

1990

## David Simpson

Daphne A. Deeds

*Curator at Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery*

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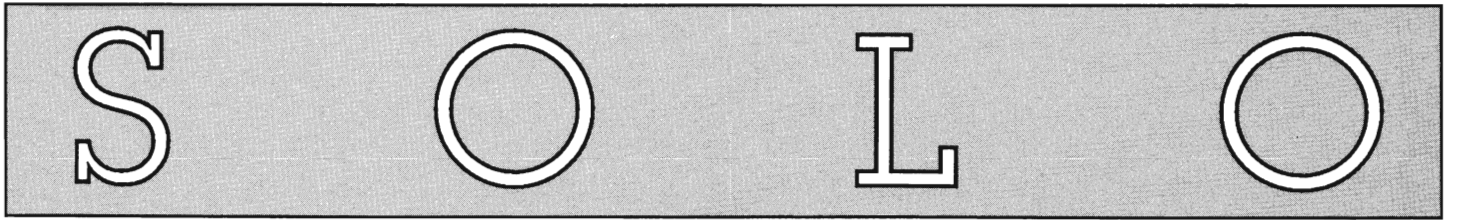
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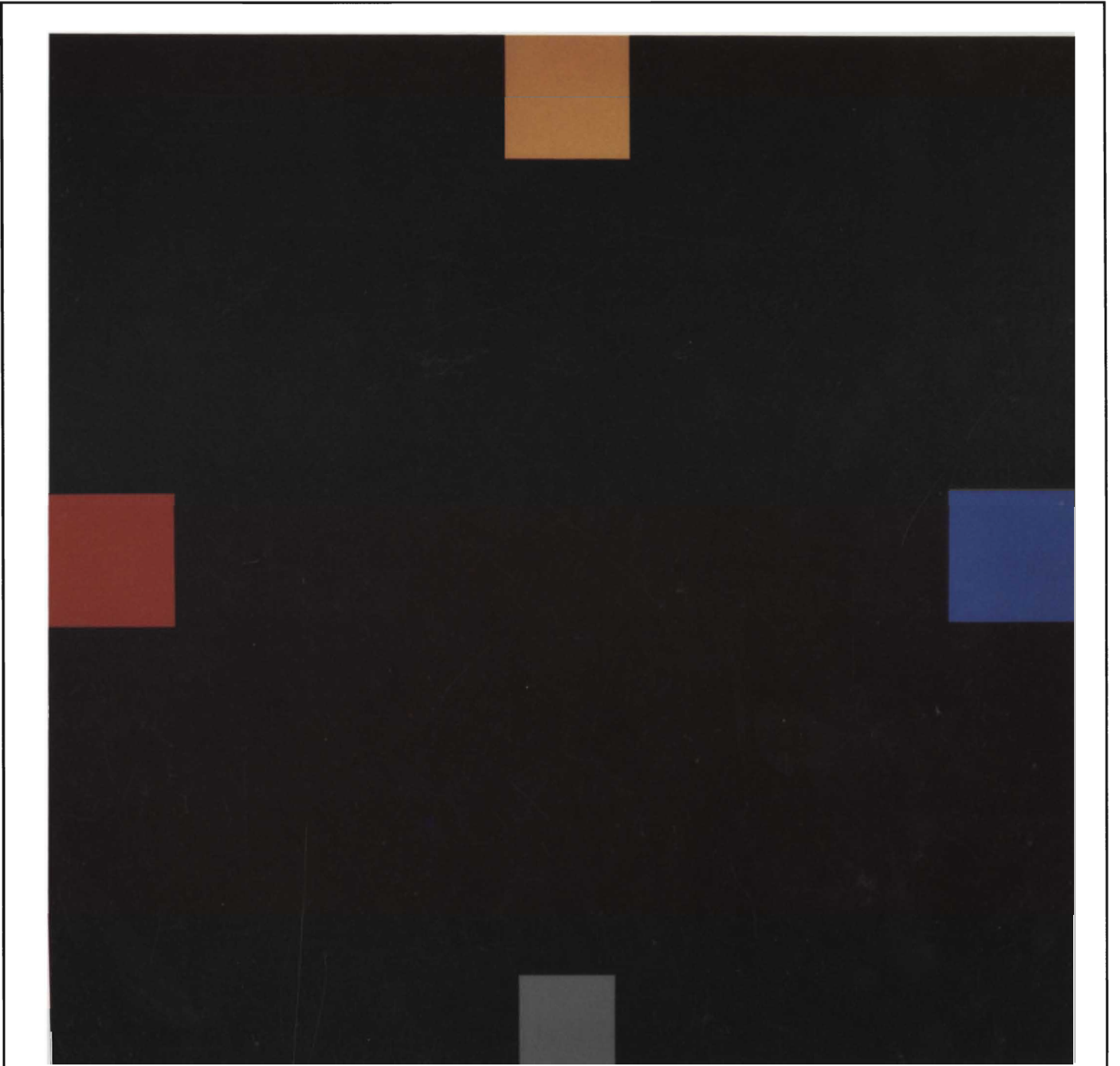
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S H E L D O N



S H E L D O N M E M O R I A L A R T G A L L E R Y

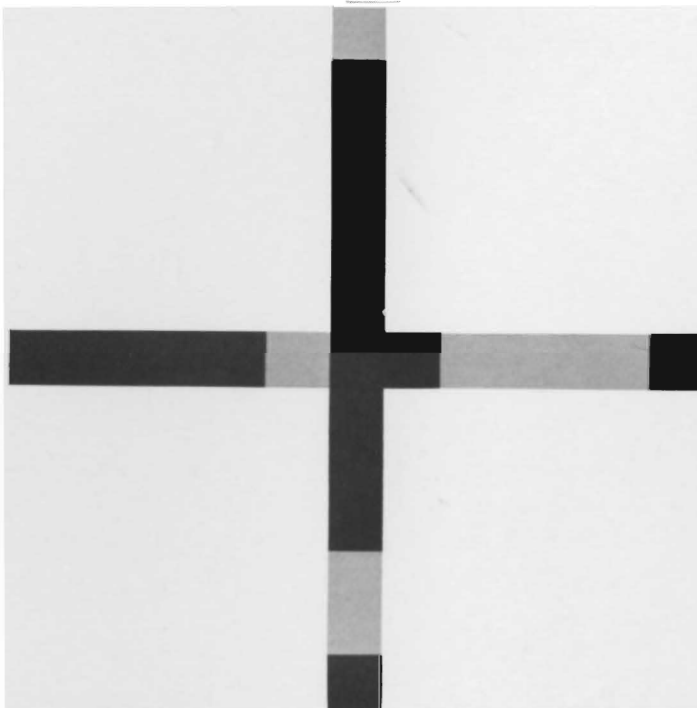


**DAVID SIMPSON**

JUNE 5 - AUGUST 19, 1990

Pure abstract art has always been controversial. Since the first abstractions of early modernism, to the emotional paintings of abstract expressionists during the mid century, the concrete abstraction of minimalism of the 1960s and recent symbolic abstraction, any apparent retreat from representation has been met with discourse. This consternation has been shared by both the lay public and the informed viewer, for the problems posed by abstraction refer to essential questions about reality while they appear to avoid the real world. But this apparent contradiction between non representation and content has become more obscure as both artists and viewers become more visually sophisticated.

In each of its diverse manifestations, abstraction refers to that which is not seen in the world around us, but felt, imagined, or conceived in the mind of the artist. The



Study  
Quatro Caminos  
1986

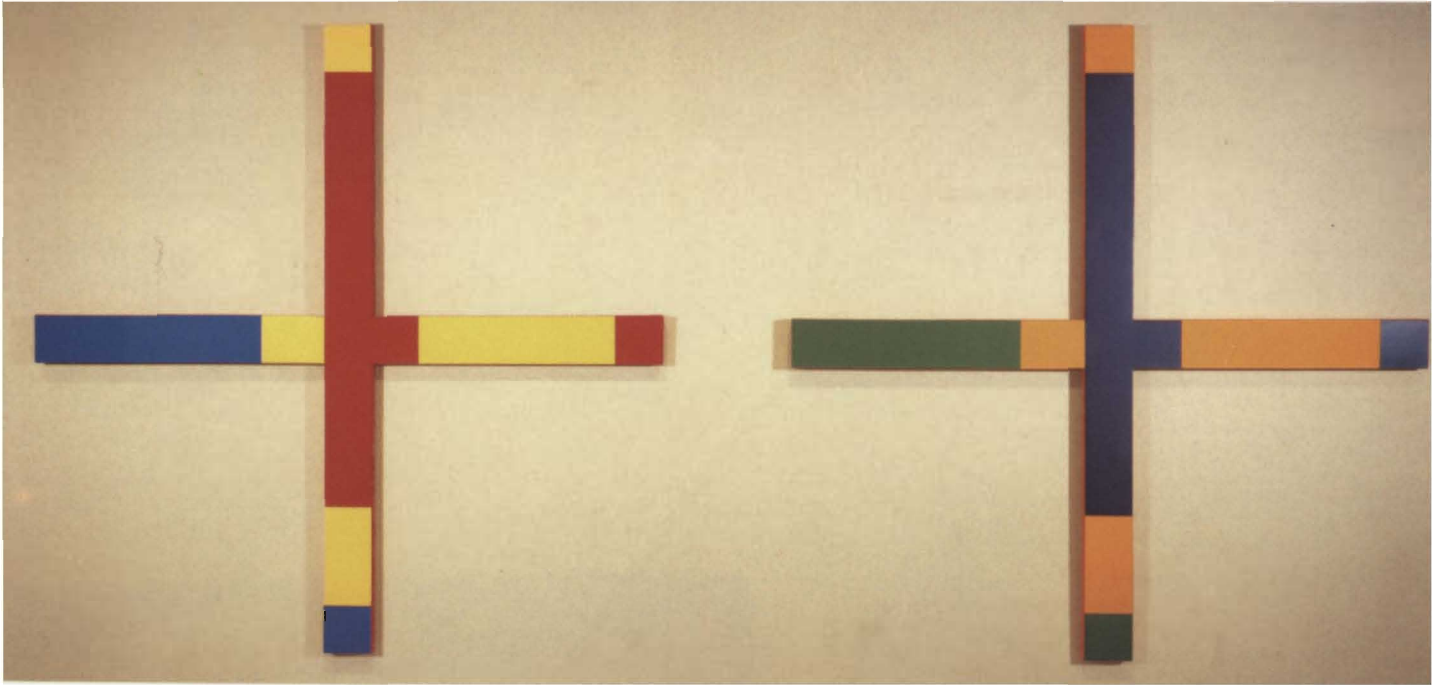
viewer must take a leap of faith when contending with a work of abstraction, because the usual methods for corroborating the truth are not applicable. A painting of a bouquet of flowers or a bronze sculpture of a mythological goddess are verifiable subjects. The viewer can recognize them from personal or literary experience. But abstraction exists in a hermetic place, unsullied by worldly assumptions. This inherent isolation from the visible world has continually lent abstraction a mysterious role in twentieth century art. And that which is mysterious is often suspect and sometimes threatening.

The first true abstract paintings were made by Wassily Kandinsky in Russia and Arthur Dove in the U.S., each in about 1910. They were logical evolutions of the late nineteenth century rejection of academic art and its insistence upon placid depictions of the natural world or moralistic interpretations of

history. As the culmination of early modernism, the first abstractions embodied the radical imperative to pursue an art which could communicate certain transcendental truths without the mediating elements of narration, symbolism, or retinal mimicry. They were paintings which sought a direct communion with the pure truth of an inner reality, or the reality of another plane. They were the tools with which modernists would establish a new aesthetic for the new century, an aesthetic dependent upon the crucial separation of abstraction from realism.

The natural distinction between realism and abstraction which was established more than eighty years ago has proven too facile a dividing line. Since those first idealistic forays into the intangible, the gap between the material world and abstraction has periodically narrowed and widened again as our understanding of modernism and the twentieth century has evolved. When Picasso, Braque and Schwitters inserted newspapers, words and debris into their art, they blurred that division irrevocably. And yet the distinction persists. If an artist is a realist, a figurative artist, or a classicist, he/she is thought to be conserving the virtues of occidental aesthetics. If, on the other hand, the artist pursues abstraction, he/she ventures

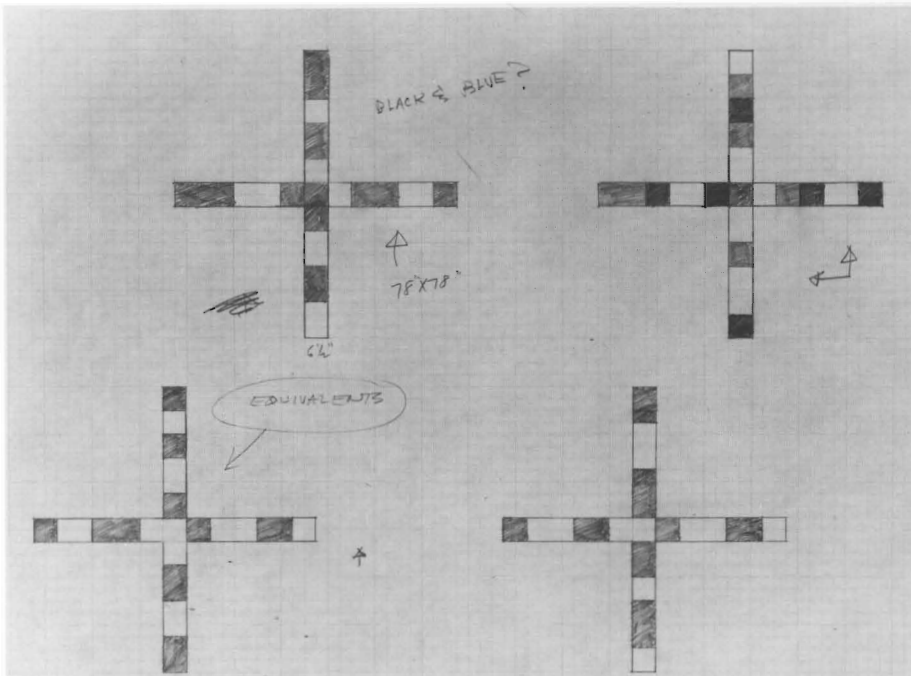
Quatro  
Caminos  
1986



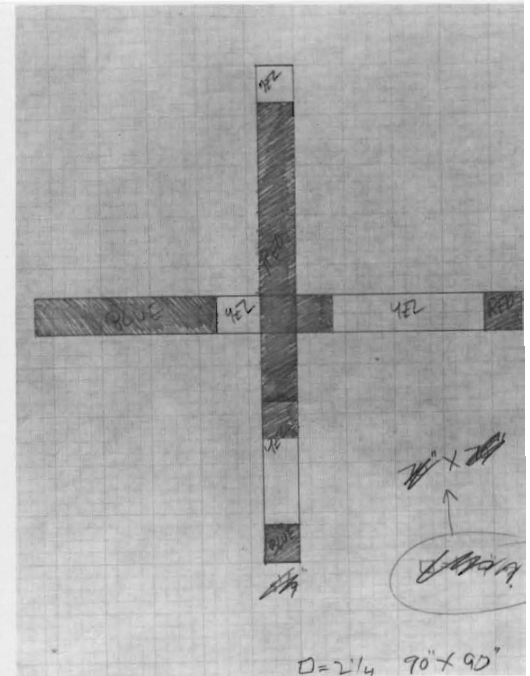
been riveted to the issues of abstraction. While the interest in figuration has come and gone and returned again, while conceptualism declared painting obsolete, while performance took art into the theatre, and post modernism allowed the world back into abstraction, Simpson has persisted in his pursuit of the Ideal. It is perhaps his unswerving commitment to classical values, that sustains Simpson's singular vision.

Like his early modernist predecessors, the Suprematists, and like Mondrian and Rothko at mid century, Simpson is an inheritor of the Romantic spirit. He is daunt-

Untitled, Four Crosses, 1985



Untitled. One Cross. 1986



toward the unknown, and the indecipherable.

The realism/abstraction duality has become the distinction of familiarity and convenience rather than truth. Now at the turn of a new century we realize that realism, which has long been understood as a literal reflection of the visual world, is itself an abstraction because even realism can only approximate nature. And abstraction, which is derived from nature, from dreams, and from thought, is as real as the text on this page. With the wisdom of the century to support them, contemporary artists understand that all art

is in some sense an abstraction, because no work of art can occupy the same sphere of influence as Nature itself. As abstraction assumes a role which is more integrated into the pre-modern assumptions, the former controversy has eroded to reveal more subtle relationships between recognizable imagery and that distillation of nature we call abstraction.

The history of abstraction is complex because since its inception eighty years ago both the artist and the viewer have questioned its definitions and perimeters. Some artists have employed abstraction to reduce natural references to

their most elemental qualities of color and form. Others have used abstraction to elucidate the modernist tenet which insists that any work of art is self-referential and thus functions as a discreet object devoid of associative meanings. A third tendency reveals abstraction as a powerful vehicle of transcendence and spiritual content, and an art form which is capable of establishing an understanding of eternal verities.

David Simpson's abstractions partake of all these usages to arrive at a personal imagery which aspires to universal meaning. For the past thirty-five years, Simpson has

less in his pursuit of the ideal relationship between color and form, a relationship which is capable of transporting the viewer to a meditative state, wherein the actuality of the thing seen becomes what Simpson calls "belief made visible".

Though his paintings resemble minimalist works by artists such as Frank Stella, Ad Reinhart, and Ellsworth Kelly, Simpson rejects the minimalist adage, "What you see is what you see". Rather, Simpson refers to himself as an "essentialist". By reducing his paintings to their essential elements, he frees the viewer to directly encounter his med-

itative visual language, and to aspire to what he calls "a realization of the spirit". But Simpson also specifically avoids the grandiose meanings which the term "transcendental" implies. Instead, his paintings are not meant to confer with God, but to refer to the resilient human spirit.

*Four Square Pedro*, a black square canvas punctuated with smaller squares of pure color, is one of a series of paintings the artist made during the mid-1970s and early 1980s. During this period, Simpson began to use Spanish words in his titles which refer to exotic places where he had traveled, and suggest poetic meanings. The relationships between the black field and the four squares of color can be read as an intellectual arrangement of color relationships, or as a directive toward a Mondrian-like mediation. But the four squares also refer to a Greek cross shape lurking just below the surface, a reference which recurs more overtly throughout the exhibition.

Simpson's use of the square with its proportional color components, and his suggestion of a religious icon establish *Four Square Pedro* as a work of human rather than divine reference. Both the square and the cross are human implements used to decipher the natural and spiritual worlds. The allusion to these universal forms connects the formal surface of the painting with the temporal histories of geometry and spirituality, to create a beautiful painting of surprising profundity.

The Greek cross form is reiterated in the *Quatro Caminos* quartet of shaped canvases, and their related preparatory studies. The series is both relational and linear, as the colors are balanced like antiphonal music. The colors of the first canvas are primary colors of the color wheel, the second canvas is composed of secondary color,

and the third and fourth crosses are colors of the tertiaries. According to the artist's two part system, Simpson's compositions refer to the conscious, rational and intellectual faculties, and he uses color to establish emotional and romantic allusions.

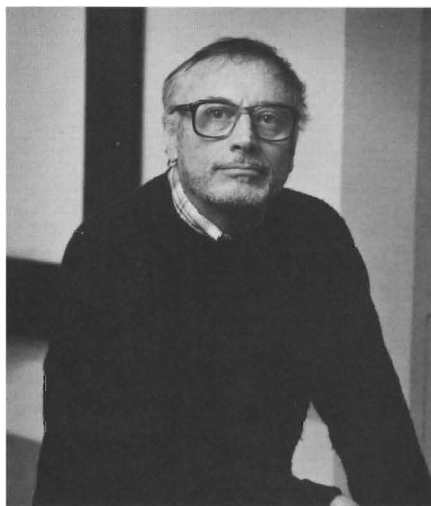
Like many of his modernist peers, Simpson assigns redemptive powers to art. But the redemption he seeks is not religious per se. Rather it is relief from mundanity and worldly concerns, a retreat to a contemplative realm.

In the midst of the postmodern multisensual bombardment, Simpson entrusts his art to the visual sense. His paintings are retinal conduits which give the viewer access to the essential purity which can penetrate the disorder of the world.

Daphne A. Deeds, Curator  
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery

## CHRONOLOGY

David Simpson was born on January 20, 1928 in Pasadena, California. After study at Pasadena City



College, Simpson received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the California School of Fine Arts in Oakland in 1956, and a Master of Fine Arts degree from San Francisco State College in 1958. He began his teaching career in 1958 and joined the University of California at Berkeley faculty in 1965. He recently celebrated his twenty-fifth anniversary as a member of the UCB faculty. David Simpson has been included in innumerable group exhibitions, and many one person exhibitions. Notable among these many exhibitions are one person exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1959, the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in 1960,

the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco in 1961, the Mills College Art Gallery in 1973, the Oakland Museum in 1978, the Berkeley Modernism Gallery in 1984, and the Oakland Museum in 1985. Widely cited as an exemplar of modern day suprematism, Simpson's work is frequently referred to in scholarly publications and theoretical essays. His paintings and drawings are included in the permanent collections of the Oakland Museum, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the National Collection of Fine Arts, the Seattle Art Museum, the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, and the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, among many others.

## Checklist

### FOUR SQUARE PEDRO

1980, acrylic on canvas  
80 x 80 in.  
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection  
1984.H-2724

### QUATRO CAMINOS

1986, acrylic on canvas  
90 1/16 x 90 3/16 x 2 3/16 in.  
UNL-Gift of the artist  
1986.U-3927.1

### QUATRO CAMINOS

1986, acrylic on canvas  
90 3/16 x 89 15/16 x 2 1/4 in.  
UNL-Gift of the artist  
1986.U-3927.2

### QUATRO CAMINOS

1986, acrylic on canvas  
90 x 90 3/8 x 2 1/4 in.  
UNL-Gift of the artist  
1986.U-3927.3

### QUATRO CAMINOS

1986, acrylic on canvas  
89 15/16 x 90 3/8 x 2 1/4 in.  
UNL-Gift of the artist  
1986.U-3927.4

### BREAKING THE SYSTEM

1983, acrylic on canvas  
80 1/8 x 80 1/8 in.  
UNL-Gift of the artist  
1986.U-3926

### STUDY-QUATRO CAMINOS

1986, oil on paper  
22 1/4 x 29 7/8 in.  
UNL-Gift of the artist  
1988.U-4082

### STUDY-QUATRO CAMINOS

1986, oil on paper  
22 1/4 x 29 7/8 in.  
UNL-Gift of the artist  
1988.U-4083

### STUDY-QUATRO CAMINOS

1986, oil on paper  
22 1/4 x 29 7/8 in.  
UNL-Gift of the artist  
1988.U-4084

### STUDY-PRIMARY CROSS

1986, oil on paper  
22 1/4 x 29 7/8 in.  
UNL-Gift of the artist  
1988.U-4085

### UNTITLED-FOUR CROSSES

1985, pencil  
16 15/16 x 21 15/16 in.  
UNL-Gift of the artist  
1988.U-4080

### UNTITLED-ONE CROSS

1986, pencil  
16 15/16 x 21 15/16 in.  
UNL-Gift of the artist  
1988.U-4081

Sheldon Solo is an ongoing series of one person exhibitions by nationally recognized contemporary artists. As a museum of twentieth century American art, the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery recognizes its responsibility to present both a historical perspective and the art of our time. Each Sheldon Solo exhibition assesses the work of an artist who is contributing to the spectrum of American art, and provides an important forum for the understanding of contemporary art issues.

The Sheldon Solo series is supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional funding has been provided by the Nebraska Art Association and the Nebraska Arts Council through a Year-Long Program Grant.



On the cover, Four Square Pedro, 1980  
Photograph of David Simpson by, Jon White

