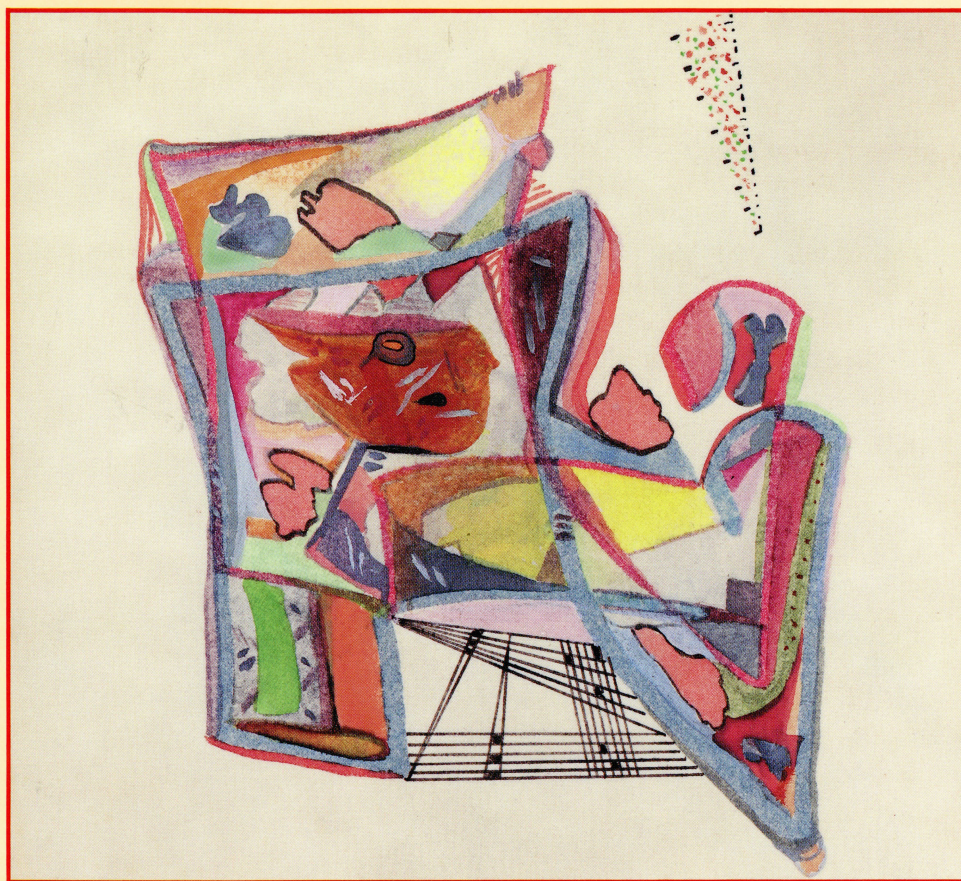


# MEL POWELL: Watercolors



SORDONI ART GALLERY, WILKES COLLEGE





**MEL POWELL:**  
Watercolors

**Sordoni Art Gallery**  
Wilkes College  
Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

*October 10 through November 8, 1987*

**Hank O'Neal**, *Guest Curator*  
Exhibition organized by the Sordoni Art Gallery

Front cover photo: *Jelly Roll*, watercolor and ink

Copyright © 1987  
Sordoni Art Gallery, Wilkes College  
All rights reserved.  
**ISBN 0-942945-00-X**



1. 12 Tone (cat. no.1)



## Introduction and Acknowledgements

The third in an innovative series begun in 1984, this exhibition again pursues the theme of musicians as visual artists. Throughout art history, there have often been individuals and movements concerned with the interaction between branches of the fine arts. Because the tools used by painters — brushes, color, canvas — are more accessible than those of other disciplines, the overlapping of interest often falls heavily on the side of the two-dimensional studio arts. The excitement of placing color on a surface is a compelling process to many creative people. It is in this way that Mel Powell's watercolors show the pure enjoyment of combining color and abstract form on paper. Inevitably, his pre-occupation with music also comes through in his images.

We are grateful to Hank O'Neal who, in his role as guest curator, provided an enlightening essay for this catalog. O'Neal interviewed Powell in the late Spring of 1987 during which time he recorded the quotations noted in the essay.

Mel Powell was involved in each planning phase for the exhibition and concert. His collaboration was essential in preparing the essay and in arranging the loan of pictures from his collection and others.

Andrew J. Sordoni, III and the Sordoni Foundation, Inc. have made this exhibition possible by initiating and supporting the series, *Celebration of Music and Art*.

Finally, we would like to thank the lenders to the exhibition for their generosity in sharing pieces from their collections with our audience.

**Judith H. O'Toole**  
Director





*Left to right: Count Basie, Teddy Wilson, Hazel Scott, Duke Ellington, Mel Powell (August 1942)*



## The Artistry of Mel Powell

Sometime in early August 1942, there was a special gathering of musical talent at the uptown branch of Barney Josephson's legendary Cafe Society. Teddy Wilson was there, along with his band which, among others, featured Edmund Hall and Sid Catlett. The pianist Hazel Scott was also playing there then, handling the intermission duties. At some point in the evening the two resident pianists were joined by Count Basie and Duke Ellington. The four crowded behind the piano and urged the evening's guest of honor to join them. The teenaged object of so much obvious affection and respect was scheduled to be inducted into the army the following day along with hundreds of other nineteen year olds. There were probably farewell parties for many of those young men that night and on other nights throughout the summer of 1942, but the party at Cafe Society was very different.

Mel Powell was anything but an ordinary nineteen-year-old inductee; his prodigious talents were well-defined by the time he became part of the Benny Goodman Orchestra in June 1941. He was only eighteen years old but had been trained as a serious pianist since childhood. He had also heard Teddy Wilson as early as 1935, and had discovered it was amusing to improvise on the themes of the Beethoven sonatas he was studying. His teacher looked on such behavior with dismay, but she was unable to do anything about it as her young pupil continued to stray, listening carefully to the work of Jess Stacy and Earl Hines. Within a few years of his introduction to jazz he found himself playing at Nick's in Greenwich Village alongside many of the outstanding musicians associated with that legendary jazz club.

It was with the Benny Goodman Orchestra, however, that he began to make his mark and during the period from June, 1941 to August, 1942 he quickly became recognized as the new pianist in town. He not only held down the piano chair with the big band and its various small ensembles, but also contributed many arrangements and original compositions to the Goodman book, eighteen of which were recorded by the band in that fourteen-month period. He also managed to secure a recording date for himself with Milt Gabler's Commodore label and four exceptional sides were released, featuring Powell and some of his musical associates including the boss, happily participating as a sideman under the name "Shoeless John Jackson." Given Powell's early endeavors as a semi-professional baseball player, it is puzzling why he didn't refer to Goodman as Shoeless Joe instead of John. Perhaps it was just a printer's error or Gabler didn't know baseball.

These months of crowded activity with Goodman led Powell to a third place finish in the Metronome All Star poll, finishing behind Jess Stacy and Count Basie, but ahead of his first idol, Teddy Wilson. He had made a lasting impression, for he remained in the top five of the Metronome poll throughout the war years, even though he was part of the Glenn Miller Army Air Force Band, a group which never released a commercial recording during the years it was active and rarely performed in venues or even countries where the average Metronome reader might encounter it.

In 1987, Mel Powell confessed that in his view, one of the most profound statements of the Twentieth Century was made by the Czech composer, Ernst Krenek (1900-), who said, some years before Powell joined Benny Goodman, "What we understand no longer interests us and what interests us we no longer understand." The philosophical implications of Krenek's statement have obviously guided Powell's thinking and action for many years. In hindsight, it seems clear a simple lack of interest in the kind of





2. *Little Pollock* (cat. no. 46)



music he was playing in the 1940's and the new directions in which jazz seemed to be evolving impacted on Powell in a negative way. There is even the possibility that had not World War II intervened, resulting in his joining the Glenn Miller Army Air Force Band immediately after his brief stay with Goodman, Powell might have ceased being a full-time, on-the-road-again-forever jazz musician in 1942.

Powell understood the technical facility of his playing, dazzling inventions at the keyboard were not difficult and the skill and originality he brought to his compositions and arrangements appeared to come to him with ease. Yet, even though it was surely an exciting time to sit next to such creative men as Benny Goodman, Charlie, Christian, Count Basie or Duke Ellington, it was not enough. Powell's life in jazz began at the pinnacle; there was no place to go except to accomplish more of the same. It might have been initially interesting to write **The Earl** or **Mission To Moscow** but it was not a serious challenge to play them night after night for weeks and months on end. To play them forever would have been unthinkable. Just how many times could he dazzle an audience with **The World Is Waiting For The Sunrise** or **The Count**?

The large orchestras of Goodman and Miller set standards for musicianship; the small groups within them were equally exceptional but Powell had easily conquered the challenges of the music played by these groups. The developing currents in jazz, primarily bebop, while suggesting possible new directions in jazz, particularly in terms of technical virtuosity, generally offered, except in rare instances, only modest amounts of musical substance. Where could he go?

Powell's three years with the large Miller ensemble had provided him access to many non-jazz musicians. He delighted in writing modest chamber pieces for some of these players and this experience convinced him he wanted to pursue serious composition after the

war. Yet, within a few weeks after his return to the United States practical considerations led him back to Benny Goodman. He remained with the Benny Goodman Band almost one year as pianist/composer/arranger and in the process managed to again insure his good standing in the Metronome poll. This was, however, the last time Powell spent any lengthy period as a player in the world of improvised music.

He dabbled at jazz for the next ten years, creating a legacy of excellent recordings, first for Capitol in the 1940's and then with Vanguard in the 1950's, as well as an exceptional 1955 concert to benefit the Lighthouse for the Blind which was released on record by Columbia. He also managed occasional forays with Goodman; it seemed that whenever his old boss had a special project, a motion picture such as **A Star Is Born**, an important recording or a major television show, Powell would get the call and be "persuaded" to forsake academic for a shining moment or two. The last time Goodman managed to do this was in 1957; Powell appeared with him on a series of television shows, culminating with one with Perry Como. This was to be his final public appearance in a jazz context for two decades. In that same year I heard my first Mel Powell record and he taught his first classes at Yale.

Serious composition was intellectually fulfilling for Powell and in the late 1940's, he submitted a piece to the renowned composer, Paul Hindemith, for his consideration. Hindemith was associated with Yale University and, by all accounts, an extraordinary teacher. He accepted Powell as a student; the student soon became his teacher's assistant and when Hindemith retired Powell became Chairman of Yale's Composition Department and a full professor as well. He remained there until the late 1960's when he was offered the opportunity of structuring and heading the Music Department at the newly founded California Institute of the Arts.

The concept behind Cal Arts was stimulating to Powell; an academic center where students and



music. Dull, absurd and unchallenging as provostal chores might be for a composer, they nevertheless made it impossible to compose and sustain over an extended period of time an undistracted focus on musical thought. Some felt a good deal of compassion for me and one day someone suggested that it might make sense for me to lecture to the institute as a whole. It seemed a good idea; interesting issues were involved which governed work in all the arts and I decided to undertake a series of lectures which would occupy me for a while and take my mind off the terrible aggravation of political handholding. When you are running an institute peopled by painters, playwrights, dancers, composers, all certifiably insane, it is very difficult. I was just as demoniacally crazy as any of them; probably that's why they wanted me to remain as Provost.

"With that as background, I decided to give a lecture on some very advanced music. Not many people know very much about serious new music and I thought I would give a lecture which would bring up-to-date the kinds of issues which interest composers of what is popularly called "classical" music in our century.

"The lecture was a good chance for me to talk to people who knew nothing technically. The painters didn't know anything about it, nor did the writers or the actors. In my music seminars I am able to discuss certain matters with my students, but if I wanted to discuss the twelve-tone system with non-musical listeners I could make no technical references or assumptions.

"I sat at my desk in my office wondering what to do and, while sitting there, decided to attempt to illustrate what certain twelve-tone manipulations are in a visual way. I used color coding to show different transformations of serial techniques and, while I was working on them, my secretary came in and said that one of the Cal Arts designers had arrived for his appointment. He came in and when he came over to my desk he looked down and noticed what I was

teachers from all the arts could interact and inspire one another in a decidedly non-academic, though academically structured, environment. The Music Department at Cal Arts flourished under his guidance and he found increased opportunity for not only composition but to become a serious amateur tennis player as well, accumulating a shelf full of trophies to prove it. Then disaster. In the early 1970's various internal political problems developed at Cal Arts and Powell found himself part of an institution facing serious difficulties on the brink of disintegration. No department escaped the turmoil and in 1972, at the urging of his peers, Powell assumed the position of Provost of the Institute. He aided in stabilizing the institution but at great personal sacrifice; he produced no new music until 1979. The administrative difficulties at Cal Arts had cost him nearly a decade of composition.

This tragedy, his loss of musical expression and the resulting intellectual frustration produced something totally unexpected. Shortly after he became Provost, Powell began to experiment with watercolors. He maintains he was not initially aware of what he was doing but he was nonetheless fascinated by the work he was creating. Perhaps it was because he didn't understand what would happen each time he put his brush to the paper or perhaps it was just the joy of instant gratification. In music, it was often a year or two before he might hear his new compositions played by others. Watercolor happened instantaneously and he didn't have to rely on further expression or interpretation by others.

In 1987, Powell summed up his beginning as a watercolorist:

"The reason I began painting was a shift in my function at Cal Arts. In 1972, I was asked to become Provost and I accepted because the place was teetering. I didn't know what a Provost was or what one should do, but I quickly learned and that sort of thing seemed to me very easy to do, but I soon found myself removed from composition, removed from



music. Dull, absurd and unchallenging as provostal chores might be for a composer, they nevertheless made it impossible to compose and sustain over an extended period of time an undistracted focus on musical thought. Some felt a good deal of compassion for me and one day someone suggested that it might make sense for me to lecture to the institute as a whole. It seemed a good idea; interesting issues were involved which governed work in all the arts and I decided to undertake a series of lectures which would occupy me for a while and take my mind off the terrible aggravation of political handholding. When you are running an institute peopled by painters, playwrights, dancers, composers, all certifiably insane, it is very difficult. I was just as demoniacally crazy as any of them; probably that's why they wanted me to remain as Provost.

"With that as background, I decided to give a lecture on some very advanced music. Not many people know very much about serious new music and I thought I would give a lecture which would bring up-to-date the kinds of issues which interest composers of what is popularly called "classical" music in our century.

"The lecture was a good chance for me to talk to people who knew nothing technically. The painters didn't know anything about it, nor did the writers or the actors. In my music seminars I am able to discuss certain matters with my students, but if I wanted to discuss the twelve-tone system with non-musical listeners I could make no technical references or assumptions.

"I sat at my desk in my office wondering what to do and, while sitting there, decided to attempt to illustrate what certain twelve-tone manipulations are in a visual way. I used color coding to show different transformations of serial techniques and, while I was working on them, my secretary came in and said that one of the Cal Arts designers had arrived for his appointment. He came in and when he came over to my desk he looked down and noticed what I was

teachers from all the arts could interact and inspire one another in a decidedly non-academic, though academically structured, environment. The Music Department at Cal Arts flourished under his guidance and he found increased opportunity for not only composition but to become a serious amateur tennis player as well, accumulating a shelf full of trophies to prove it. Then disaster. In the early 1970's various internal political problems developed at Cal Arts and Powell found himself part of an institution facing serious difficulties on the brink of disintegration. No department escaped the turmoil and in 1972, at the urging of his peers, Powell assumed the position of Provost of the Institute. He aided in stabilizing the institution but at great personal sacrifice; he produced no new music until 1979. The administrative duties at Cal Arts had cost him nearly a decade of

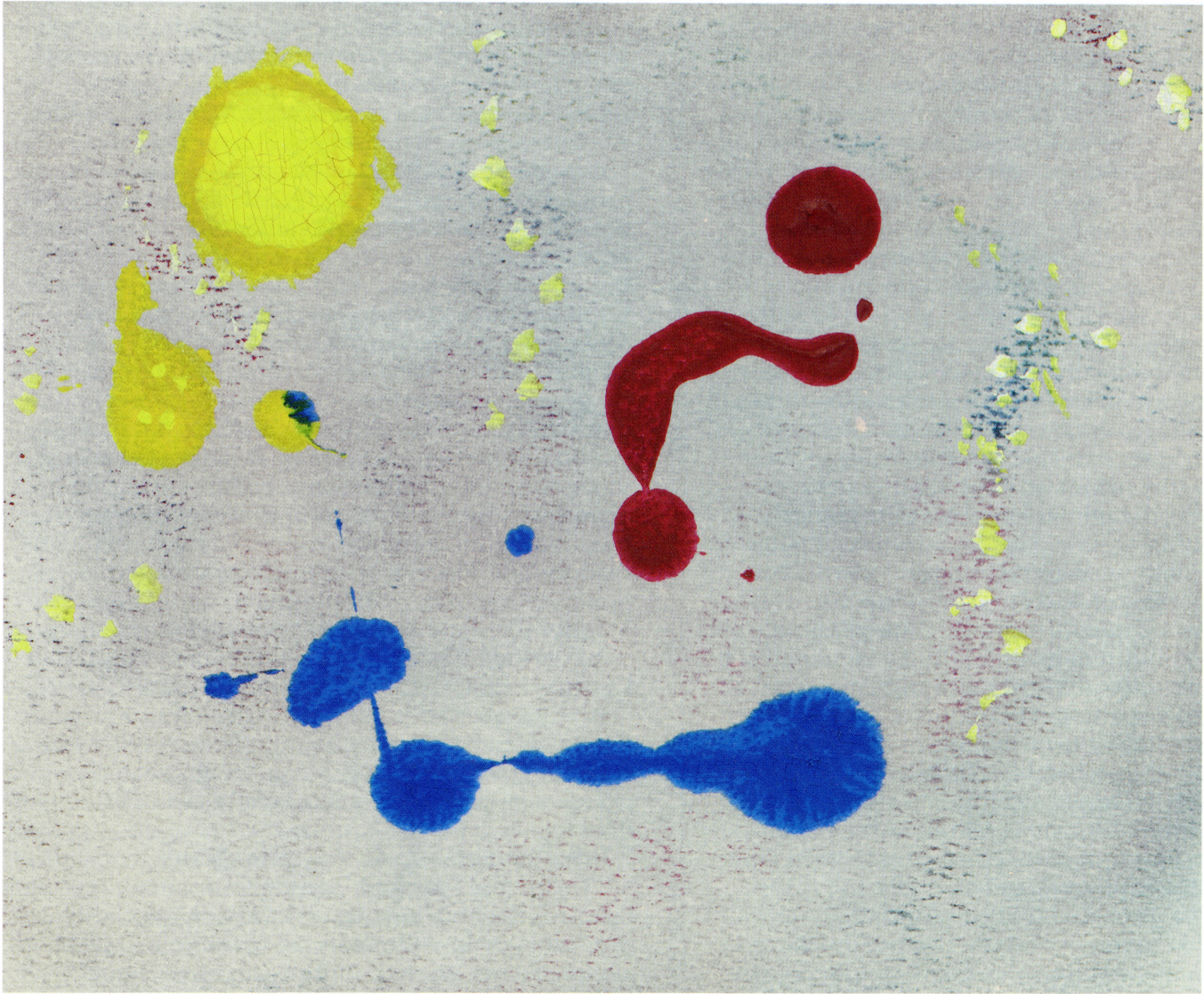
**Erratum: Columns on this page are transposed.**

Powell began to experiment with watercolor and maintains he was not initially aware of what he was doing but he was nonetheless fascinated by the work he was creating. Perhaps it was because he didn't understand what would happen each time he put his brush to the paper or perhaps it was just the joy of instant gratification. In music, it was often a year or two before he might hear his new compositions played by others. Watercolor happened instantaneously and he didn't have to rely on further expression or interpretation by others.

In 1987, Powell summed up his beginning as a watercolorist:

"The reason I began painting was a shift in my function at Cal Arts. In 1972, I was asked to become Provost and I accepted because the place was teetering. I didn't know what a Provost was or what one should do, but I quickly learned and that sort of thing seemed to me very easy to do, but I soon found myself removed from composition, removed from





3. *Little Miro* (cat. no. 48)



doing. He said, 'What is that? It's lovely.' I then looked at it for the first time and said, 'My goodness, you're right, it is lovely.' I was stunned because it had to do with formal structures of music. This was the actual beginning." (Fig. 1, cat. no. 1)

Powell was astounded at how pleasing it was to put color on a piece of paper, particularly watercolor. The color had flow; it had movement. He could almost sense the energy pulsing as the color spilled and spread in tiny currents along the surface of the paper. He refined his technique and soon the frustrated administrator was engrossed in producing paintings, some for his lectures but most simply for his own pleasure.

The small watercolors began to attract some attention from the faculty at Cal Arts. One of the first to notice the work was the painter Miriam Shapiro who unhesitatingly declared that the unassuming amateur was surely a genius, but also decided she needed to explain to him what he was doing. In the process, she brought Powell a rubber plant and suggested that he use the plant as a model and paint it as he saw it. Shapiro later said she never saw such a distorted rendering of a rubber plant in her life. This was the extent of Powell's formal "training."

A very wise man once told me after I had prepared a position paper for the Office of National Estimates suggesting the Department of State was allowing their stated policy to influence perception of certain information, that a preconceived notion of the truth can be the most damaging influence in any intellectual or artistic endeavor. Someone also probably said the same thing to Powell at some point, or at least he was aware of it relative to his painting.

It is clear Powell had no particular notion that a painting had to be this or that; that he had to follow certain rules. The only thing he followed was his own innate sense of an upward order of things, within his own intellectual guidelines. He was obviously aware of the work of many other painters, some of whom he admired greatly. None of them exerted any particular

influence on him except when he chose to emulate one and create his "little Pollock" (Fig. 2, cat. no. 46) or his "little Miro" (Fig. 3, cat. no. 48). He readily confesses that his favorite painters, in addition to Pollock, are Mondrian, Kandinsky and Klee. He even produced one painting (Fig. 4, cat. no. 21) which is very reminiscent of Klee's work in the mid-1920's, such as **Abstract with Reference To A Flowering Tree** (1925). Some also have a distinctly Kandinsky-like feeling, primarily the Kandinsky of 1912-14. This is, of course, not surprising for in Powell's scheme of things, if Raphael and Rembrandt represent Mozart and Beethoven, then Kandinsky and Mondrian represent his two primary compositional influences, Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern.

Powell has worn many hats in his distinguished and happily continuing career. His many talents are presented in a modest, often self-effacing manner. Because he is skilled in so many fields of endeavor, the scope of his imagination seems limitless and extraordinarily perceptive and whatever direction it takes makes it difficult to consider any aspect of his work as less than very serious, despite his protestations to the contrary. His paintings are a case in point. The same mind which created the musical compositions, **Little Companion Pieces** (1979) and **Clarinade** (1945), also created a body of work in watercolor and while one person might perceive **Clarinade** to be of far greater significance than **Little Companion Pieces** or vice versa, another equally perceptive person might dismiss all the music and be drawn only to his visual work.

In his modest fashion, Powell has stated:

"The root of the word 'amateur', of course, betokens 'love' (which, as we all know, may be practiced with no technical skill whatsoever). What one does as an amateur is in any case free from the ineluctable requirements of professionalism; and, as a consequence, the pleasures yielded by an amateur's pursuits become, as they should, an unclouded refreshment of spirit. Every serious composer knows



that each of the sister arts is as unyielding in its demands as his own is, and my esteem for real painters is far too profound to allow me to take very seriously my invasion of their terrain. Of course, it is true that so-called primitivism can flourish in painting (Rousseau, Grandma Moses, et al), while it is unthinkable in my field. So far as the composition of serious music is concerned, alas, it is necessary to know an enormous amount, and to command great technical prowess, before one can hope to produce something dreadful. I used to tease my painter friends about the fact while even Winston Churchill had a go at their art, neither he nor they could compose so much as a note of, say, a string trio or a sonatina.

“When I painted, I naturally regarded the structures in the only terms I could invoke comfortably, that is, musical terms. This is simply to say that collections of objects in space, like those in time, are subject to the interplay of invariance and transformation. I think I read pictures more or less as I read words, or, indeed, as I read music: from left to right. (Would it be right to left if I had been born in Tel Aviv?) This at once establishes a convenient translation from sequences that unfold in time to those that are displayed in space. Accordingly, to give thought to, say, ‘climatic’ areas would require no special conceptual strain.”

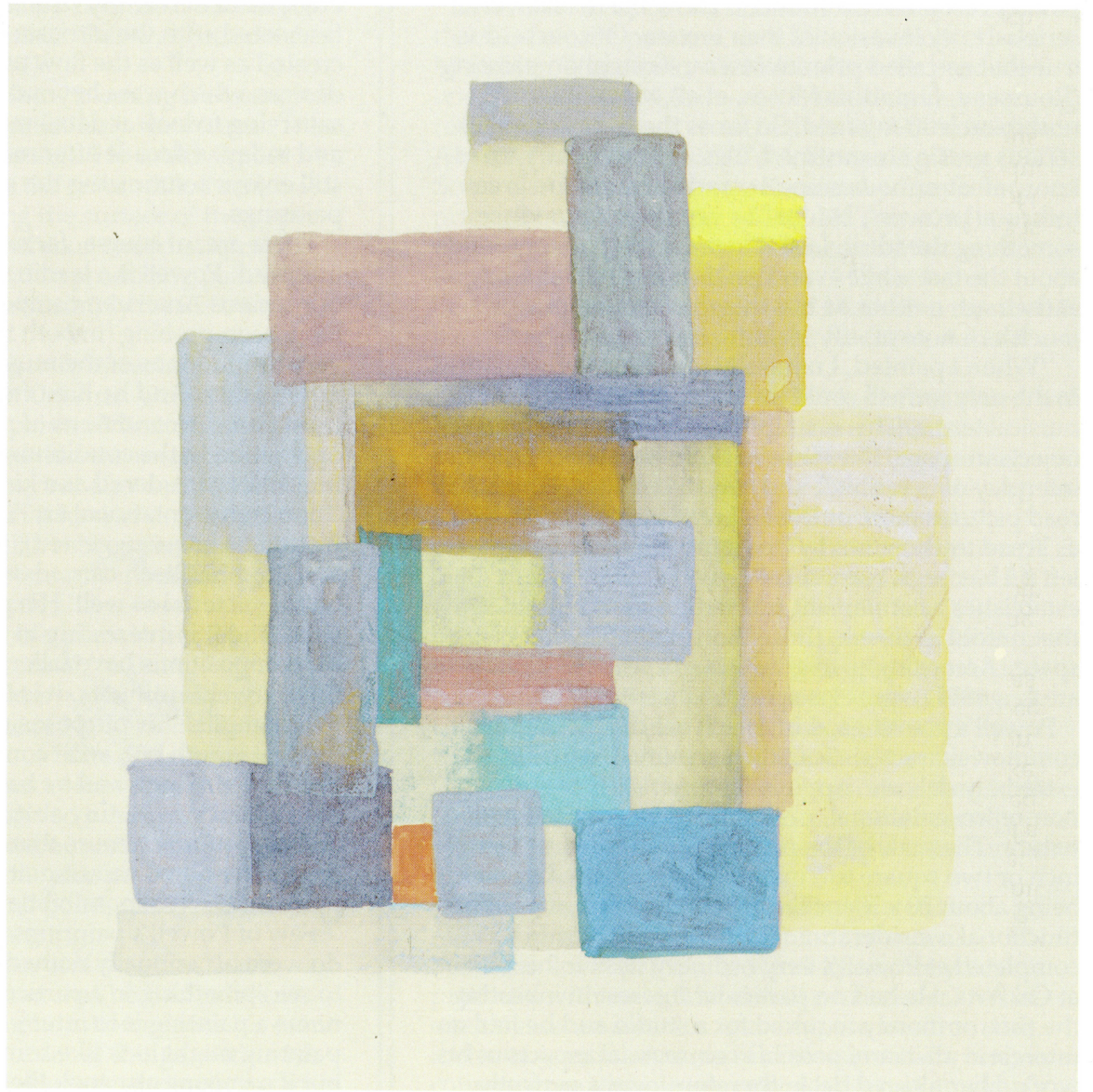
Powell’s paintings, while each are distinctive, have common characteristics. They are small, usually extremely delicate, optimistic, completely non-representational, untitled and improvisational in nature. The scale of the paintings, ranging from an inch or two square to “massive” works, the largest being about 20 x 30 inches are all the result of a functional consideration. Each painting was completed at Powell’s very ordinary desk in his office at Cal Arts. He had no particular interest in investing the time or money required for a studio and he had no interest at all in any possible commercial aspects of his work. His cultured desk, therefore, was a perfectly reasonable workspace.

The small scale of the work is also the result of other factors, one of which is that the size facilitated Powell’s enjoyment of the tiny details in the paintings. He was fascinated with the intricate lines and patterns he had created as well as the flow of color and random designs which were beyond his control. It is far more satisfying to look at detail in a work of modest size, and today, a decade after most were completed, he still enjoys scrutinizing the smallest details of the paintings.

There are, of course, far more complex matters involved. Powell is a leading figure among those of our serious American composers who, for decades, have been probing (in both theory and practice) the very foundations of the musical language of nontonality. And he has often asserted that for the most part the conditions of nontonality stand in opposition to the conditions of the epic. If “nontonal music” is considered as a kind of analogue of “non-representational art” (as many cultural historians have suggested), it is apparent that Powell’s assertion has been carried over to govern his outlook on the pictorial as well. His paintings are, therefore, small and it is interesting to note that in recent years his compositions have fallen in the general range of five to twelve minutes. It is obviously difficult for him to accomplish his purposes with compositions of such modest length but, with consummate skill, he has been able to do so and he has been able to do the same in his paintings. A tiny abstraction can often accomplish much more than a massive representational painting; it can offer a viewer many more intellectual possibilities.

Few of Powell’s paintings have names; those which do were occasionally named by friends who happened to see something in a particular image. He feels that to name a painting is to interfere unnecessarily. A certain painting might look like something to a certain viewer, but if someone else took the time to look at it they might see something totally different. There is no need to restrict a painting with a verbal configuration, to





4. Klee (cat. no. 21)







impose an order on it which was not consonant with his original intentions. Everything that may seem to be representational in his work is *ex post facto*. He never set out to paint a piano player or a Spanish dancer and, given his rubber plant experience, would not attempt anything of the sort with confidence. Powell named but one of his paintings; one which he produced for purely pedagogical purposes. It is entitled **Here and There** (Fig. 5, cat. no. 41) and is supposed to demonstrate a binary form in music. This single titled painting is the exception which proves the rule.

The freedom and flow of events which are evident in his music are equally evident in his paintings. The only element that restricts his visual improvisation in watercolor on paper is the size of the surface upon which he paints and the limits of his own imagination. The final consideration, his imagination, is extremely significant.

"Part of the strategic quest that still characterizes our century, even now in its waning years, is the struggle to transcend the imagination. It is clear that many of us are destined to live and work at the threshold of the incoherent — as reasonably good citizens addressing the epoch's crisis of intelligibility. What other century would have welcomed a distinguished work of literary criticism such as my late colleague, Wimsatt, published entitled **The Meaning of Meaning?** Bergson pointed out that chaos is in reality a very high order: the moment one grasps the principles of its organization of course it ceases to be chaos. I enjoy looking at the "snow" on a television screen when the transmitter has gone off for the night. It provides what is usually more interesting than the evening's programs: an abstract, activated, black and white Seurat. It's a great gamble to predict the precise moment at which a particular point will appear or reappear, and that, after all, reflects an important aspect of the random process. Still, from another point of view, there is no comprehensive control and even predictability: all the points will, in fact, reappear at

their respective positions within that square frame of the screen, and such a process is at a vast distance from the merely aleatronic. But just this kind of maze, this interaction of what is known, what is expected, what is not known, what is not expected, what we embrace and what we dismiss, what we think we understand and what things we do not — this storehouse of mysteries is always at the heart of the search not only for the strong perception theories we presently lack, but for deeper insights into the constituency of our notions of 'chaos' and 'order' as they connect to all of humanities enterprises."

Powell's paintings are much the same; they are highly ordered despite the chaos they may impart to one who takes the time for but a casual glance. Within the obvious improvisations are structured motifs and, as often as not, much repetition and circular development. His paintings, possibly more than his musical compositions are affirmations of his belief in the stability of the circular, always changing, always the same and the remarkably mysterious effects of the perception of repetition on the human psyche.

Powell's last paintings were completed shortly after he resigned as Provost of Cal Arts and he has not considered painting since that time. His first new compositions appeared a year or so later, in 1979. The paintings have never been publicly exhibited. Two were used on record album jackets and except for these his works are private paintings and almost all remain in Powell's possession except the handful which are treasured by the friends and relatives to whom he has given them.

Some of the paintings have a special meaning to him and often these are casually displayed in his California home. The one some call **Jelly Roll** (Fig. 6, cat. no. 12), because they see a pianist in it is normally affixed to a wall in his bedroom with a double-faced tape; the "little Pollock" leans against a tennis trophy on a book shelf in the entrance hall. A spectacular painting (Fig. 7, cat. no. 60) hangs casually on a wall in a small television viewing room, mixed in with posters and





7. *Untitled* (cat. no. 60)



awards related to Martha Scott's distinguished acting career. Others could have been scattered about his home before they were collected for the **Celebration of Music and Art III**, but most of the paintings are kept in a large envelope, mixed in with music scores and manuscripts in Powell's studio. They are not exactly forgotten, but they are at least ignored, a part of the past which he regards as but an interesting creative sidestep when the doors leading to other creative outlets were temporarily closed. It is not surprising most of the paintings are usually out of sight; Powell does not worship the past nor does he even seem particularly concerned about it on a creative level for the present is far too stimulating and anticipation of the future is even more exciting.

Will there be more paintings? Powell is ambivalent on this question. Sometimes he thinks yes, other times he feels no but, well . . . maybe. He has already had an extraordinary career in the arts and it will undoubtedly continue to amaze and confound critics, the public and Powell himself. He probably doesn't completely understand his ambivalence towards painting and jazz and perhaps this is why he continues to be fascinated with each and why there just may be more attention to both fields in the future.

An interesting thing is now happening to Powell. In 1986, he agreed to play jazz for the first time in almost three decades. Except for a few private gatherings he had done nothing in jazz for thirty years. He then suddenly reappeared in October 1986 aboard the S/S Norway and performed with old friends like Ruby Braff and Buddy Rich and some new "old" friends such as Dizzy Gillespie, Svend Asmussen, Jack Lesberg and Mel Lewis. Some younger new friends also gathered around his piano; Dick Hyman, Makoto Ozone, Bob Wilber, Gary Burton, Howard Alden and Kenny Davern. Audiences, critics and performers were astounded with his exuberant, brilliant playing. In a matter of seconds he proved he could go home again and, like a merry pied piper, have a happy public trailing after him. The ink spread from those

shipboard concerts in the Caribbean across the United States in all directions, to the Far East and Europe. It was a jazz journalist's dream, the reappearance of a major personality after almost forty years of limited appearances, or none at all. There was nothing like it in the history of jazz; after all, when Bunk Johnson was brought back before the public he had only been absent about twenty years and, unfortunately, was unable to play at anything approaching his best. Powell had been a mystery for almost twice as long but here he was, playing better than ever. One noted writer, Whitney Balliet, even prepared a piece for *The New Yorker* magazine entitled, **What Ever Happened To Mel Powell?**

The truth is nothing "happened" to Mel Powell. He simply elected to do something he wanted to do, something he had to do. It was a puzzling decision to many, made even more complex because of the extremely low visibility of non-tonal music with the public at large. That his decision didn't please jazz oriented listeners, while perhaps unfortunate, was of little consequence to Powell when he made the decision nor is it a consideration today. The same is equally true of his painting; to anyone unaware of the facts it appears he suddenly began painting, produced an extremely interesting body of work and then just as suddenly stopped. The foregoing shows nothing particularly mysterious happened, but, rather, everything was very logical in progression.

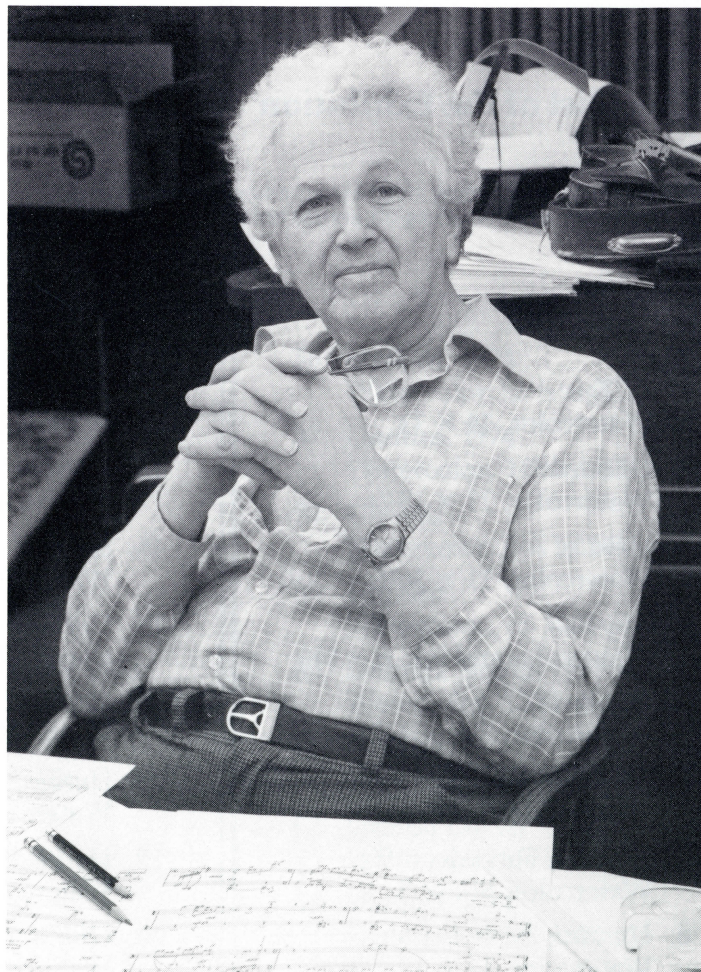
It is, of course, a fascinating story and one which is still unfolding. It will be interesting to watch it develop. Powell clearly intends to devote almost all his creative efforts in the direction of composition, but public adoration can often lead one astray, particularly if one enjoys being led astray. His experiences in 1986 were so satisfying that Powell has decided to dabble in jazz again and has agreed to a limited number of public performances in October 1987. He finds it difficult to turn his back on so many smiling faces no matter how dedicated he is to his composition. The same thing may happen with his painting and public



exhibition may cause him to rethink his decision to abandon watercolors. He is certain far more people can derive pleasure from looking at his painting than listening to his recent woodwind quintet because it is psychologically far easier to look at a non-representational painting than it is to listen to non-tonal music. This might be all it takes to shift a tiny percentage of his time in the direction of watercolors.

If Powell elects to never paint again, he has already produced a fine body of work. If he chooses to never play another note of jazz, he has already produced an extraordinary body of compositions and performances. If he chooses to add to what he has created in either field, we will all be enriched by that decision.

**Hank O'Neal**  
New York City  
July, 1987



Mel Powell (1987)

## Checklist of the Exhibition

(All dimensions in inches; height precedes width. All works collection of the artist unless otherwise noted.)

1. *12 Tone*  
Watercolor, 14 × 11
2. *Untitled*  
Watercolor, 11 × 13<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>
3. *Untitled*  
Watercolor, 11 × 10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>
4. *Jelly Roll*  
Watercolor and ink, 6 × 5<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>
5. *Untitled*  
Watercolor, 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> × 4<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>
6. *Untitled*  
Watercolor, 8 × 9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>
7. *Untitled, February 1974*  
Watercolor, 8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> × 5
8. *Untitled, 1974*  
Watercolor, 11 × 10  
Courtesy of Mary Powell
9. *Untitled, 1975*  
Watercolor, 11 × 15
10. *Untitled*  
Watercolor, 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>
11. *Untitled*  
Watercolor, 11 × 14
12. *Untitled, 1974*  
Watercolor, 5<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 5<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>
13. *Untitled*  
Watercolor, 14 × 11
14. *Untitled*  
Watercolor, 12 × 12<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>
15. *Untitled*  
Watercolor, 14 × 11
16. *Untitled*  
Watercolor, 11 × 14
17. *Untitled, 1974*  
Watercolor, 5 × 5<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>
18. *Untitled*  
Watercolor, 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 5<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>
19. *Untitled*  
Watercolor, 12<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 12<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>
20. *Untitled, March 1974*  
Watercolor, 9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> × 9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>
21. *Klee, 1975*  
Watercolor, 8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>
22. *Untitled*  
Watercolor, 3<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 2<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>
23. *Tango Dancers*  
Watercolor, 5<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> × 4<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>
24. *Untitled, 1976*  
Watercolor, 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> × 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>
25. *Jazz House*  
Watercolor, 10 × 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>
26. *Untitled*  
Watercolor, 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> × 7
27. *Untitled, 1975*  
Watercolor, 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 5<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>  
Courtesy of Jill Williams
28. *Untitled*  
Watercolor, 10<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>
29. *Untitled*  
Watercolor, 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 11
30. *Untitled*  
Watercolor and ink,  
12<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 12<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>
31. *Untitled*  
Watercolor, 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 2<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>
32. *Untitled, March 1974*  
Watercolor, 6<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>
33. *Untitled, March 1974*  
Watercolor, 8 × 8<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>
34. *Untitled (two sided drawing)*  
Watercolor, 4<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> × 6
35. *Untitled*  
Watercolor, 8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> × 12



36. *Untitled*  
Watercolor,  $10^{3/4} \times 9^{1/8}$
37. *Untitled, 1974*  
Watercolor,  $10^{1/8} \times 14^{3/4}$
38. *Untitled*  
Watercolor,  $10^{1/2} \times 15$
39. *Untitled, 1975*  
Watercolor,  $11 \times 14^{3/4}$
40. *Untitled*  
Watercolor,  $8^{1/2} \times 6^{1/2}$   
Courtesy of Hank O'Neal  
and Shelley Shier
41. *Here and There, 1974*  
Watercolor,  $12 \times 16^{1/2}$   
Courtesy of Hank O'Neal  
and Shelley Shier
42. *Untitled*  
Watercolor,  $3^{3/4} \times 4^{1/8}$   
Courtesy of Hank O'Neal  
and Shelley Shier
43. *Untitled*  
Watercolor,  $12^{1/4} \times 12^{1/2}$   
Courtesy of Hank O'Neal  
and Shelley Shier

44. *Untitled, 1975*  
Watercolor,  $3^{1/2} \times 5^{3/4}$
45. *Untitled*  
Watercolor,  $5 \times 7^{5/8}$
46. *Little Pollock*  
Watercolor,  $4^{1/2} \times 6^{3/8}$
47. *Untitled, 1973*  
Watercolor,  $6^{3/8} \times 5^{3/4}$
48. *Little Miro, December 1973*  
Watercolor,  $6 \times 7^{1/4}$
49. *Untitled*  
Watercolor,  $10 \times 9^{3/4}$
50. *Untitled*  
Watercolor,  $10 \times 7$
51. *Untitled*  
Watercolor,  $13^{7/8} \times 10^{1/2}$
52. *Untitled, 1974*  
Watercolor,  $8^{1/2} \times 11$
53. *Untitled*  
Watercolor,  $9^{7/8} \times 7^{5/8}$
54. *Untitled, 1974*  
Watercolor,  $8^{1/2} \times 11^{3/4}$
55. *Untitled*  
Watercolor,  $16^{3/4} \times 12^{1/8}$

56. *Untitled, 1974*  
Watercolor,  $12^{1/2} \times 11^{1/8}$
57. *Untitled, 1974*  
Watercolor,  $11^{5/8} \times 15$
58. *Untitled*  
Watercolor,  $6^{1/8} \times 10^{1/8}$
59. *Untitled*  
Watercolor,  $15 \times 21$
60. *Untitled, March 1974*  
Watercolor,  $13^{3/4} \times 14^{3/4}$
61. *Untitled*  
Watercolor,  $19^{1/2} \times 14^{1/2}$
62. *Spanish Dancer*  
Watercolor,  $19^{1/2} \times 14^{1/2}$
63. *Untitled, 1974*  
Watercolor,  $22 \times 30$
64. *Untitled*  
Watercolor,  $21 \times 30$

**Sordoni Art Gallery**  
**Advisory Commission 1987-88**

Lou Conyngham, *Chairman*  
Judith H. O'Toole, *Director*

Christopher N. Breiseth, Ph.D.

Deane Berger

Richard F. Charles

Aleta Connell

Mary Lee Cuscela

Virginia Davis

Yvonne Eckman

Doris Fordham

Marilyn Friedman

Oscar Jones

Ann Marie Kennedy

Susannah Kent

Charlotte Lord, Ph.D.

Constance McCole

Melanie Manning

Marilyn Maslow

Arnold Rifkin

Jill Evans Saporito

Judith Schall

Charles Shafer, Esq.

William Shull

Helen Farr Sloan

Andrew J. Sordoni, III

William H. Sterling, Ph.D.

Diane Ushinski

**Sordoni Art Gallery**

Wilkes College

Wilkes-Barre, PA 18766







