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Ronald Slowinski

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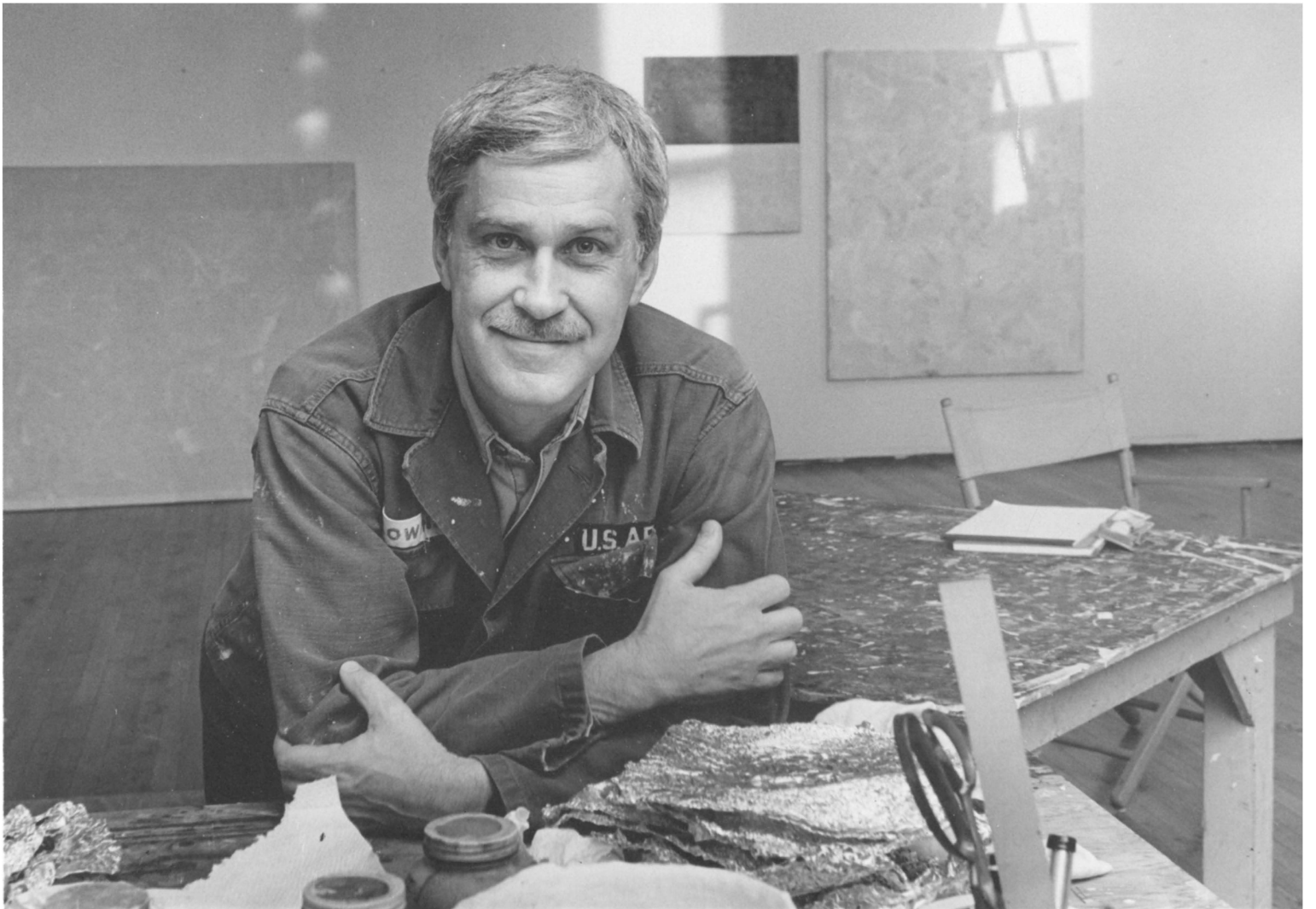
Ronald Slowinski

Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery

Ronald Slowinski: 25 Years

February 24-April 1, 1984

Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln



Ronald Slowinski, 1984

Acknowledgements

Because Ronald Slowinski has taught, lived and worked in Kansas City for nearly two decades, his audience has been limited in a significant way to the mid-west. If limited in this geographical fashion, however, the response to his work has been marked by deep, sometimes ardent respect. It is our hope that this first comprehensive review of his work from 1958 to 1983 will offer a wider and fuller insight into the quality of Slowinski's work.

In his more recent paintings, there is a resonant fluency in his command of color, his command of a kind of radiant space. The syntax out of which these paintings have flowed is one honed to a deceptive simplicity. This exhibition can be seen as a visual record of Slowinski's personal quest for his own unique and "correct" syntax.

The process of selecting works for this exhibition involved the examination of a very large number of paintings. All of that was distinctly a pleasure and an adventure. For his help and cooperation I am, first, deeply indebted to the artist. His suggestions were invariably good ones; his refusal to direct curatorial choice or otherwise infringe upon my own freedom in developing this exhibition was impeccable.

I owe the Nebraska Art Association and the Nebraska Arts Council, especially their most competent Associate Program Director, Rebecca Blunk, a debt of gratitude. Without that aid, the astonishingly expensive process of assembling this exhibition could never have been undertaken. For

his generous contribution to this exhibition, warm thanks should go also to Douglas Drake.

Without the personal generosity of Mr. and Mrs. John Barlow, the color plate of the Five Color Series watercolor could not have been included in this catalog.

I am grateful, too for Norman Geske's early support of this venture, to George Neubert for his continued endorsement, and to many of the Sheldon's staff. Special mention must be made of Ruth York, who attended to dozens of details with good cheer, and of Eileen Ullman, who assisted with many aspects of this exhibition in its formative stages.

To Jim Yestadt, whose careful attention was paid to every aspect of this volume's final form, go very special thanks. E. G. Schempf's work as the photographer for the catalogues must also be recognized. His profound response to Slowinski's work certainly contributes to the quality of this publication.

Finally, I wish to thank all of the lenders to this exhibition. Their loyalty to Ronald Slowinski's work and their willingness to part for a time with works they treasure was vital encouragement. Without their generosity, this project would have failed its attempt at a full review of the artist's achievement.

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Introduction

This exhibition is the result of a visit to the studio of Ron Slowinski in 1981. Such a visit is the surest test of one's reaction to the artist's work seen on previous occasions only in isolated examples. Such partial contacts are frequently inconclusive, but in the instance of Slowinski the impression made was sufficient to create an appetite for more. The several hours spent looking at the accumulated work of four or five years was exciting to say the least and impressive to the degree that I came away from the experience convinced that here was an artist who could and should be seen in the demanding context of a large exhibition.

Fortunately I made this visit in the company of Donald Doe whose enthusiasm for what we had seen matched my own and, fortunately as well, he is eminently qualified to enter into the critical dialogue with the artist which is the necessary context for the organization of such an exhibition.

The result is, in every respect, the confirmation of our original impression. Here is an artist whose commitment to the business of art is total, an artist whose activity in our midst establishes a qualitative standard of a high order. The exhibition in itself represents the Sheldon Gallery's commitment to the critical appraisal and endorsement of the best work being done in our region, which is part of the best from anywhere.

Norman A. Geske *Director Emeritus*

Ronald Slowinski

Ronald Slowinski's art has thrived on change.

Even in the small canvases of twenty-five years ago which remain in existence (much early work was lost in a fire which destroyed the painter's New York loft), there is a hint of furious brushwork. That spontaneous surface gave way to geometry, sometimes executed in black and white, sometimes in a very limited range of colors. Quite abruptly, these works were followed by canvases filled with a tumult of color and shape. By the middle Seventies, the tumult had quieted in several closely related series of works marked by luminous clouds of color on which linear patterns seem to float. In this decade, the work has stilled further toward delicately inflected monochrome. These changes do not merely disclose an evolution from formal complexity to simplicity. They do point, however, to the enduring quality of Slowinski's search. Increasingly, his images have become empty of distractions from their symbolic value. Rarely, however, are the works so much ethereal as they are sensuous, resonant with color, rhythmic in their incidents of shape and texture.

Slowinski's involvement with art began remarkably early. By age thirteen, he was weighing a career in music against a career in art. To study piano was his first choice, but he could find no high school in his native Chicago which offered the curriculum he wanted. At Lane Technical High there was, however, a rigorous commercial art program that seemed a reasonable

alternative. He spent the next four years commuting across Chicago to classes that included lay-out and paste-up, lithography and etching, perspectival rendering and figure drawing.

Upon graduation in the spring of 1950, Slowinski felt he had only two real alternatives: the Institute of Design, which was the Bauhaus, relocated in Chicago, and the Chicago Art Institute. He chose the latter, thoroughly aware of the difference between fine and commercial art. He was drawn to the Art Institute by more than its curriculum, however. The superb collection of impressionist and post-impressionist paintings, as well as works by modern masters such as Matisse, Picasso, and Brancusi were sources from which he would draw again and again. At that time, Slowinski recently recalled, the work of such artists "struck me as right, as modern, as art."¹

While the course of 20th century art is perhaps inconceivable without Matisse or Brancusi, the remark does point to the extraordinary changes which have taken place in the world of contemporary American Art since mid-century. "None of us knew DeKooning," Slowinski also recalled. "This was 1949-1950. None of us knew about Abstract Expressionism. No sixteen-year-old likes Jackson Pollock. A couple of my friends had sniffed out Mondrian and Brancusi — but abstract art was not the issue. Avant garde, explorative, questioning contemporary work was what art meant to me."

In considering the growth of an artist in Slowinski's generation, it is easy to overlook the fact that, in 1950, the American avant garde, or at least most of its prominent members, could gather in a single room, to participate in the debates and listen to the presentations offered by The Subjects of the Artist school founded by Robert Motherwell and his colleagues. Much of that same avant garde could, and did, convene readily in Max's Kansas City or the Cedar Bar.

Only a handful of American galleries then showed contemporary, adventurous American art; without Ellie Poindexter, Peggy Guggenheim, Betty Parsons, and very few others, the Abstract Expressionists would have had no commercial venue at all. The number of critics who took such work seriously and wrote intelligently about it was also small; without Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, and very few others, the avant garde in America would then have been conspicuously in need of fluent champions.

For some time, certainly, the very notion of an avant garde has been suspect. The number of artists, galleries, nationally distributed publications, museum exhibitions and catalogs, writers and scholars, is now overwhelming. It is difficult to imagine any style in art which challenges the values of society at large or which breaks deeply with accepted conventions of art making or art criticism — unless it is art which is extremely conventional. The critical and commercial successes of contemporary art

have softened the persistent sense of challenge and opposition which are among the defining qualities of an avant garde. In 1950, however, “explorative, questioning contemporary work” was not eagerly sought. Interest was mainly derisive. To be committed to such art as a young student in Chicago in 1950 required an intuitive response to the power of modernism — and no small amount of nerve.

Slowinski was not, of course, alone in his decision. At the museum school, he found, in addition to the great collection, two extraordinary teachers: Isabel McKinnon and Kathleen Blackshear.

Kathleen Blackshear was something of a protege and a disciple of Helen Gardner. Responsible for the two year survey of art history at the Art Institute, Blackshear introduced her students not only to western art but also to what was then called primitive art. Slowinski found himself spending as much time at the Field Museum as at the Institute. Oceanic art, especially the richly ornamented surfaces of masks from New Ireland and New Guinea especially fascinated him.

Out of this experience came a growing awareness of the ritualistic function of art. “Blackshear has a phrase,” Slowinski reports. “‘An interesting, space-filling design.’ She applied that to all art, not only Oceanic masks. At the Field Museum, I really saw the clarity and logic of her point, that visual art was the break-up of a two-dimensional surface. I was also attracted by the fact of surface texture. The surface of

fabrics in textile art, feathers, cowerie shells, beads, all of that thrilled me.”

At the same time, Slowinski was taking figure drawing. He had always loved to draw; as a child, he had been able to faithfully reproduce photographs and *Saturday Evening Post* covers by Norman Rockwell. Blackshear’s art history course also showed Slowinski that the great draughtsman of the Renaissance could be powerfully important to him. “It was another thrill to realize that Raphael and Michelangelo were as vital as Picasso. Art expanded in historical and geographical directions for me.”

From Isabel McKinnon, a former student of Hans Hofmann, Slowinski absorbed the tradition of cubist-based abstraction which Hofmann taught at his own School of Fine Arts in New York. Living in Paris from 1903 to the outbreak of World War I, Hofmann discovered Cezanne’s concept of space and the analytic cubism of Picasso and Braque. These lessons he brought back to Munich, where he taught and painted, fusing cubism with the brilliant color employed both by his friend Robert Delaunay and Wassily Kandinsky. In New York after 1934, he introduced his students to the notion of “push-pull” — to the idea that an abstract picture should be an image filled with tension created by advancing and receding planes of color, positive and negative space, and rhythms of gesture, shape, and color. In bringing these ideas to the studio classroom, McKinnon introduced Slowinski to the foundation upon which formal abstraction rests.

His teachers thus focused upon the formal paradox found in modernist abstraction. Blackshear insisted upon loyalty to the two dimensional surface; McKinnon on the spacial implications generated by making a mark on that surface. “I was thinking about space all the time,” Slowinski says. “Space moving laterally across the canvas and space incorporating depth. With depth, there was also the problem of structuring those marks that seemed to be behind the picture plane. The dichotomy confused the absolute hell out of me at the time.”

The double problem of organizing the picture plane and organizing the shapes within the space behind it, Slowinski brought to his continued contact with the Art Institute’s collection. Especially important to the young painter were the elegant, flat shapes of the Japanese painters and the work of Matisse. He recalls, “I must have spent, literally, one hundred hours in front of Matisse’s *Bathers at the River*.”

On the first of April, 1952, Alfred Barr’s retrospective exhibition of Matisse opened at the Institute. The major works in that exhibition riveted Slowinski’s attention. In the works of the French master, he found a culminating statement which fused the organization of the surface of the work and, while keeping the surface intact, also structured the relationships of shapes and colors which existed behind the picture plane. In the space of Matisse’s studio interiors, window views, and landscapes, the dichotomy which had puzzled Slowinski was resolved.

From September 15th through October 15th, 1953, an exhibition of masterpieces of Japanese Art, sponsored by the Japanese government, was on view at the Institute. Containing national treasures which have never again left Japan, the show offered Slowinski the chance to study the extraordinary colors and essentially abstract space of the Japanese painters, and their practice of placing architectural forms diagonally across the surface. The subtlety of these works and their apparent modernity commanded the young artist's attention.

During these months, Katherine Kuh curated a series of small exhibitions at the Institute in the Gallery of Art Interpretation. One of these exhibitions introduced to Slowinski and his fellow students the work of Mark Rothko. "I went with my friends at the Institute," Slowinski recalls. "We were very excited. We responded to those paintings as radically new — not simply cleaned-up European painting. DeKooning's huge work, *Excavation* was another encounter with awesome work. In 1952, it looked very new, a masterwork."

Finally, and perhaps inescapably, a strong influence for Slowinski during his student years was Chicago School architecture and, especially, the work and the ideas of Frank Lloyd Wright. Slowinski traveled to Wright's Taliesin in Spring Green, Wisconsin and seriously inquired about continuing his studies there. Slowinski wrote not long ago, "I think my concept of building or structuring a painting from 'inside' came as much from Wright as from Matisse. I read

most of Wright's writings and visited many of his buildings (once, memorably, as a trespasser). I wanted to make paintings according to Wright's philosophy of 'Organic Form.'"

In 1954, Slowinski earned the Certificate of Art from the Institute — and was almost immediately drafted. Stationed for most of the next two years in Detroit, he painted rarely. In 1956, out of the service, he returned to Chicago. Over the next three years, he devoted most of his time and energy to making art. It was, he recalls, a crucial period, "an independent equivalent of graduate school." He renewed friendships formed at the Art Institute, began to show in juried exhibitions and, regularly, at the Wells Street Gallery.

Slowinski was not one of the founders of that co-operative gallery, but among the artists who showed there he found both his best friends and strongest artistic influences. The Wells Street Set, as they were wryly called, formed a group which saw themselves and their gallery, in Slowinski's words, "as a reaction-alternative to the Allan Frumkin Gallery, the dominant aesthetic force in Chicago at that time."

By the end of the Fifties, Slowinski found it no longer possible to resist moving to the center of American contemporary art. In 1959, he found a loft in New York. Only a few months later, fire destroyed the building and Slowinski found a second loft in a decaying commercial neighborhood where residence was not quite legal. Then

called Hell's Hundred Acres, it was a mash of light industry and warehouses, trash-filled streets and the grind of heavy trucks. Now, dotted with galleries and boutiques, utterly transformed by the cachet and expansion of the contemporary art market, it is SoHo.

In his own view, although he did not have a solo exhibition until 1963 — at the Poin-dexter Gallery — Slowinski matured as an artist during his time in New York. He worked steadily. He frequented MOMA, the Frick, the Metropolitan. In 1965, he was offered a one year appointment at the University of Indiana. He had never considered teaching part of his vocation, but he found the experience challenging. The following year, Slowinski was invited to join the faculty at the Kansas City Art Institute.

His move to Kansas City was prompted in part by the fact that he and his wife now had two children. "Raising children in a fifth floor loft in that commercial neighborhood was less than ideal," he observed drily. "Kansas City had trees, lawns, terrific residential areas. And houses we could afford." Slowinski has taught since at the Kansas City Art Institute and is now Professor of Painting. In 1968, he received a Fulbright Advanced Research Grant and, pursuing his long-standing interest in Japanese art, spent a year in the ancient city of Kyoto. In Japan, he worked at a rather rigorous schedule, but availed himself of the opportunity to visit and revisit gardens and temples and to see the art treasures of Kyoto repeatedly. Toward the conclusion of

his stay there, the work completed in Japan was shown in a solo exhibition in Tokyo.

Given the artist's abiding interest in Japanese art, it is perhaps astonishing to discover that the paintings of Slowinski's Fulbright year in Kyoto evince no specific response to traditional Japanese art. Instead, his acrylic on canvas works continued his explorations of geometry.

That exploration began in 1960. At that time, Slowinski found himself dissatisfied with his abstract expressionist painting. "There was no focus, no structure," he reports, "Increasingly, I began to suspect all that intuition. Even finishing a painting seemed arbitrary." This response to the dominant style of the New York School was not, at that date, at all eccentric. Pop Art was emerging with considerable fanfare; alternately, geometry was being rediscovered by a number of artists reacting against the rhetoric and procedures of the abstract expressionists. Al Held, for example, in a recent interview which is likely to become a classic in its neatly vulgar assessment of the period, remarked, "You were beginning to feel that a lot of Abstract Expressionists — the self-appointed keepers of the flame — were faking it, with all the arm-waving and verbosity. I remember making a slogan for myself, 'If it's going to be shit, I'm going to dot the i and cross the t.' I was not going to fudge it. It was going to be clear and specific. It was a move toward clarity, order and structure."²

To endow his paintings with structure,

Slowinski introduced geometric elements, superimposing them like a floating grid on the turmoil of his brushwork. Gradually the DeKooning-esque surface was subsumed by the grid; by 1963, the expressionistic brush work and vibrant colors were locked into the linear bars of the grid itself. Characteristically, in paintings of this period, the precise geometry of the grid floats on a white ground. Only occasionally does color appear in the squares delineated by the grid's structure.

By the middle Sixties, Slowinski's use of the grid had become more subtle and complex; rather than the dominant formal motif, the grid was now a precisely ruled substructure. Within that structure, Slowinski ordered a sequence of geometric shapes, painted in a programmed sequence of colors. He worked systemically, developing series of canvases in which he explored closely related sequences. Rarely, in these works from 1965 and 1966, is there a clear sense of module, however. So complex were his carefully ordered systems, that the sense of clarity and repetition is concealed; only when contemplating several paintings from a series does the continuity and connected variation of the paintings emerge for the viewer.

In the canvases completed in Kyoto, however, the grided system generates an obvious clarity. The succession of geometric shapes seems predictable; if the pattern varies, the logic of the variation is apparent. In these paintings, the reiterated internal order provides a sense of completeness;

the whole of the work can be grasped at once.

Quite suddenly, upon his return from Japan in 1970, Slowinski decided to abandon geometry. "Very simply," he says, "it was not getting me anywhere. The paintings were completely self-contained, but that did not generate any sense of transcendence. Geometry did not take me, at least, where I wanted to go."

If variations on conceptualized order did not suffice, it was nevertheless an enormous task to discard the systems which had anchored his art for a decade. For eleven months, Slowinski wrestled with a large red painting, painting out, scraping away, beginning again and again. When he was done, he titled the work in homage to Matisse: *The Red Studio*.

In this painting, to be sure, geometry is still present. It can be considered the armature of the painting; its geometric pentimental presence hovers in the rich color, it underscores and reiterates the framing edge. Still, *The Red Studio* marks a distinct break with earlier work. For a decade, the artist had generated his images by repeating geometric modules in accord with prescribed system. Here, the composition is much freer; Slowinski was not working systemically, but in response to the specific challenge raised by a poster (received in the mail), reproducing an ambitious, all-red painting by Robert Natkin, a member of the by then defunct Wells Street Set.

In titling the work in homage to Matisse, Slowinski recalls his student days at the Chicago Art Institute, where the work of the French master had resolved, for him, the formal dilemmas which had so thoroughly confused him.

The Red Studio thus asserts more than the artist's frustrations with the limitations of geometry. It also points in the direction his art was to take: toward increasingly freer and more spontaneous composition, generated in response to art and ideas which originated outside the boundaries of his canvases rather than to abstract systems developed within them.

In the summer of 1971, Slowinski executed a series of watercolors directly in response to the landscape he encountered in Wyoming. A second series of watercolors was done the next summer, in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. None of these watercolor paintings is a topographic study; all are in response to the textures and colors of the land, to the folk paintings, architecture, pottery and costumes which he found in his summer travels.

Slowinski had been exploring the use of watercolor since his student years in Chicago, when he discovered the works of Cezanne and John Marin. Now, for the sun-bleached landscapes of the Southwest, he found the transparency of watercolor the ideal medium to impart the luminous quality of his visual experiences.

The veils of thinly brushed color are

echoed in *Wyoming* and other acrylic works on canvas from the very early Seventies. Like the watercolors, these glisten in response to the sunsets and rock strata of the west. Like the watercolors, too, the acrylic paint is thinned and is spontaneously brushed, the shapes a distilled arrangement of ravines and outcropping rock.

The cross-reference between watercolor and acrylic on canvas, first visible here, has continued in all his subsequent work. Spurred by his continuing interest in Japanese art, Slowinski turned from his images evoked by landscape to a series of painting he titled *Genji*, after the very long episodic novel written early in the 11th century. The *Genji* paintings such as *Jade* and *The Death of Lady Purple* are again distilled responses to — and not copies — of the Japanese scrolls which illustrate scenes from the novel. In these works the thinned acrylic achieves something of the translucency of watercolor. The linear patterns and strong diagonals derive not from the abstract geometric systems the artists employed in the Sixties, but from the architecture — villas, summer houses, porches — rendered on the ancient Japanese scrolls. The colors: dark plums, celadon greens, silvery grays, are reflections of the artist's extended study of the traditional Japanese paintings, as well as costumes and ceramics.

In 1975, the *Genji* series merged with the *Corn Dance* Series. The title change does not, however, reflect a change in form; in

fact, it is perhaps more accurate to say that the *Genji* Series is continued under a different rubric. Colors do not change radically. The same strongly diagonal linear patterns continue to anchor the composition. What the new generic name does reflect is the artist's growing interest in Native American cultures encountered in his travels to the Southwest.

Just as the *Genji* paintings do not imitate Japanese art, the *Corn Dance* works do not contain any graphic replications of ceremonial artifacts. In a general way, the linear patterns of these paintings, even if ruled, echo the crafted shapes of a tablita used by an Acoma dancer or the painted geometry of a Crow Indian parfleche. Similarly, the colors selected by Slowinski suggest the worn surfaces, patinae and the faded colors of ritual objects. Essentially, as Jan Schmitz has pointed out, what interested the artist was the symbolic quality of these objects: "The desire is to transfer from these pieces some of the feeling, design or surface interest, or even something of the meaning of the object as a whole, into his painting."³

To capture the sense of age resident in a patina or to suggest the symbolic resonance of, for instance, a Kachina mask involves both subtle intentions and equally subtle technique. It is not, that is, remotely self-evident how "something of the meaning of an object" can be transferred from the thing itself to a painting.

Ordinarily, of course, one does not consider the *meaning* of an object — a vase in

a still life, for instance — one simply recognizes it. (There are, certainly, objects with special meaning — the cross, for example. Usually, however, the meaning of such objects is known; the knowledge of the meaning is fused with the recognition of the thing that means). The meaning of an unidentifiable object would elude, however, even a thoroughly accurate depiction of its appearance. For the viewer the puzzle would be, ‘what is it?’ — not ‘what does it mean?’ Unless armed with special knowledge, the viewer would find the object simply strange or exotic. Its meanings would remain fugitive.

For Slowinski, fascinated by ceremonial objects of obscure purpose, the challenge was a double one: to work toward a technique which expressed his own feelings toward these items of ritual and dance and to simultaneously suggest the beyond-the-surface meanings of those objects. In confronting this difficult task, Slowinski was facing one of the central problems generated by abstract art: how can abstract art mean, in the absence of representational clues to meaning?

At least since World War II, the American art public has grown accustomed to the notion that abstract art conveys feeling. DeKooning asserted, “Painting isn’t just the visual thing that reaches your retina — it’s what is behind it and in it.”⁴ Robert Motherwell, writing in 1950, insisted “The major decisions in the process of painting are on the grounds of truth, not taste...”⁵ Adolph Gottlieb, in the same vein, wrote

“Paint quality is meaningless if it does not express quality of feeling,”⁶ Barnett Newman, in an eloquent article titled “The First Man Was an Artist,” wrote “Man’s first expression...was a poetic outcry...of awe and anger at his tragic state, at his own self-awareness and at his own helplessness before the void.”⁷ This expressive position, as it were, is echoed very recently in a cluster of interviews published in *Art in America*. David Novros, a painter of cool, uninflected geometry, indicated that he was most influenced by the Abstract Expressionists,...” especially by their commitment to painting as a means of expressing a kind of hidden truth.”⁸ Robert Ryman acknowledged, that he too “...would say that the poetry of painting has to do with feeling. It should be a kind of revelation, even a reverent experience. You come away feeling delight.”⁹

These examples could be multiplied perhaps endlessly. Certainly, the general notion that is voiced here has taught a whole generation that in vigorous brushwork, or intense color, or randomly brushed monochrome, there is a message. But, does the message express delight, or awe and anger or hidden truths? The real question, as Thomas McEvilley recently noted, “...is not whether content is present, but what its relationship to form is.”¹⁰ In the same article, McEvilley went on to observe:

If paintings express “feeling,” and if “feeling” must be some particular feeling, then the implication is unavoidable

that feelings have recognizable visual correlates — that is, that the relationship between the feeling expressed and the form expressing it is motivated. There is then no limitlessness of interpretation. The feeling-or thought-content is recognizably related to the formal properties of the work, and grounded in them.¹¹

Form and, inseparably, technique in Slowinski’s work correlate in varied and subtle ways with his sources. The insistent rhythms and weaving patterns of ritual dances are evoked, for instance, by the harmonic structure of the Corn Dance paintings. As is true for poetry and music — and for the ritual dances — the relationship between the form in these abstract works and the feeling or thought content must remain ambiguous.

Much that is essential to the Hopi Flower Series, Slowinski’s next body of work, is grounded in a single piece of pottery. From the First Mesa in northeast Arizona (where, in fact, all Hopi pottery is made), this Polacca polychromed jar’s surface colors modulate from subtle pinks and oranges to ochre. These colors — and the char of fire clouds — result from the firing process, not from the potter’s choice. Over this “natural” ground produced in the kiln, carefully plotted in relation to the size and curvature of the pot, the Hopi artist made two very different kinds of drawings. One, linear, aggressive, skeletal, suggests a kind of omnibus monster; the other, delicate,

naturalistic; represents the flower that gave Slowinski's series of paintings its title.

Slowinski's first Hopi Flower paintings echo the warm, varied tones of the polychromed jar. Pouring the thinned acrylic across the canvas in a manner that again directly relates to the artist's use of watercolor, Slowinski allowed chance to control the varied intensities of stained color — just as chance generated the fire clouds and modulated colors on the piece of pottery. Slowinski then placed his drawing over that chance-produced surface, again in response to the Hopi jar. The linear patterns dot and flicker on the surface, sometimes evaporate into the clouds of faded color. The more overt presence of gesture suggests that these paintings are more intimate than those of the Corn Dance Series. The varied intensity of the stained color fuses with the sometimes flat, sometimes tilted rectilinear planes described by the lines, creating a complex, richly active space within the paintings.

The ground of the Hopi Flower Series, generated by flowing wet paint into wet in response to the kiln effects on the surface of the polychromed jar, formed the principal resource for the Pollen Series, the series which continues to the present day. No drawing is imposed on the surfaces of the Pollen Series paintings. Rather, the drawing is fused with the brushwork that generates the essentially monochromatic surfaces. The paintings are drier, the flecks of color which complement or contrast with the ground color are not dripped or

flowed onto the surface, but are splattered with a palette knife onto the dry monochrome hue.

If the paintings themselves are closely tied to the formal properties of the preceding series, they also are vitally informed by Slowinski's appreciation for the Navaho's symbolic concept of light. In her text, *Navaho Religion*, Gladys Reichard reports that, for the Navaho,

Light is an essential of life and protection, whose most outstanding symbol is pollen... it emits light in all directions, it shines in amongst. Since light (sunbeams, warmth) is a necessary element of generation, it is not surprising that pollen should be the symbol of...the continuity of life and safety. The associations are extended to include glint or sheens as an essential part of an animal, object, or person, a quality represented by pollen.¹²

In the Pollen paintings, distilled from the complexities of the Hopi Flower works, Slowinski creates monochromatic fields in which a sense of light "shines in amongst." As Schmitz observes, the color in Slowinski's work generally "...creates an atmospheric effect of luminous space with dust-laden, reflective qualities." She adds that, especially in the Pollen paintings, "His projections of luminous space have a non-static quality that both emits and receives light."¹³

The Navaho language offers a kind of glossary for these qualities.

Among the many words for different qualities of light are terms which mean polished, glassy, opaque, lustrous like wax, clear and pure, crystalline, glittering and scintillating. Certainly, amid the canvases with which are mauve or green or burned red, flecks of color and the white of the prepared ground glitter and shine through the monochrome. In a sense, these works are icons, sharing a property with the intangible but visible quality they represent. The iconic quality of the Pollen Series — and of the Hopi Flower and Corn Dance Series as well — does not include a transfer of any specific myth, or of any pantheistic view of the world, of course. That quality does include the felt response of the artist to the world around him, however, a response to the stone and feathers of a Hopi fetish, to the kaolin covered and painted leather of Kachina masks, to the subtle colors and dry, sun-filled landscape of the Southwest. The paintings are not, in any sense, regionalist; they are not so much about the region as they are about the quality of the region, in which the native religions focus upon the physical, enduring realities of the desert and mountains and find in them the reflected sheen of significance.

The limits of interpretation for Slowinski's work are offered by his poetic distillation of that sense of significance. What drives that process of distillation is the artist's on-going response to the abstract issues of form and color in his own work.

The work of Ronald Slowinski is, thus,

Endnotes

layered. First, they are deeply personal. "I meditated upon the colors of the Pollen paintings," he reports. Only after that inward process, does he select very specific hues. In part, the artist's work obtains its ineluctably mysterious and poetic qualities out of his respect for the complex symbols and beliefs of the Hopi, Navaho, and Pueblo Indian peoples. Second, Slowinski has been driven by the formal challenges which lie at the heart of the history of modernist abstraction. His admiration for Rothko and DeKooning was profound, but his own need to question and challenge his work led him to abandon the inherited gestures of abstract expressionism. By the end of the Sixties, his exploration of geometry had generated images as austere and rigorous as any minimalist's, but the same need turned his art toward more personal expression. Both shifts in direction were coincident with very widespread changes in American art; neither shift, however, was prompted by any urgency to conform.

Slowinski's private art history has been propelled not by the mere accumulation of sources, but by his refusal to continue work which failed to get him where he wanted to go. He has tested his own work against his demand that it be at once focused and beautifully wrought, and transcendent in its formal qualities. The works are private distillations and are not merely tangible. They decipher the artist's experience of other art, other places, other cultures. What resonant form that visual language of deciphering will continue to take

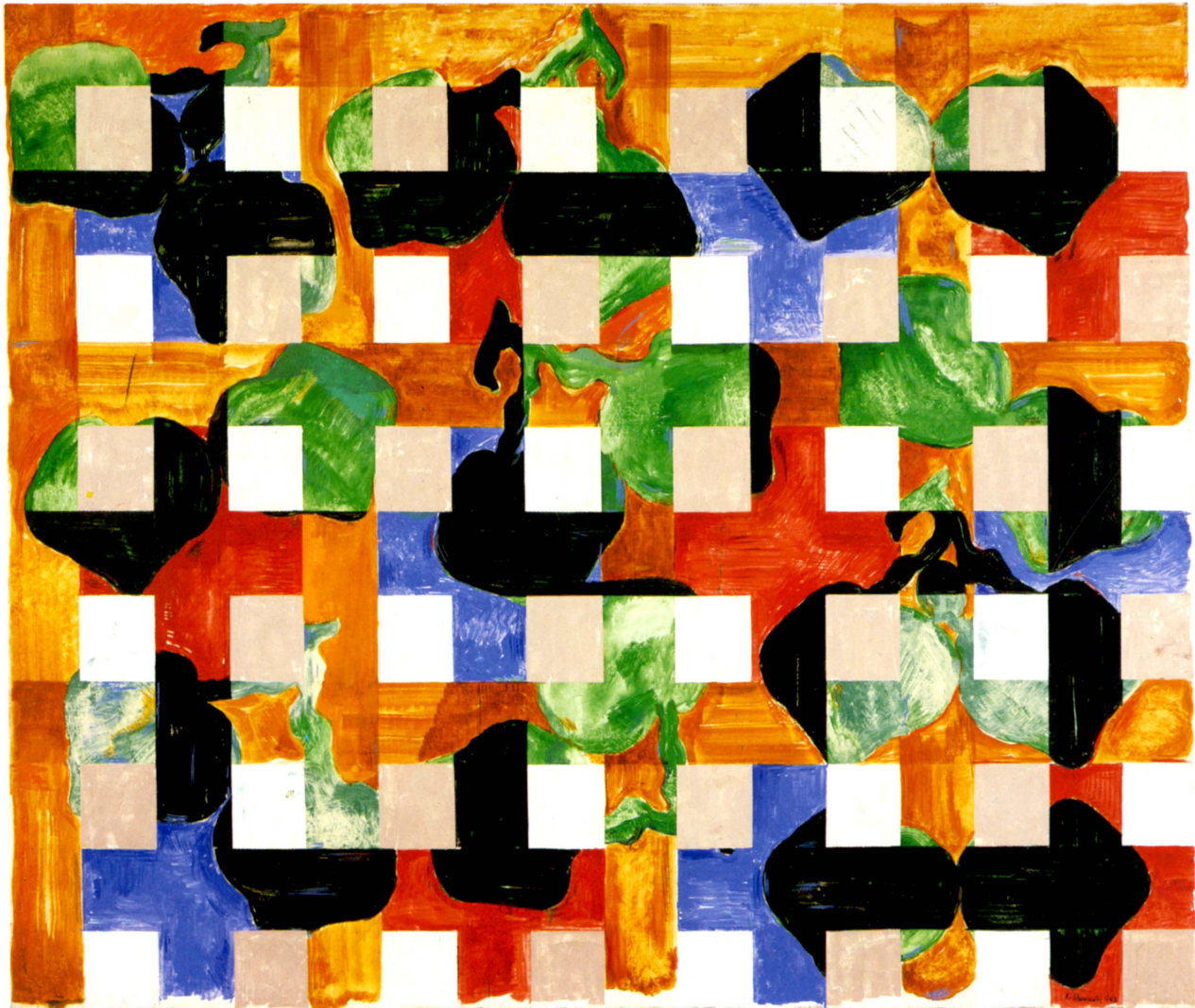
is, of course, beyond prediction. Certainly, however, that work will be shaped by the artist's essential need to challenge and question.

Donald Bartlett Doe

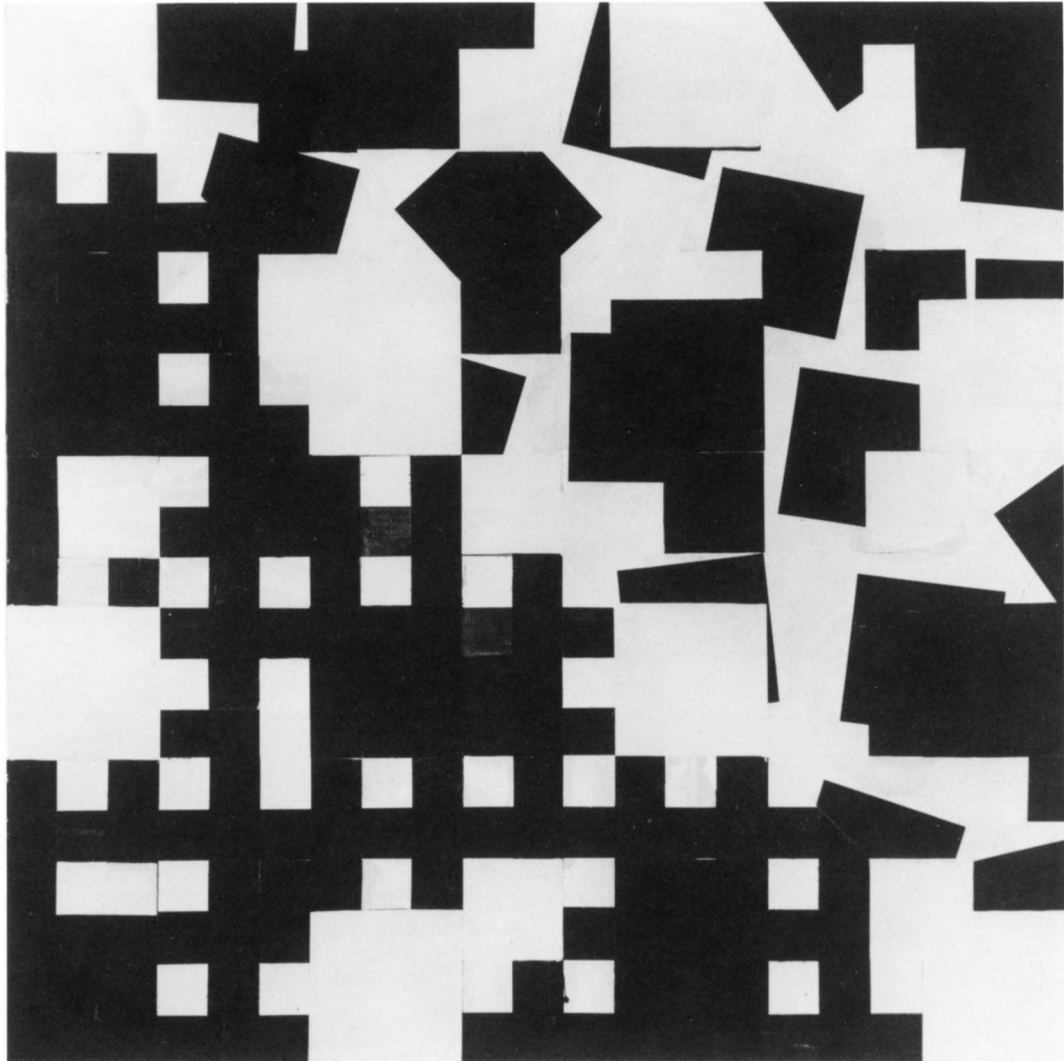
1. All direct quotations of the artist's remarks were recorded in interviews and conversations held in March, May, June, and November, 1983.
2. Maurice Poirier and Jane Necol, "The 60's in Abstract: 13 Statements" and an essay, *Art in America*, Vol. 71, No. 9 (October, 1983), 124.
3. Jan Schmitz, "Ron Slowinski," *Native Arts/West*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (September, 1980). 7.
4. Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting* (New York: Harper & Row, Icon Editions, 1970), p. 92.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
8. Poirier and Necol, p. 135.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
10. Thomas McEvilley, "Heads Its Form, Tails It's Not Content," *Artforum*, XXI, No. 3 (November, 1982), 57.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 59. Elsewhere in this article, McEvilley observes (p. 60) "Existing at the intersection of countless semantic realism, the artwork, like any cultural object, is saturated with meanings of different kinds." This point would seem undeniable. However, during the sixties and seventies, (it should be acknowledged) perhaps the dominant critical position insisted that no abstract painting had *any* extra-pictorial content.
12. Schmitz, p. 10.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 10.



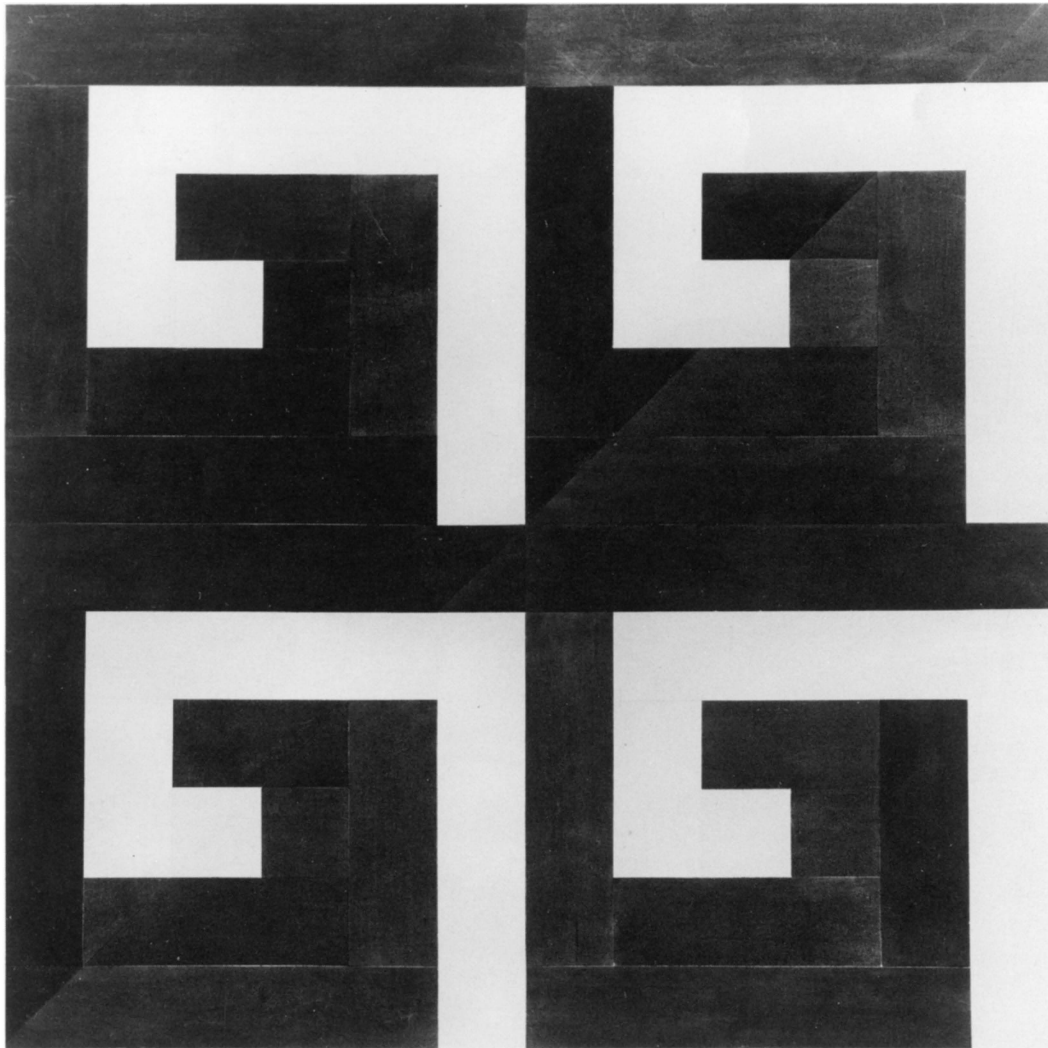
Untitled, November 1958, 48" x 50", oil on canvas/Collection of Rachel Slowinski, New York



Untitled, January 1963, 100" x 118½", oil on canvas/Collection of the Artist



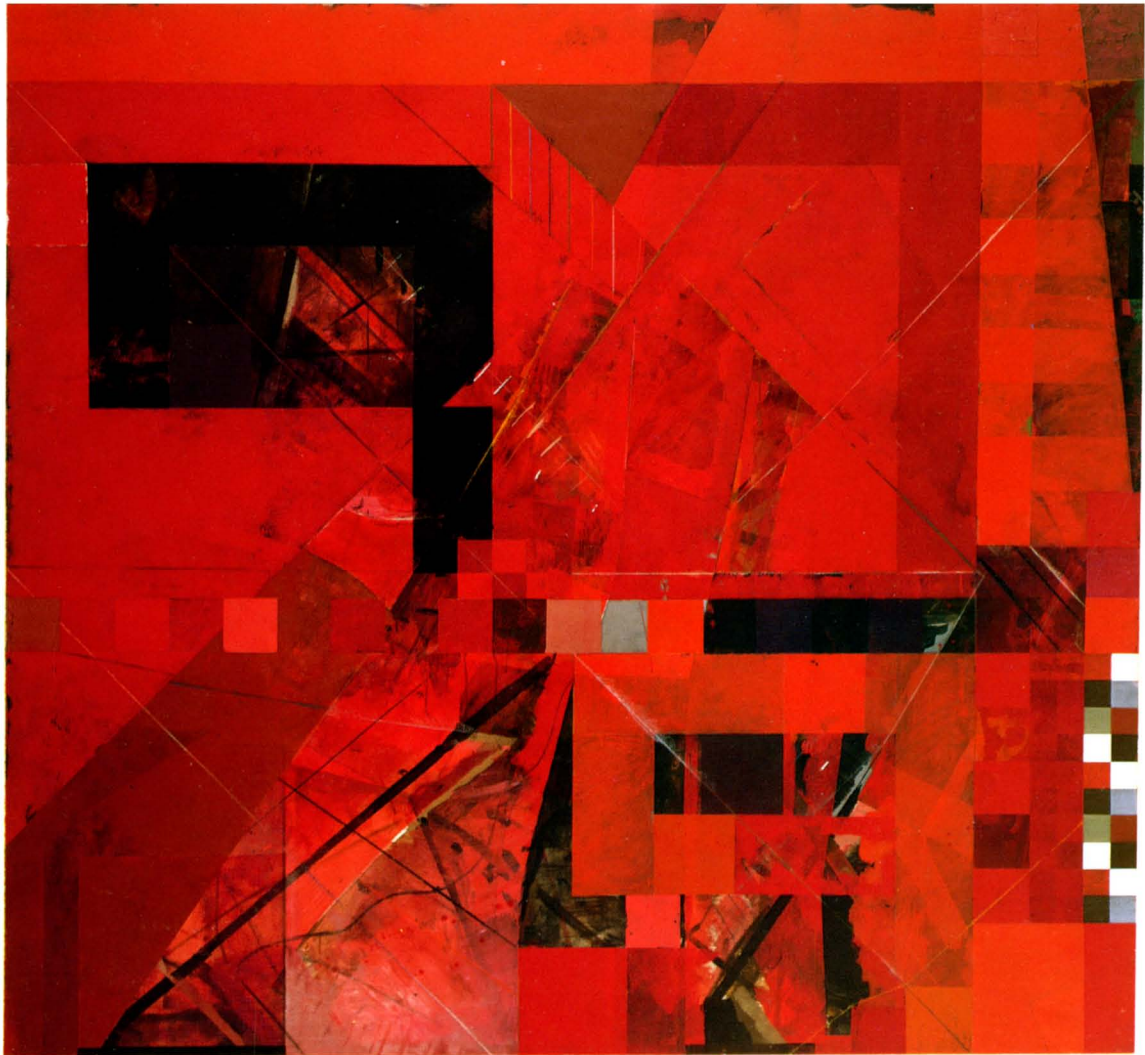
Untitled, February 1966, 73½" x 73½", acrylic on canvas/Collection of Joe Slowinski, Kansas City



Untitled, June 1969, 71" x 71", acrylic on canvas/Collection of the Artist



Wyoming, January 1972, 84" x 96", acrylic on canvas/Collection of the Artist



Red Studio, 1972, 78" x 84", acrylic on canvas/Collection of Mobil Oil Corporation



Jade, Genji Series, December 1973, 70" x 46", acrylic on canvas/Collection of the Artist



Untitled, Five Color Series, July 1974, 22" x 30", watercolor on paper/Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Barlow, Shawnee Mission, Kansas



Death of Lady Purple, Genji Series, October 1974, 46" x 56", acrylic on canvas/Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Weber, Chicago



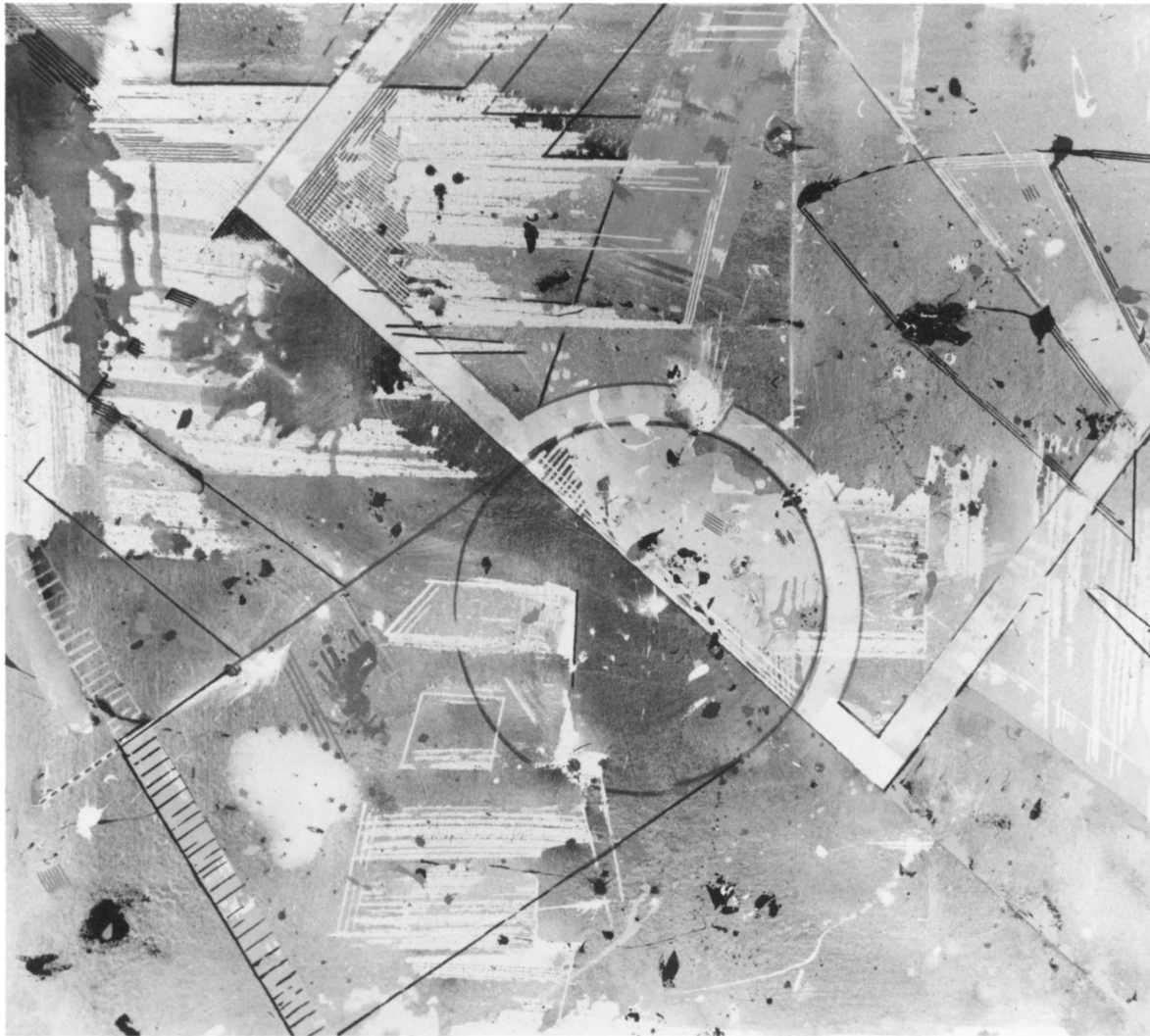
Untitled, Hopi Flower Series, 1975, 54" x 56", acrylic on canvas/Collection of Albright-Knox Gallery, gift of Mrs. David E. Jones



Blue Corn Dance, Corn Dance Series, May 1975, 56" x 54", acrylic on canvas/Collection of Joe Slowinski, Kansas City



Untitled, Corn Dance Series, November 1975, 56" x 46", acrylic on canvas/Lent by the Artist, courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City



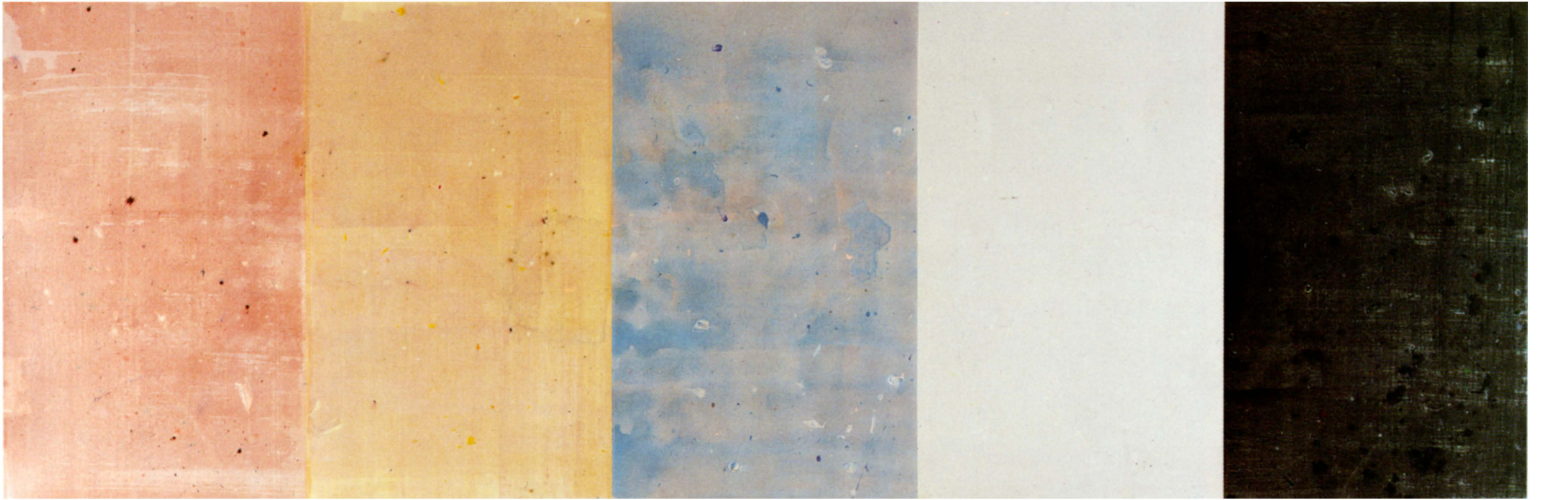
Untitled, Hopi Flower Series, December 1975, 50" x 56", acrylic on canvas/Lent by the Artist, courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City



Untitled, Hopi Flower Series, January 1976, 56" x 46", acrylic on canvas/Collection of Rachel Slowinski, New York



Untitled, Hopi Flower Series, May 1976, 56" x 46", acrylic on canvas/Lent by the Artist, courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City



Untitled, Pollen Painting, November 1976, 36" x 108", acrylic on canvas/Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Jake Mascotte, Rye, New York



La Bagh Woods, Pollen Painting, December 1977, 50" x 56", acrylic on canvas/Collection of Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City



The Divide, Pollen Painting, May 1978, 56" x 50", acrylic on canvas/Lent by the Artist, courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City



Untitled, Pollen Painting, June 1981, 56" x 54", acrylic on canvas/Lent by the Artist, courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City



Untitled, Pollen Painting, February 1983, 54" x 56", acrylic on canvas/Collection of Continental Corporation

Checklist

1. Untitled, November, 1958, 48" x 50", o/c, Collection of Rachel Slowinski, New York.
2. Untitled, January, 1960, 70-1/2" x 64-1/2", o/c, Collection of the artist.
3. Untitled, April, 1960, 28" x 20", o/c, Collection of Joe Slowinski, Kansas City.
4. Untitled, June, 1962, 24" x 18", o/c, Collection of Rachel Slowinski, New York.
5. Untitled, January, 1963, 100" x 118-1/2", o/c, Collection of the artist.
6. Untitled, December, 1965, 73-1/2" x 73-1/2", a/c, Collection of Rachel Slowinski, New York.
7. Untitled, February, 1966, 73-1/2" x 73-1/2", a/c, Collection of Joe Slowinski, Kansas City.
8. Untitled, December, 1966, 24" x 24", a/c, Collection of the artist.
9. Untitled, 1967, 24" x 24", a/c, Collection of Dr. and Mrs. John Arnold, Kansas City.
10. Untitled, 1968, 36" x 36", a/c, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Ivan Chermayeff, New York.
11. Untitled, August, 1968, 36" x 36", a/c, Collection of the artist.
12. Untitled, April, 1969, 35-1/2" x 35-1/2", a/c, Collection of the artist.
13. Untitled, June, 1969, 71" x 71", a/c, Collection of the artist.
14. *Red Studio*, 1972, 78" x 84", a/c, Collection of the Mobil Oil Corporation.
15. *Wyoming*, January, 1972, 84" x 96", a/c, Collection of the artist.
16. Untitled, Genji Series, 1973, 48" x 36", a/c, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Nerman, Overland Park, Kansas.
17. *Jade*, Genji Series, December, 1973, 70" x 46", a/c, Collection of the artist.
18. Untitled, Genji Series, 1974, 60" x 46", a/c, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. William Sankovich, Franklin, Michigan.
19. *Polish Easter*, Genji Series, April, 1974, 60" x 46", a/c, Collection of Joe Slowinski, Kansas City.
20. *Death of Lady Purple*, Genji Series, October, 1974, 46" x 56", a/c, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Weber, Chicago.
21. Untitled, Hopi Flower Series, February, 1976, 48" x 36", a/c, Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
22. *Thunderbolt Sow*, Five Color Series, February, 1975, 46" x 56", a/c, Collection of Mobil Oil Corporation.
23. *Blue Corn Dance*, Corn Dance Series, May, 1975, 56" x 54", a/c, Collection of Joe Slowinski, Kansas City.
24. Untitled, Hopi Flower Series, November, 1975, 56" x 46", a/c, Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
25. Untitled, Corn Dance Series, November, 1975, 56" x 46", a/c, Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
26. Untitled, Hopi Flower Series, December, 1975, 50" x 56", a/c, Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
27. Untitled, Hopi Flower Series, January, 1976, 56" x 46", a/c, Collection of Rachel Slowinski, New York.
28. Untitled, Hopi Flower Series, January, 1976, 36" x 48", a/c, Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
29. Untitled, Hopi Flower Series, May, 1976, 56" x 46", a/c, Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
30. Untitled, Pollen Painting, October, 1976, 30" x 26", a/c, Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
31. Untitled, Pollen Painting, October, 1976, 56" x 50", a/c, Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
32. Untitled, Pollen Painting, November, 1976, 36" x 108", a/c, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Jake Mascotte, Rye, New York.
33. *Prayer Stone*, December, 1976, 72" x 92", a/c, Collection of Mobil Oil Corporation.
34. *La Bagh Woods*, Pollen Painting, December, 1977, 50" x 56", a/c, Collection of Nelson-Atkins Museum, gift of Dr. and Mrs. John Arnold & Dr. and Mrs. Burnell Landers.
35. *The Divide*, Pollen Painting, May, 1978, 56" x 50", a/c, Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
36. Untitled, Pollen Painting, June, 1978, 54" x 56", a/c, Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
37. Untitled, Pollen Painting, June, 1978, 54" x 56", a/c, Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.

Watercolors

38. *The Plan* (For Daniel H. Burnham), January, 1979, 72" x 54", a/c, Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
39. Untitled, Pollen Painting, January, 1980, 48" x 36", a/c, Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
40. Untitled, Pollen Painting, October, 1980, 32" x 26", a/c, Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
41. Untitled, Pollen Painting, December, 1980, 48" x 36", a/c, Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
42. Untitled, Pollen Painting, February, 1981, 32" x 26", a/c, Collection of Mr. Gary Gradinger, Kansas City.
43. Untitled, Pollen Painting, March, 1981, 56" x 46", a/c, Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
44. Untitled, Pollen Painting, June, 1981, 56" x 54", a/c, Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
45. Untitled, Pollen Painting, July, 1981, 40" x 30", a/c, Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
46. Untitled, Pollen Painting, September, 1981, 32" x 26", a/c, Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
47. Untitled, Pollen Painting, February, 1983, 54" x 56", a/c, Collection of Continental Corporation.
48. Untitled, Pollen Painting, March, 1983, 36" x 26", a/c, Private Collection.
1. Untitled, March, 1962, 22-1/2" x 20-1/2", Collection of Martha Crow, New York.
2. Untitled, November, 1962, 18" x 23", watercolor and sumi on paper, Lent by the artist.
3. Untitled, April, 1964, 22" x 22", acrylic on paper, Lent by the artist.
4. Untitled, Taos Series, July, 1973, 30" x 22", Lent by the artist.
5. Untitled, Five Color Series, July, 1974, 22" x 30", Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Barlow, Shawnee Mission, Kansas.
6. Untitled, Series of 24, August, 1974, 22" x 30", Collection of Joe Slowinski, Kansas City.
7. *St. Basil*, Series of 24, November, 1974, 30" x 22", Lent by the artist.
8. *The Hopi Flower*, Corn Dance Series, March, 1975, 22" x 30-1/2", Collection of Rachel Slowinski, New York.
9. Untitled, Series of 24, August, 1975, 23" x 31", Lent by the artist.
10. Untitled, Emergence Series, October, 1975, 31" x 23", Collection of Rachel Slowinski, New York.
11. Untitled, Series of 24, December, 1975, 23" x 31", Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
12. Untitled, April, 1978, 30-1/2" x 22", Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
13. Untitled, November, 1979, 30" x 22", Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
14. Untitled, December, 1980, 23" x 30-1/2", Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
15. Untitled, August, 1981, 23-1/2" x 32", Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
16. Untitled, August, 1982, 21" x 30-1/2", Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
17. Untitled, August, 1982, 31" x 23", Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
18. Untitled, July, 1983, 26" x 27", watercolor on silk, Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
19. Untitled, October, 1983, 30" x 22", Lent by the artist, Courtesy of Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.

All works are watercolor on paper unless otherwise specified.

Biography

Ronald J. Slowinski

Born 10 January, 1932 in Chicago, Illinois.

Educated

1950-52 School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Received Certificate of Art in painting.

Currently lives and works in Kansas City, Missouri.

One Person Exhibitions

- 1984 Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
- 1982 The Art Gallery, Drake University, Des Moines.
- 1981 Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City
- 1980 Hoshour Gallery, Albuquerque, New Mexico.
- 1979 Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
- 1978 Mulvane Art Center, Washburn University, Topeka.
- 1977 Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
- 1976 Smith-Andersen Gallery, Palo Alto, California.
- 1975 Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
Walter Kelly Gallery, Chicago.
- 1973 Southwest Missouri State University, Springfield, Missouri.
- 1972 The Octagon Art Center, Ames, Iowa.
- 1970 Contemporary Gallery, Jewish Community Center, Kansas City.
- 1969 Minami Gallery, Tokyo, Japan.

- 1966 Indiana University, Museum of Fine Arts.
Poindexter Gallery, New York.
- 1963 Poindexter Gallery, New York.
- 1960 Devorah Sherman Gallery, Chicago.
- 1957 Wells Street Gallery, Chicago.

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1976 "Painting and Sculpture by Mid-West Faculty-Artists," Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, April-May; and Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington, May-July, illustrated catalogue, *Untitled (Corn Dance Series)* reproduced.
- 1974 American Colorfield Painting, Douglas Drake Gallery, Kansas City.
- 1973 Gallery of Modern Art, Taos, New Mexico.
- 1972 "Five Chicago Expatriates," Illinois Bell Telephone, Chicago, Illinois.
- 1967 "Four Painters," Charlotte Crosby Kemper Gallery, Kansas City Art Institute.
"15 in '67," Albrecht Gallery, St. Joseph, Missouri.
"Art in the Midwest," Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City.
- 1966 Exhibition "25," Indiana University Museum of Fine Arts.
- 1963 Fairweather-Hardin Gallery, Chicago.
- 1961 Group Show, Studio for Dance Gallery, New York.

- 1959 Spring Invitation, Nonagon Gallery, New York.
Ravinia Festival Art Exhibition.
Chicago Annual Show, Chicago Art Institute.
Wells Street Gallery, Chicago (Two Man Show).
- 1957 1020 Art Center, Chicago.
Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago.
"Exhibitions Momentum 1957"
Wells Street Gallery, Chicago.

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- 1983 Elizabeth Kirsch, "Artists and Their Space," *Kansas City Magazine*, July, 1983, p. 24.
- 1981 Donald Hoffmann, "How Artists Are Made," *The Kansas City Star*, July 13, 1981, p. 2 B.
Donald Hoffmann, "Abstract Artist Resolves Early Tension Peacefully," *The Kansas City Star*, March 15, 1981, p. 7 F.
- 1980 Jan Schmitz, "A Minimalist Painter Finds Aesthetic and Emotional Resources in Amerind Art," *Native Arts/West*, September, 1980, p. 7.
Donald Hoffmann, *The Kansas City Star*, August 10, 1980, p. 8 E.
Jan Schmitz, "Ron Slowinski at Hoshour," *Art Space Magazine*, June, 1980, p. 55.
Keith Raether, "Light Radiates from Works at Gallery," *The Albuquerque Tribune*, May 24, 1980.
Jan Schmitz, "Light and Color an Important Aspect in this Artist's Work," *Independent Newspapers*, Albuquerque, N.M., May 23, 1980.
Daniel Gibson, "Influence of Southwest Clear in Work of Ron Slowinski," *Albuquerque News*, May 21, 1980.
Jennie Lusk, "Varied Works Offered in 3 New Art Shows," *Albuquerque Journal*, May 18, 1980, p. D 2.
Alan Milstein, "Works Evoke Mystical State," *Topeka Daily Capitol*, January 31, 1980, p. 13.
- 1979 Sarah McFadden, "Midwest Art," *Art in America*, July/August '79, p. 62.
Jan Schmitz, "The Art of Ron Slowinski," *Forum-Kansas City Artists Coalition*, Summer Issue 1979.
Victoria Kirsch Melcher, "Color Scrims Compose Delicate Paintings," *The Kansas City Star*, April 29, 1979, p. 13 E.
- 1978 Joseph O. Fischer, "Polish American Works Shown at CEMREL," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, July 1-2, 1978.
- 1977 Donald Hoffmann, "Space, Light, Surface," (an interview), *The Kansas City Star*, May 1, 1977.
Donald Hoffmann, *The Kansas City Star*, April 10, 1977, p. 3 E.
Dennis Adrian, Art Critic, *Chicago Daily News*, Douglas Drake Gallery announcement, April, 1977.
Palo Alto Times, June 4, 1976.
- 1976 *Chicago Tribune*, October 19, 1975 (Review).
Judy Goodman, "Kansas City: Ron Slowinski at Douglas Drake," *Arts Magazine*, May, 1975.
Donald Hoffmann, (Review), *The Kansas City Star*, March 9, 1975.
- 1973 Regina Cooke, (Review), *The Taos News*, July 11, 1973.
- 1971 Donald Hoffmann, "New Art for Office Buildings," *The Kansas City Star*, July 4, 1971, Section E.
- 1969 Jennifer S. Byrd, (Review), *The Japan Times*, July 2, 1969, p. 5.
- 1967 Donald Hoffmann, "Four Painters," Exhibit, *The Kansas City Star*, January 8, 1967, Section D.
- 1963 Donald Judd, (Review), *Arts Magazine*, November, 1963.
G. R. Swenson, (Review), *Art News*, November, 1963, p. 19.
Emily Genauer and John Gruen, *New York Herald Tribune*, October 12, 1963, (Review), p. 9.
- 1960 Franz Schulze, *Art News*, "Chicago" (Review), May, 1960, p. 46.
- 1959 Franz Schulze, "Chicago," *Art News*, Jan. 1959, p. 49.

Selected Public Collections:

Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo
Westinghouse Electric Corporation, Pittsburgh
Illinois Bell Telephone, Chicago
Borg-Warner Corporation, Chicago
Price-Waterhouse, Pittsburgh
The Palmer House, Chicago
Johnson County National Bank, Shawnee Mission, Kansas
Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Company, Kansas City
Chermayeff and Geismar Associates, New York
Mobil Oil Corporation, New York
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Continental Corporation, New York