

**Joan Snyder**



# Joan Snyder

*Work on Paper: 1970s and Recent*

Essay by Jenni Sorkin

ALEXANDRE GALLERY

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The House

↑ (photo of a house)

↑ painter - of a House

↓ isolating strokes - (a painting)

study of strokes -

(photo of House)

(photo of painting of House)

[people in House]

Then Window - into unknown -  
under visual vocabulary -

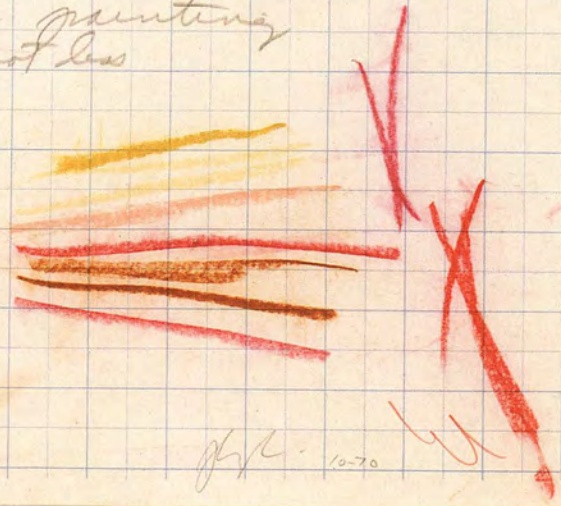
{ The guts of -  
depth  
debris

↓ The drops in the painting  
Tens  
process  
debris  
whole of brush movement

Reality  
Reflection of reality

Reality of a painting.

Anatomy of a painting  
more not less





## The Shapes of Lines

By Jenni Sorkin

Years before Neo-Expressionism hit New York in the mid-1980s, Joan Snyder was producing sensuous mixed media paintings that set a standard for the narrative potential of abstraction. Snyder is best known for the impulsive surfaces created in her first mature body of work, *Stroke Paintings* (1969–1973), emanating from the most elementary gesture in painting, the brushstroke. An exploration of the continuity, surface, and texture of the single, repeated gesture, the *Stroke Paintings* were large, rectangular canvases made on a grid. In contrast to the deliberate geometric forms of Jo Baer, Frank Stella, and other minimal painters, Snyder's strokes were given full expression, where paint was allowed to spread, culminating in heavy drips, smears, and globs. Snyder's distinctive surfaces balanced seepage and absorption, alluding to bodily experience through layered articulations.

Snyder's emotive gestures can be seen as a reaction against the pervasive minimalist tendencies of the mid- to late-1960s. To counter the long domination of Abstract Expressionism, a visibly minimal trend emerged. Artists such as Brice Marden and Robert Mangold emphasized the treatment of individual canvases as objects through an emphasis on structure, opacity, and surface perfection. Snyder seemingly resisted this tendency, but her incorporation of the grid belies an interest in the placement of a framing device within a composition. In this way, Snyder's work can be seen in relationship to Eva Hesse (1936–1970), a sculptor whose intensive writing and drawing process has been well-documented. While the works are aesthetically dissimilar, nonetheless, Hesse's earliest works were also concerned with referencing the body through a formal vocabulary.



Fig. 1 *Strokes for Fink*, 1971





Fig. 2 *Torn White*, 1973

This exhibition selects from two different eras of Snyder's production, recent drawings dating from 1999 to the present, and those from 35 years prior, made at the beginning of her career, before or in tandem to the *Stroke Paintings*. Snyder's drawings are often in preparation for a painting, but they are also intimately scaled, self-contained works. Ranging from spare to sprawling, the process of drawing occupies a central place in her production, both as a formal and informal working through of ideas, recording many of her earliest forays and numerous attempts at charting emotive space through an abstract language. Writing is integral to the images set forth on paper, and account for the underpinnings of Snyder's narrative impulse. More apt to describe the world through language than figuration, large swaths of color are crisscrossed with itinerant scrawl. Text serves as a bridge, offering concrete information within an abstract terrain. Often anthropomorphic, but rarely figurative, Snyder's recurrent themes include the body, the grid, and the use of pastoral imagery. Her drawings embrace the daily litany of responsiveness, keenly mapping the rhythmic sequences of seasons, of nightfall, the ocean, and the cyclical nature of human relationships. Snyder narrates lived experience without the directed specificity of autobiography or storytelling.

The artist's earliest compositions in this exhibition date from 1969 and 1970, and provide much of the framework for the *Stroke* paintings. Snyder sought to loosen the constraints of the grid with her own boisterous successions of primary color slashes, saturated orbs, and heavy scribbles. Conceived in pastel on individual sheets of graph paper, many of these drawings leave large white spaces punctuated by sharp blows of color. The *Shapes of Lines* (cat. no. 14) dates from this era, a work in a warm palette in which slim red hatch marks become bolder, thicker, and more saturated in descending configurations, ending in a row of



glowing orange stalks. *Stroke Watercolor* (cat. no. 2) points to the same expansion of the line. Through stacking, Snyder amasses bands of unbroken color, all of varying length and girth. Such inventories of the line are a way of accruing physicality and depth. This sense of expansiveness allows for permeability within the picture plane, often expressed through thin layers of wash, porous, half-formed spheres, and semi-obscuréd grids.

In fact, much of her visual process is imbued with a strategy of accumulation. The additive quality of her canvases results in a growth and intensification of feeling through layering and collaging. Within her drawings and sketches, this occurs through writing. That her draftsmanship is marked by constant inscription is both a preoccupation and an assertion of territory, claiming space for everything from formal “notes to self” to diaristic asides. As with writing, most of Snyder’s work adheres to a horizontal configuration of the page. Her intonation of color, shape, and stray phrases offer a combination of densities that are simultaneously legible and non-verbal, creating movement and vehemence through a rush of words. In *Women Make Lists* (cat. no. 30), Snyder examines internalized divisions through an agitated grocery-like list of sad categories—“people I think about but don’t call,” and “people who I worry about and call but they would never call me.” The names tumble vertically down the page, nearly indecipherable, blotted out by abundant pink circles.

Writing is also mined as an important source of imagery. Associative titles often give way to organic forms, as in *Omphalos* (cat. no. 24), in which a row of fleshy red circles protrude, five suns set amid gentle hues of pink and mint that grace the upper regions of the drawing like an evening haze. Installed below, compass-like, is a larger, freestanding circle with an emphatic red cross at its center. Set off-kilter, this is the drawing’s *omphalos*. The word itself is a reference to a stone that ancient Greeks regarded as the center of the world, but



Fig. 3 *Spot Blue*, 2004

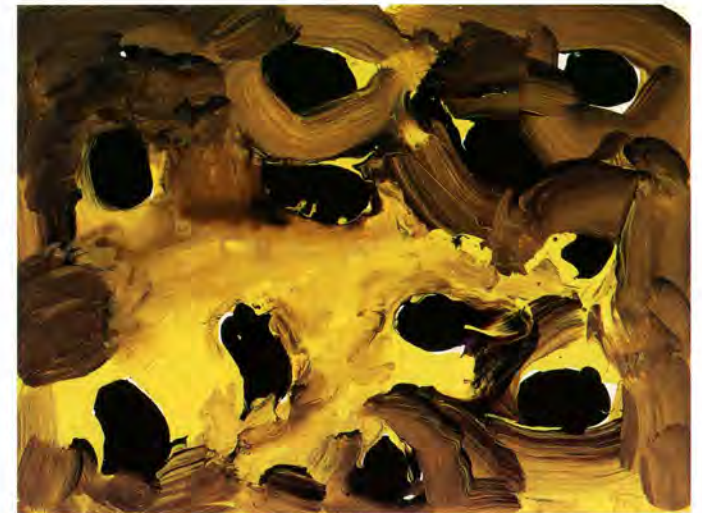


Fig. 4 *Spot Deep Maroon*, 2004





Fig. 5 *Blue Drawing*, 2004

Snyder's usage summons its metaphorical and corporeal potentials. The center as a compass, a directed experience, the center as a belly. Her phrases turn the stone into a navel, where the navel functions as the gut, or the heart of a city. A long-time New Yorker, Snyder's suggestion of an urban soul, a city afflicted at its core, resonates with both the date, September 2002, and location of its origin—Truro, Massachusetts. Truro, rather than New York, signals temporary separation and rupture. Taken together, the cumulative experience of the drawing is one of profound loss.

Snyder makes explicit notations within her drawings, as in *Blue Drawing* (fig. 5). Here, she embellishes shapes with arrows and penciled annotations, suggestive words such as “transparent,” “under,” and “blackberries.” Evoking both the drawing's next incarnation and its unspecified longing, the text is interrupted by purple-black smudges, as if the berries themselves had appeared upon the paper. This trace, or index, of the fruit, taken together with the word “blackberries,” is a profound, inventive rendering of text and image, marking the human presence within the abstract gesture.

Snyder's work has been described as both abstract and expressionistic. The perilous combination of those words is, of course, Abstract Expressionism, though her work has been characterized under that rubric as well. Curators such as Marcia Tucker and Michael Walls compared Snyder to Hans Hofmann, wrestling with the enormous differences between Snyder's less formal gestures, and those of “Kline, de Kooning, Pollock, or Guston.”<sup>1</sup> This stemmed from a certainty that Snyder's work was neither minimal, nor fit comfortably with the rigidity of the previous generation of painters. While Snyder's colors are suggestive of Phillip Guston's pink-red palettes, or her brushwork reminiscent of Kline's, her work is stubbornly her own.



An interest in heroic canvases resurfaced again until the mid-1980s. Dubbed Neo-Expressionism, macho painters in both New York (Eric Fischl, Julian Schnabel) and Germany (Anselm Kiefer, Sigmar Polke) garnered critical attention for their sloppily impastoed, grandiose surfaces. While the painting revival sparked much deserved retrospective interest in Snyder, her work had little in common with the rowdy sexuality and aggressive figuration of Neo-Expressionism. In 1992, the artist published a contrarian essay, titled “It Wasn’t Neo to Us,” arguing that it was the feminists of her generation who had pioneered unadulterated narrative and personal expression in art production.<sup>2</sup>

Spanning the entirety of her career, Snyder’s drawings constitute the merging of the intentional with the intuitive, setting the tone for compositions that are both textually rich and startlingly diverse. The artist draws upon a vast repertoire of painterly techniques—smearing, blending, bleeding—to convey a strong material presence. Above all, writing ignites Snyder’s passion for mark making. As a visual strategy, her technique ranges from descriptive, legible, and purposeful to a near-erasure of the boundary between the verbal and the visual. Sometimes drawing looks like writing, and writing looks like drawing. She communicates through an economy of shapes and colors, building upon a landscape of text to create loosely connected works that bristle with the same intensity. Snyder’s works on paper explore the intimacy of expression, its rhythmic sequences, and its topologies.

1 Marcia Tucker, “The Anatomy of a Stroke: Recent Paintings by Joan Snyder,” *Artforum*, May 1971, p. 45.

2 Joan Snyder, “It Wasn’t Neo to Us,” *Journal of the Rutgers University Libraries*, Vol. LIV, 1992, pp. 34–35.

Jenni Sorkin is a critic and curator based in New Haven, Connecticut. She has published in *Art Journal*, *Frieze*, *Art Monthly*, and *Third Text*. She is doctoral student in the History of Art at Yale University. The Abrams monograph on Joan Snyder’s work to be published August 2005 will include text by Ms. Sorkin.



Fig. 6 *Red Landscape*, 2001





2. *Stroke Watercolor*, c. 1971





3. *In Four Voices*, 1970, diptych



1st voice - strokes - bold - emotive - fuzzy -  
~~moving~~ - color

second - long thin lines -  
~~high~~ voices wispy sharp  
piercing

Third - bold - serious -  
~~read up~~ / fully emotional  
squares - straight line

Last voice? Grid lines (y) rough / straight - squares

separating out the emotions / diff. elements I used to put all together - each feels  
isolated - intertwined → many voices at once

loud / soft / piercing / jubilant / radiant / tragic / slow / fast / bold / moving ahead - marching /  
strident / female / bull / lines / I'd bring as I do it my hand ~~feel~~ ~~feel~~ ~~feel~~  
R.N. 1970





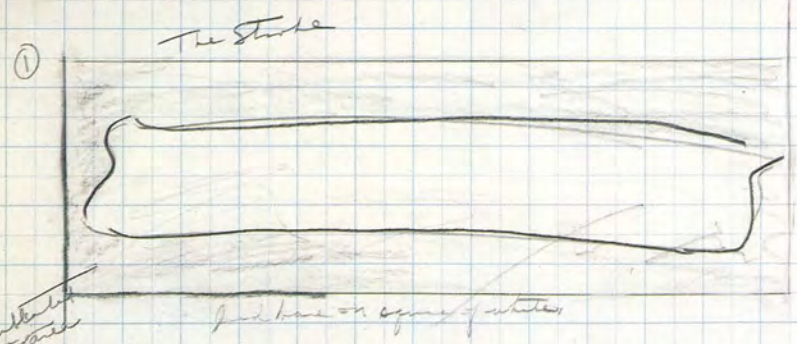
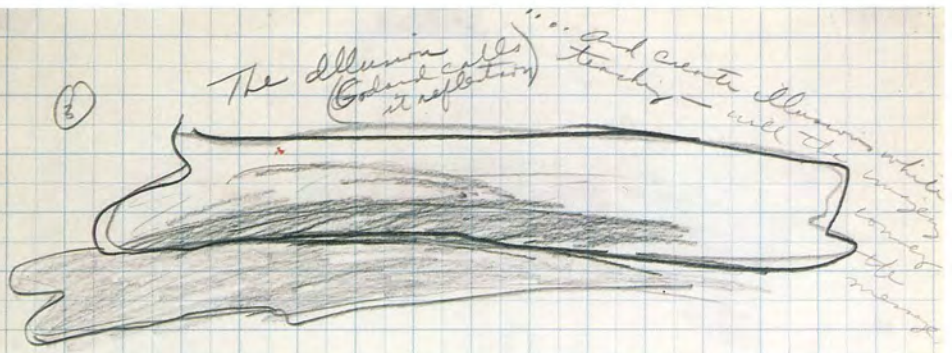
4. Disintegrate Down, 1971





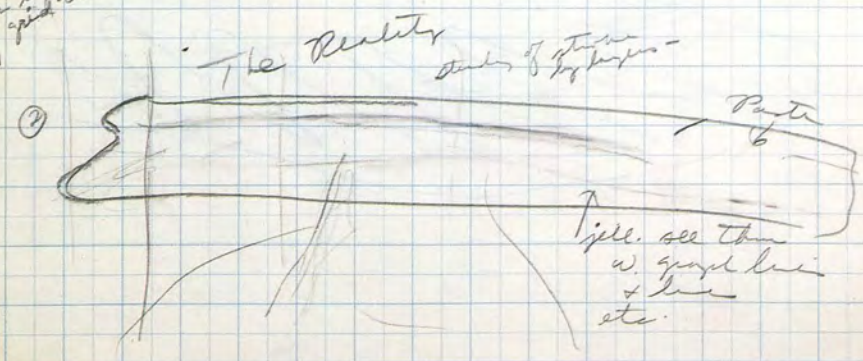
5. *My Lai Collage*, 1969





understand  
the nature  
of spirit there -

Just base on square of activities

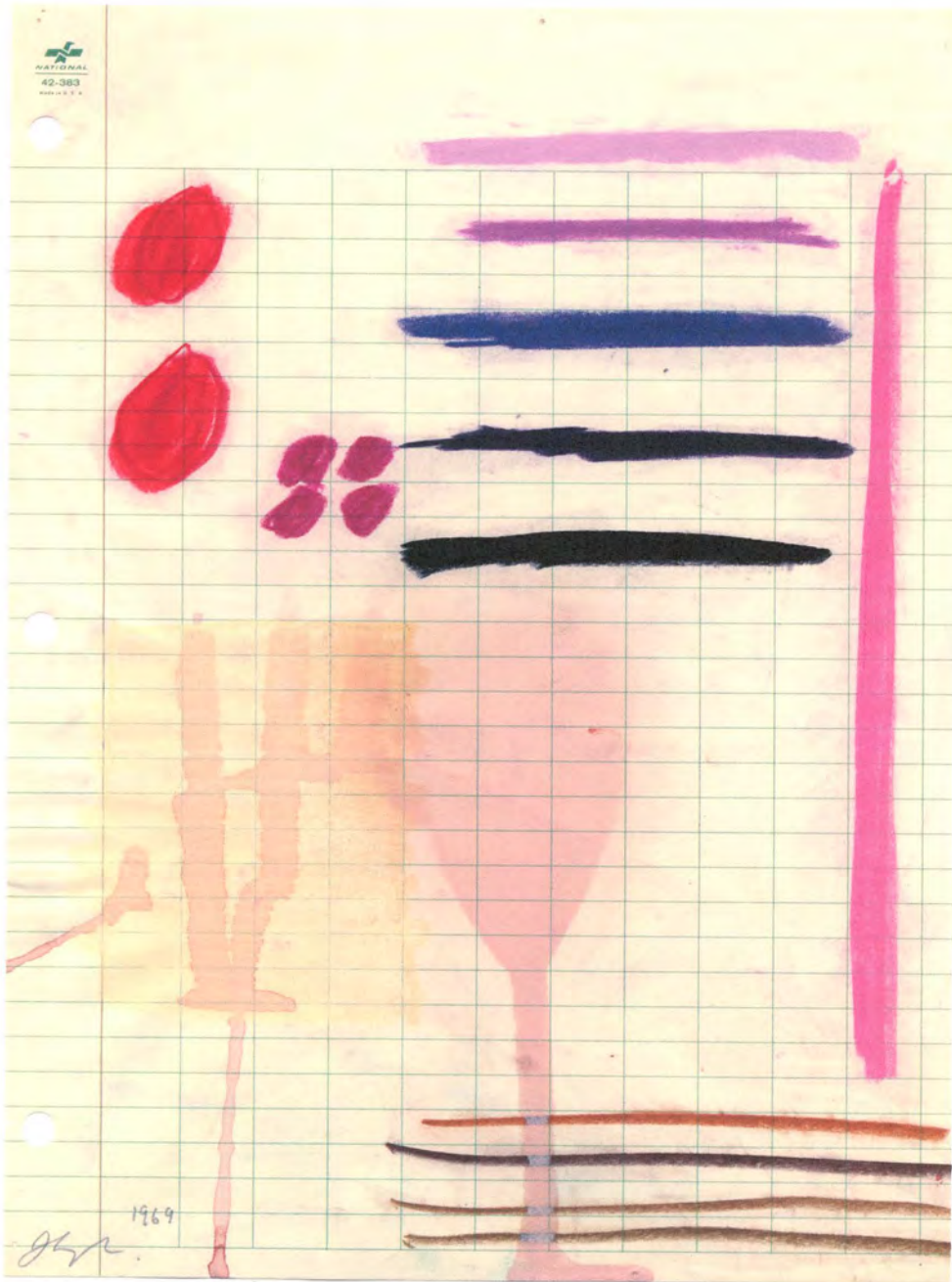


fill. see the  
w. grey line  
& line  
etc.

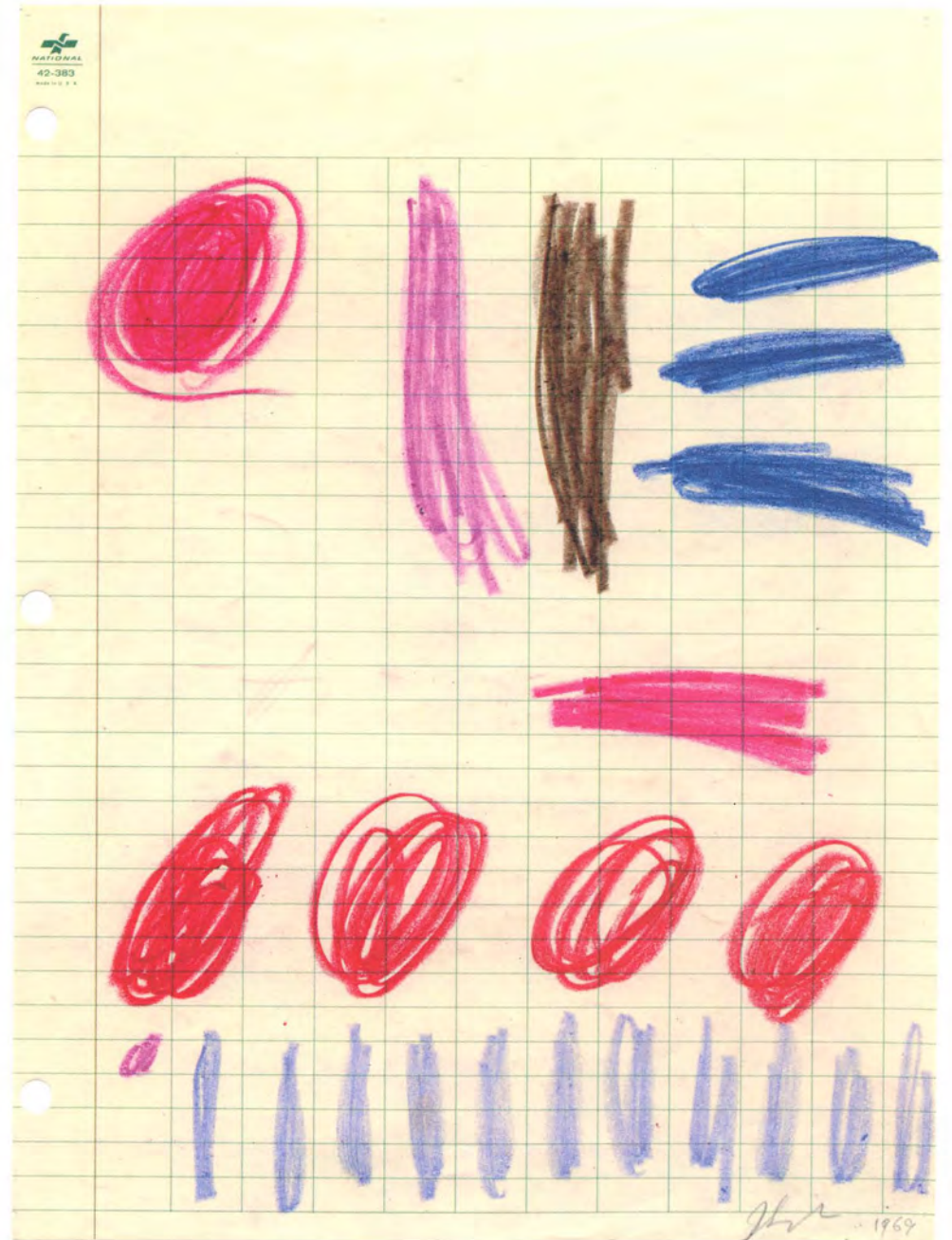
The extending force possible when beauty than an illusion  
to the real - begin here for  
going backward in order to go forward - an analysis of my  
own work to study a painter, painting -

1970



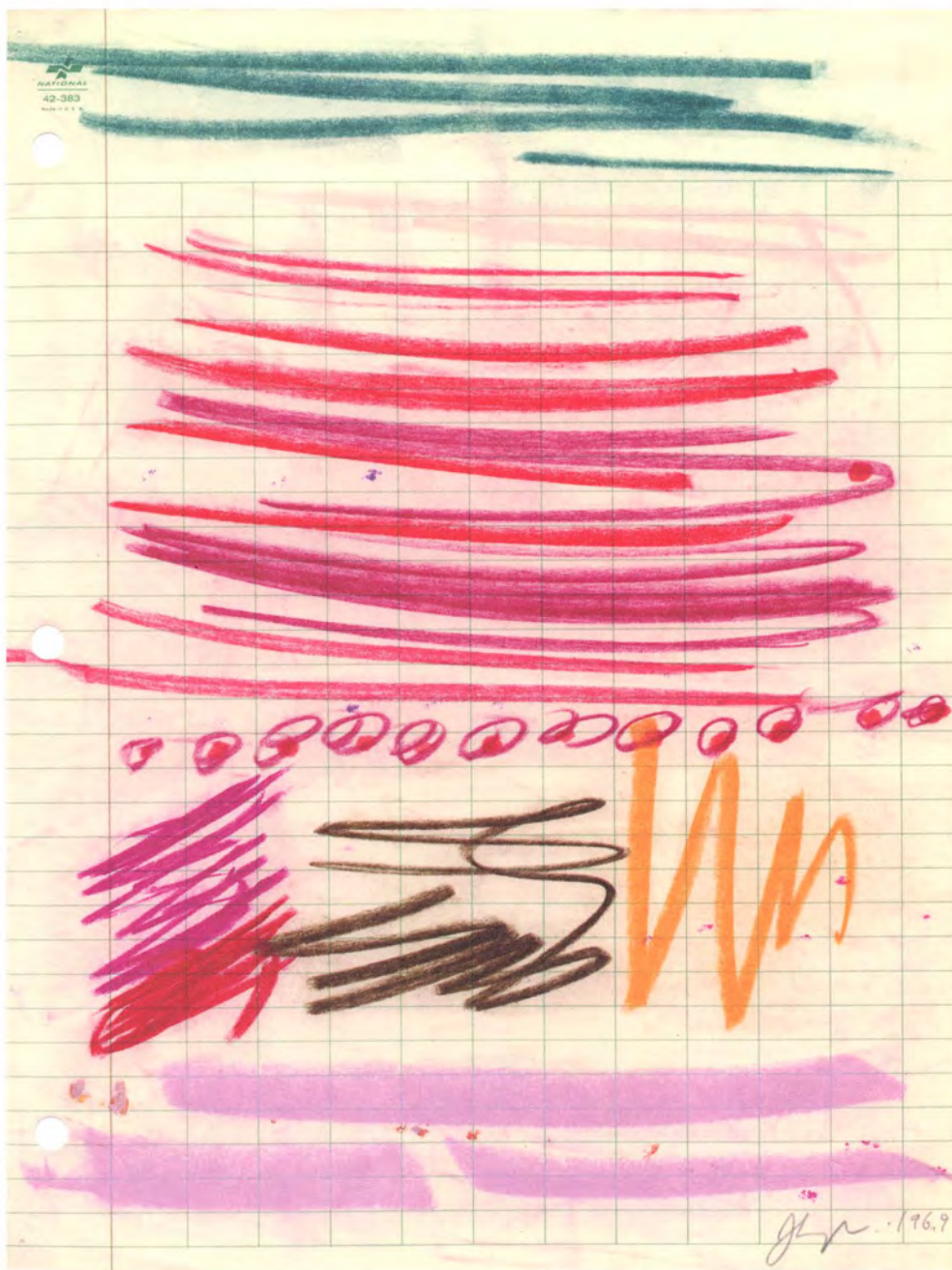


9. *Shapes of Lines No. 3*, 1969

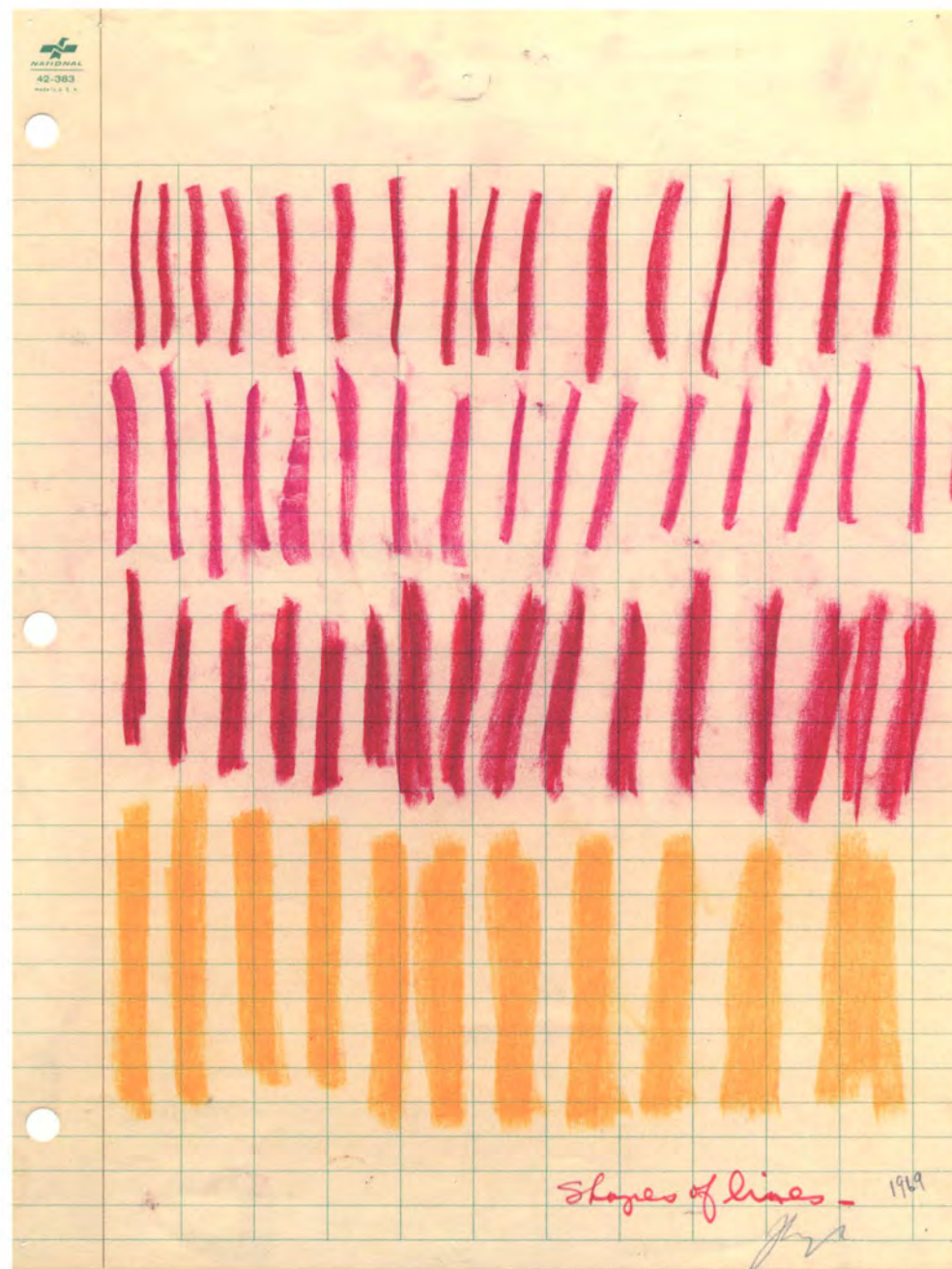


10. *Shapes of Lines No. 4*, 1969



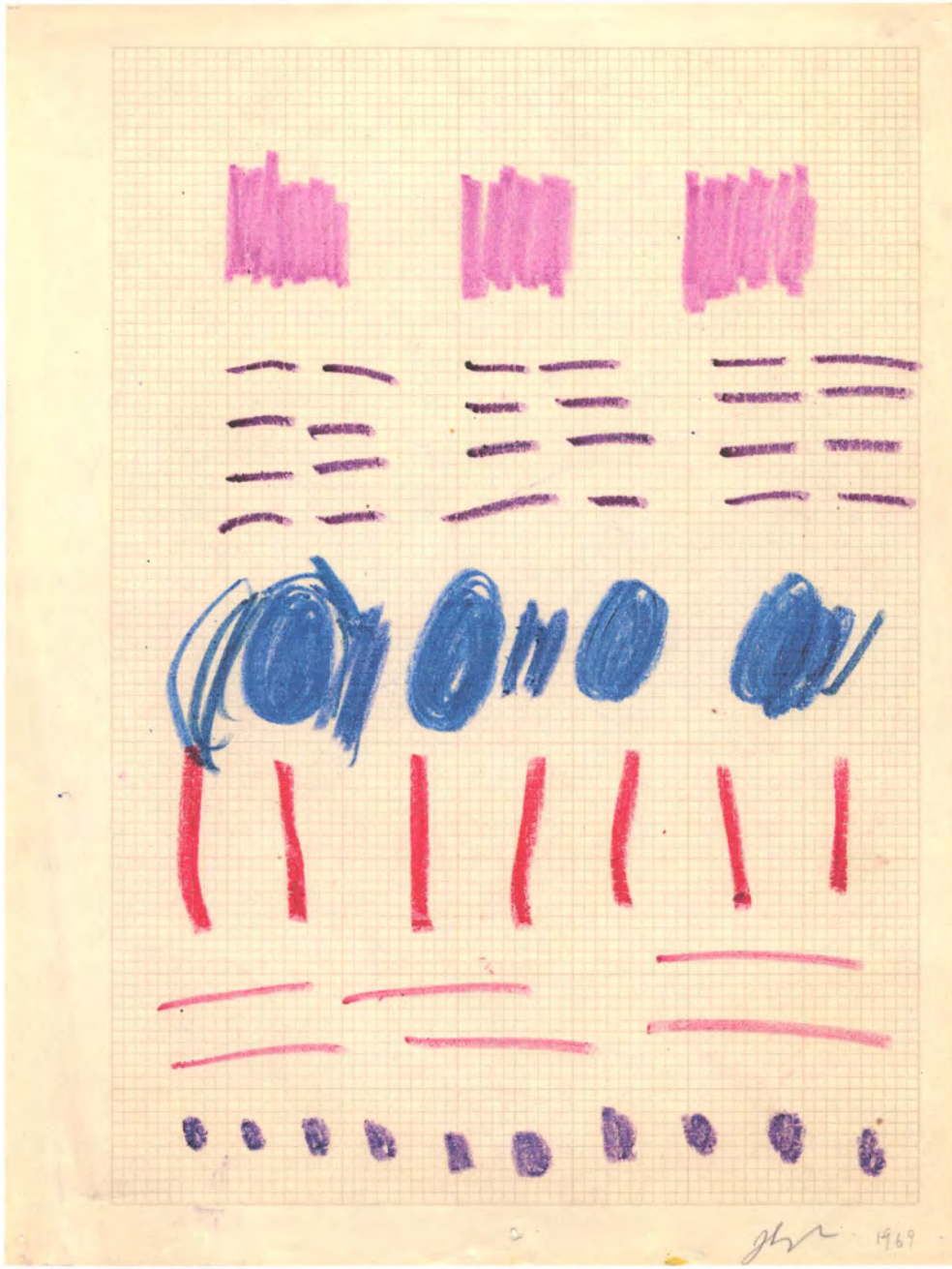


13. *Shapes of Lines* No. 7, 1969

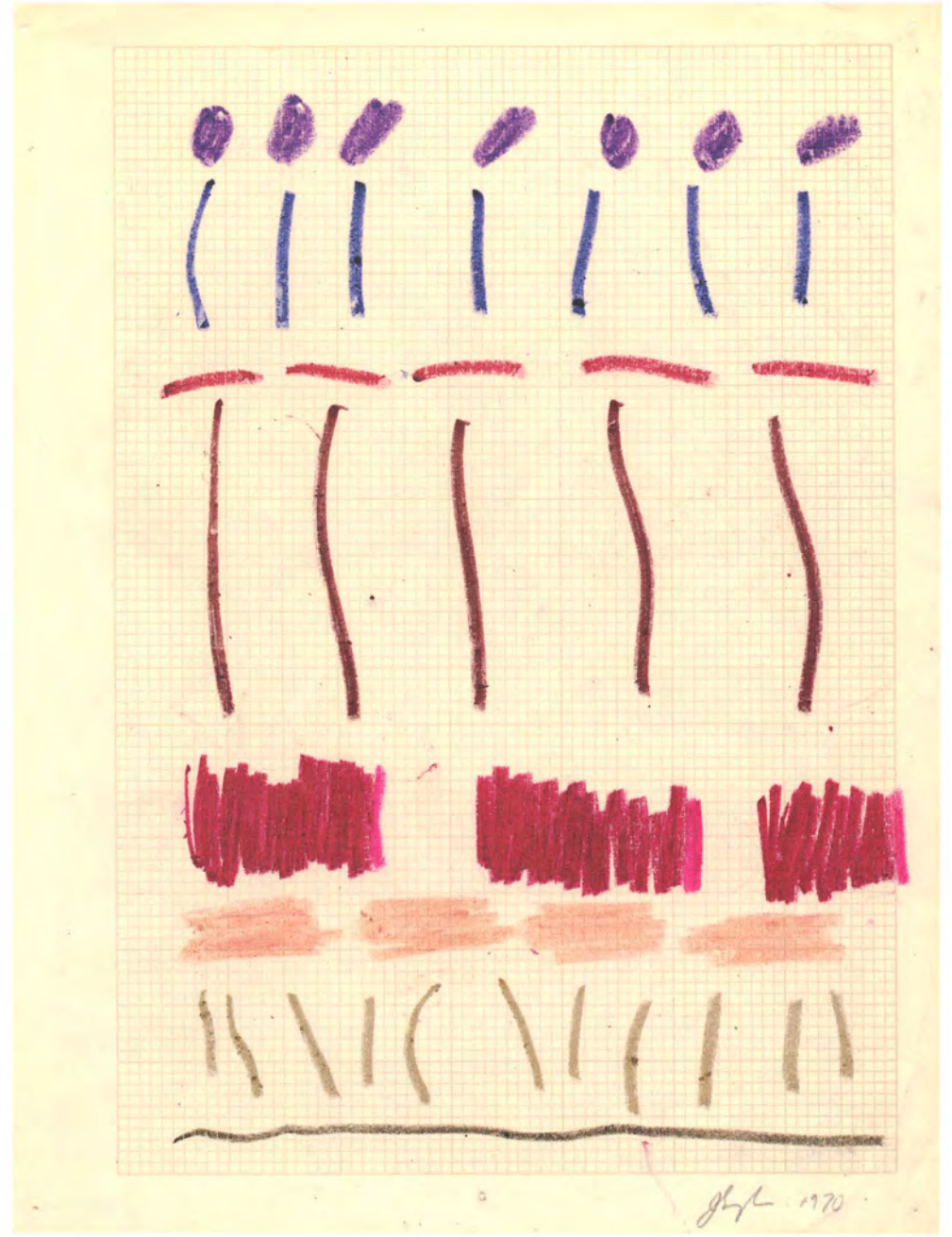


14. *Shapes of Lines* No. 8, 1969





11. *Shapes of Lines No. 5, 1969*

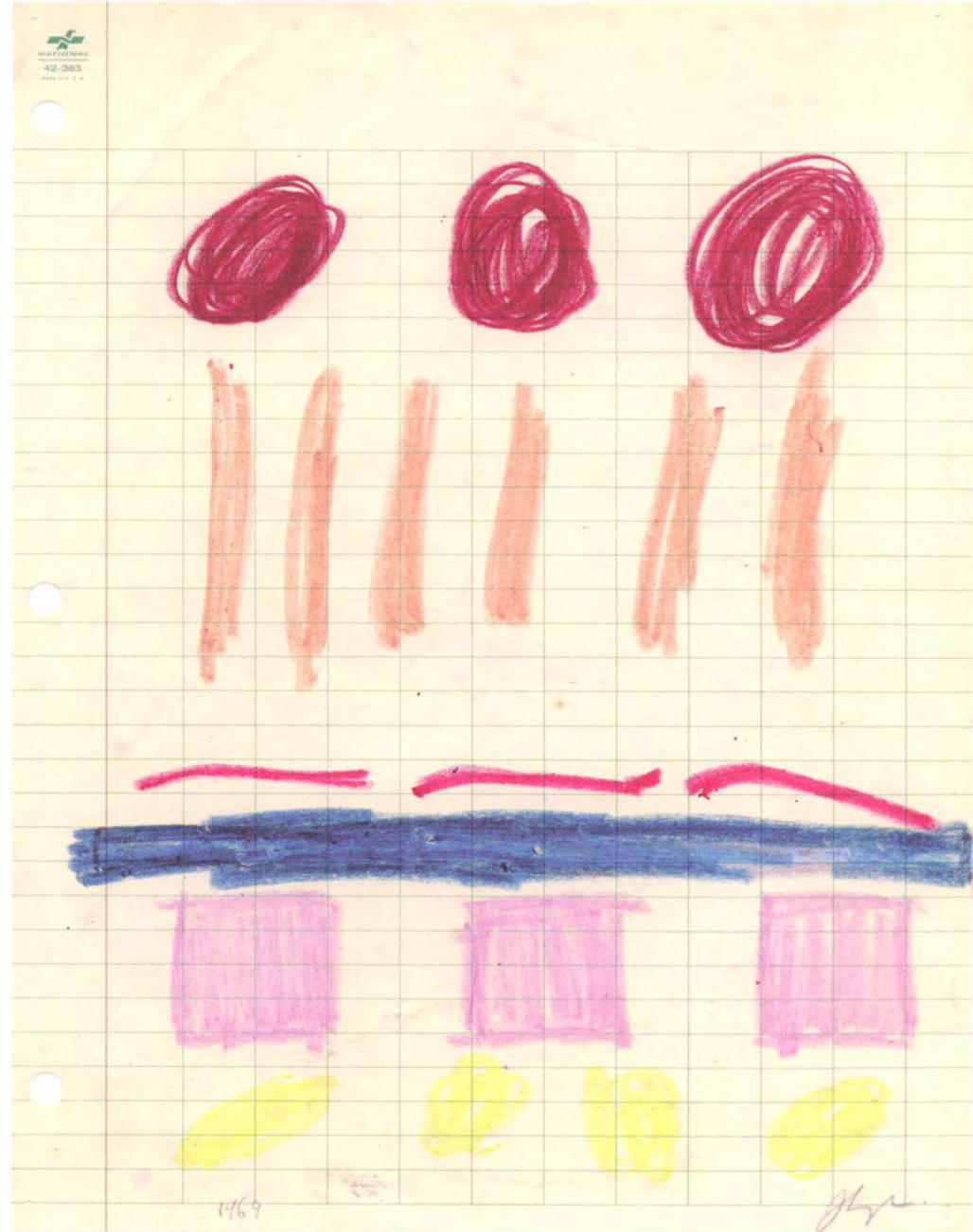


12. *Shapes of Lines No. 6, 1969*



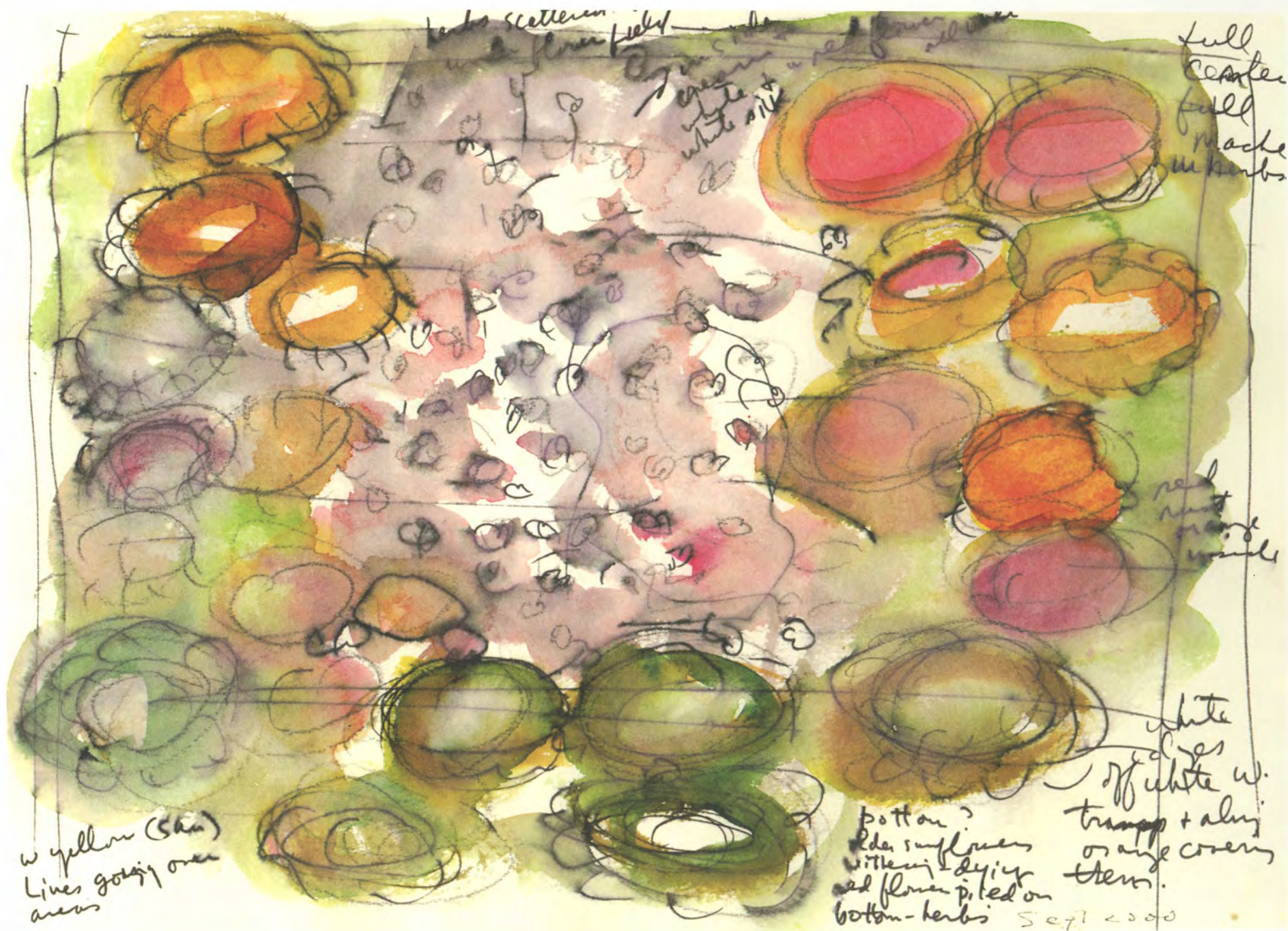


7. Red, Blue, Orange, Green, 1969



8. Shapes of Lines No. 2, 1969





w yellow (skin)  
Lines going over  
areas

herbs scattered  
in flower field

white silk  
red flowers  
all over

full  
center  
full  
made  
in herbs

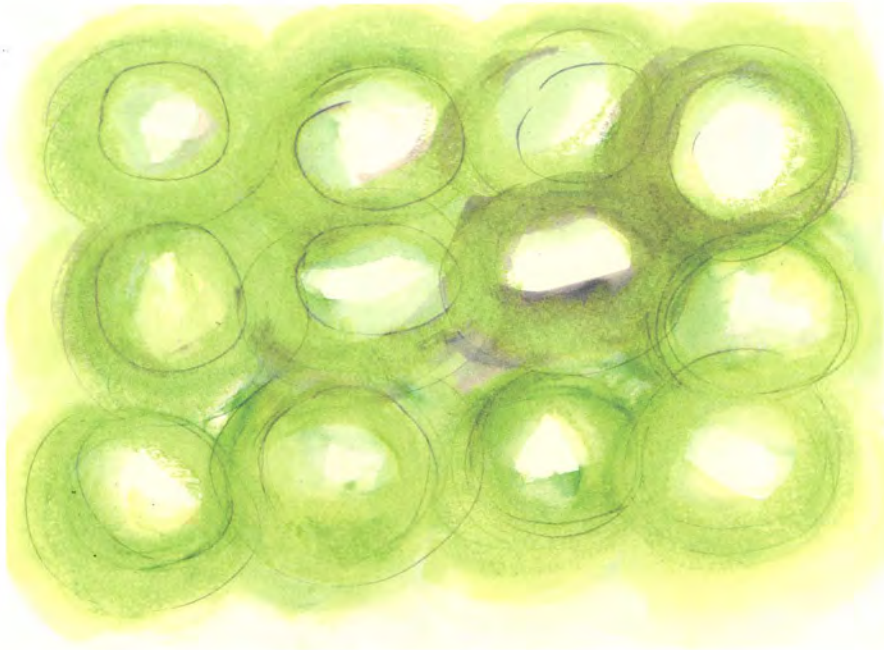
red  
next  
name  
inside

bottom?  
Red sunflowers  
withering - dying  
red flowers piled on  
bottom - herbs

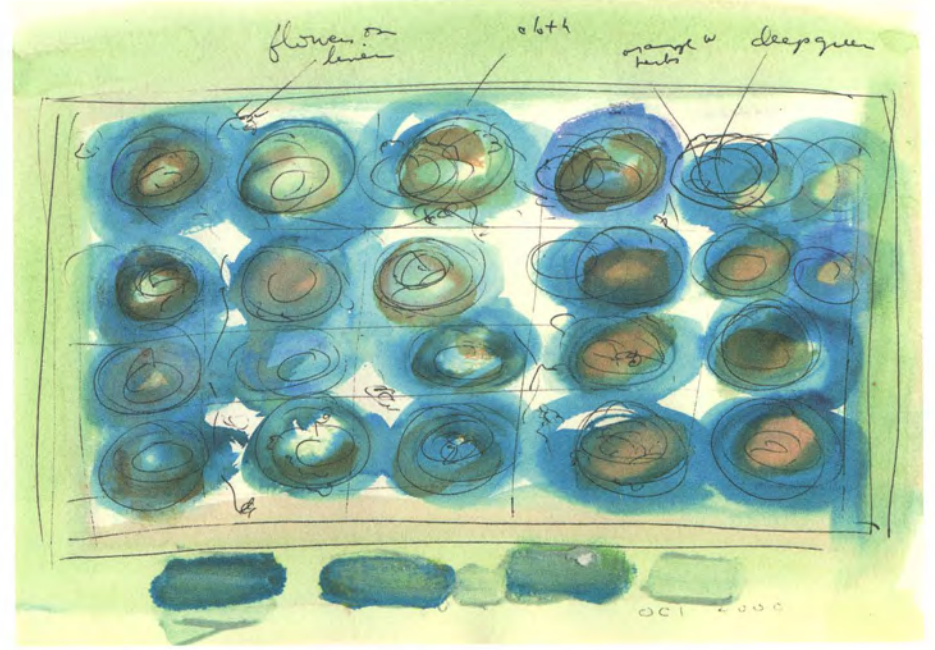
white  
dyes  
off white w.  
trapp + aliy  
orange covers  
them.

Sept 2000





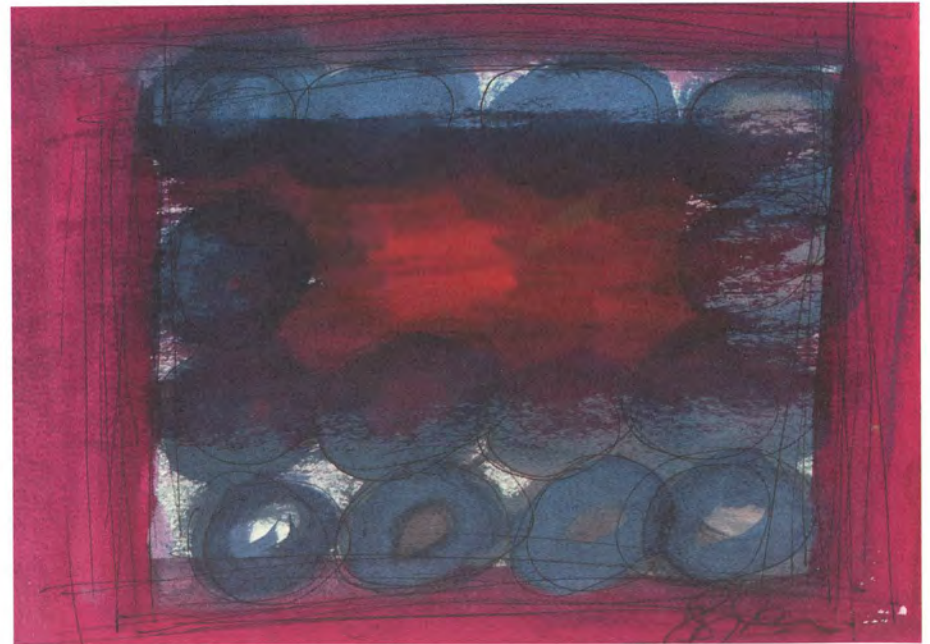
20. *Lime Green Circles*, 2000



21. *Flowers on Linen*, 2000

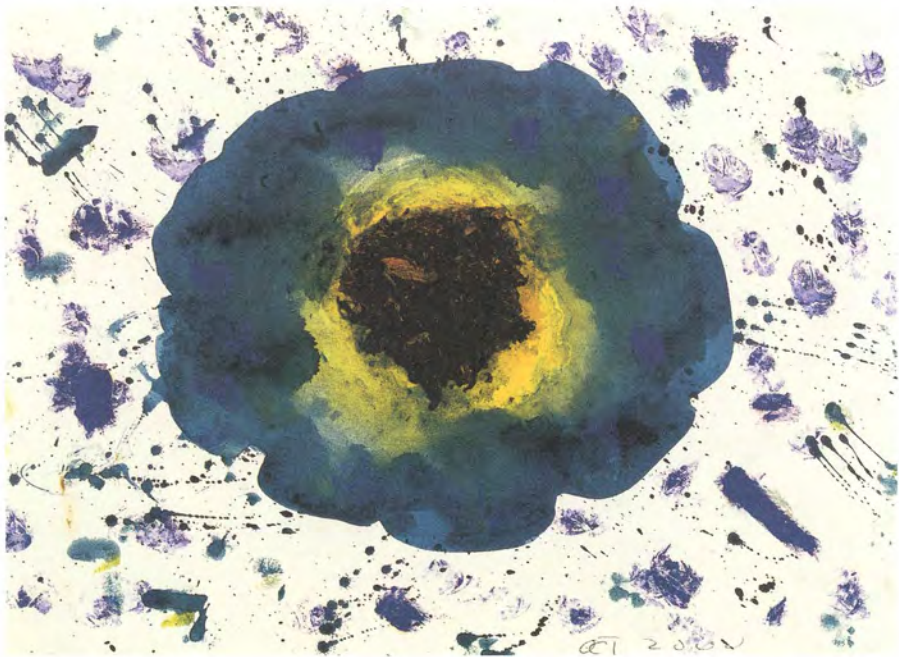


22. *Big Pink Figure*, 2001



23. *Framed Circle*, 2000





16. *Big Flower*, 2000



17. *Grid Grid*, 2000

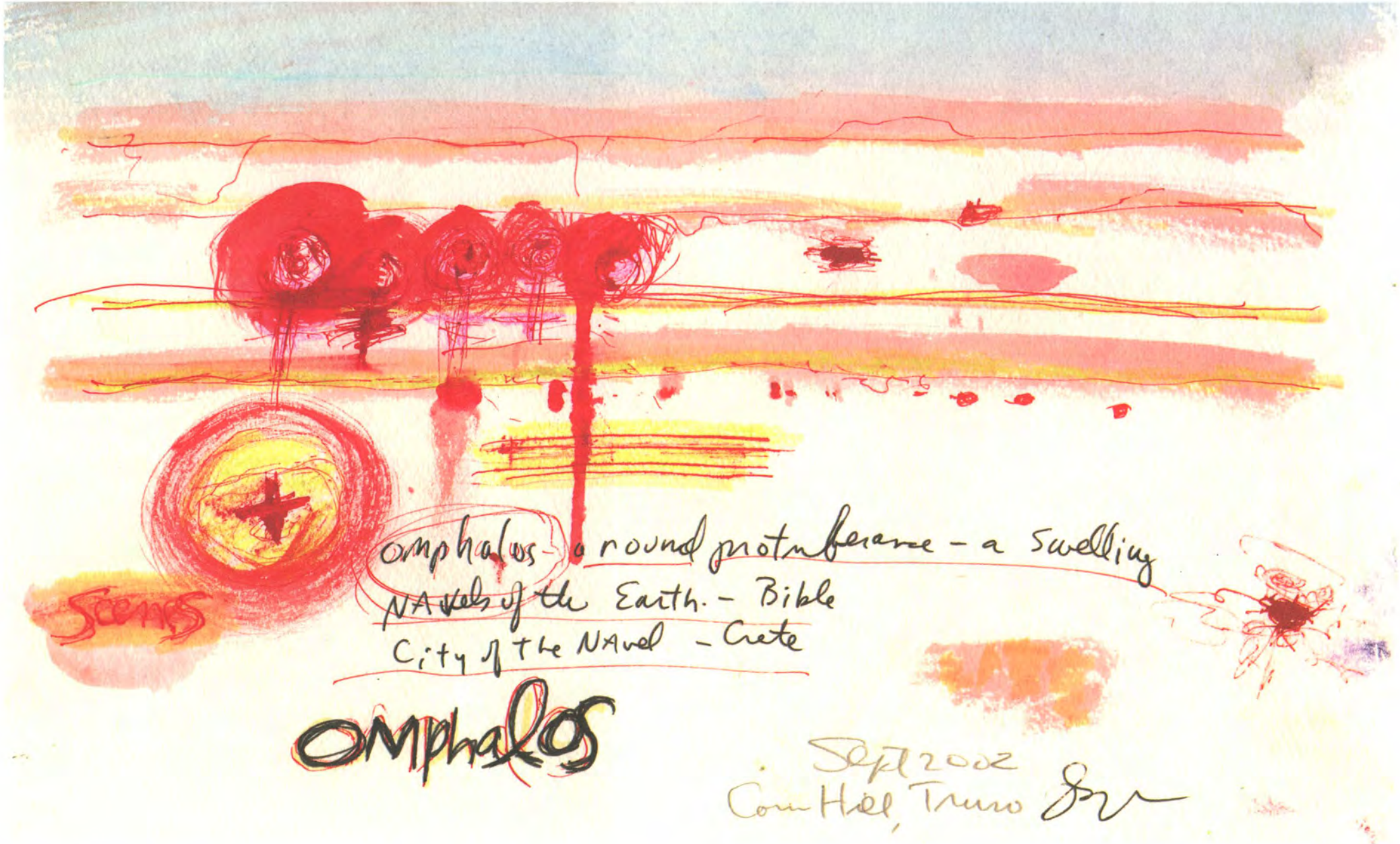


18. *Cherries and Eyes*, 2001



19. *Dream*, 2001





SCENES

omphalos - a round protuberance - a swelling  
NAVELS of the Earth. - Bible  
City of the NAvel - Crete

OMPHALOS

Sept 2002  
Com Hill, Truro, Jr



Running flowers, maps, fruit maps, flowers, squares of  
beautiful color



IKHKLAS KHOUli

RAJAH IBRAHIM

2 diff paints on white clear base lines of paint - not on  
the brown lines in white

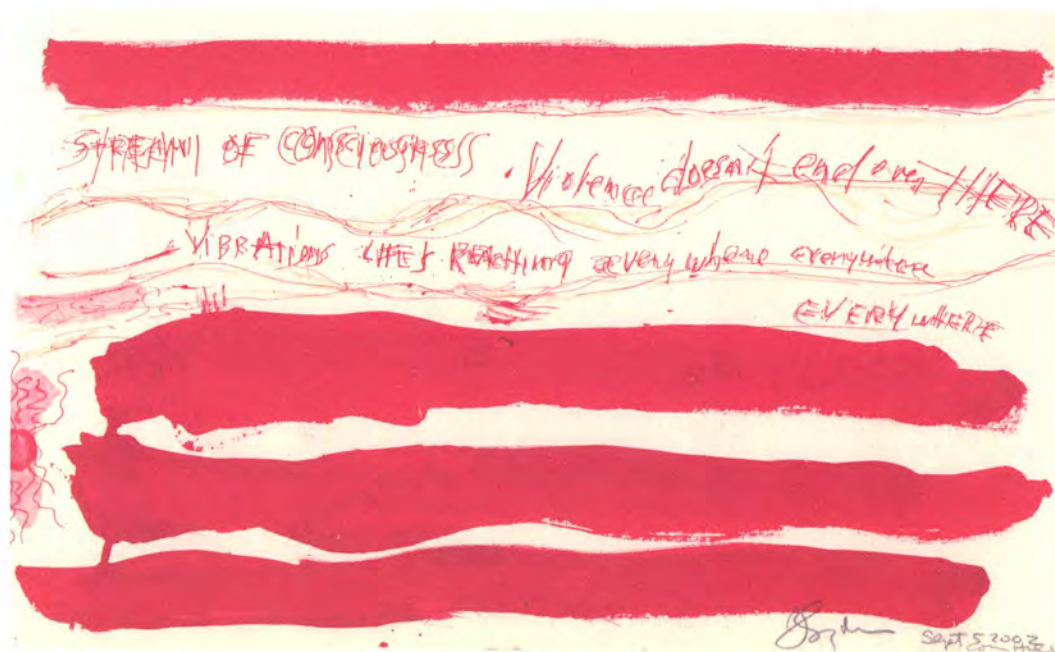
Some times

do on saw lines in white glass sanded areas. for image + squares  
94-02 con'till 2nd





28. Corn Hill, Truro, 2002

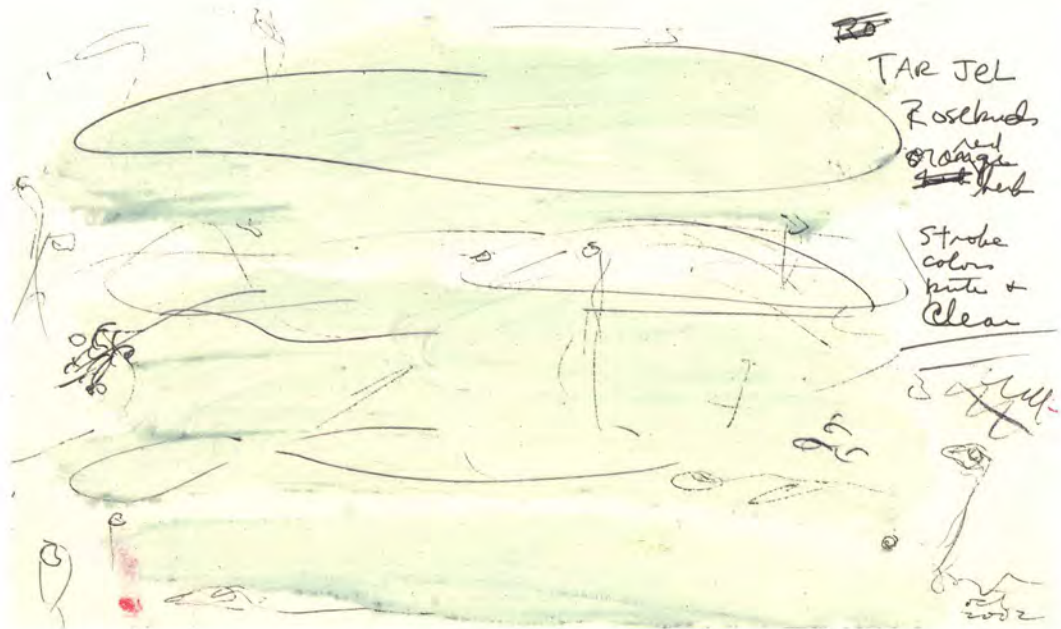


29. Stream of Consciousness, 2002



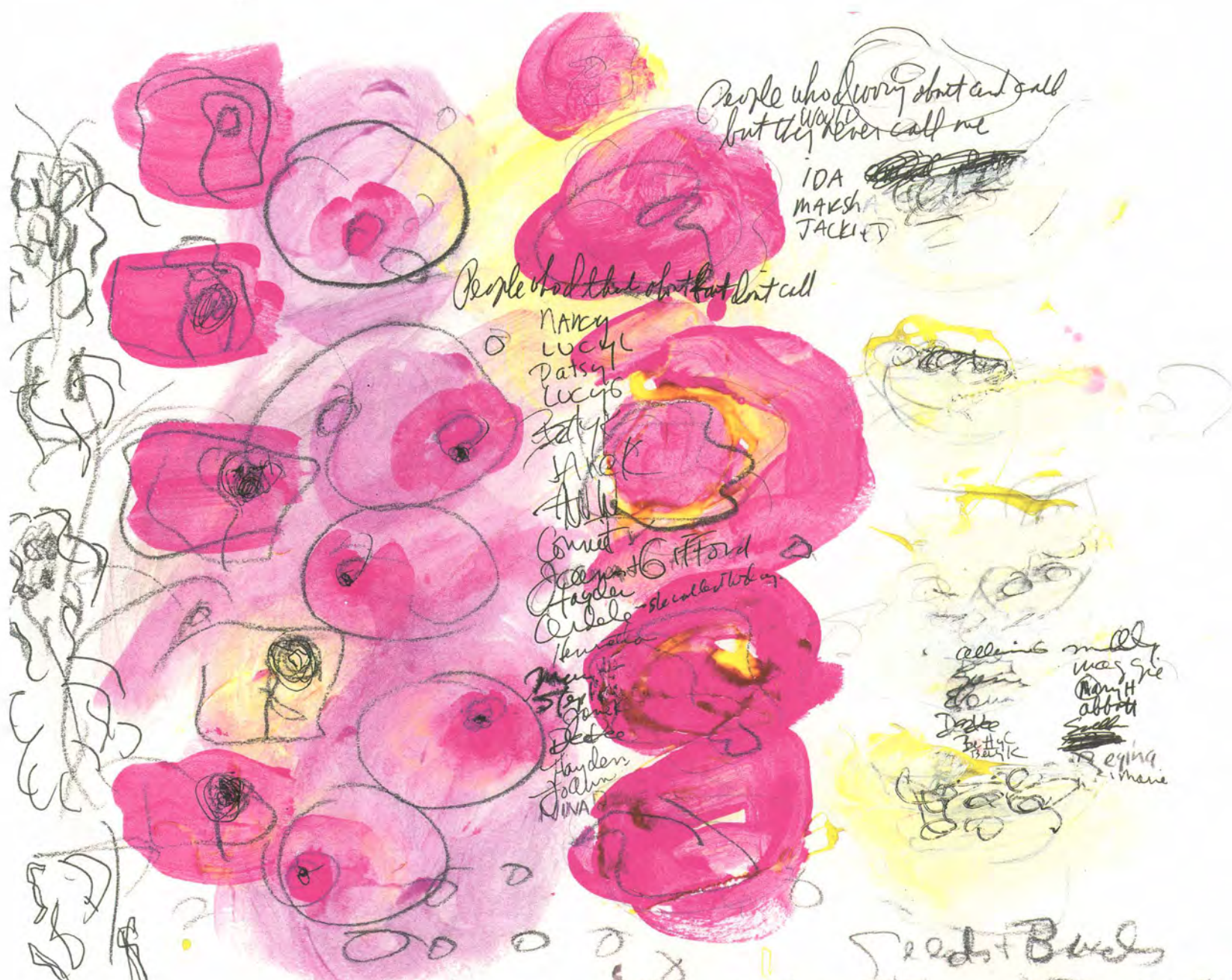


26. Howl Your Requiem, 2002



27. Tar Jel Rosebuds, 2002





People who worry about not call  
but they <sup>would</sup> never call me

IDA  
MARSH  
JACKIE

People who don't call but don't call

NANCY  
LUCY  
PATSY  
LUCY  
JACKIE  
JACKIE  
ALLIE  
CONNET  
JACQUELINE  
HAYDEN  
ARLENE - she called her  
KENNETH  
STEPH  
JANE  
JACKIE  
HAYDEN  
JILLIAN  
NINA

ALLIE  
MILLY  
MAY SIE  
MAY H  
ABOTT  
REGINA  
MAY

Needs + Bush

Saturday Feb 24 2004 "Women Make Lists" #1 Turn out Feb 24









34. *Pink Wreath*, 2004



35. *To Iraq: I'm So Sorry*, 2004





32. I, II, 2004



33. Missing the Ocean, 2004



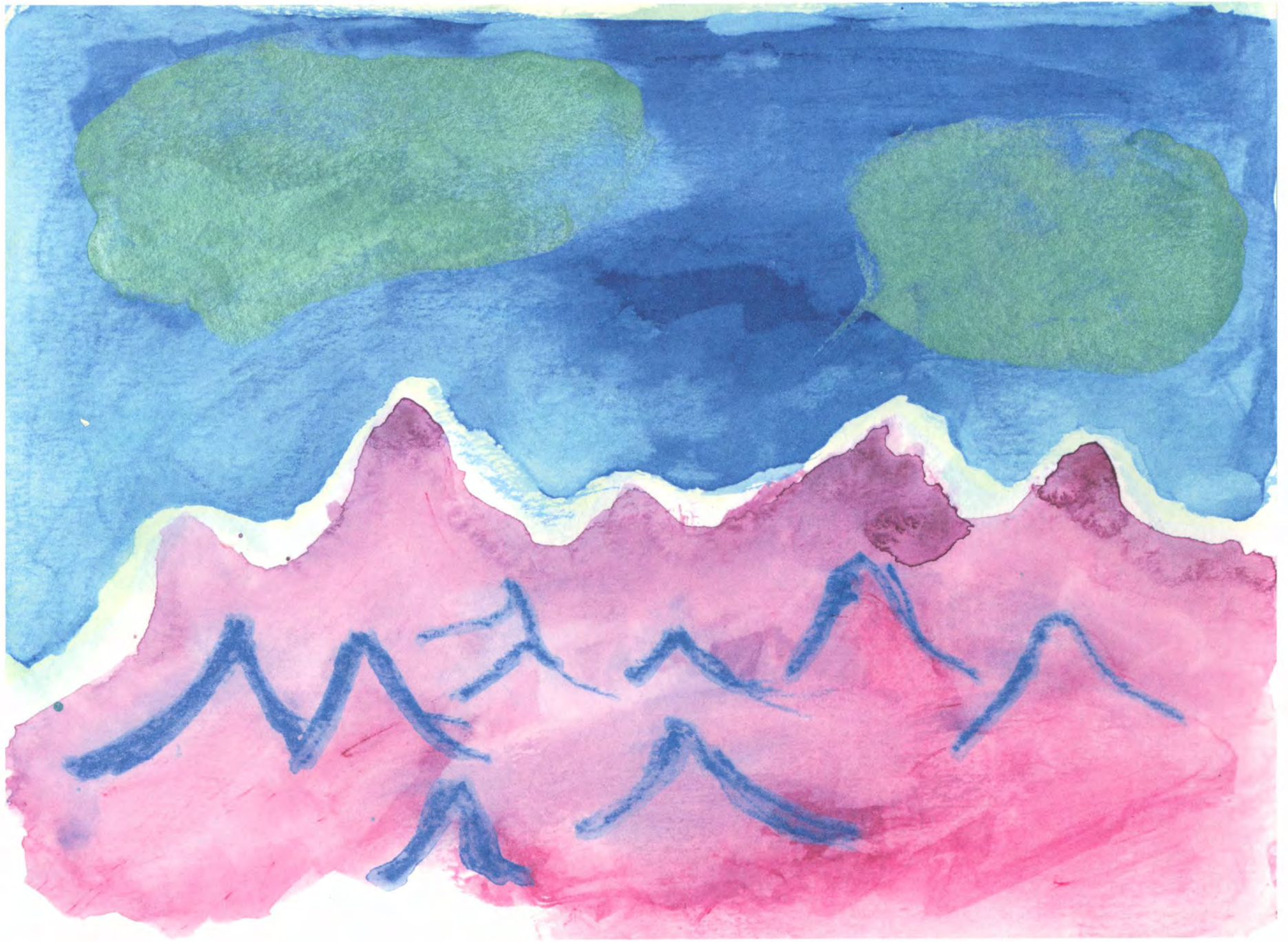






37. Study for Tearfulness, 2004

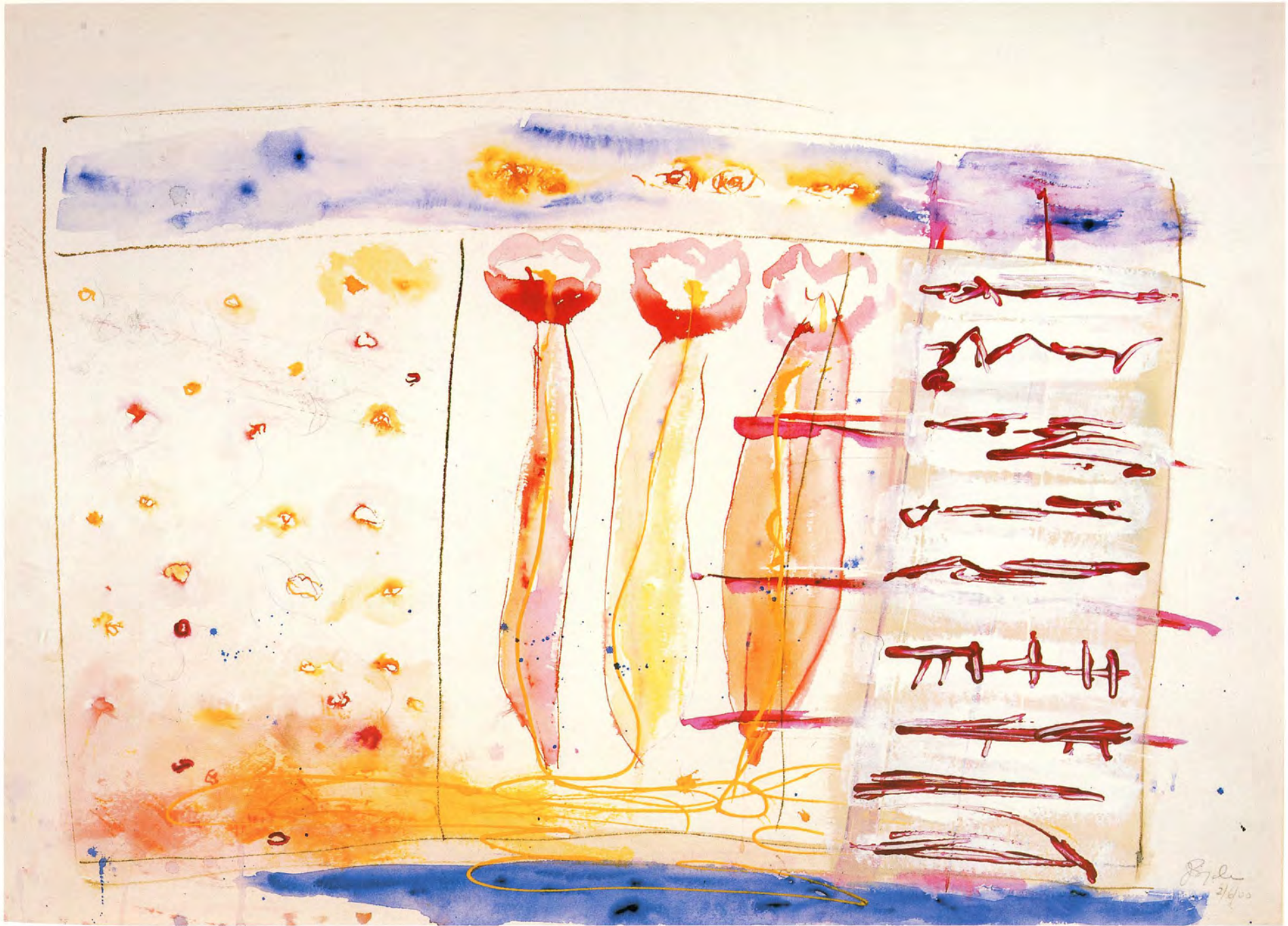












40. *Tongues/Triptych*, 1999





41. *Flowerfield/Tongue*, 1999





42. *Tongues/Pool*, 1999





43. *She is the Earth*, 2000





44. *Deconstructing the Stroke*, 2001





45. *Mamilla Pink*, 2004





46. *Mamilla Pods*, 2004



## Exhibition List

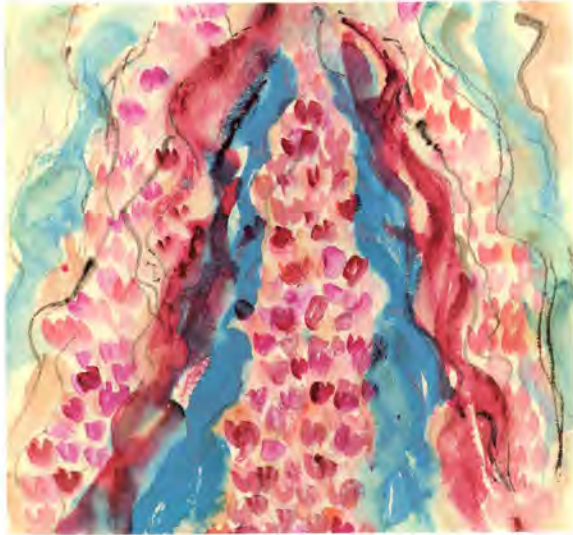


Fig. 7 *Tulips*, 1999

*My Lai Collage*, 1969, collage installation, 32 x 32 inches

*Red, Blue, Orange, Green*, 1969, pastel on lined paper, 8½ x 11 inches

*Shapes of Lines No. 2*, 1969, pastel on lined paper, 8½ x 11 inches

*Shapes of Lines No. 3*, 1969, pastel on lined paper, 8½ x 11 inches

*Shapes of Lines No. 4*, 1969, pastel on lined paper, 8½ x 11 inches

*Shapes of Lines No. 5*, 1969, pastel on lined paper, 8½ x 11 inches

*Shapes of Lines No. 6*, 1969, pastel on lined paper, 8½ x 11 inches

*Shapes of Lines No. 7*, 1969, pastel on lined paper, 8½ x 11 inches

*Shapes of Lines No. 8*, 1969, pastel on lined paper, 8½ x 11 inches

*In Four Voices*, 1970, graphite, acrylic and collage on acetate paper, diptych, left: 14 x 16½; right: 13¼ x 16¼ inches

*The House*, 1970, graphite and pastel on paper, 17¼ x 22¼ inches

*Strokes for Fink*, 1971, watercolor and graphite on paper, 22 x 30 inches

*Stroke Watercolor*, c. 1971, watercolor and graphite on paper, 9 x 12¼ inches

*Disintegrate Down*, 1971, watercolor and graphite on paper, 18 x 24 inches

*Stroke Illusion*, 1973–75, graphite on paper, 22 x 17¼ inches

*Torn White*, 1973, acrylic and collage on paper, 15 x 22 inches

*Tongues/Triptych*, 1999, watercolor and graphite on paper, 22¼ x 30 inches

*Flowerfield/Tongue*, 1999, watercolor, ink and graphite on paper, 22¼ x 30 inches

*Tongues/Pool*, 1999, watercolor on paper, 22¼ x 30 inches

*Tulips*, 1999, watercolor on paper, 10 x 10 inches

*She is the Earth*, 2000, watercolor, crayon and acrylic on paper, 22½ x 30 inches

*Grid Grid*, 2000, watercolor on paper, 10 x 14 inches

*Big Flower*, 2000, watercolor and herbs on paper, 10 x 14 inches

*Flowers on Linen*, 2000, watercolor and acrylic medium on paper, 10 x 14 inches

*Lime Green Circles*, 2000, watercolor on paper, 10 x 14 inches

*Framed Circle*, 2000, watercolor on paper, 10 x 14 inches

*And Always Searching . . .*, 2000, watercolor on paper, 10 x 14 inches



*Deconstructing the Stroke*, 2001, graphite and watercolor on paper, 23¼ x 30½ inches

*Red Landscape*, 2001, watercolor and acrylic on paper, 18 x 24 inches

*Cherries and Eyes*, 2001, watercolor on paper, 10 x 14 inches

*Dream*, 2001, watercolor on paper, 10 x 14 inches

*Big Pink Figure*, 2001, watercolor on paper, 10 x 14 inches

*Omphalos*, 2002, watercolor and ink on paper, 8 x 13 inches

*Howl Your Requiem*, 2002, graphite and ink on paper, 8 x 13 inches

*Tar Jel Rosebuds*, 2002, acrylic and ink on paper, 8 x 13 inches

*Corn Hill, Truro*, 2002, pastel, watercolor and ink on paper, 8 x 13 inches

*Stream of Consciousness*, 2002, acrylic and ink on paper, 8 x 13 inches

*Ikkklas Khouli*, 2002, watercolor, graphite and ink on paper, 8 x 13 inches

*Mamilla Pink*, 2004, watercolor and acrylic on paper, 22¼ x 30 inches

*Mamilla Pods*, 2004, watercolor, acrylic, twigs on paper, 22¼ x 30 inches

*Lacrimae Perantigua: An Intensification of Lacrimae*, 2004, watercolor, acrylic, dried berries on paper, 22¼ x 30 inches

*Blue Drawing*, 2004, acrylic and ink on paper, 14 x 17 inches

*Women Make Lists*, 2004, acrylic, pencil, pen and watercolor on paper, 14 x 17 inches

*I, II*, 2004, acrylic on paper, 14 x 17 inches

*Missing the Ocean*, 2004, acrylic and glitter on paper, 14 x 17 inches

*Pink Wreath*, 2004, acrylic on paper, 14 x 17 inches

*To Iraq: I'm So Sorry*, 2004, acrylic on paper, 14 x 17 inches

*Are They Actually . . .*, 2004, acrylic and glitter on paper, 14 x 17 inches

*The Tears of Women of Ancient Times*, 2004, watercolor and ink on paper, 9 x 12 inches

*Shapes Stacked*, 2004, watercolor, ink and pastel on paper, 9 x 12 inches

*Blue Clouds*, 2004, acrylic on paper, 9 x 12 inches

*Study for Tearfulness*, 2004, acrylic and watercolor on paper, 9 x 12 inches

*Spot Blue*, 2004, acrylic on paper, 9 x 12 inches

*Spot Deep Maroon*, 2004, acrylic on paper, 9 x 12 inches



Fig. 8 *Lacrimae Perantigua: An Intensification of Lacrimae*, 2004



This catalogue is published on the occasion of the exhibition:

*Joan Snyder*

*Work on Paper: 1970s and Recent*

November 11 – December 23, 2004

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The gallery wishes to thank Joan Snyder for so very generously opening herself and her work to this project. We appreciate the time spent on the many various details of this exhibition and accompanying catalogue, both by the artist and by her studio assistants Mira Dancy and Allison Gildersleeve. Thanks is also extended to Jenni Sorkin for an insightful and comprehensive essay.

An Abrams monograph on the work of Joan Snyder will be published in August 2005. It will include 120 color reproductions and essays by Hayden Herrera and Jenni Sorkin. The book will be published in conjunction with a traveling retrospective curated by Regina Coppola of the University Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where the show opens in winter 2006. The retrospective will open in New York at The Jewish Museum in August 2005.

The artist thanks her good friends Marie and Andrew Foley for all things Latin.

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COVER: *Stroke Watercolor*, c. 1971, watercolor and graphite on paper, 9 x 12¼ inches

FRONTISPIECE: *Tongues/Triptych*, 1999, watercolor and graphite on paper, 22¼ x 30 inches (detail)

BACK: *The House*, 1970, graphite and pastel on paper, 17¼ x 22¼ inches (detail)



Reality  
Reflection of reality

Reality of a painting.

Anatomy of a painting  
more not less

