

2010

Dan Christensen: Forty Years of Painting

Sharon L. Kennedy

Curator of Cultural and Civic Engagement at Sheldon Museum of Art

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sheldonpubs>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Kennedy, Sharon L., "Dan Christensen: Forty Years of Painting" (2010). *Sheldon Museum of Art Catalogues and Publications*. 20.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sheldonpubs/20>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sheldon Museum of Art at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sheldon Museum of Art Catalogues and Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

DAN CHRISTENSEN

FORTY YEARS OF PAINTING

SHELDON MUSEUM OF ART • OCTOBER 23 THROUGH JANUARY 31, 2010



DAN CHRISTENSEN, *LISA'S RED*, 1970, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 102 X 88 INCHES, COLLECTION OF THE KEMPER MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI, BEBE AND CROSBY KEMPER COLLECTION, GIFT OF THE ENID AND CROSBY KEMPER FOUNDATION 1995.15

Art critic Clement Greenberg described Dan Christensen (1942–2007) as “one of the painters on whom the course of American Art depends.”¹ This retrospective exhibition documents Christensen’s life-long quest to understand the possibilities of color, paint, and pictorial space. Though long associated with Color Field painting, Christensen’s relentless experimentation with style and technique places him among this country’s most ambitious abstract and gestural painters.

Kansas City Art Institute and after one year of graduate school moved to the East Coast where he spent the rest of his life. Although he was painting the figure when he arrived in New York, he soon made an abrupt break from this style.

Artists in Christensen’s circle met and shared ideas at Max’s Kansas City, a bar on Park Avenue South in New York City. There, Christensen met Minimalist artists Carl Andre and Brice Marden, whom he considered important early influences. Max’s is also where Christensen met art dealer Richard Bellamy, who offered to represent him in 1966.

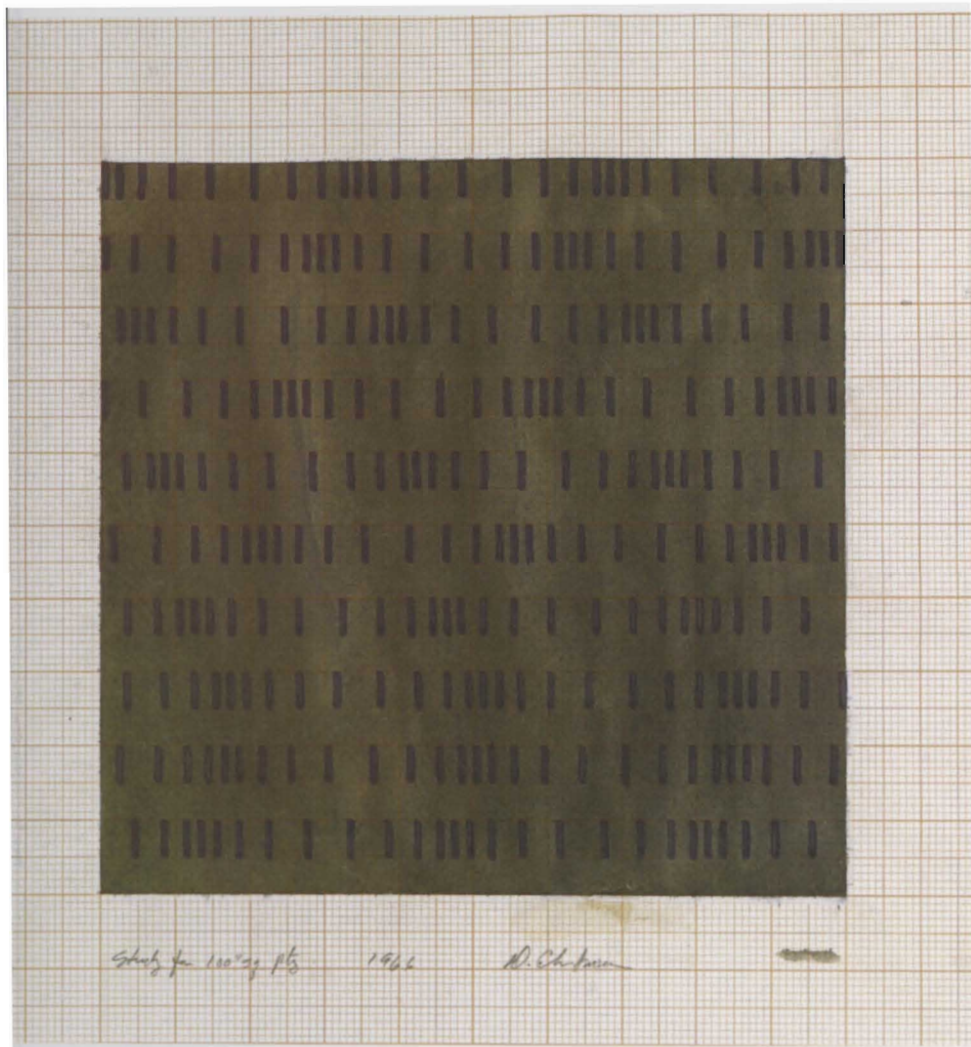
Shortly afterward, Bellamy brought art collector and author James Michener for a studio visit. Michener bought a painting—the first real sale Christensen made.

Christensen and his circle of friends made a pact to do something other than maintain the status quo. According to critic Karen Wilkin, their decision to continue painting, even though the fashionable consensus indicated painting was dead, was in itself a transgressive act.²

The constant challenge Christensen sought in making art is reflected in the diverse body of work he created during his 40-year career. The earliest works in the exhibition—the grid paintings for example—are a giant step away from Christensen’s figurative work. This leap in direction signaled an ongoing attitude of constant change in his artistic process, a mindset that prevailed throughout his career. Wilkin calls this his “restless exploration.”³

The grid paintings are sometimes described as punch-card holes floating effortlessly on a painted surface. His process involved aligning horizontal rows of randomly spaced bars on paper and then on canvas. Although the grids appear methodically done, the random placement of the rectangles gives the paintings a sense of atmosphere and luminosity.

Upon first glance, Christensen’s ribbon or loop spray paintings seem to be another departure in style from his previous series, the grid work. However, as critic James Monte points out, the “gravity” that exists in the grid paintings continues in the loops.⁴ In the painting *Mallee* (1968), intertwined ribbons of color are suspended in an atmospheric white space. They suggest music, calligraphy and lyricism. Eschewing traditional painting techniques, Christensen experimented with a spray gun, a tool that requires precision and control yet delivers



DAN CHRISTENSEN, *STUDY FOR 100TH SQUARE PAINTING*, 1966, ACRYLIC AND INK ON GRAPH PAPER, 23 X 18 INCHES, COURTESY OF SPANIERMAN MODERN, NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Christensen was born in Lexington, Nebraska and grew up outside of Cozad. As a teenager Christensen listened to music on radio stations from Shreveport and Little Rock and grew fond of soul, blues, and pop music. His early aspirations to reach beyond his Midwest roots and experience a larger world, coupled with a youthful sense of independence and self-reliance, contributed to his eventual move to New York City. In 1964 he graduated from the

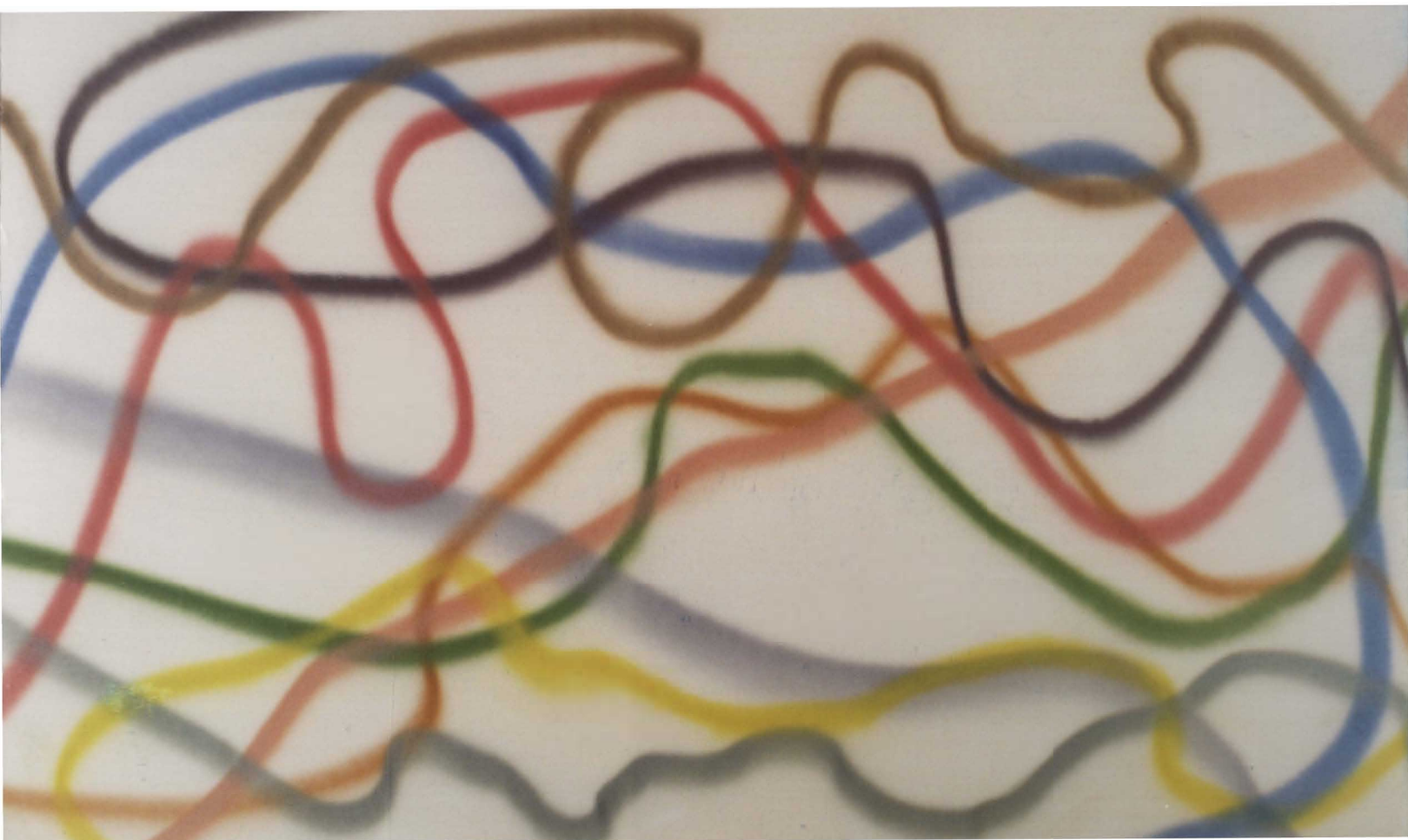
loose, unpredictable results. His loop paintings earned him entry into a young artist group show at the Guggenheim Museum. He was only 26 years old.

In another break of artistic style, Christensen began painting a series of plaids in 1969. Here the artist painted planes of color in post and lintel configurations at perpendicular angles. Pictorial space is flattened: and unlike Geometric Abstractionists who employed precise techniques in painting, Christensen painted this series on the floor using paint rollers or brushes. He rarely predetermined the outcome, finishing some paintings without the use of masking tape. Monte suggests that rather than reflecting an effort in control, Christensen's process in paintings such as *Lisa's Red* (cover), completed in 1971, evolved from chance procedures similar to those in the work of abstract artists Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko and Robert Motherwell.⁵

By 1971, Christensen's interest had jumped from using vivid colors to creating brown and white slab paintings, a practice he explored for almost four years. For tools, he used a window washer's squeegee and a knife to push the paint around the canvas. The quiet painting *Coldsilk* (1973), for

example, gives a subtle sense of depth in its sophisticated underpainting and layering. In these works, color, now muted, takes a back seat to technique and other formal elements such as texture and space.

Christensen's work in his last 20 years seems to revisit his previous styles and investigate ideas not yet exhausted. His paintings in the 1980s combine scraping techniques with spontaneous drawing in vertical and horizontal configurations. Christensen's circular paintings, such as *April Blue* (back), 1995, return to his earlier spray-painting technique but are different in the highly developed layering of finely misted paint that gives the work a sense of pulsating movement. The circles and ovals and their halos appear energized yet delicate as they float in color-filled space. Paintings such as *Back Jack* (2000) and *Eve's Garden* (2005) take on the likeness of tree structures. Other works are more graphic. Yet, according to Wilkin, "While it is possible and even instructive to itemize the similarities between the early and late iteration of related motifs...it is probably more important to pay attention to the differences between them."⁶



DAN CHRISTENSEN, *MALLEE*, 1968, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 72 X 120 INCHES. COLLECTION OF THE SHELDON MUSEUM OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN. NAA-GIFT OF PHILIP JOHNSON

DAN CHRISTENSEN,
APRIL BLUE, 1995,
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS,
95 X 77 INCHES
COLLECTION OF
ELAINE GROVE CHRISTENSEN

Like the jazz Christensen played in his studio, his approach was improvisational. "You have to surprise yourself," he said, "and if the surprise holds up, maybe you've got something."⁷ To achieve spontaneity, Christensen investigated, invented and reinvented, image-types, taking himself beyond his comfort level and calling into question the received ideas of his time. His quest resulted in a mature body of work, diverse in nature and certain in its realization.

– Sharon L. Kennedy, Curator of
Cultural and Civic Engagement

ENDNOTES

¹ Clement Greenberg, *Dan Christensen: A Survey, 1967-1990*, Vered Gallery, 1991.

² Karen Wilkin, *Dan Christensen Forty Years of Painting*, Kemper Museum of Art, 2009, p. 39.

³ Karen Wilkin, "Dan Christensen: Fluid Line: Funky Beat," *Art in America*, June/July 2007, p. 191.

⁴ James Monte, "Dan Christensen The Circular Paintings," New York: Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc., 1991, p.1.

⁵ Monte, p. 2.

⁶ Wilkin, *Dan Christensen: Forty Years of Painting*, p. 42.

⁷ Dan Christensen, interview by Bonnie Grice, *The Song is You*, WLIU 88.3 FM radio, Long Island, New York, October 18, 2002.

CREDITS

The exhibition *Dan Christensen: Forty years of Painting* was organized by Rachael Blackburn Cozad, Director and CEO of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art.

General support for the Sheldon Museum of Art is provided, in part, by the Nebraska Arts Council.



Exhibition support generously
provided by the Richard P. Kimmel and
Laurine Kimmel Charitable Foundation