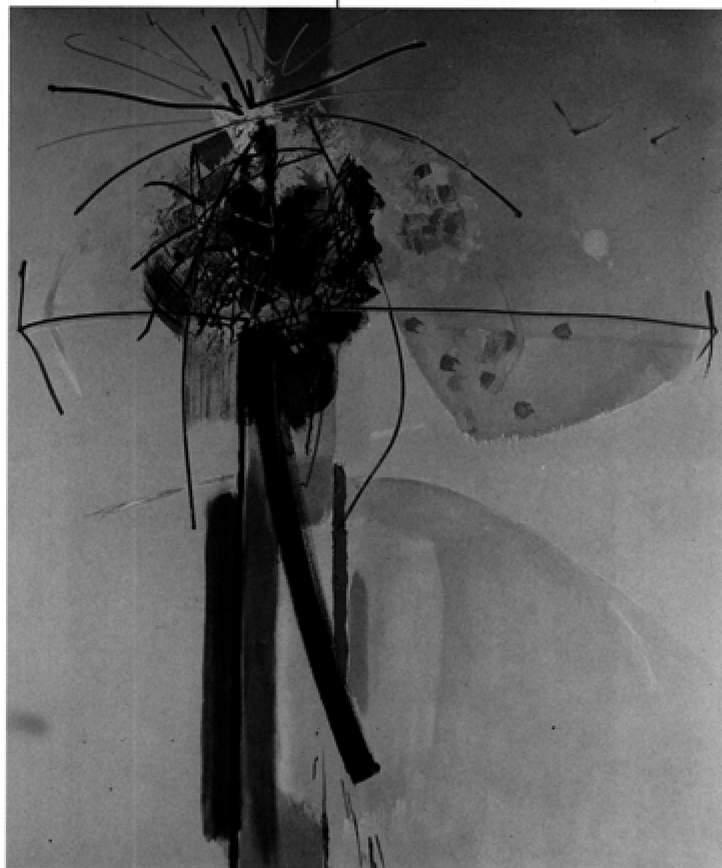
Works in the Exhibition

Unless otherwise indicated, all works are lent by the Estate of John Ferren, courtesy of the Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, New York. Measurements are given in inches, with height preceeding width.

Images from Nature: The 1950s
University Art Gallery,
State University of New York at Stony Brook

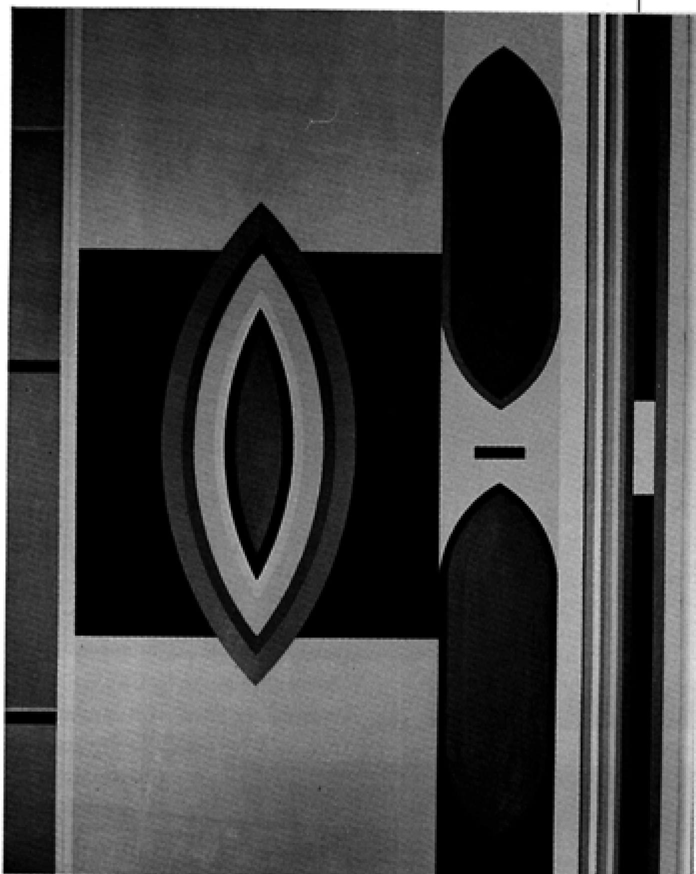
16. *The Garden*, 1951. Oil on canvas, 66 x 92.
17. *The Garden II*, 1951. Oil on canvas, 85 x 50.
18. *Sierra*, 1952. Oil on canvas, 50 x 72.
19. Untitled, 1952. Oil on canvas, 32 x 48.
20. *Red Spot*, 1953. Oil on canvas, 60 x 48.
21. *Utah*, 1954. Oil on canvas, 48 x 54. Lent by Cleary, Gottlieb, Steen & Hamilton, New York.
22. *Western Landscape*, 1954. Oil on canvas, 68 x 95. Lent by Bran Ferren.
23. *The Conquest of Mexico*, 1954. Oil on canvas, 81 x 66½.
24. *Nebraska*, 1954. Oil on canvas, 50 x 60.
25. *Valley of the Kings*, 1955. Oil on canvas, 55 x 72.
26. *Birch Branches*, 1955. Oil on canvas, 72 x 54½. Lent by Bran Ferren.
27. *August*, 1955. Oil on canvas, 72 x 61. Lent by Katharina Rich Perlow.
28. *L'Envoi*, 1955-60. Oil on canvas, 75½ x 63¼.
29. Untitled, 1956. Oil on canvas, 75½ x 60.
30. *The Figure*, 1958. Oil on canvas, 48 x 40.
31. *Greenock*, 1958. Oil on canvas, 55 x 69.
32. *November*, 1958. Oil on canvas, 54 x 65.
33. *The Skaian Gate*, 1958. Oil on canvas, 66 x 72½. Lent by The Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York.
34. *Image: Dog Walker*, 1958. Oil on canvas, 73 x 55.
35. *Tandil*, 1959. Oil on canvas, 65 x 72.

cat. no. 18



cat. no. 23

Color Abstractions: The 1960s
The Godwin-Ternbach Museum, Queens College

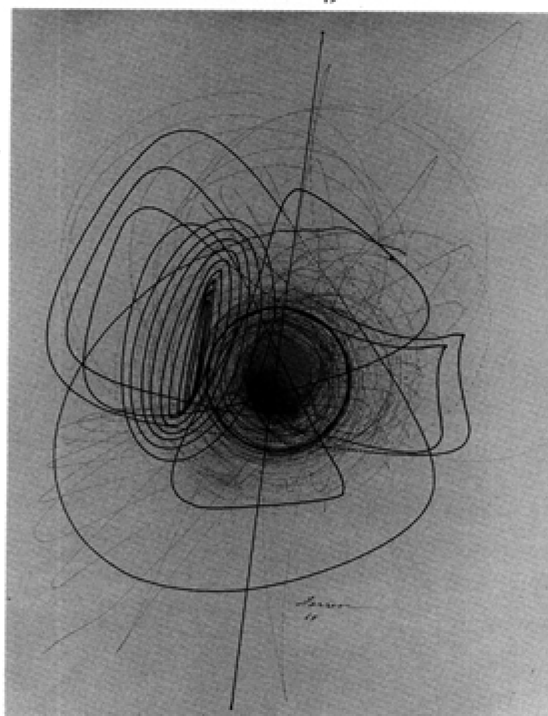


cat. no. 49

36. *Pace (Peace)*, 1965. Oil on canvas, 72 x 60.
37. *Shiraz*, 1965. Oil on canvas, 73 x 61.
38. *Red Queen*, 1965. Oil on canvas, 50 x 45.
39. *Two Moons*, 1965. Oil on canvas, 27 x 65 1/4.
40. Untitled, 1965. Oil on canvas, 25 x 30.
41. *Green Dominant*, 1966. Oil on canvas, 24 x 29.
42. *Red Field*, 1966. Oil on canvas, 72 x 76.
43. *Green Field*, 1966. Oil on canvas, 58 x 73.
44. *Yellow One Yellow*, 1966. Oil on canvas, 50 x 56.
45. *Mood*, 1966. Oil on canvas, 25 x 24.
46. Untitled, 1966. Oil on canvas, 47 x 62.
47. *Red With Violet and Green Mandala*, 1966. Oil on canvas, 72 x 60.
48. *Fahadrev*, 1966-68. Oil on canvas, 40 x 38.
49. *Trio*, 1967. Oil on canvas, 56 x 72.
50. Untitled, 1967. Painted wood, 23 1/2 x 65 1/2.
51. *Fahajro*, 1968. Oil on canvas, 36 x 40.
52. *Like The Birth of Venus*, 1968. Oil on canvas, 72 x 61.
53. *Tear Chalice*, 1968. Oil on canvas, 65 1/2 x 53.
54. *Radial*, 1968. Oil on canvas, 72 1/2 x 57.
55. *Study (A)*, 1968. Oil on wood, 12 x 24.
56. *Study (B)*, 1968. Oil on wood, 12 x 24.

57-63. Seven mixed-media drawings, 1968. Ink, pastel, and oil spray on paper, each 24 x 18.

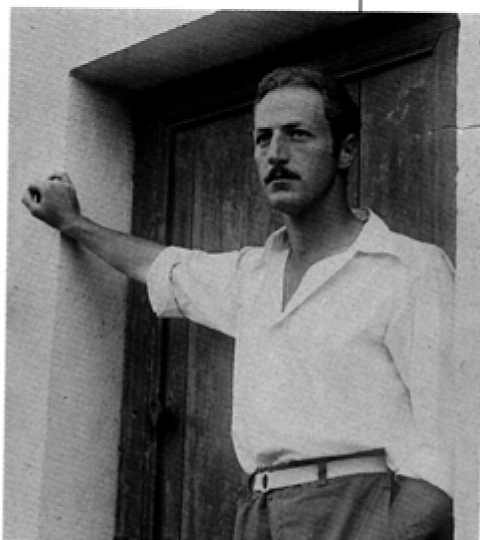
64. *Three-Cornered Orange*, 1969. Oil on canvas, 60 x 72.
65. *Two Stars*, 1969. Oil on canvas, 58 x 72.
66. *Red, White, Blue*, 1969. Oil on canvas, 50 x 45.
67. *Green, Violet, Orange, Red*, 1969. Oil on canvas, 60 x 50 1/2.
68. Untitled, 1969. Oil on canvas, 18 x 24.
69. *Double Star*, 1969. Oil on canvas, 55 x 72. Collection of Queens College. Installed in the New Science Building.



cat. no. 57

Like the Birth of Venus, 1968.
Oil on canvas, 72 x 61 inches.
Catalogue number 52,
exhibited at the Godwin-Ternbach
Museum, Queens College.

John Millard Ferren was born on 17 October 1905 in Pendleton, Oregon, but spent his youth in California. Without formal training in art, he developed an interest in sculpture and began exhibiting in San Francisco and Los Angeles. After working as a sculptor and stonecarver for several years, he visited Europe in 1929. His experiences during this trip caused him to turn his attention toward painting. Returning to Europe in 1931, he studied art history, philosophy, and languages at the Sorbonne and in Italy and Spain. In 1932 he married Laure Mathilde Ortiz de Zarate, daughter of a Spanish painter; they were divorced in 1938.



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Ferren remained in Europe throughout his formative years as a painter, although he made brief return trips to the United States, often in conjunction with exhibitions of his work. At this time he was represented by the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York and was loosely associated with the American Abstract Artists, while also exhibiting abroad. The outbreak of World War II forced him to remain in America and arrange for storage of the works in his Paris studio. His second marriage, to Inez Chatfield in 1940, also ended in divorce. During the war he returned to Europe as a civilian attached to the Office of War Information, served in Algeria, Italy, and France, and was awarded the Bronze Star for his work in publications.

After his discharge in 1946, Ferren returned to painting and began his teaching career at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, where he taught until 1950. He also taught at The Cooper Union, and gave private classes in his studio at 52 East 9th Street in Manhattan. In 1952 he joined the faculty of Queens College, where he ultimately became a full professor in the Art Department.

Having established himself in New York, Ferren became an influential presence in the developing American vanguard. He participated in the landmark 9th Street exhibition in 1951, showed regularly at the Stable and Rose Fried galleries, and was included in numerous group exhibitions around the country. As an active member of The Club, he participated in many of the discussions that helped focus attention on the emerging New York School.

In addition to teaching, writing, and lecturing on modern art, Ferren was involved in two cinematic projects for the director Alfred Hitchcock, creating the artwork featured in "The Trouble With Harry" (1955) and designing the nightmare sequence for "Vertigo" (1958). The artist and his family – his wife, the painter Rae Tonkel, whom he married in 1949, and their son Bran, born in 1953 – summered in Brentwood, California, until 1958, when they bought property in The Springs, East Hampton, Long Island. In 1963, he was sent to Beirut, Lebanon, under the State Department's American Specialists Abroad program, for which he also traveled and lectured in India, Pakistan and the Middle East. Before returning to the United States in 1964, he was a resident at the American Academy in Rome.

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Ferren is widely represented in public collections, including those of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Cleveland Museum of Art; the Detroit Institute of Arts; the Los Angeles County Museum; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D. C.; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. His work was the subject of numerous one-person exhibitions, the last in his lifetime at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton, New York. He died in Southampton Hospital on 25 July 1970. – H. A. H.

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Illustrations

Front Cover: John Ferren with a painting in progress in his Beirut studio, 1963. Courtesy of Rae Ferren.

Fig. 1: Ferren with *The Chalice*, 1956. Photo: Ken Whitmore.

Fig. 2: *The Vase*, 1956. Oil on canvas, 73 x 64 inches. Estate of John Ferren.

Fig. 3: Untitled #35, 1937. Plaster and glass relief, 11 1/4 x 17 1/2 inches. Estate of John Ferren. Photo: Edward Peterson.

Fig. 4: *Figuration*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 43 x 70 inches. Private collection, courtesy of the Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, New York.

Fig. 5: Ferren in Spain, ca. 1933. Courtesy of Rae Ferren.

Fig. 6: Ferren with his class at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, ca. 1947. Courtesy of Rae Ferren.

Fig. 7: Ferren at work in his Beirut studio, 1963. Photo: Issa Brothers.