

TWELVE

Cynthia Hawkins

In reviewing the paintings of Cynthia Hawkins, one must conclude that negative and positive space is one and the same. It is only space that exists. Hawkins suggests that one consider the results of positioning a shape upon a rectangular canvas because negative and positive space must co-exist.

The life of nature and man is not recognized as artistically significant by Hawkins. Realistic images are absent in her work. She is a proponent of the Abstract Expressionist school of thought evidenced by her color-field rendition. Color floats in color, space in space; limitations occur only when the edge of the canvas is reached. She has purposely avoided a linear composition. This suggests she is concerned about volume and mass but not shape. The occurrence of a shape without any apparent perimeters is indeed difficult to envision.

Hawkins fell heir to the reductivist process of the Abstract Expressionist school and specifically of the color-field process of expression. Recognizable images were never a part of her production. To interpret her work is to attempt to examine her conscience. From those who ignore or condemn the works of the Abstract Expressionist school, a highly and deeply personal response to concepts that are totally alien cannot be anticipated.

Hawkins does not care. Her profound personal approach can be appreciated for its dramatic, poetic or

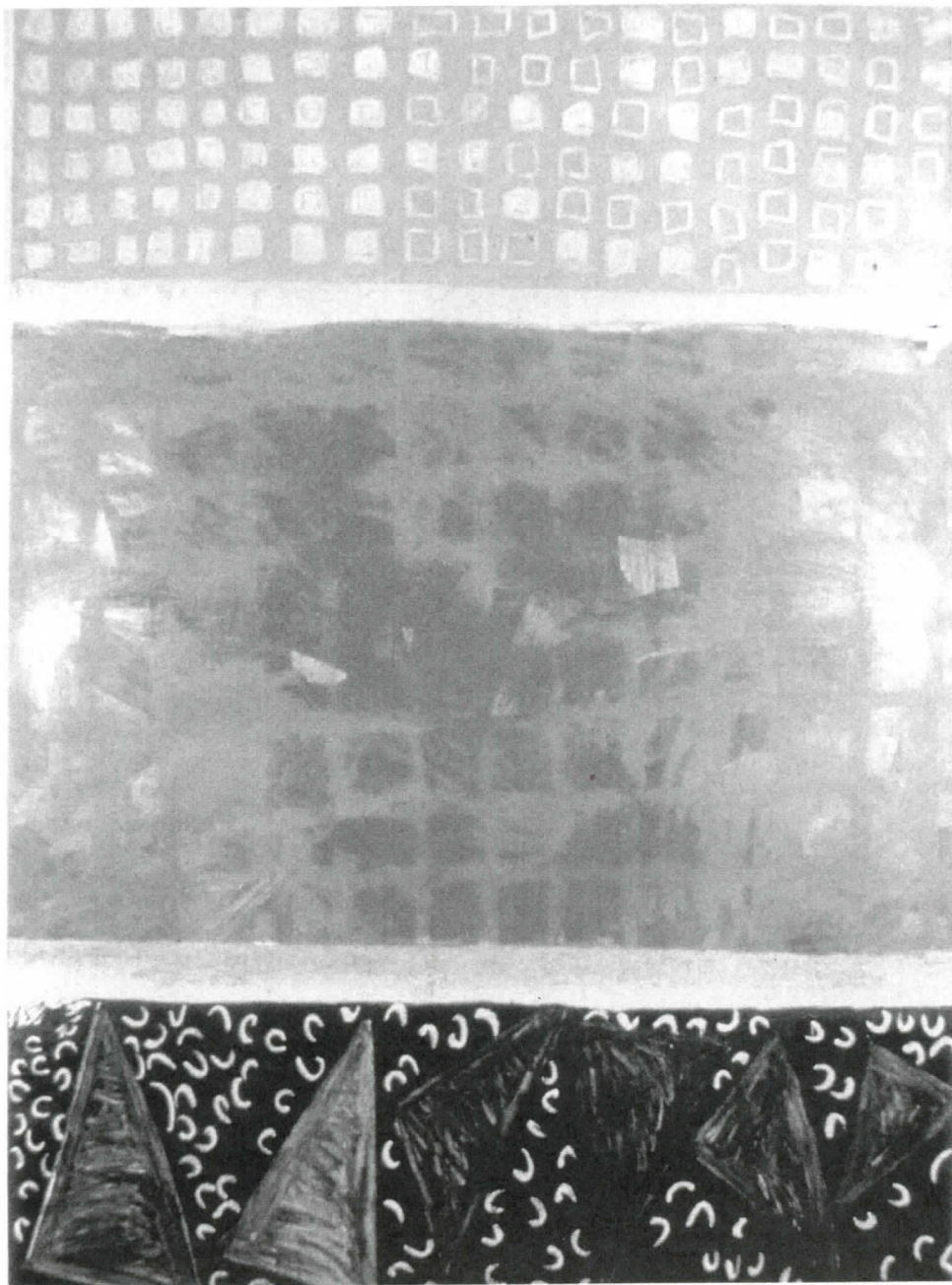
spiritual compositions of color in space.

There are several points at which the creative process will end for the artist. The intuitive forces which pierce the working surface end when the intellect dictates the results. Hawkins is an intuitive painter, an Abstract Expressionist who deals with the unknown. If an idea exists before the plunge onto canvas, it may soon be abolished or sidelined in favor of a more recent urge to contradict the initial act.

Hawkins has preconceived ideas; she does not rely on accidental meanderings of the brush. By the same token, she has not ignored the possibilities of discovering and exploring unknown territories. Hawkins's work is exciting, not because of its color or composition but because of the unpredictability of the process.

When does the end occur? How many times does the artist reach the end during the creative process? Answers occur at the discretion of the artist. They cannot be predicted. However, as Hawkins explains it, compositional planning occurs at the outset of the painting. In a letter to this author, she has stated,

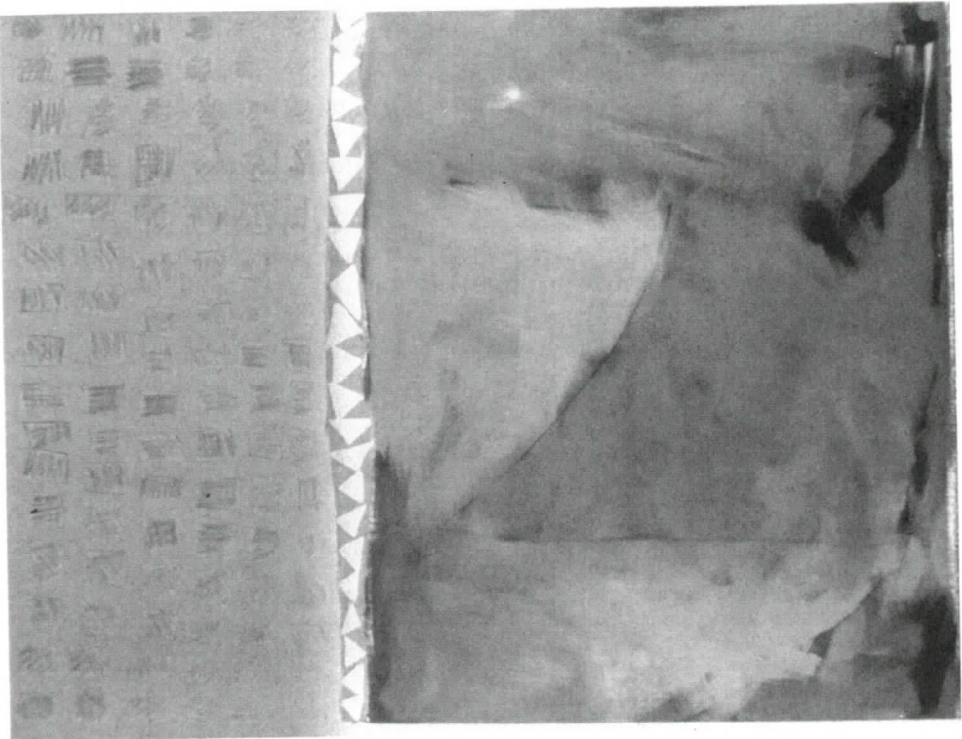
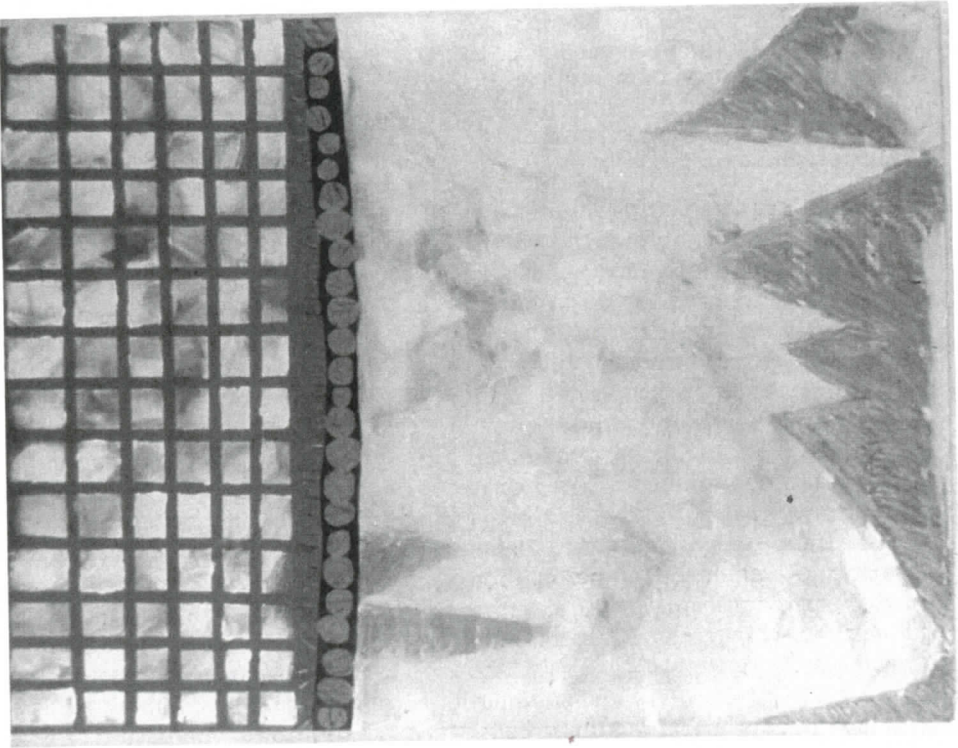
My work differs from others by way of focusing on the inference of symbols and signs, and of linear calligraphic marks, and in addition, the use of static marks together with geometric symbols and geometric configurations. These varied marks and forms when



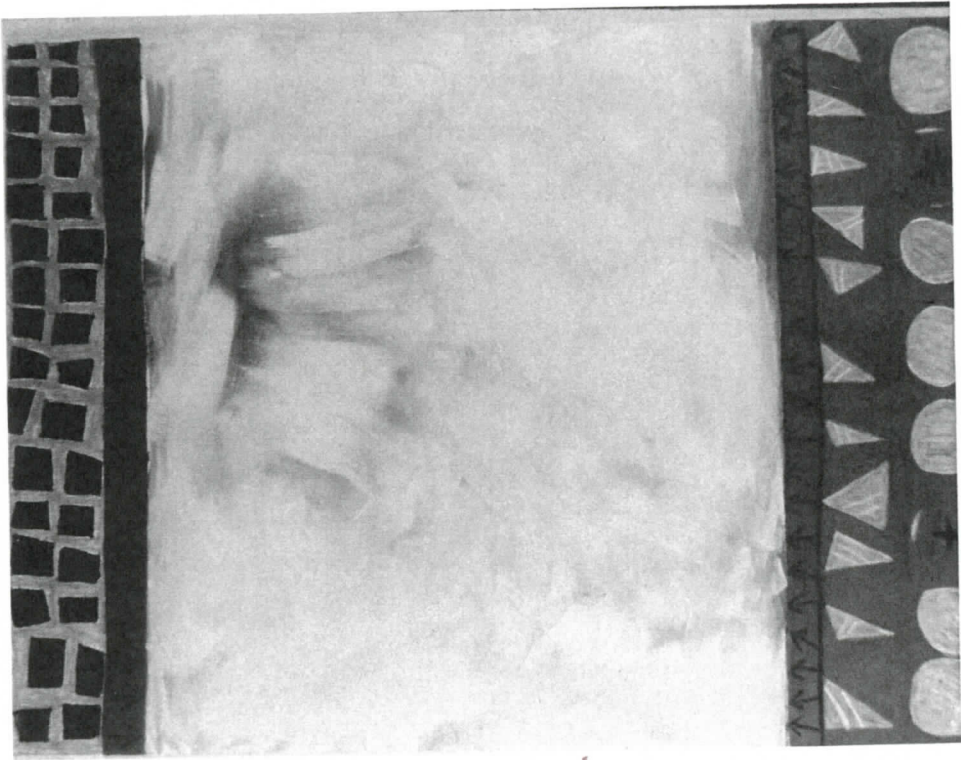
Cynthia Hawkins. *Currency of Meaning #10 Ruby, Ruby* (1989). Oil on canvas, 50×68 in. Courtesy of the artist.

strung together imply a sentence or a passage of text. An important aspect of the marks or configuration of marks is the nature of the line. Whether a brush or an oil stick, the lines must allude to a human behind the mark; that is, the

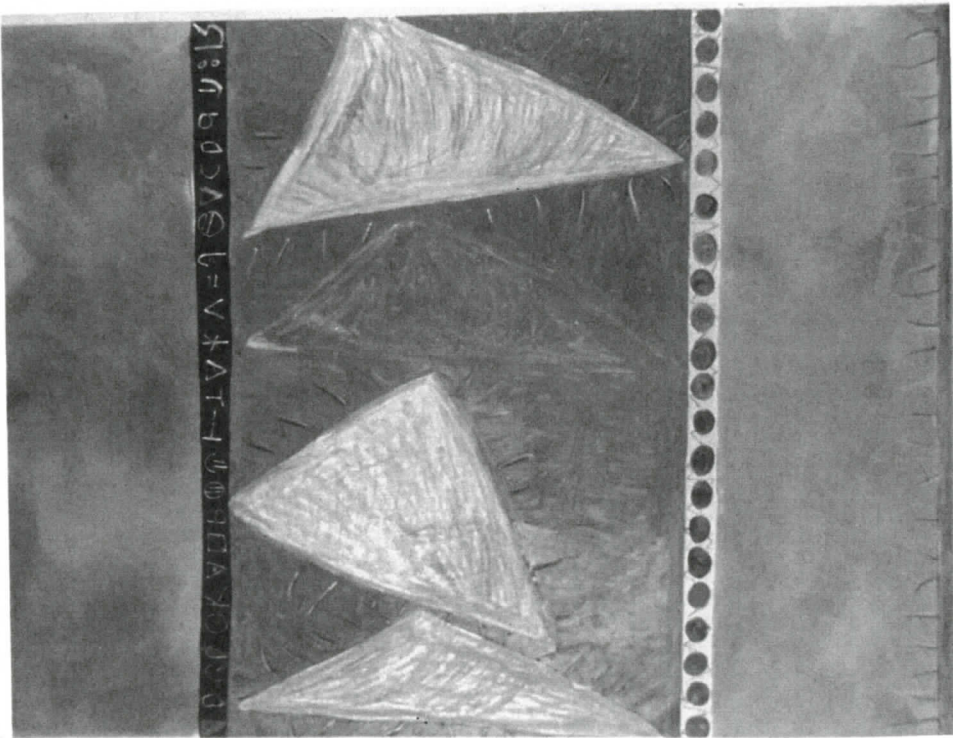
gesture embodies both, a sign/symbol which possesses an implied meaning by its very configuration, as well as a physicality of the gesture. Physicality, through the vitality of the hand/movement, whether the mark is hard edge



Left: Cynthia Hawkins. Currency of Meaning #5 (1988). Oil on canvas, 56x76 in. Courtesy of the artist. Right: Cynthia Hawkins. Currency of Meaning #6 (1988). Oil on canvas, 56x76 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Left: Cynthia Hawkins. Currency of Meaning #9 (1989). Oil on canvas, 50x68 in. Courtesy of the artist. Right: Cynthia Hawkins. Currency of Meaning #11 (1989). Oil on canvas, 56x70 in. Courtesy of the artist.



and flat, or determined and roughly described. The roughly described configuration is an engagement of intimacy with the viewer. The fact that the line may be in some places incomplete only engages further and becomes, even a sub-text, and the conversation continues as the nuances of language are recognized and are come to terms with.

This describes the intuitive process that Hawkins applies to her work. There is even a strong suggestion that the intuitive process may bridge several productions. In other words, if newly discovered directions occur as a painting nears completion, that discovery may find its place within an ensuing painting, or it may even be a motivation to initiate a new series of works totally different from preceding ones.

According to Hawkins,

the intuitive use of color within particular boundaries has produced conditions where the range in color value and chroma are quite close, particularly in the larger more expressive passages of each painting.

That is not applicable to all intuitive processes. Color contrast is a choice the artist makes before the application of paint. The choice does not always result in a satisfying conclusion.

Hawkins wishes that diverse interpretations would occur among a wide audience. She has stated that

the way in which color is used can also be perceived as the gesticulations that, along with the overall expressiveness of my work, adds to the visually discursive nature of the works, thereby increasing the levels or shades of inference, interpretation and meaning attributed not only by myself, but the viewer as well.

The very nature of Abstract Expressionism opens wide the avenue of various interpretations, and it seems to be to Hawkins's advantage that several different meanings occur to her audience.

Hawkins is not aware of all her actions; that is, she is not accountable for all that exists within the framework of her paintings. It is a fact that subconscious images emerge upon the surface of the canvas that are purely coincidental.

The intent of the artist is seldom the intent interpreted by her audience. The artist sends a message via the painted expression and the viewer moves in to receive the message. One must realize that for each viewer receiving the message, there will exist an equal number of interpretations. Thus, in order to understand Hawkins's message, one needs to understand the creative process and particularly, the intuitive process.

The language of Hawkins is Abstract. In her *Currency of Meaning* series, she refers to divisions of space, the splitting of her canvas into three different passages. Other artists refer to such passages as environments or habitats. Interestingly enough, each division or environment has its own language or inhabitants. And yet, each of the three environments contribute to the totality, thus creating a single unit or composition. Most artists at one time or another, consciously or subconsciously, have utilized the theory that Hawkins has prescribed. Incorporating single aspects of nature into separate habitats that constitute a whole is not a new technique. The approach dates back to medieval times. However, Hawkins approach is definitely Abstract, leading to diverse and unusual meanings and interpretations. According to critic Thelma Golden (in *The International Review of African-American Art*, v. 9, no. 2) in describing *Currency of Meaning #5* (1988),

the top, large half of #5 speaks directly to her earlier large canvases. In huge, flat swatches the shadows of triangles are evident. Their yellow white points pierce through the darker, equally sharp expanse which covers the uppermost part of the canvas. Within her characteristic tactile surface, she has incorporated a more graphic brushwork. The bottom half of the canvas,

separated from the top section of the painting by a blue line with irregular bright orange circles, is a fence-like grid of squares. Irregular in a way that reveals the indisputable characteristics of their medium, the squares cover what could be another painting. With its marbled, wet-into-wet effect the surface highlights neither one or the other color, but the symbiotic merger of both.

In spite of critic Golden's remark that both passages merge into one, the fact that the two passages are contrary leaves doubt as to their compatibility. They exist as a single unit but more on a physical basis than a literal or spiritual one. And yet, the artist does not object to possible misinterpretations because of the diversified responses open to the viewer. Those are the merits of Hawkins's series of paintings. It is difficult enough to finalize a painting in the Abstract Expressionist manner because of the intuitive urges that intrude upon the process, and then to deliberately extend the process onto a second, third and fourth painting makes the possibility of failure even greater. But as Hawkins has explained, the failure results in a new direction. In other words, errors became opportunities for new adventures.

What appears as an overlay in *Currency of Meaning #5* becomes a passage in and of itself in *Currency of Meaning #6* (1988). It is a habitat without an inhabitant whereas in #5, two environments overlap while remaining separate, each with its own function. Were one of the environments to be removed, the remaining one would unite with the upper environment resulting in a totally different message.

Hawkins is careful to meander only within boundaries so that the message is not prolonged to the point of obscurity. Even though there are limits, the language differs with each work.

In *Currency of Meaning #6*, the top half varies in shades of blue, and because the color blue identifies with the sky, one would assume that the dark and light are

aspects of nature residing in their natural habitat. As clouds, they are interchangeable and movable so that the message or language is everpresent and everlasting. The narrow horizontal band of triangular shapes reaching from left to right across the canvas separates the two passages while uniting them as well.

Hawkins has introduced a grid with doodles that speaks a different language from that witnessed in #5. It has an irregular pattern. As a patchwork of several rectangular units, each unit becomes an environment of its own as well as a single aspect of a total environment.

Currency of Meaning #10 (1989), subtitled, *Ruby, Ruby*, is described by Thelma Golden as follows:

Unlike #5 and #6, *Ruby, Ruby* is divided into three parts. The top third is a verdant green field populated with both full and empty squares. Their disjointed nature makes them seem like scattered pebbles. With an unintentionally deliberate hand, Hawkins fills in some of the squares rendering them a wash-like white, leaving others merely outlined with no system beyond their obvious variation.

There are occasions when the artist subconsciously paints an area, not realizing until the area becomes part of the expression that the action was not intended. And yet, because of such action, an unintended creative act, although deliberate in a subconscious sense, alters an original intent into one of total satisfaction.

Critic Golden says,

the middle *Ruby, Ruby* passage is again the familiar, liberated abstract scape which partially obscures the presence of a grid. This passage, like most of Hawkins' works, revels in its own painterly purity. This dominant, middle expanse is hemmed in at both top and bottom by thin dividing lines, both a diversion and a constraining device for the painter.

There is a certain beauty that exists not only in the pigment itself but in the

manner in which it is applied to the surface of the canvas, especially in the middle passage.

Golden calls the lower third of *Ruby*, *Ruby*

the most unusual. On a black ground, Hawkins draws six determinative triangles, perhaps related to those which have been heretofore partially or totally obscured. Surrounding the triangles are luminescent half-moon shaped marks. As seemingly unrelated as this passage is, it also brings us closer to newer, more untried concerns in Hawkins' work. With a variation of approaches, Hawkins sets an unavoidable temper for the experience of divulging meanings which the paintings in this series demand.

Currency of Meaning #9 (1989) reveals both the intuitive and non-intuitive approach within a single expression. Totally instinctive in nature is the middle passage in which an explosion of color occurs and which acts in total contrast to the upper and lower passages. The calculated spacing existing in the two outlying passages is equal to the variety of geometric shapes that occur. However, in the lower passage, a mosaic-like pattern consumes the spatial surface.

Irregularities exist since both the rectangular shapes which constitute the positive aspects and the remaining environment unite to form a preconceived pattern. The opposing forces of technical application of pigment seem compatible since the intuitive middle ground is balanced on top and bottom.

A reversal of procedure is evident in *Currency of Meaning #11* (1989). However, instead of three different passages, five exist. The top and lower passages are intuitively expressed while the middle one is conceptualized by four floating triangular shapes. Narrow horizontal shapes separate the upper and lower passages from the central one. Circular shapes equally distanced from one another are carefully positioned to fit snugly within the prescribed area.

The lower band separating the middle passage from the bottom passage relies on hieroglyphic messages. The beauty of *Currency of Meaning #11* lies in the combination of intuitive, semi-Expressionistic and non-objective techniques within a single expression. One will continue to speculate upon the abstractions of Hawkins. Her work may be misinterpreted, but often it is the beauty of the search that is most satisfying.

Career Highlights

Born in Queens, New York in 1950.

Education

B.A. degree from Queens College, CUNY, New York; M.F.A. degree from Maryland Institute, College of Art; postgraduate work from Art Students League, New York; postgraduate work from Brooklyn Museum Art School, New York.

Awards

Brooklyn Museum Art School, Provincetown Workshop, 1985; Artist-in-residence Fellowship, Studio Museum in Harlem, 1987; Patricia Roberts Harris Fellowship, 1990-91, 1991-92.

Selected Exhibitions

Queens College, New York, 1973; Emily Lowe Gallery, Hempstead, N.Y., 1979; The Jamaica Art Center, New York, 1980; Bronx Museum, New York, 1980; James Szoke Gallery, New York, 1984; Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Ms., 1984; Augusta Savage Gallery, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, 1984; Grace Borgenticht Gallery, New York, 1986; Kenkeleba Gallery, New York, 1986; Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, 1988; Aljira Gallery, Newark, N.J., 1989; PepsiCo Gallery, Purchase, N.Y., 1989; Dome Gallery, New York, 1990; Montclair State College, Montclair, N.J., 1990; The Hudson Guild Gallery, New York, 1990; Decker Art Gallery, Baltimore, Md., 1991

Solo Exhibitions

Queens College, New York, 1974; Midtown/Downtown Gallery, New York, 1981; Miami-Dade Community College, Miami, Fl., 1986; Cinque Gallery, New York, 1989.

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