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George D. Green: Influences Behind His Work

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NOTE: This paper is part of a collective project that is published online in the Michigan-based *Undergraduate Research Journal for the Human Sciences*, 2008 Special Edition: "Eye Deceptions: The Evolution of George Green's Painting from the Late 1970's to the Present" (http://www.kon.org/urc/v7/v7a/george-d-green-painting-evolution.html). Our sincere gratitude to Dr. Dorothy I. Mitstifer, Executive Director of the *Undergraduate Research Journal for the Human Sciences*, the Honors Society Kappa Omicron Nu and the Association of College Honor Societies, for authorizing the separate publication of this paper, as individual contribution, in the 2008 SDSU *Journal of Undergraduate Research*. All the reproduced images of paintings by George D. Green are courtesy the artist.

LATE 1970's AND EARLY 1980's

In *Untitled 9* (Figure 1), Green created a composition consisting of banners. He created a rich texture by draping them one on top of the other and giving each banner its own shadow to make them pop off of the canvas. There are breaks in the overlapping and we see the white of the canvas showing through. Green applies a gradient to most of the banners and disperses another texture throughout them, in order to give the impression of a different material. The positioning of the banners makes them coalesce in the center of the composition, forming a triangular form, which points downward. The addition of the orange banner emphasizes the directional force. There are additions, to the painting, that stand out from the banner elements. Pieces of white masking tape rest behind the banners.

George Green's use of tape can be traced back to Wallerant Vaillant's *Letter Rack*, 1658 (Figure 27). Here, on a wooden board, Vaillant has positioned letters that are kept in place by nailed down strips of tape. The strapping is perceived to fasten the letters, while Green's pieces of tape apparently fasten some of the banners.

In Green's painting (Figure 1), what appears to be a clipping of a completely different painting has been adhered to a banner using the same white masking tape. Another clipping can be found near the left side of the painting, beneath a banner that seems to be folding itself up to reveal what is underneath it. Cornelius Gijsbrects' *Studio Wall*, 1665 (Figure 28), also contains a folded piece of fabric that reveals the canvas supports underneath.

The clipping in Green's painting contains smeared paint that later becomes a regular element. Throughout his works of this period, Green added paint streaks that are similar to smears on a painter's palette. There seems to be dimension to the paint streaks, appearing to be built up by layers. Their role becomes more that of an object and less that of simply texture, but the viewer is not sure if this is an actual dimension, or just another illusion.

Green's painting *Bare Narious Ojay*, 1979 (Figure 2) echoes the banner forms found in *Untitled 9* (Figure 1). They have been given a playful, pastel tone. Green plays with proportion by enlarging some of the banners. Unlike the previous work, this one contains no breaks to reveal the white underneath, just another banner underlying another. Green's style, like that of Frank Stella, consists of overlapping similar shapes to create a cohesive meshing effect, and at the same instance it creates the illusion of depth between the elements (Stella 154).

Similar to George Green's *Fox Trot*, 1981 (Figure 3) is Stella's *Raqqa II*, 1970 (Figure 34). *Raqqa II* includes overlapping semicircles that seem to mesh together yet remain separated by the use of various hues. Where each semicircle overlaps and touches another, new forms and directional forces are created. This effect makes it difficult for the viewer's eyes to find a start or a stop in activity.

Directional forces keep the viewer's eye continuously moving, searching for a focal point to rest upon. Green's textural solution consists of making the gestural strokes and the banners one, not simply paint applied to the banners. More pieces of masking tape have been added to the composition but have been given color. Perhaps they were used to mask out areas of the painting and later placed throughout the composition.

The masking tape's shadows (Figure 3) are placed a distance away, suggesting that the masking tape is much closer to the viewer than the rest of the painting. The shadows also allow them to freely float above the banners. In this way, the banners appear heavier and act as a backdrop, while the pieces of tape rise up and leap towards the viewer. One piece has found its way outside of the composition and overlaps with white frame. In *Podge-Wade*, 1981 (Figure 4), Green begins combining two or more banners to form new shapes. He has also combined the pieces of tape to form lightning bolt shapes.

THE 1980's: SHAPED CANVASES

When studying George Green's shaped canvas period, the influence of Elizabeth Murray upon his work is apparent. Like Green, she used shaped canvases and pop color palettes. Murray's *Tempest* (Figure 38) and Green's *Holy Rollers* (Figure 5) contain both similarities. *Holy Rollers* contains a chaotic lightning bolt element that weaves in and around the angular shapes, while the yellow lightning bolt in *Tempest* weaves in and around the voluminous shapes. "...the fine yellow line that connects and penetrates the figures seems almost narrative and at the same time like the emblematic signs used by cartoonists to indicate motion, surprise, or an aside that is not meant to be seen within the narrative frame" (Fineberg 440).

Both artists used the lightning bolt to create eye movement, leading the viewer throughout the painting. The influence of Wassily Kandinsky is evident: it is as if both Murray and Green took Kandinsky's flat, two-dimensional compositions and brought them into the realm of three dimensions.

In Green's *The Eccentric Beauty* (Figure 9), 1988, we notice the abstract elements exploding from the center of the composition, and our eye is drawn to the pink and red lightning bolt shape. A direct correlation can be found in Kandinsky's *Quiet Impulse*, 1939 (Figure 32). Here, Kandinsky uses the lightning bolt shape to express energy and to

create a strong directional force (Whitford 186). Green takes the element to the next level by giving it dimension.

Both lightning bolt shapes appear to be moving from the right to the left of the canvas, originating from a point on the right and stopping with a hard line on the left. "Movement towards the left according to Kandinsky is movement 'into the distance' or 'going outside' (i.e. as we 'read' a picture from left to right we encounter a movement in the opposite direction). This movement, Kandinsky says, is more 'adventurous' than left-to-right movement and seems to have greater intensity and speed. Movement to the right is movement 'towards home', 'centered inwardly': 'This movement is combined with a certain fatigue, and its goal is rest. The nearer the right, the more languid and slow this movement becomes – so that the tensions of the forms moving to the right become ever weaker, and the possibility of movement becomes increasingly limited'" (Overy 132).

The lightning bolt, found in Kandinsky's *Quiet Impulse*, appears to have origination points on the right and on the left side of the canvas. According to Kandinsky's theory, the lightning bolt should be both energized and relaxed, or be an activity level in between.

Green, however, positions his lightning bolt shape in both *Boogie Woogie Country Man* (Figure 6) and *The Eccentric Beauty* (Figure 9) on the left side of the canvas and allows it to travel towards the right side. The lightning bolt acts to tone down the movement created by the other shapes in the composition.

Although Kandinsky's canvas kept the traditional rectangular proportions, the compositions therein are viewed as having an overall outer shape (Overy 118). Green's shaped canvases from the 1980's allow the composition to break away from the binding square and rectangle format. This gives his work an evident energy and turns the painting into an object.

Other examples of correlation exist when comparing Green's *Minding Dog Rag*, 1987 (Figure 7) and Kandinsky's *Small Worlds* 9, 1922 (Figure 29). Both artists used flat planes to keep the piece from flying away. "Forms that overlap others tend to remain solid" (Overy 117). The planes anchor the composition and emphasize the free, organic shapes elsewhere in the piece. The overlapping of planes can be found in Kandinsky's *Dream Motion*, 1923 (Figure 30). Here, he has overlapped circles, squares, and triangles of complementary colors to create a base for freer elements to be attached. Green applied a similar idea in *Invisible Clarities Breezing Asleep*, 1987 (Figure 8). Bound planes act as the anchor, from which organic shapes burst.

In the 1960's, Frank Stella began his first works using shaped canvases. Instead of creating a work using the traditional rectangle or square shaped canvas, he took advantage of triangular forms like "V" and "L" shapes. In the work *Valparaiso*, 1963 (Figure 33), Stella combined an "A" and a "V" shapes, in order to create a canvas shaped like a parallelogram. Both shapes include the pinstripe pattern, which conforms to the shapes outside line, and in doing so it creates the illusion of depth (Turvey 364).

Stella's *Jarmolince III*, 1973 (Figure 36) is part of a series of shaped collage reliefs, in which Stella started to move away from the flat surface and towards a three-dimensional space. In this work, Stella took advantage of the power of the viewer's eye to pick out negative shapes that surround the elevated portions of the relief. For every form, we see at least another counter-form. The negative shapes can become just as powerful, in terms of visual hierarchy, as the positive shape, which creates a push-pull effect. The negative shape

mirrors the positive yet fights for dominance. However, if not for the positive shapes, the negative ones would not exist and vice versa.

In *Holy Rollers* (Figure 5), Green's style is similar to that of Stella's *Jarmolince III*. Green created the illusion of actual three dimensions by implementing shadows, overlapping of shapes, gradients and textures. Green again overlaps flat planes like those seen in *Podge-Wade* (Figure 4). However, the idea is pushed further when Green adjoins three similar paintings together to form one large painting. The viewer becomes confused when attempting to discern what is real and unreal, which area is paint and which one is not paint, and what is an actual dimension and what is simply illusion. Every shape has a shadow and every shape is overlapped by another shape, which creates the overall meshing appearance of the piece. Everything is held together or supported by another piece. The meshing keeps the eye grounded and prevents the piece from floating.

Lightning bolt elements (or possibly one single lightning bolt), weave themselves in and out of shapes and even find themselves outside of the canvas. This organic addition unifies the entire painting and its lively nature keeps the work from feeling too heavy. It also seems to be a living element that has the ability to snake itself anywhere in the dimension Green has created. The work does not feel too light or too heavy, because there are instances of both extremes throughout. Paint smears can be found on the majority of *Holy Rollers* (Figure 5), and this texture unifies the painting. The paint texture also complements the flat areas.

Boogie Woogie Country Man (Figure 6) contains similar ideas and elements as in Holy Rollers (Figure 5), but takes them in another direction. The layering of shapes and shadows is used to make the shapes cohesive, but the piece as a whole has a whimsical, floating feel. Organic and geometrical elements flow in and out of other shapes keeping the piece from floating away. Green is again using a lightning bolt element to hold the piece together, but this time he enlarges the element and gives it dimension. The pink lightning bolt acts as the main support of the entire work and as the focal point, drawing the eye from close to the viewer to out of the viewer and vice versa. It is one of the strongest directional forces seen in the period.

Green smeared yellow and red paint on it, so that the result seems flat with no dimension. In essence, he created an impossible scenario, where a three-dimensional object has perspective, but its texture is two-dimensional. He is mixing the third dimension and second dimension in the same object. This impossible scenario is a trademark of abstract realists like Green and best defines the trompe-l'oeil abstractionism.

Even though the shapes do not depict objects in the natural world, they are done in an extremely realistic way that makes them seem to actually exist.

Also, the organic French curve elements help to create a lightening effect for the piece. Acting as directional forces, the lighter three-dimensional elements meander in and out of the heavier, flatter elements. Green has also included the paint smears not only on the flatter areas, but also on elements that have dimension and visually travel away from the eye. The texture he adds to three-dimensional elements does not take on a third dimension quality, but remains two-dimensional.

THE EXUBERANT PHASE: 1989-1991

Green's work from 1989 through 1991 is characterized by the three-dimensional shaped canvases, but instead of using solely free floating elements, Green implements the cloud-like, gestural strokes as support. Acting earlier as texture, the paint smears seem to hold up the three-dimensional shape and the overall composition's weight. The relationship between the smears and the geometric blocks becomes a symbiotic one, as the smears emphasize the vibrant colors and hard edges of the blocks, while the geometric blocks emphasize the smears fluffy, organic appearance and pastel colors.

In *Neskowin North Coast Blues #6*, 1989 (Figure 10), Green stacks four voluminous shapes in an awkward, unbalanced composition surrounded by a melting pot of colored paint smears. In *Neskowin North Coast Blues #7*, 1989 (Figure 11) and *Neskowin North Coast Blues #8*, 1989 (Figure 12), Green balances the shapes as awkwardly as in *Neskowin North Coast Blues #6*, but he cuts out a section of the paint smear background to reveal more overlapping of flat planes. This setup gives the impression that the viewer is peering through this painting into a previous one done in the late 1970's and early 1980's. Green creates a sort of timeline and shows us that he is moving in a new direction with his compositions, away from the flatness and into more voluminous forms.

In *Tropical Island Country & Western Suite #3*, 1990 (Figure 13), we see a composition of vibrant, voluminous shapes framing a gradient from white to violet. On further inspection, we find that the gradient, which we thought was a view into the distance, is in fact a side of another geometric shape. Following the yellow staircase to the right of the gradient, we notice that the bottom step is part of another separate shape. This is an impossible situation and becomes the focal point of the work.

Green's illusion of depth has never been greater than that of *Gateway Star*, 1991 (Figure 14). The artist has basically built a four-sided runway for our eyes to follow and shoot off into the infinite horizon. A good traditional example, of giving the viewer the illusion of infinite space, is the *Ceiling Fresco* in the Palazzo Ducale created by Andrea Mantegna from 1461 to 1474 (Figure 25), where the artist has created an illusionary scene of angels looking down through an opening in the ceiling. The angels surround the circular opening under a blue sky with puffy clouds. The eye is led to the "opening" though the use of concentric circles, like a bull's eye.

THE LATE 1990's

The art of trompe-l'oeil can be seen from as far back as the Pompeian frescoes. "...Even in ancient times, artists who set out to paint a cycle of pictures giving the illusion of reality have tried to overcome the flat surface of the wall. In some cases they did away with the background wall by opening up a new space which extended that of the spectator by increasing the depth. In other cases the background wall is left in place, and the third dimension is obtained through the invasion of the spectator's space by the picture space. There are of course examples in which both solutions are found side by side" (Milman 14).

George Green added major elements of trompe-l'oeil into his compositions with *Jockey of Artemisium*, 1997 (Figure 15). Green painted wood carved elements with

delicate, stained wood grains, adding highlights and shadows to represent depth and fool the viewer into believing that they are looking at actual alcoves and niches. A central element is the wooden sphere enclosed by a geometric framework consisting of fitted, beveled layers that act as hallways. The sphere appears to rest within this hallway. Similar to *Jockey of Artemisium* is the illusion created by Baccio Pontelli in *Studiolo*, 1476 (Figure 26), located in the Palazzo Ducale. *Studiolo* "consists of a series of trompe-l'oeil panels in which thousands of pieces of wood to create the illusion of half-open, latticed cabinets. Depicted are the accourrements from the duke's life: armor and insignia, musical and scientific instruments, and books" (Milman 51).

In *Jockey of Artemisium* (Figure 15), Green has included two of these sphere/square elements that seem to differ in scale; however, at further inspection it is clear that the smaller of the two spheres is at further distance from the viewer than the larger, closer sphere. Four wooden alcoves lie beneath the larger sphere, and within them sit three bicolor swatches and one horse and rider figurine done in trompe-l'oeil style.

The horse figurine found in *Jockey of Artemisium* can be traced back to a work done earlier by the hyperrealist artist Ben Schonzeit. In *Horse and Rider*, 1974 (Figure 37), Schonzeit renders a photorealistic chrome hood ornament of a jockey atop a racing horse in full stride. Green substitutes the chrome with a bronze coating. Placing the figurine in the alcove may be Green's attempt to show that this is what has been done in the past, now he is doing it again and then he is stashing this idea away in this alcove never to be used again. Green may have added the figurine to pay homage to Schonzeit or to show respect to the trompe-l'oeil artists that came before him.

We see the illusion of dimension in prior paintings, but this is the first time Green has used representational elements. The wood carved elements allow Green to imitate the actual dimension more convincingly than in any of his other works.

Another addition to Green's compositions (Figure 15) is scenery. In the upper-left hand corner he painted a peaceful cloudy scene, where puffy and wispy clouds intermix. A hurricane-like twirl of delicate clouds acts as the focal point in the cloud scene. Again Green uses the trompe-l'oeil style to represent the clouds. He is not necessarily attempting to trick the viewer into thinking that they are seeing actual clouds, but more so that they are seeing a photograph or a smaller painting within a larger painting. The cloud scene could pass for a cropping from another painting that Green has placed into his composition.

The usual paint smears, which we have seen in previous works, make another appearance here. They themselves appear cloud-like and seem to correlate with the cloud scene. By adding the cloud scene and paint smears, Green has created a mixed media type work, which strictly uses nothing but paint.

In the work *Gravityspool*, 1997 (Figure 16), Green has taken the beveled alcove elements to the next level by increasing their numbers from four smaller ones to eight larger ones. Within six of the alcoves, Green paints along a common theme: Greek and/or Roman art. Whereas *Jockey of Artemisium* (Figure 15) contains only one element pointing to another actual artwork, *Gravityspool* (Figure 16) contains six. The remaining two alcoves contain non-representation color compositions, like those we see in the previous painting. Instead of increasing the number of the sphere/square elements, Green has added only one to this work. However, Green has pushed the wood grain even further in

this painting. A large majority of the work contains the wood grain. In turn, more wood grain translates into more intricate wood carvings.

Green also pushes the cloud scene images from one image to three. While the scene in *Jockey of Artemisium* is frameless, two of the three scenes are now enclosed in beveled frames. The frameless cloud scene does not seem to rest solitarily, as we see in the previous painting, but now is held into place by wood paneling, which produces a stair-stepped type shape. Again, Green downplays the use of the paint smears, but gives them an even more cloud-like look. He uses a creamy white hue over a sky blue.

In *Untitled*, 1997 (Figure 17), Green not only inserts more wood grain elements, but he also visually composes them into more intricate "architectural" pieces. Green brought the wood elements off the surface of the canvas and has created a sort of garden, an Escher-like environment. He has added other new wood pieces. A wooden pediment is held up by a wooden rounded column on one side, and on another is held up by what appears to be a piece of floor trim. Green has also created a floor on which these pieces stand. He has now increased the number of the sphere/square elements to three. He has also created a new element by framing a pyramid instead of a sphere. *Untitled* contains one cloud scene, which is not framed like previously, but is held in place by an actual wooden staircase. Green has moved from framing images with flat two-dimensional stair casing panels, to a three-dimensional staircase.

Both evasion and invasion of the viewer's space can be found in many of Green's paintings from the late 1990's. *Horizon*, 1999 (Figure 18) contains wooden elements that move out toward the viewer, and also openings for the eye to travel away from the viewer. The shapes jutting towards the viewer make the recesses more impressive and vice versa. Adding both extremes of space creates a push-pull effect. Green set up an environment where we can choose where our eye can focus, near or far.

In *Horizon*, Green has created wooden forms in a trompe-l'oeil style. We find two cloud scenes bordered by picture frames, intermixed with the wooden forms. The cloud scenes appear to be paintings within a painting. This aspect of trompe-l'oeil can be traced to the Surrealist work of René Magritte. In *The Human Condition*, 1934 (Figure 31), Magritte has created a situation where the viewer is facing a window and is peering out onto a generic landscape. He has placed an easel in front of the window, blocking the view. On the easel rests a canvas that depicts the exact landscape scene behind it.

"I placed a painting representing exactly that portion of the landscape covered by the painting. Thus, the tree in the picture hid the tree behind it outside the room. For the spectator, it was both inside the room within the painting and outside in the real landscape. This is how we see the world. We see it outside ourselves, and at the same time we only have a representation of it in ourselves" (qtd. in Torczyner 156).

It is as if the viewer is allowed to see the making of a trompe-l'oeil painting within in a trompe-l'oeil painting. Not only are we fooled once, but even a second time, on further inspection of the scene.

THE LATEST PHASE, AT THE BEGINNING OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

Green's works from 2000 onward contain an illusionary wooden frame. A similar use of frame has been made by Jan van Eyck when he painted *The Annunciation Diptych* (Figure 24). Jan van Eyck allowed the figure, he was painting, to reach outside the border of the frame. Green does something similar in *Pictures from the Monroe: Sphere*, 2001 (Figure 19), where he allows the abstract shapes to travel into the illusionary frame and outside of it.

In an *Untitled* work of 2003 (Figure 22) Green has painted a frame with a near absence of a painting. A photograph, tape and scraps of paper are the only elements held within the frame. Cornelis Norbertus Gijsbrechts created the illusion of the backside of a canvas with "nothing more than a white tag applied to the surface" (Grootenboer 167).

With *Pictures from the Monroe: Sphere*, Green has created a composition with two of the strongest elements found in his work from the late 1990's: the sphere/square element, and the seascape/cloud scene. The piece would be entirely representational, except for the cluster of abstract shapes he has painted in the upper-right hand corner. *Untitled*, 2001 (Figure 20) has similar attributes. If not for the playful, interactive abstractive shapes, it too would be solely representational.

In *Palm Forest*, 2002 (Figure 21), Green joined three croppings from what appears to be three different ocean scenes and surrounded them by a very convincingly depicted frame. He did not include any playful shapes or abstractions.

Other borrowed objects can be traced back to other works by Ben Schonzeit. In *After the Hurricane*, 1971 (Figure 35), Schonzeit placed sugar packets, featuring landmarks from Chicago, Washington and Dallas, onto a photorealistic rendering of a generic city street. A similar composition can be seen in *Green's Mendocino to Gold Beach*, 2005 (Figure 23), where the artist created a photorealistic image and placed, on top of it, the illusion of photographs from different locations. In Schonzeit's work, the sugar packets act as a roadmap that tells the viewer where he has been and where he is now. He painted the present location with the help of past experiences. Green did something similar, in that he painted a new location by picking and choosing from past locations he has visited. Both artists used souvenirs as references to better capture a new environment, or at the least allowing the viewer to see the process of creating art.

An offshoot of Magritte's idea of the painting within a painting is the photograph within a painting. Green painted photographs over a convincing ocean scene. The photographs are also ocean scenes and therefore create a situation found in *The Human Condition* (Figure 31), where the artist is allowing the viewer a glimpse at the making of a painting. The photographs act as the research an artist would work from in creating a trompe-l'oeil work and is evidence of past events that lead up to creating new ones: in this case, a painting.

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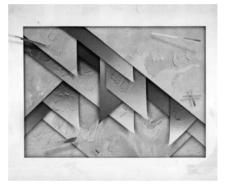


Figure 2. George D. Green, *Bare Narious Ojay*, 1979



Figure 3. George D. Green, Fox Trot, 1981



Figure 4. George D. Green, *Podge-Wade*, 1981



Figure 5. George D. Green, *Holy Rollers*, 1982



Figure 6. George D. Green, *Boogie Woogie Country Man*, 1986



Figure 7. George D. Green, *Minding Dog Rag*, 1987



Figure 8. George D. Green, *Invisible Clarities Breezing Asleep*, 1987



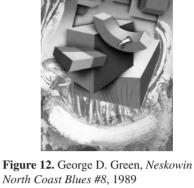
Figure 9. George D. Green, *The Eccentric Beauty*, 1988



Figure 10. George D. Green, *Neskowin North Coast Blues #6*, 1989



Figure 11. George D. Green, Neskowin North Coast Blues #7, 1989



North Coast Blues #8, 1989



Figure 13. George D. Green, Tropical Island Country & Western Suite #3, 1990



Figure 14. George D. Green, Gateway Star, 1991

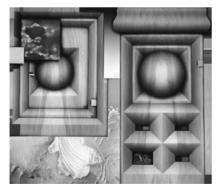


Figure 15. George D. Green, Jockey of Artemisium, 1997

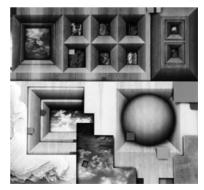


Figure 16. George D. Green, Gravityspool, 1997



Figure 17. George D. Green, Untitled, 1997



Figure 18. George D. Green, Horizon, 1999



Figure 19. George D. Green, *Pictures from the Monroe: Sphere*, 2001

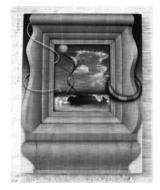


Figure 20. George D. Green, Untitled, 2001

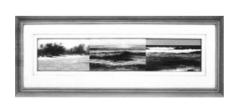


Figure 21. George D. Green, *Palm Forest*, 2002



Figure 22. George D. Green, Untitled, 2003



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General art (not illustrated)

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Figure 25. Andrea Mantegna, Ceiling Fresco: Palazzo Ducale, 1461 http://cache.eb.com/eb/image?id=99427&rendTypeId=4

Figure 26. Baccio Pontelli, Studiolo, 1476

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Figure 27. Wallerant Vaillant, Letter Rack, 1658

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Figure 28. Norbertus Cornelius Gijsbrects, Studio Wall, 1665

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Figure 29. Wassily Kandinsky, Small Worlds 9, 1922

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Figure 30. Wassily Kandinsky, Dream Motion, 1923

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Figure 32. Wassily Kandinsky, Quiet Impulse, 1939

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Figure 33. Frank Stella, Valpariso, 1963

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Figure 34. Frank, Stella, Raqqa II, 1970

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Figure 35. Ben Schonzeit, After the Hurricane, 1971

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Figure 36. Frank Stella, Jarmolince III, 1973

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Figure 37. Ben Schonzeit, Horse and Rider, 1974

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Figure 38. Elizabeth Murray, Tempest, 1979

Fineberg, Jonathan. *Art Since 1940: Stategies of Being*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003, 441.