

Johnnie Winona Ross

Cover:

*Sand Bend Draw (SBD-01)*, 2004 (detail)

acrylic, mixed media on linen

60 × 57 in.

Collection of Stephen Haller,

New York, NY

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January 15–March 5, 2006

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Sordani Art Gallery  
Wilkes University  
Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

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## Acknowledgments

Since first encountering the work of Johnnie Winona Ross nearly two years ago, I have had the great good fortune of working with people who have given generously of their time, expertise, and enthusiasm. Foremost among them, of course, is the artist himself who has liberally shared both his talent and his insight and has made working on this project truly a pleasure and a privilege. A great debt of thanks also goes to the staff of the Stephen Haller Gallery in New York, particularly Stephen Haller and Daniel Ferris, for their tireless support, patience, and good humor. It was, in fact, an exhibition of Ross's work at the Stephen Haller Gallery in 2004 that prompted my initial interest in following the work of this fascinating artist.

Ronald R. Bernier, Ph.D.  
Director

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## A Conversation with Johnnie Winona Ross

The conversation took place between the author (RRB) and the artist (JWR) from October 5 to October 19, 2005.

**RRB:** More than one reviewer has made the association between your painting and that of Minimalist artist Agnes Martin and the logic of the grid. But there also appear to be less remarked-on associations that could be drawn between your work and, for instance, the color drips and washes of Morris Louis and Ad Reinhardt, and the primary structures and stacked verticals and horizontals of Donald Judd. Could you comment on the significance, if any, of the work of these artists to your own painting?

**JWR:** 'The Agnes thing.' It is one of those things that I don't fully understand, and I have given it a great deal of thought. My work has hung in the same room with Agnes's work, and they are quite different, she dematerializes the painting as an object. I do almost the opposite, I call attention to the physical object . . . but . . . we both create paintings that either allow the viewer to feel a sense of transcendence, or the paintings themselves to transcend the weight of their own physical presence. There are certainly several artists, both contemporary and historical, that do the same. I think the effect of transcendence is the common link between our work, and it is something that few viewers or writers have commented on. Just using the word *transcend*, or trying to talk about it, is quite tricky and usually not attempted, but it is certainly part of both of our paintings, as well as Brice Marden, Ad Reinhardt, Donald Judd, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, etc. . . .

It is that feeling that you get in the small of your back, that thing that you can't quite verbalize, it is something that can only be communicated visually.

What viewers/writers usually land on with the Agnes thing is 'white' and 'horizontal bands':

The primary colours that I use are titanium white and zinc white. The density, opacity, and physicality of titanium offer a strong yet subtle contrast to the ephemeral, atmospheric translucency of zinc. Earth/sky. If you use white as a colour (few artists have, Robert Ryman is certainly one, Morandi another), it feels absolute next to other colours, it is pure without any adulteration visible, you can't mix anything with it without a feeling of dilution. It is a difficult colour to use effectively. I use white—not only as a colour, but as a material. I'm not sure Agnes Martin uses white beyond the white of the gesso ground. Her colours are generally very thin washes over white gesso. In most of the paintings white is the support that is under the other colours.

The horizontal bands . . . Brice Marden relied on 'grid structure' until the *Cold Mountain* series. When I walked into Dia where those were first exhibited, I saw a new possibility with contemporary structure. That series changed how I saw the world; literally when I walked from the *Cold Mountain* series I was different. He not only made the grid organic, many artists have achieved that, but . . . he separated the vertical from the horizontal with the complexity of turning the ground into atmosphere, instead of mere support of the grid lines on the same plane. Seems simple, but it isn't. That shook my visual world. When was that? Early '80s. That is when I began to approach the horizontal more symbolically, more of a physical material, a component. Cy Twombly also did much the same at about the same time, just different and not as clear. Over the past 25 years or so, my big step was to create the somewhat rigid horizontal contrasting the organic quality of the

vertical drip. Again, it seems simple but there are several things happening within that contrast of material and effect.

Morris Louis was not much of an influence. I never found his work that interesting, except the large size that causes an impact . . . but . . . Jackson Pollock, impasto paint over earlier drips. That got my attention when I was quite young in the '50s. Ad Reinhardt, of course, Kasimir Malevich even more, the first of the contemporary aesthetic, we are still dealing with that, one of the first and still one of the few who successfully combined the spiritual with contemporary vision. Donald Judd's monastic aesthetic, an extension of Bauhaus design. How can he create so much with so little? Susan Rothenberg, another important artist for me.

I continue to ramble on, but for the moment let's stop.

**RRB:** Your process and technique is evidently a long, painstaking, slow one, one which includes repeated scrapings and burnishings of the surface. Could you describe this process, its rationale, and the importance of this sense of slowness and accretion to your canvases?

**JWR:** I didn't start out to create a working process that is "long, painstaking, slow." As an artist, I never found technique by itself to be that interesting or really very important. I am basically an intuitive painter, with much to owe to abstract expressionism. Intuitive moves happen quickly. They are reactive, honest, direct, and complex to understand.

Crafting an object, whether it is a titanium white band, or a burnished surface, or a perfectly stretched linen tacked with copper is contemplative, intentional, slow, and done with obvious skill. Melding those two ways of working into one seamless strain of energy creates a magic; it seems to contain the primary aspects of 'being.'

This play between intuition and the contemplative is played out maybe 150 times per painting, giving the painting a 'history.' It is not just repeating, but doing it over—

within the context of the structure of an individual painting—until a resonance, a magic occurs. If I could do the painting in one cycle and see the magic I would certainly be a happy painter, but with my simple mind, it takes scores of cycles.

A marble stairway in a new structure has far less interest than seeing a marble stairway that has been used for 400 years. Its wear is its history, the hardness is softened by the touch of countless feet. When one is holding an Anasazi pot with a burnished surface, it is 800–900 years old, you know the process of rubbing a smooth stone over and over to harden the surface, the time it takes, the beauty, the care of the maker. . . magic . . .

**RRB:** This sense of slowness seems to be expected of your viewers as well. Your canvases require a certain patience of the beholder, long and close observation, and the expenditure of considerable effort, a state of meditation of sorts. Is this a fair assessment?

**JWR:** Yes, contemplative, meditative—it is an important part of the dialogue between you as a viewer/me as an artist. Experiencing the ‘magic’ is not a passive act. It takes energy, openness, sensuality, and a need to see beyond ‘self.’

**RRB:** I’m interested in the language you use to talk about your painting—*transcendence, spiritual*, and, in particular, your reference to Malevich and his efforts to discover a visual language able to transcend mundane experience and natural appearance and place the viewer in touch with an alternative, ultimately spiritual world through pure, non-objective form.

**JWR:** The above is tricky. Much of how transcendence and the spiritual are perceived by the reader/viewer is context. One can sound ‘woo woo’ very quickly. As an artist, and also you as a writer/curator, we are really in an unknown area here, and difficult to articulate. First, you are dealing with a non-verbal experience (the feeling or sensation one gets when viewing) that is not dependent on words.

There is some type of sensual response in many people, whether it is the small of the back thing that I feel when I see or hear something that affects my core, or a sense of well being or even the opposite, again quite tricky to articulate.

**RRB:** Elsewhere you also mention the need to “see beyond the self.” Together with the idea of ‘transcendence,’ this sense of a call to invisibility, to unrepresentability, would seem to be part of the aesthetic tradition of the Sublime—the idea that something ‘beyond’ transcends the limits of our ordinary phenomenal being. Would you go as far as to say that the idea of the Sublime is part of what you are after, and that, perhaps, your painting may be seen/experienced as an instrument or embodiment of the spiritual?

**JWR:** The Sublime, a tricky area once again. Context . . . many of the artists and composers of the early-to-mid twentieth century used symbolism to key the viewer/listener to sublime direction. This at best is romantic and rather schlocky, and goes down from there. Malevich’s Suprematism (1914–1919) was tapping into something quite different—unchartered territory. I think Brice Marden picked up on this with his *Cold Mountain* series, James Terrell sometimes also enters this realm, as well as John Coltrane. And yes, Agnes sometimes.

I try not to nail this down too much. I don’t understand it, but I *do* know when I’m in that area, whether with my own work, or experience it through someone else’s. I only attempt to provide a situation for the viewer to experience something that is outside of everyday experience—a quick meditation? a deeper understanding/perception? . . . but that is basically what you said before . . . but context removes this from being too ‘woo woo.’

I find it interesting that my work is doing so well at this point in our culture. It is really outside of prevailing artworld ‘speak.’ . . . In one sense, is it reflecting something that is needed?

**RRB:** In spending time looking at your work, time the painting itself urges—insists on, even—it seems that there are apparent tensions, suspended oppositions, or perhaps better, equivalences, in your work between: surface and depth; repetition and spontaneity; opacity and transparency; presence and absence; emptiness and plenitude. Can you comment on this?

**JWR:** I believe in the ol' Joseph Albers saying, "you never see a colour isolated, but always related to a society of colour" (I actually combined two quotes there). Every mark, or copper tack, or piece of linen, surface, or colour is related to the collective whole of the painting (a Jungian phrase). Like nature. Within that relative context "opposites" create an energy, a life, or power. Tension . . . the balance between two opposing forces . . . doesn't quite describe it for me. It is more like sensing the potential between two opposites.

**RRB:** Finally, there seems to be a subtle but deliberate evocation of the physical environment in your painting, of geological structures and formations, particularly of the southwest where you now live and work. Could you talk a bit about these implied experiences or sensations of the desert environment and its importance to your work?

**JWR:** Earlier, when you asked about Martin, Judd, and other artists, which I addressed briefly, those were/are influences, certainly important within the language of the visual, as well as contemporary historical context. (But) Nature—is the inspiration. Nothing is more powerful, important, complex, simple, awe inspiring. Nature is mother. Art is friend. I don't use specific shapes, colours, or patterns from nature, but use the power of a place. I work with the effect it has on me as a person. The awe. The mystery. The beauty.

When I look through the glass doors of my studio and I see the mountains everyday, I am humbled. It would seem almost silly to try to imitate the appearance

of the mountains, but I try to create something with some of the complexity and power, an object to elevate one's senses, something that changes your sensibilities as when looking at those mountains, or looking out over the canyons, with a gentle wind, feeling the sun on your skin, sand on your hands, the smell of sage, you just keep looking, you are not passive, your senses are heightened, they become quite sharp, you get that feeling in the small of your back. I try to create an experience similar, but different. It's not about Martin or Judd. You are humbled by being a small part of nature.

*Sand Bend Draw (SBD-01)*, 2004

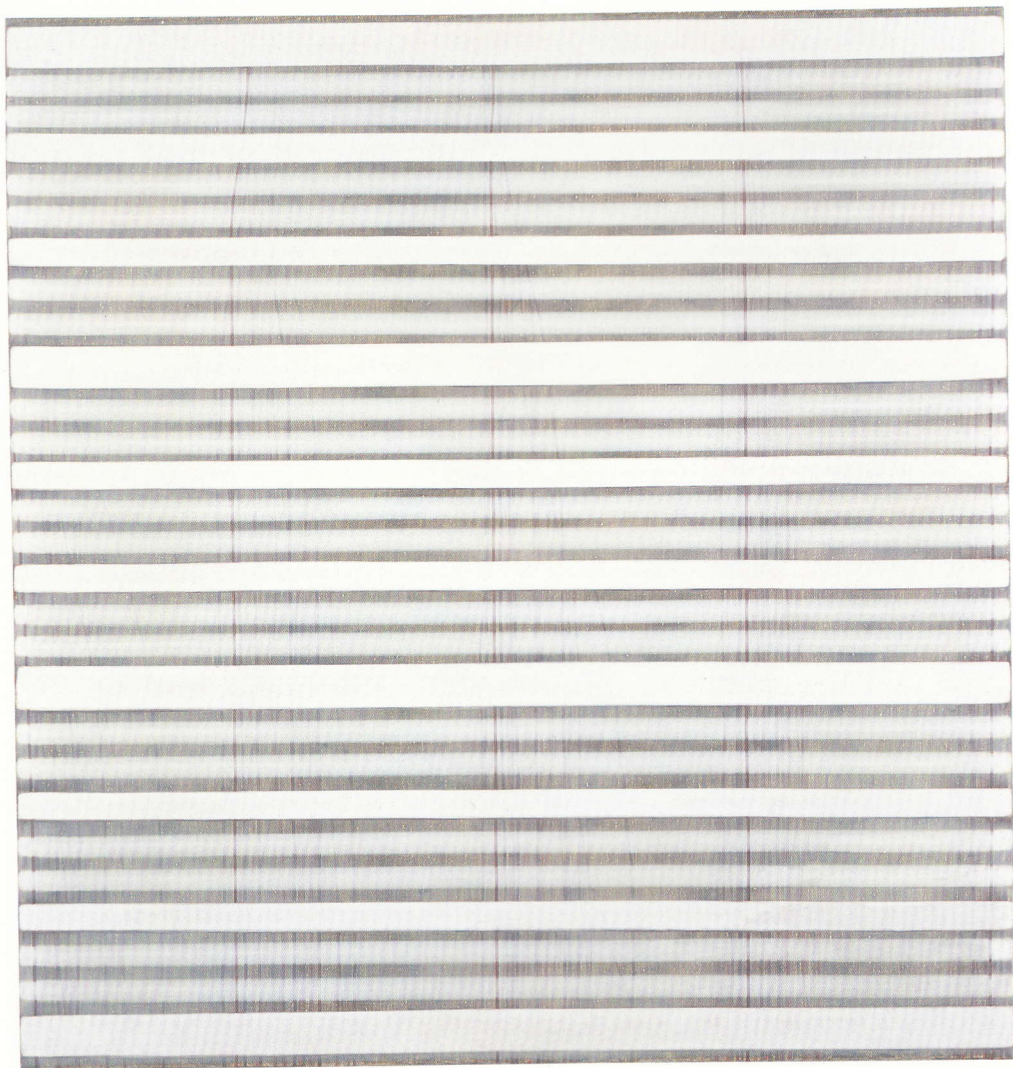
acrylic, mixed media on linen

60 x 57 in.

Collection of Stephen Haller,

New York, NY





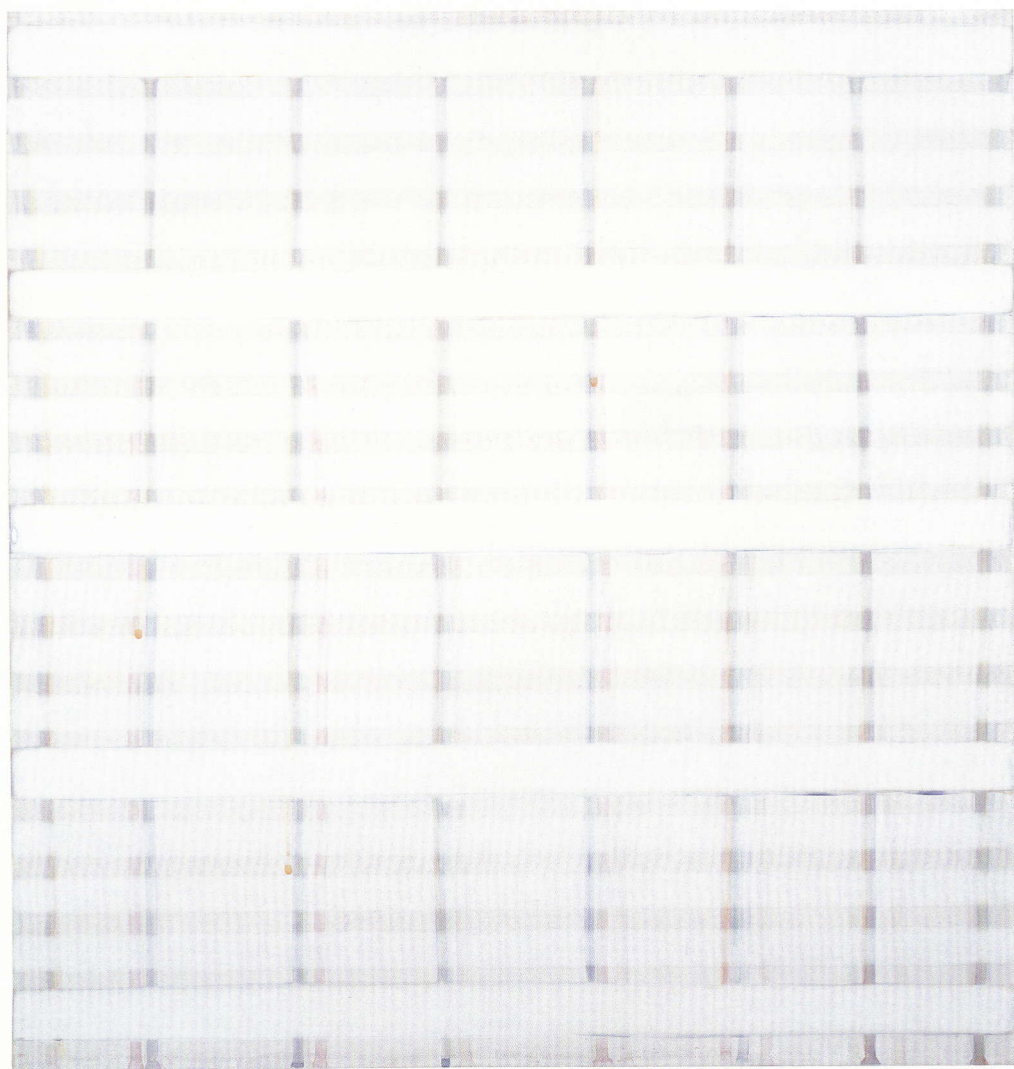
*Sand Bend Draw (SBD-06), 2005*

acrylic, mixed media on linen

18 × 17 in.

Collection of Michael Koch,

New York, NY

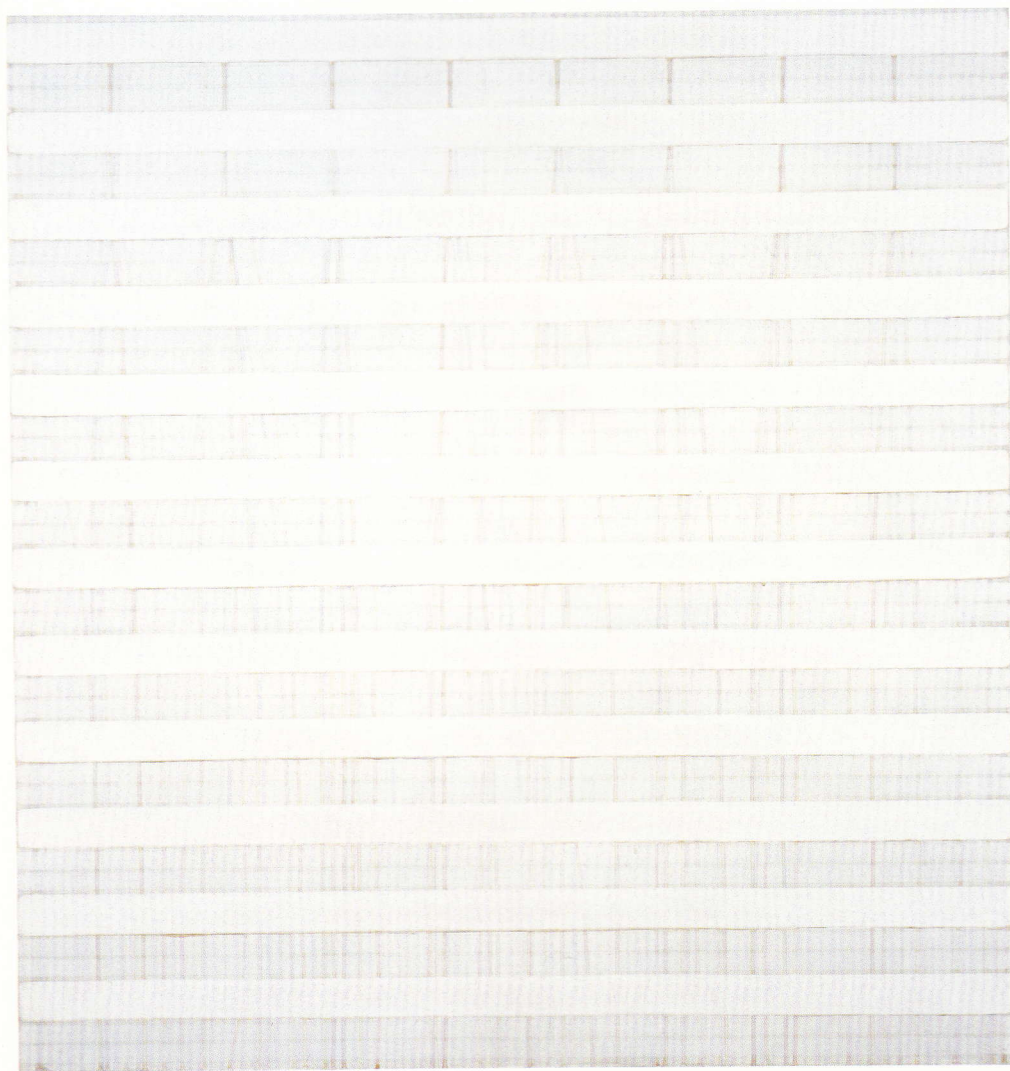


*Sand Bend Draw (SBD-10)*, 2005

acrylic, mixed media on linen

48 x 45½ in.

Courtesy of the Stephen Haller Gallery,  
New York, NY

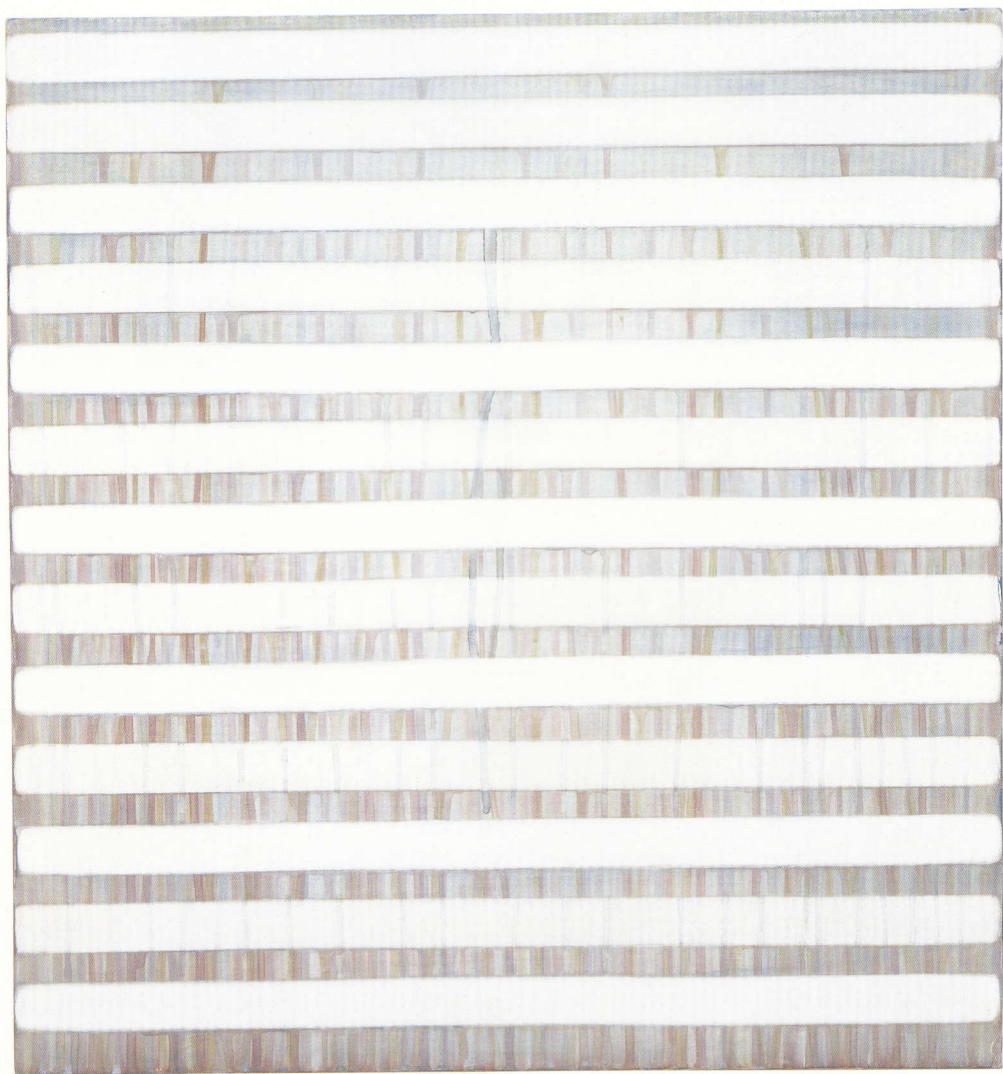


*Dry Wash Seeps*, 2004

oil, mixed media on canvas

20 x 18<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.

Private collection, courtesy of the Stephen Haller Gallery,  
New York, NY



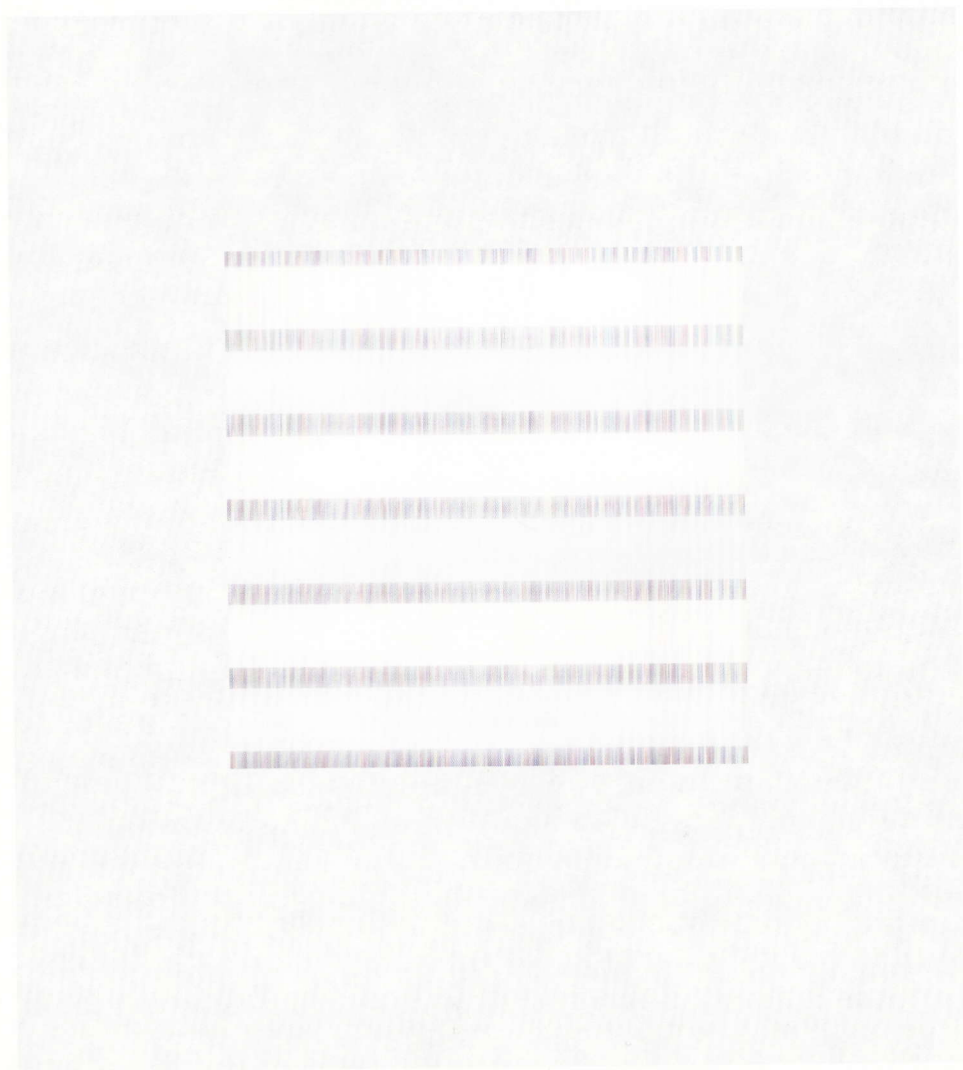
*Salt Seeps .03, 2005*

digital print on paper

24½ × 22 in.

Courtesy of the Stephen Haller Gallery,  
New York, NY



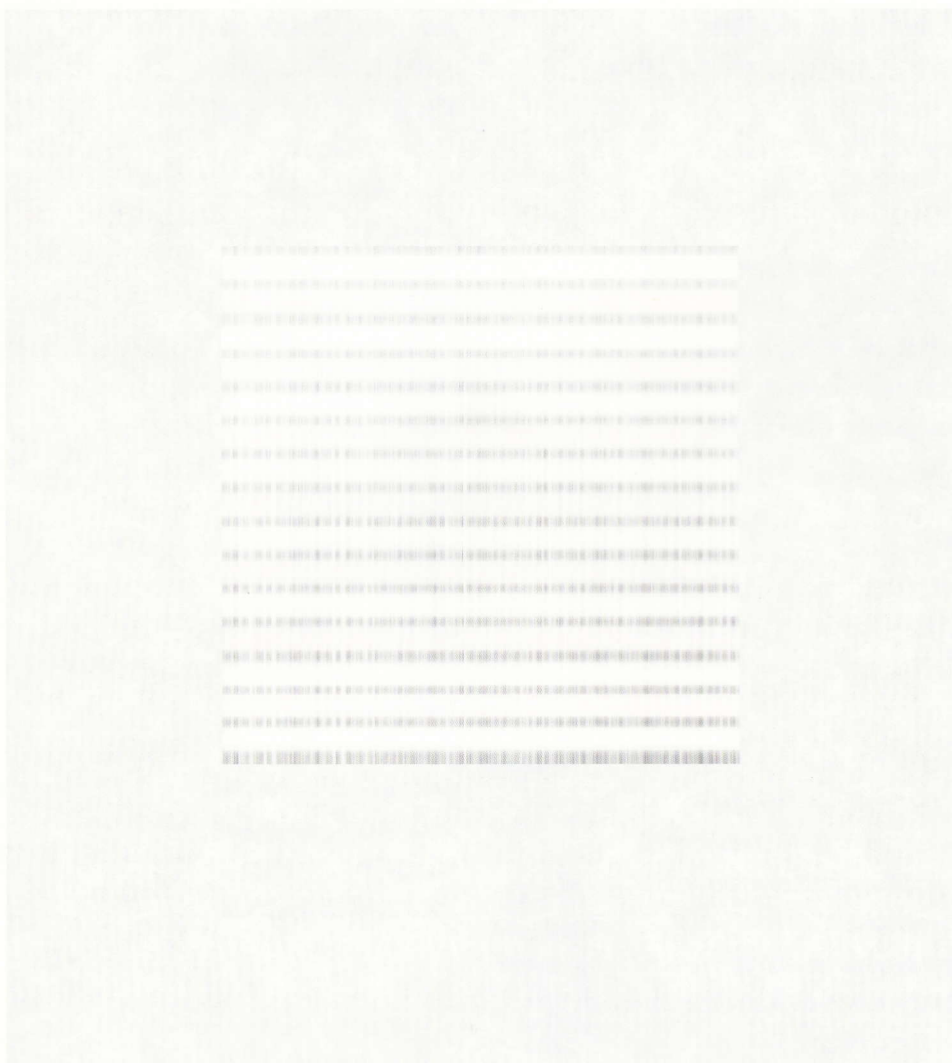


*Salt Seeps .02*, 2005

digital print on paper

24½ x 22 in.

Courtesy of the Stephen Haller Gallery,  
New York, NY



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This project was supported in part by the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, a state agency funded by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.

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