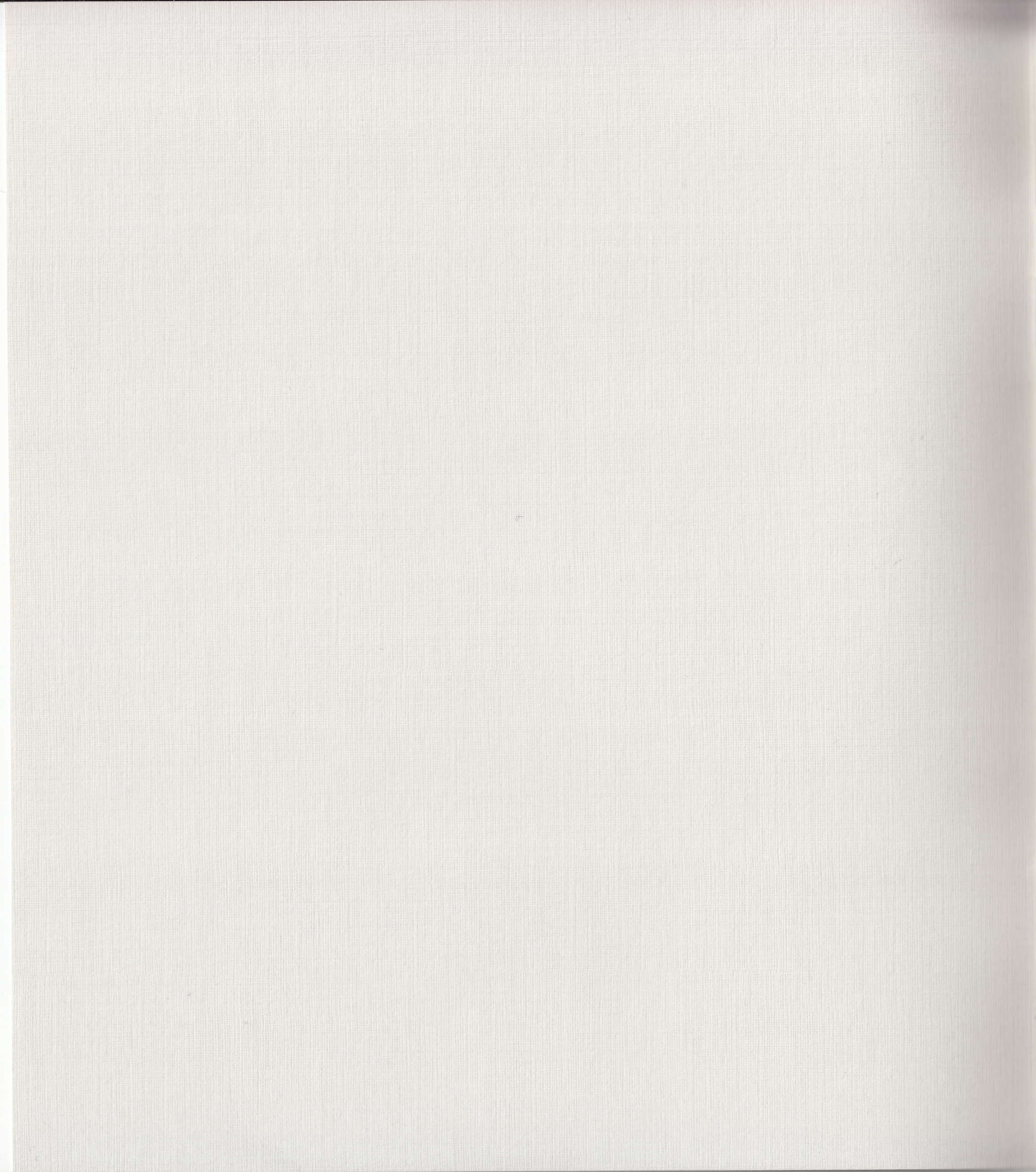


WILLIAM STERLING



MOODS AND STRUCTURES

The Paintings of William Sterling

Exhibition Curated by
Stanley I Grand

Essays by
Stanley I Grand
William Sterling

September 7–October 17, 1999
Sordoni Art Gallery, Wilkes University
Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

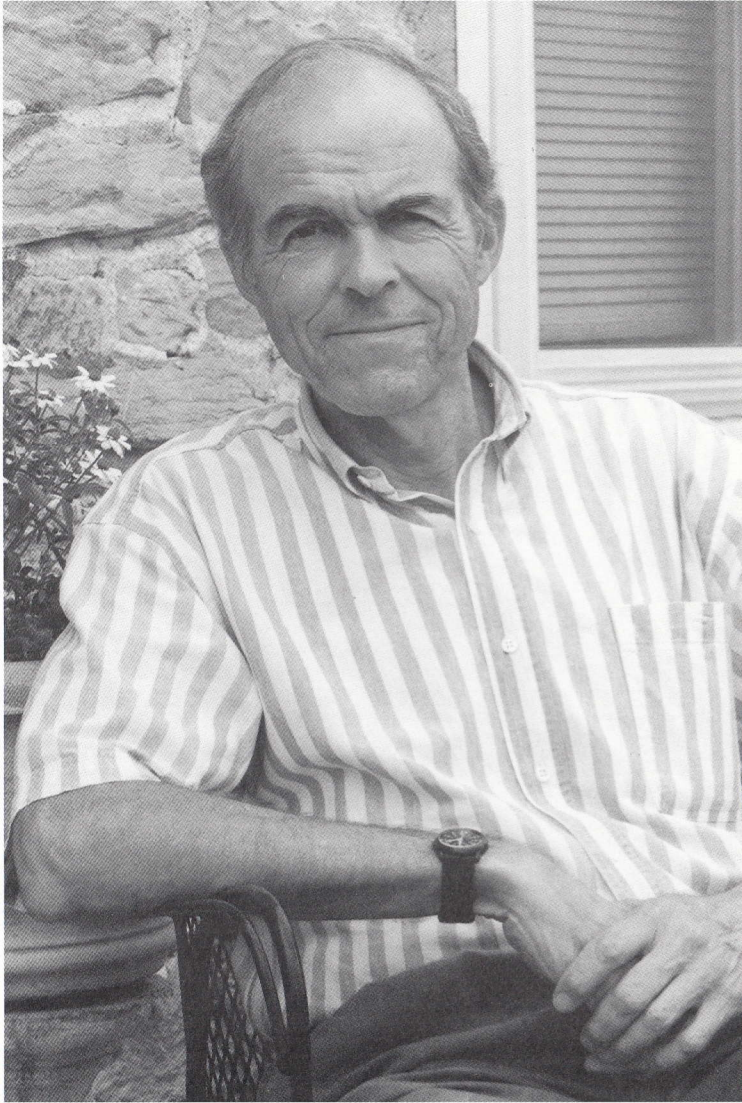


Photo Stanley I Grand

William Sterling: An Appreciation

Stanley I Grand

SINCE 1976, WHEN WILLIAM STERLING began teaching at Wilkes College (now Wilkes University), he has had a profound influence on the area's artistic and intellectual life. As Professor of Painting and Art History, Chair of the Art Department (1976–1990), and Director of the Sordoni Art Gallery (1979–1982); Sterling has been a teacher and mentor of young artists. As a curator and author of exhibition catalogues on a wide variety of subjects, he has sought to expand our understanding of historical and contemporary artists. In addition, he has continued to paint and exhibit his own work, participating regularly in faculty and regional exhibitions.

Sterling's career has straddled the line between artist–creator and art historian–curator. After graduating in 1959, with a degree in Fine Arts from The College of William and Mary, he attended graduate school at the University of Iowa. Although initially he planned to concentrate in sculpture, painting and, increasingly, art history captured his energies. During the late 1960s, he taught art history at Lawrence University, a small, liberal arts school in Appleton, Wisconsin (1967–1969). After completing his Ph.D. at Iowa with a dissertation entitled “The Iconography of the Wedding at Cana in Western Art of the 14th, 15th, and 16th Centuries,” Sterling taught at Arizona State University (1970–1973) and at Chatham College, Pittsburgh (1973–1976) before moving to Wilkes, where he was the sole art historian in a department consisting primarily of studio artists. In this environment, Sterling rediscovered his own commitment to creating art and began to paint anew.

As a working artist, Sterling is involved primarily with aesthetic issues, which is to say that his paintings deal with formal, compositional concerns and color relationships. He is more interested in edges and how they meet than with expressing his own emotions. He has no particular interest in extrinsic matters such as narrative, symbolism, iconography, or social messages. With few exceptions, he has worked in a restrained, abstract manner, investigating the syntax of a formalist language. Indeed, these investigations frequently involve a series of paintings on a particular theme. His is a refined, elegant, art for art's sake aesthetic that since Whistler has been a dominant leitmotif in twentieth-century vanguard art.

Blue Floater (1979, Figure 1) illustrates a number of Sterling's concerns. A small canvas, verging on minimalism, it is sensuously painted with the surface animated by subtle contrasts that appear to flicker or pulse. To the right, floats an open-ended square or lozenge with blurred edges. Although Sterling regards the square as a very neutral format, he recognizes that his placement of a square within a square recalls the modernist vocabulary of Kasimir Malevich or Josef Albers. This awareness is the crux of his ongoing struggle to separate his individual vision from his knowledge of art history.

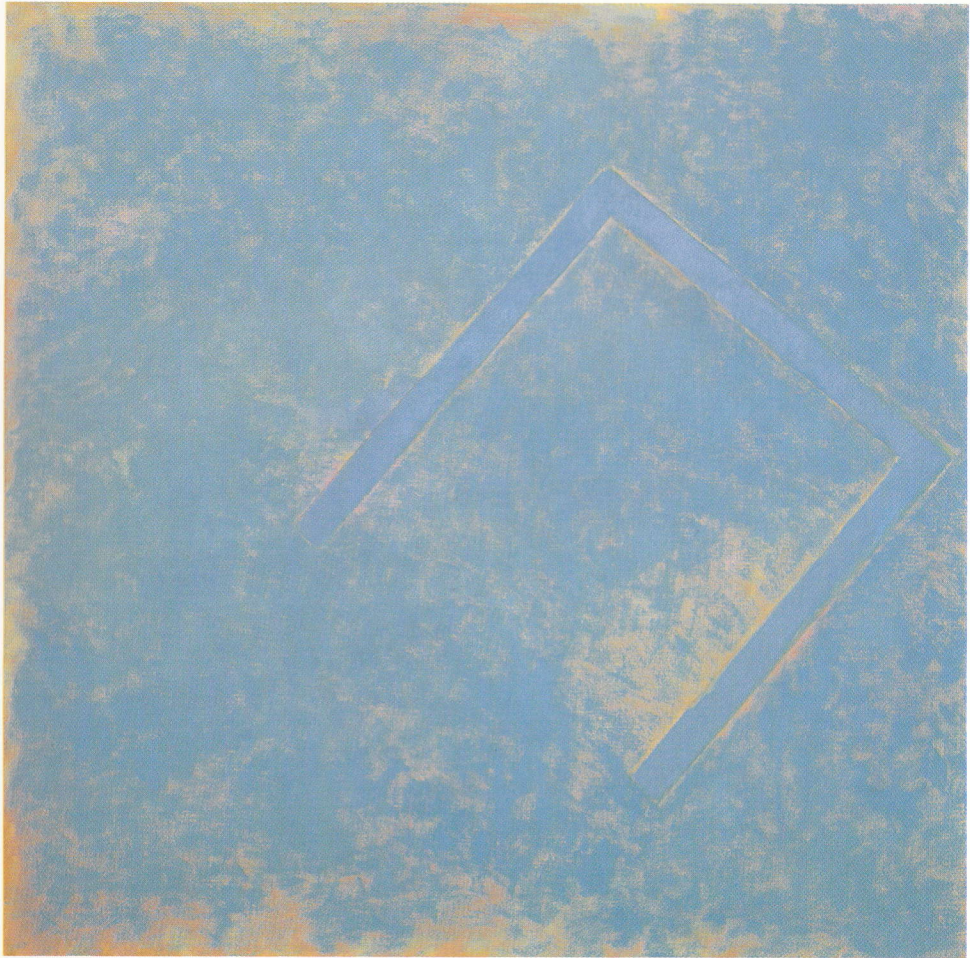
Whereas *Blue Floater* looks back to Mark Rothko and Color Field painting, *Enter Spring* (1986, Figure 2), with a bisected, vertical composition suggestive of two canvases, seems thoroughly charac-

teristic of its decade. The top portion of the painting contains geometric motifs that he had explored in his earlier "Stair" series. These are juxtaposed with the more expressive, dynamic squiggles on the lower section, not totally unlike the "automatic writing" that so fascinated the Surrealists, which Sterling would subsequently explore further in his "Raveling" series. Together, the two "panels" of *Enter Spring* create an overall balance between the conflicting imperatives of rational design—stated by flat, hard-edged surfaces—and intuitive expression, which is looser and more painterly. Or, put somewhat differently, this architectonic, hierarchical painting suggests Sterling's resolution of the classic theme of dualism.

Although Sterling would prefer not to title his paintings, believing that so doing detracts from the purely aesthetic experience, he does recognize that a title can provide an introduction to paintings like *Tuscany* (1994, Figure 3), which are informed by specific locales. Painted six months after a visit to Italy, *Tuscany* evokes the summery light of central Italy falling on the unsaturated, matte colors of the region's weathered, stucco buildings. Although the composition might suggest a flattened or forward-tilted fragment of the patterned floors so beloved by Renaissance artists, the painting more properly refers back to an untitled work from 1989. This, the first of the "Lozenge" series, expanded on works such as *Blue Floater*, by introducing multiple quadrilaterals and triangles to form a pattern or field of intersecting diagonals. Curiously, considering the series' later development, the earliest "lozenge" painting has a plastic quality that, on some level, recalls David Smith's *Cubi* sculptures.

Fields After Rain (1999, Figure 4) seems to herald a new direction in Sterling's art. Having retired in 1999, he and his wife have moved to and are restoring an old stone house in Berks County. Although he has always drawn inspiration from nature, now, surrounded by fields and the undulating countryside, landscape has become an increasingly important subject for him. Nonetheless, he renders the landscape in a modernist manner; his commitment to formalist concerns like pattern and design, color and the interaction of colors, truth to materials, and maintaining the two-dimensional integrity of the canvas, remains unchanged. He believes, like all orthodox modernists, that to paint an illusion of three-dimensional space is inherently contradictory and untruthful. His landscapes remain abstractions: he has no desire to depict every peculiarity of his subject in a realistic manner, but rather he seeks the essence or core of the scene which, in turn, he converts into a formal composition. Among the essential components, of course, is the sensuous element, the beauty of the physical aspect, which he interprets not only with color but with texture and surface as well.

Throughout his career as a painter, Sterling has remained a steadfast Modernist. He has remained true to the ideals advocated by Clement Greenberg and shunned the temptations of the myriad movements—Pop, Minimalism, Conceptual, and all the Neos (Geo or Expressionism), and the varieties of Postmodernism—that like waves breaking on the beach have swept across the contemporary art scene. This has been a conscious choice: he is well acquainted with contemporary artistic theory, but his involvement with these directions has been as a teacher and not as an artist. In a recent interview, Sterling noted "I never approached art in a doctrinaire way. I am a democrat in terms of what people do in their art. Those who are sincere ideologues should do ideological works. But I'm a sincere formalist and so should be doing formalist work." The paintings in this exhibition underscore his long-standing pursuit of this ideal.



Blue Floater, 1979



Enter Spring, 1986



Tuscany, 1994



Fields After Rain, 1999

Moods and Structures

William Sterling

AT FIRST GLANCE, my painting over the past twenty-five years may look inconsistent. Like many artists who are also teachers or administrators, I have, perforce, been a part-time painter. The obligations of the classroom meant an irregular schedule in the studio, which frequently led to detours and delayed actions in my creative work. I think, however, the works in this exhibition relate to a common center which one could call my “style” or, at the very least, my temperament and *modus operandi*.

In fact, style, in the sense of visual form, is very much at the heart of my work. Philosophical messages or realistic representation have rarely been my aims. I have followed that tradition of Modernist Formalism which accepted that artistic form might resonate with a whole world of experiences and emotions but in the end would sublimate that world within an abstract visual language. Expression and communication of ideas were allusive and metaphorical while the visual experience (or in music, say, the aural one) was “real” and essential from an aesthetic point of view.

What then is the common center of my particular style? I think it revolves—in a purely intuitive, unprogrammable way—around a basic duality that might be expressed as improvisation and design or entropy and structure. One is always pulling at the other, like orbiting bodies. This is a not uncommon theme in art, but it can be expressed in many ways. My geometric shapes, for example, are rarely hard edged or flatly colored like printed forms; by the same token, my spontaneous passages are usually short bursts, or accents, within a more structured context. Close tones in hues are usually played off against a greater range of warmth and intensity. Balance and harmony are often precarious. Whatever motifs (“subjects,” if you will) I might be using, some kind of tensive equilibrium is sought between these dualities. Sometimes they are more or less evenly matched (e.g., *Scaffolds II* and *Enter Spring*). At other times, the design, like a superego, will seem to predominate (e.g., *Tuscany* or *Fields*). Rarely, if ever, do I go to the other—expressionist—extreme.

I used the word *equilibrium* rather than *balance* because the former connotes a more dynamic relationship. Movement, whether linear or coloristic, is important in my work. Often I feel it to be kinesthetic, an abstract reflection of a posture or gesture. Again, my procedure is intuitive. Some image (not a “thing,” more like a compositional motif) implants itself, and I begin to draw with it. Most of my paintings are based on preliminary compositional studies where the exact positioning of the various forms and nuances of color undergoes many changes. Nevertheless, despite any kinesthetic component in my procedure, the inspirations usually come from the natural environment of landscape and weather and the design environment of architecture and pattern. Even music may play some kind of role.

Although I spent many years teaching art history, the art historical influences on my work are equally intuitive and are based on their compatibility with my aesthetic preferences rather than any

ideological connection. For example, I admire Mondrian's minimalist play with equilibrium, but the philosophical underpinnings of his style are not directly or specifically relevant to me. Like a good mannerist, I pick up the forms that interest me visually, but not necessarily the messages. Still, at some deeper level there is probably a connection, a similarity of temperament or attitude. Obviously there are also important differences. Using the example of Mondrian again, his intense adjustments of space were intentionally carried out at the expense of variations in color. In my work, the aesthetic adjustments of color are at least as important as those of dimension. (The problem for the realist is to see color, for the abstractionist it is to feel color.)

Looking back chronologically, I can see my work swinging like a pendulum between the quieter, more structured mode and the brasher, more improvisational mode (e.g., from the *Fragments* of the late 1970s to the bisected compositions of the mid-1980s, then back to the *Zpirals* and *BluBlox* types of the late 1980s, and so forth). I haven't tried to relate my artistic evolution to life events in general. Perhaps, as an art historian, I could; but as the saying goes, doctors shouldn't treat themselves. In composing this statement about my art, I have felt a curiously disjunctive connection between my historian's objectivity and my artist's intuitiveness. I don't know if there is truth in any of it.

Lest my titles imply a more deliberate subject matter, except in the occasional representational works, they are usually afterthoughts, sometimes merely descriptive, sometimes suggestions for interpretation. I hope the viewer won't try too hard to find meaning in my abstractions, but will rather attempt to sense their moods and structures.

Checklist of the Exhibition

Dimensions are given in inches, height precedes width.

1. *Scaffolds II*
1975
oil on canvas
34 × 34
2. *Fragments of a Square II*
1978
oil on canvas
36 × 36
3. *October*
1979
oil on canvas
60 × 24
4. *Blue Floater*
1979
oil on canvas
36 × 36
5. *Arc Angle*
1981
pastel on paper
12 × 12
6. *Arid Zone*
1981
pastel on paper
12 × 12
7. *Shorelines*
1983
pastel on paper
12 × 12
8. *Phaeton*
1984
oil on canvas
56 × 24
9. *Passage*
1985
oil on canvas
48 × 14
10. *Enter Spring*
1986
oil on canvas
60 × 28
11. *Chainlink*
1989
pastel on paper
20 × 20
12. *November*
1989
oil on canvas
60 × 28
13. *BluBlox*
1989
oil on canvas
36 × 24
14. *Long Lozenge*
1989
oil on canvas
54 × 24
15. *Hemispheres*
1990
gouache & ink on paper
6½ × 7¼
16. *Zpiral*
1990
oil on canvas
36 × 42
17. *Raveling I*
1992
oil on canvas
36 × 42
18. *Raveling III*
1993
pastel on paper
18 × 20
19. *Evergreen: Day & Night*
1993
pencil & pastel on paper
10 × 16
20. *Cloud and Yew Bushes*
1994
oil on canvas
44 × 36
21. *Tuscany*
1994
oil on canvas
48 × 40
22. *Bruges*
1996
oil on canvas
42 × 30
23. *Breaking Points*
1997
oil on canvas
36 × 44
24. *Fields*
1998
pastel on paper
17½ × 24
25. *Turnover I*
1998
colored pencil & pastel on paper
16 × 16
26. *Turnover II*
1998
pastel on paper
16 × 16
27. *Fields After Rain*
1999
oil on canvas
34 × 44
28. *Greensward*
1999
oil on canvas
34 × 44
29. *Untitled*
1999
pastel on paper
21 × 14
30. *Untitled*
1999
pastel on paper
9 × 13

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