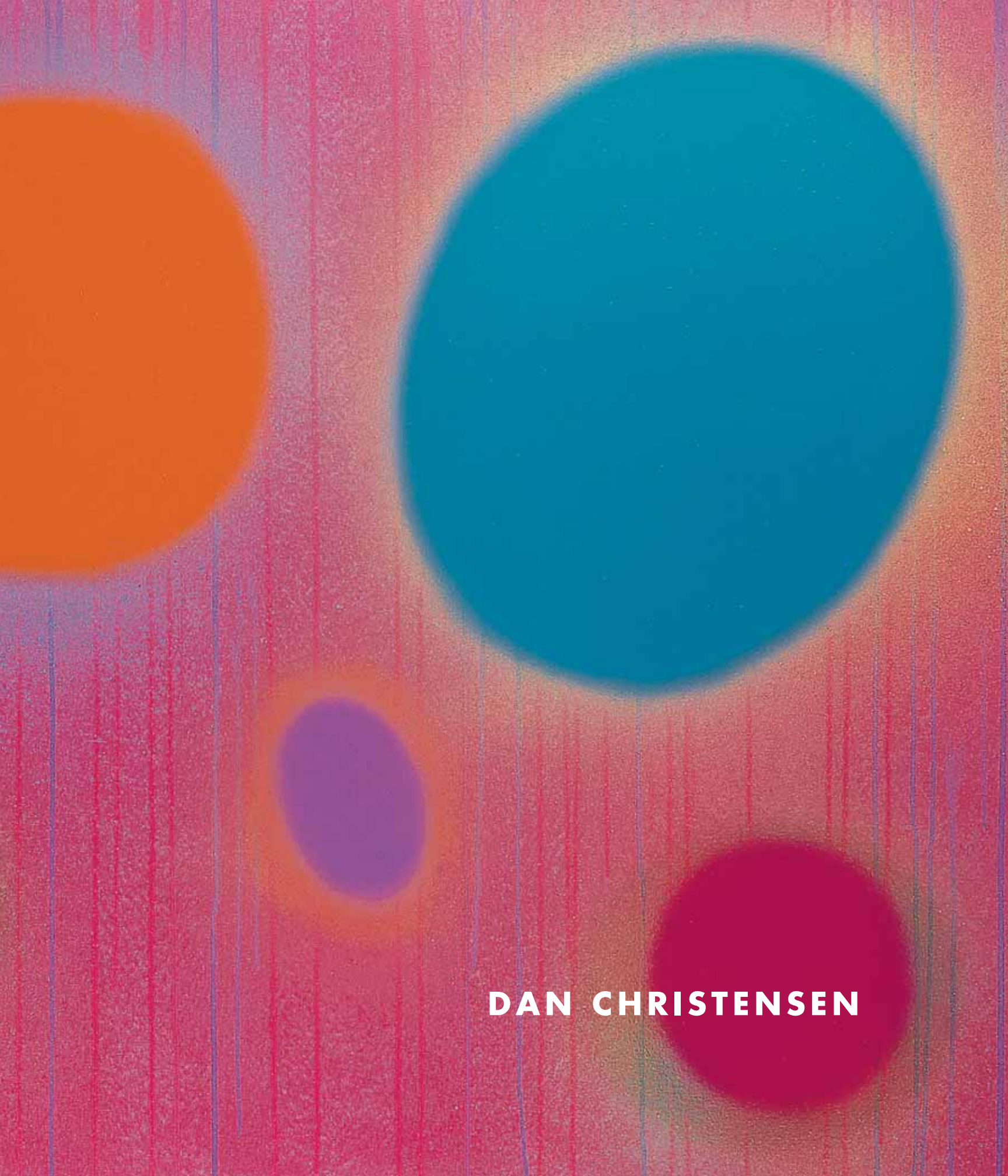


The background is a textured, reddish-pink surface with thin, vertical blue lines. Scattered across the surface are several large, semi-transparent, colorful circles in shades of red, orange, yellow, green, and blue. The text 'SPANIERMAN MODERN' is centered at the bottom in a white, bold, sans-serif font.

SPANIERMAN MODERN



DAN CHRISTENSEN

COVER: 1. **5 OR 6 PM** (DETAIL) 1994 ACRYLIC ON CANVAS 47 × 99 INCHES

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DAN CHRISTENSEN

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OVER THE LAST FORTY YEARS, Dan Christensen has explored the limits, range, and possibilities of paint and pictorial form, pursuing a unique path within the trajectory of American abstract painting. Although his art belongs within the category defined by the critic Clement Greenberg as Color Field or Post-Painterly Abstraction, he has both carried on the legacy of this approach while stepping outside of it, through drawing from a wide variety of Modernist sources, using many idiosyncratic techniques, and employing methods more commonly associated with the action painting techniques of Abstract Expressionism. The result is a distinctive body of work that is original, surprising, and filled with a sense of joy, exuberance, and pleasure in the act of painting.

Created near the beginning of his career, Christensen's spray paintings from the late 1960s and early 1970s are emblematic of a period and scene characterized by exuberant experimentation with materials and processes, when painters were stretching the definition of painting in the direction of sculpture and performance. Much of that work was somewhat short on memorable images, but not Christensen's. The earliest of his paintings in which winding vapor trails of color curl into circles and are arrayed in grid patterns, as in *Times Square* (1967), are a holdover from his prior work, in which he spread gridded dashes across rectangular fields of damped-down color. He went on to loop the sprayed line into canvas-filling columns, as in *Conjugate* (1967)—these have been called “loop paintings”—and,

later, he bent and overlapped them against more saturated fields of color in images that are like much faster premonitions of the curving lines of color that have become the principal syntactical element in Brice Marden's paintings. Christensen produced many of his best spray paintings on a white or off-white ground that was tinted by the overall build-up of the hazy edges of his color bands. The visual organization of these works invoked Minimalism, and their color typified that of Color Field painting, but their gesturalism retained the valorization of the handmade and the artist's fresh take on color in an industrial-strength material grain was something new.

Jules Olitski's heavy veils of sprayed color preceded Christensen's paintings by a couple of years, but Christensen focused the spray down to its characteristically sooty line. It was Jackson Pollock, of course, who first contrived a methodology of letting paint fly from the hand through the end of the brush. For Pollock this leap of material across space was a natural, if painful and halting, evolution of the Surrealist automatism he had practiced for several years. Christensen's air-compressed line, on the other hand, was a garage brainstorm: as if attaching a booster rocket to Pollock's gesture, from which multicolored trails blazed, Christensen produced works that appeared as if created from the residue from a polychrome blowtorch wielded by a demonic handwriting teacher. Christensen's own indebtedness to, and affinity for, both Surrealist automatism and totemism would only be revealed later, but were present in these works.



2. **CHATTANOOGA NIGHT** 1970 ENAMEL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS 6 × 82 INCHES

The only near contemporary equivalents in abstraction were the somewhat earlier *Canto Indento* paintings created by Billy Al Bengston in Los Angeles, consisting of spray painted chevrons on dented and bent metal. It is also worth remembering that Christensen was wielding his spray gun only a short time before Gordon Matta Clark started carving architecture with his chainsaw.

Some painters develop a practiced eye for the cultural field they are sending their work into and setting it against. The conception of their work as a coherent body, or “set,” helps consolidate it as a figure against this cultural ground. Thus, almost every abstract painter has worked modularly, with a group of elements that evolve gradually through repetition and reconfiguration. Christensen works this way with an extremely important, and obvious, exception: he makes huge iconographic leaps, or breaks, between sets. About 1970 he began to desire the plane more than the line and let go of what he had established only a few years before in his mid-twenties, as a singular and significant abstract painter. His resulting geometric paintings have been called “plaids,” a term that was also applied to Kenneth Noland’s series of 1971–74 that displayed a similar, though more complicated iconography (they really *were* plaids). Christensen’s rectilinear planes of color in post and lintel configurations of perpendicular angles are more iconic, stripped down in such a way that what is readable as the field behind the figured segmented planes is more nearly equal to those planes in area and surface treatment.

Pictorial space is flattened a bit more even as the compositions themselves are more traditionally asymmetrical, closer to Piet Mondrian’s “dynamic equilibrium” than the near Minimalist regularity of Color Field compositions. Christensen’s colors in these paintings feel both earthier and less predictable than the chromatic range in contemporaneous Color Field painting. Their earthier light could find a home in early twentieth-century American abstraction and in that of European artists who were part of the Société Anonyme. Part of the difference in color can be explained by his use of oil-based enamel paints, sometimes used in conjunction with acrylics, rather than acrylic studio paints. The enamels have a slightly warmer cast. These geometric paintings remain linked to Color Field painting chiefly through the means and scale of their production. Christensen made them on the floor of his studio with rollers and jars and buckets of pre-mixed color. Though some of these paintings are fairly modest in size, they could be much bigger than a standard easel painting, and the narrow formats in many of them bridge the figural rectangle of Barnett Newman’s skinnier paintings with the shaped canvases of the Post-minimalists, such as Ron Gorchov, David Novros, Elizabeth Murray, and Mary Heilmann.

By this point, having left the spray paintings behind (temporarily, as it turns out), Christensen had embarked on a restless series of procedural shifts involving changes of tools and consistencies of paint. Each shift in procedure was to produce a distinct

imagery and, again, the comparison with Color Field painting is instructive. Christensen's all-over layering produced by knife and squeegee that succeeded his geometric paintings recalls similar techniques practiced by Olitski at the same time. Both painters (and others, including Kenneth Noland and Walter Darby Bannard) were exploiting new acrylic gels to create opulent color-over-color effects and textural directionalities that flouted the prevailing monochromes and literalized the objecthood of Minimalism. Christensen's paint-scraping gestures seem more agitated than those of his somewhat older counterparts, as though he was reveling in the athleticism of what he was doing. The fast drying of the acrylic provided its own urgency. Hotter colors smolder underneath a film of what seems like ice in the off-white paintings such as *Sandu* (1972), and like a dirty windowpane in the paintings where the top layer is a translucent near-black, as in *Sleepy Hollow* (1974). These scraped paintings are one signal of the end of "Post-Painterly Abstraction," as Greenberg termed the break between Color Field painting and Abstract Expressionism. Obviously, Christensen's and Olitski's paintings are utterly painterly, to the point of recalling the chromatic and material weathers of J. M. W. Turner's late seascapes, along with the diagonals and crescents of Baroque painting. Christensen's paintings are also at the apogee of the achievements of this "late" style Post-Painterly Abstraction. They have aged as well as Olitski's paintings from the same period and prompt a reconsideration of the vitality of late Color Field painting as a whole.

In the mid- to late 1970s Christensen's paintings took a curious and marvelous turn away from the unitary field altogether. If he had already begun a spatial re-separation of color with the scraped paintings, those paintings were still unified in their all-over tactile impact. However, by the late seventies Christensen instigated a fresh break between field and mark, a break that is also a deep return, for it shoots past the unified structures of Color Field Painting to the "action" mark of Abstract Expressionism, which was concurrent with a

formative period for the artist, but one in which he was then too young to participate. Paintings from 1979 to 1981 depict squarish trapezoids of color nested inside ragged dark lines, which angle off a floating vertical axis in configurations that possess the post and lintel memory of the artist's geometric paintings from the beginning of the seventies. Other linear elements float within the gravitational field of the anchoring vertical on its flip side. The ground in these paintings is a deep flat color that shifts from canvas to canvas, and the drawing of shifting colors on top is in a fluid splatter that recalls Pollock's attack combined with the floating geometries of Robert Motherwell's *Open* series (mid-1960s) in a hybrid of spontaneity and premeditation. The axis line proves to be important as it provides an initiating structure in much of the apparently spontaneous drawing with paint that Christensen has engaged in over the ensuing quarter century.

There is a recombinant sense to Christensen's painterly operations beginning in the 1980s. He is painter confident in his tools and materials, with a deep library of experience as to what works and what does not. His paintings from the mid-1980s narrow and combine the scraping techniques of *Sandu* with "automatic drawing" in an axial configuration that can be along a diagonal, as in *New Harmony* (1984); in a vertical, as in the deep red and blue *Mayan Mist* (1986); or in a horizontal, such as the one positioned at the top of the yolky yellow *Love Attic* (1986). By this time Christensen had once again picked up the airbrush to add a truly graffiti-like jolt to the color field surface. The wonderful complication of figure/ground in these paintings can be described as follows: where the ground color was beneath the surface drawing in the previous paintings (and even in the first spray paintings), it now exists *on top* of the color revealed by most of the mark, making actions, which are scored down to a prior color optically revealed now as lines against the top color. Although the spray lines are of an obviously shallower surface than the pudding thickness of the scored field, they are

themselves; nevertheless, they are observably on top yet again. A painting such as *Love Attic* sandwiches the pudding-thick field between two sets of lines (figures), those scored down below and those sprayed on top. The scores are of one consistent color, while the color of each sprayed line is different. There is a confetti, party-like atmosphere to these paintings that, along with their opulent physicality, might delay the reading of their Surrealist animism, wherein each mark has the character of a flying or coiling living thing.

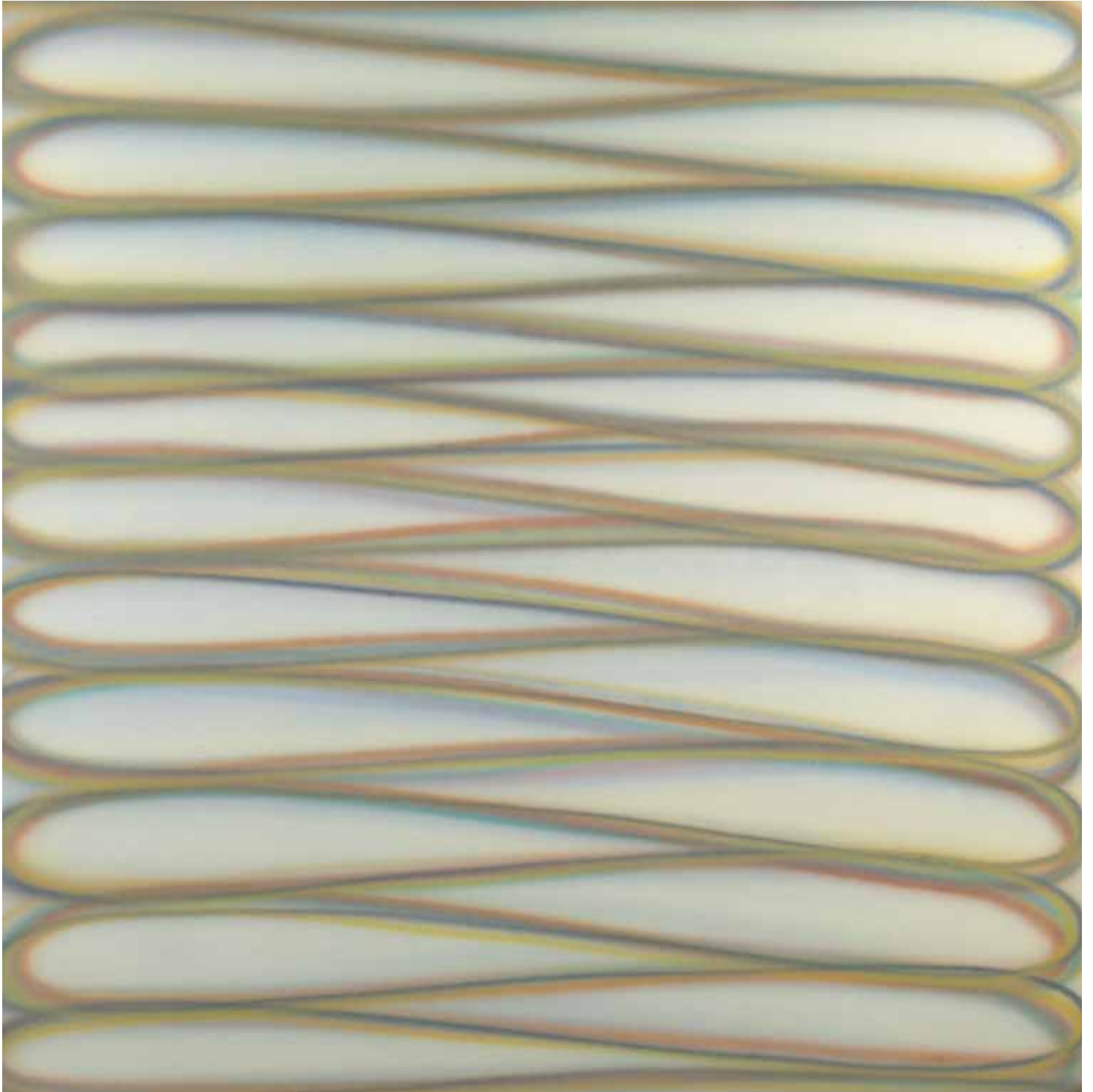
Christensen was still picking up new tools in the late 1980s. In the vertical canvas, *Line Bind* (1987), he combed through the blue surface down to the warm yellow underneath with a rake-like tool. The more complicated *Past Time* (1988) captures a moment when he put all his wares on display in a painting that nevertheless asserts an iconic straight-forwardness. There is the rake, the scraping knife, and the spray nozzle, all functioning, but every distinguishing mark is also at the service of the compositional whole and every color shift is subtle and proportionate. The triangular center form in *Past Time*, like the smaller floating rectangular blocks of *Mayan Mist* and *Love Attic*, speak of a yearning for a visual stopper, the emblematic image of the Abstract Expressionists that becomes an indelible marker of “self.” For Christensen, these first emblems became structural pivot points in larger compositions, but by the late 1980s he would fill an entire canvas with a symbolic circle, with the soft focus boundaries that result from the return of the spray gun as the overall vehicle for paint delivery.

The circle paintings are mesmerizing mandalas of color and line, where each band of color is wide enough to possess its own soft-edged interiority. The overall effect is a dazzling visual throb, verging on the psychedelic, just one of the feelings invoked by the title *Beyond the Summer of Love* (1988).

By the early nineties, Christensen’s woozy orbs of color were separating into iconically aligned stacks, as in *Conquistador* (1993), and then proliferating and morphing into ovals, a shape which, combined with surrounding

light halos of chromatic overtones, imbue the flat colors with an startling sense of volume. In the late 1990s, Christensen relegated the spray gun to being one tool among many, but he was still using it to provide the centering visual “targets” in the center of a brushy “X,” as in *Sleeper* (1998) and *Vanilla Blue* (1998).

In the first few years of the new millennium Christensen returned to a drizzle mark against a flat field of color, in the manner of his mid-eighties paintings. In a painting such as the gorgeous *Blue Sage* (2003), however, his line is more languorous and elastic, as it wanders and rises from its base like a spreading plant, while keeping the speed of a Zen calligraphic master. There is definitely an eastward bent in much of Christensen’s work, since the circle paintings. His work is also reminiscent of the characteristically American pragmatic optimism in David Smith’s automatic drawing in his sculpture and drawings. Here is the larger point to be made about Christensen’s remarkable journey: his iconographic restlessness is at the service of ever-greater degrees of assimilation of his cultural reach. He is not an artist pursuing a strain of logical elaboration, but one who moves with his enthusiasms among color (above all), Greenbergian aesthetics, paint materiality, Abstract Expressionism, Asian art, and the culture of painting itself. When we are able to look back on a career of a painter whose work has gone through so many shifts in image and technique and find that it all makes an engaging sense, then we are in the presence of a distinct and important sensibility, and someone who makes painting look like the fun that is.



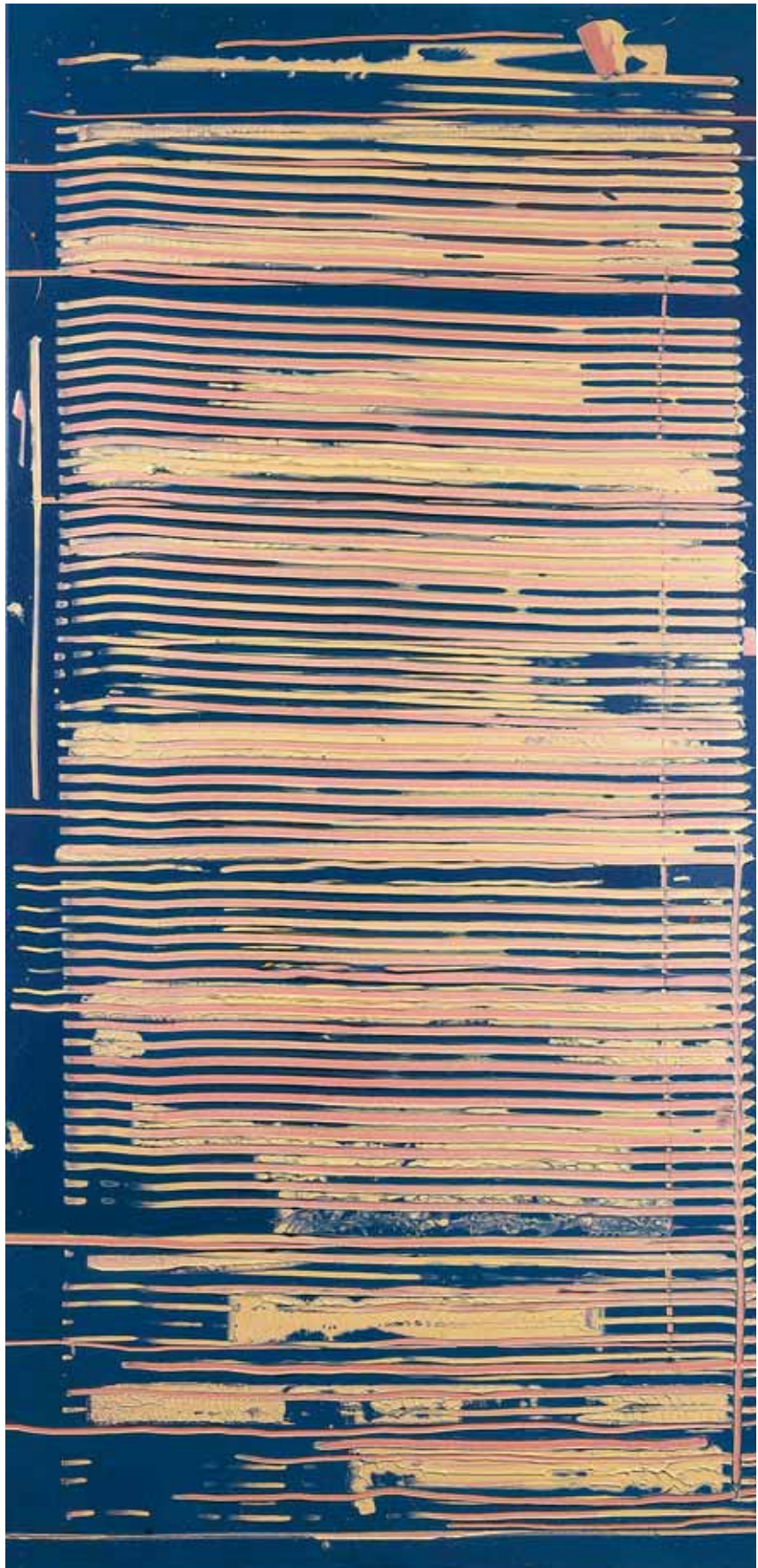




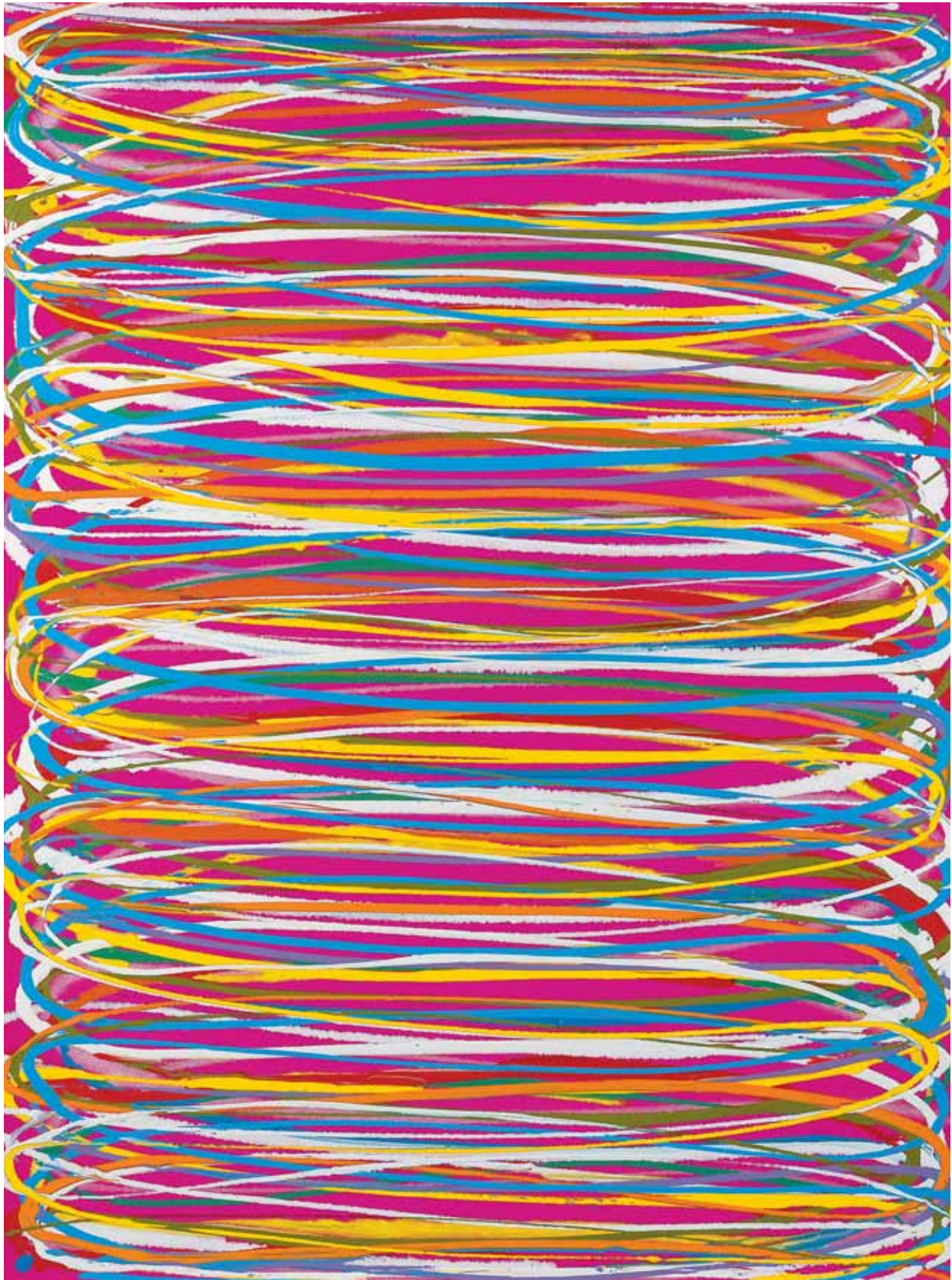


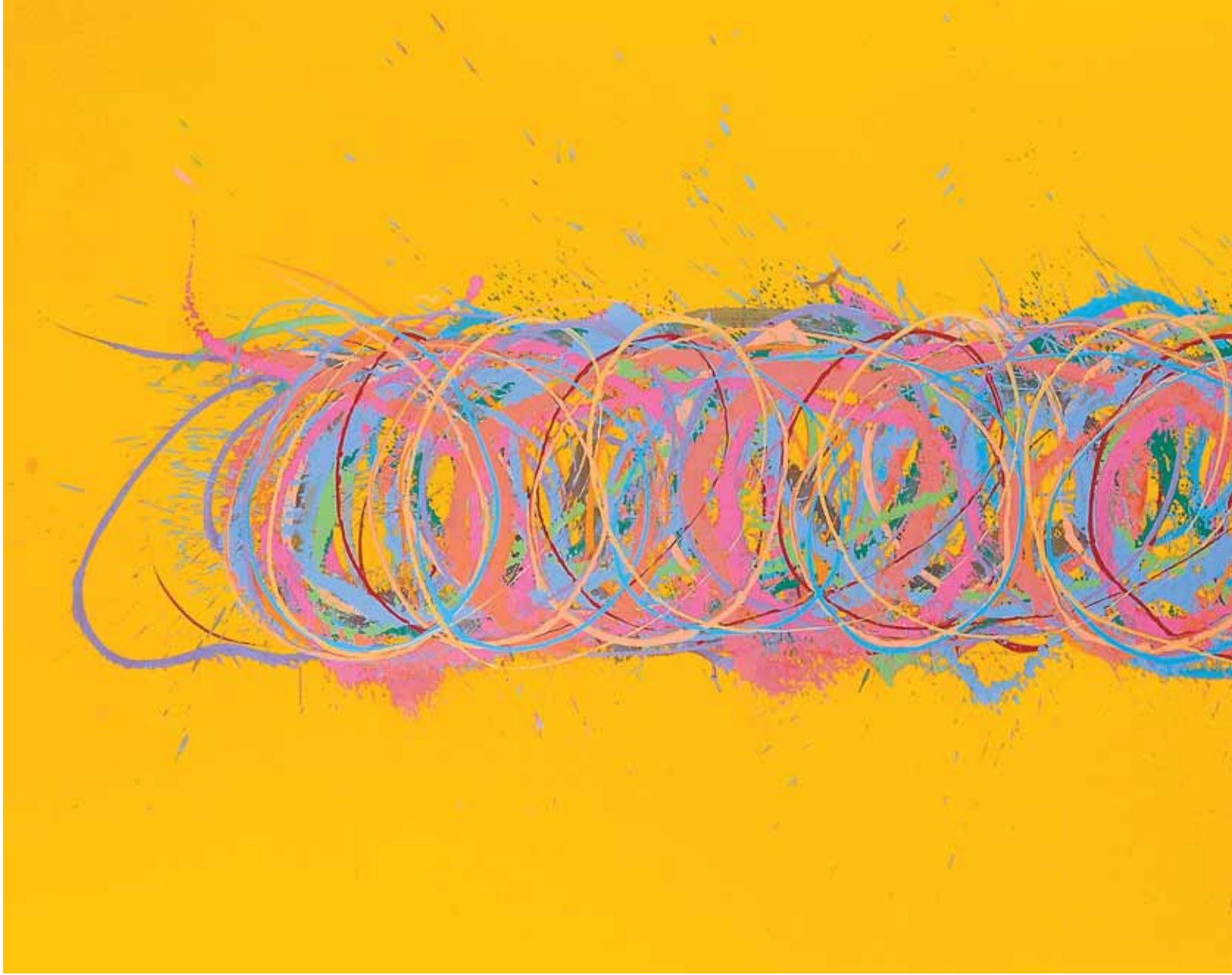




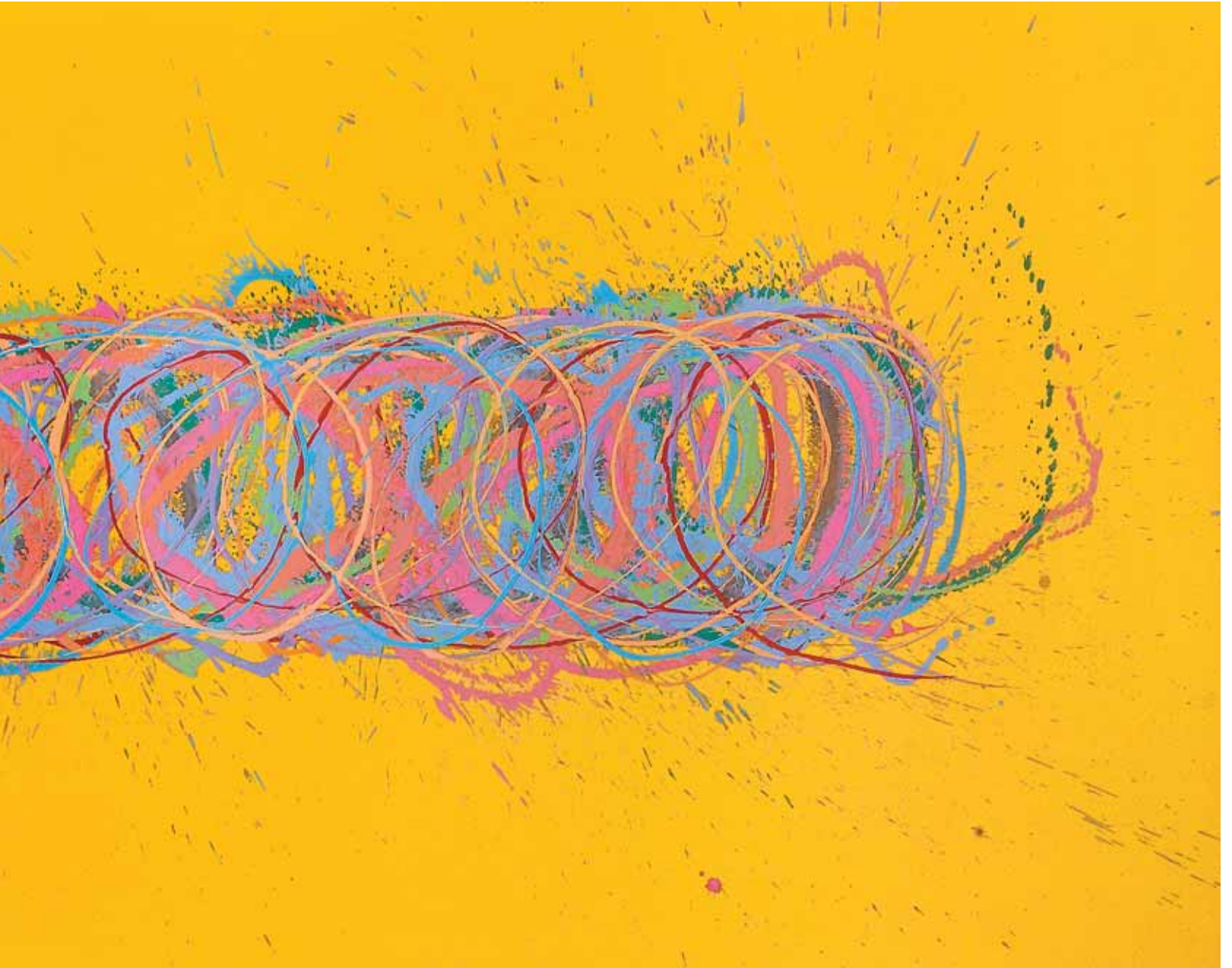








12. **YELLATHRILLA** 2006 ACRYLIC ON CANVAS 36 × 90 INCHES



DAN CHRISTENSEN

1942, born Cozad, Nebraska
1964, received B.F.A., Kansas City Art
Institute; moved to New York City
Currently resides in East Hampton, New York

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

Edmonton Art Gallery, Alberta, Canada, 1973.
Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita
State University, Kansas, 1984.
Butler Institute of American Art,
Youngstown, Ohio, *Dan Christensen:
A Forty Year Survey*, 2001–2.
Parrish Museum of Art, Southampton, New
York, *Selections From a Retrospective*, 2002–3.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York, *Annual*, 1967.
Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York, *Recent Acquisitions*, 1968.
Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York, *Annual*, 1969.
Corcoran Gallery of Art, *Biennial*,
Washington, D.C., 1969.
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum,
New York, *Theodoran Award Group*, 1969.
St. Louis Museum of Fine Arts, Washington
University, Missouri (now the Mildred Lane
Kemper Art Museum), *Here and Now*, 1969.
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York,
Color and Field 1890–1970 (also shown at
the Dayton Art Institute, Ohio, and at the
Cleveland Museum, Ohio), 1970–71.
Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York, *The Structure of Color*, 1971.
Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York, *Lyrical Abstraction*, 1971.
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York,
Six Painters (also shown at the Baltimore
Museum of Art and at the Milwaukee Art
Center), 1971–72.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, *Abstract Painting
in the 70s*, 1972.

Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York, *Annual*, 1972.

Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York, *Biennial*, 1973.

Moore College of Art, Philadelphia,
Paintings, 1973.

Museo Bellas Artes, Caracas, Venezuela,
El lenguaje del Color, 1975.

The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary
Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut, *Collector's
Choice*, 1977.

Edmonton Art Gallery, Alberta, Canada,
New Abstract Art, 1977.

University of Nebraska, Omaha, *Expressionism
in the 70s*, 1978.

Brooks Memorial Art Gallery, Memphis,
*American Masters of the Sixties and
Seventies*, 1978.

Museum of Modern Art, New York, *New Work
on Paper I* (also shown at the Museum of Fine
Arts, Houston, and at the La Jolla Museum of
Contemporary Art, California), 1981.

Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of
Nebraska, Lincoln, *Kansas City*, 1981.

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, *Miro in
America*, 1982.

Butler Institute of American Art,
Youngstown, Ohio, *46th Annual
National Midyear Show*, 1982.

Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City,
Missouri, 1985.

Spencer Museum, Lawrence, Kansas, *Pop Op
Plus*, 1985.

Museum of Modern Art, New York, *Philip
Johnson: Selected Gifts*, 1985.

Guild Hall, East Hampton, New York, *Artists of
the Region Invitational*, 1986.

Portland Art Museum, Oregon, *Clement
Greenberg: A Critic's Collection*, 2000.

Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art,
Kansas City, Missouri, *Big Paintings*, 2002.

Edmonton Art Gallery, Alberta, Canada,
*Edmonton Contemporary Artists Tenth
Anniversary Exhibition*, 2002.

- Neuesmuseum, Nürnberg, Germany, *Einfach Kunst*, 2002.
- Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, *Big Canvas—Paintings from the Permanent Collection*, 2003.
- Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York, *Three East End Artists*, 2003.
- Weatherspoon Art Museum Greensboro, North Carolina, *High Times Hard Times: New York Painting 1967–1975*, 2006.
- SELECTED REFERENCES**
- Max Kozloff, “Light as Surface: Ralph Humphrey and Dan Christensen,” *Artforum* (February 1968), 26–30.
- Ann Ray Martin and Howard Junker, “The New Art: It’s Way, Way Out,” *Newsweek* 29 (July 1968), 56–63.
- Barbara Rose, “Gallery without Walls,” *Art in America* (March–April 1968), 71.
- Emily Wasserman, “Corcoran Biennial,” *Artforum* (April 1969), 71–74.
- “To See, To Feel, Painting—Dervish Loops,” *Time Magazine* (May 30, 1969), 64.
- Grace Glueck, “Like a Beginning,” *Art in America* (May–June 1969), 116–19.
- “Art in New York, Midtown, Dan Christensen,” *Time Magazine* (June 6, 1969), 2.
- John Gruen, “The Whoosh in the Work,” *New York Magazine* (June 9, 1969), 57.
- Emily Wasserman, “New York,” *Artforum* (Summer 1969), 61–62.
- Douglas M. Davis, “This Is the Loose-Paint Generation,” *National Observer* (August 4, 1969), 20.
- Scott Burton, “Dan Christensen,” *Art News* (September 1969), 16.
- Larry Aldrich, “Young Lyrical Painters,” *Art in America* (November–December 1969), 104–13.
- Carter Ratcliff, “The New Informalists,” *Art News* (February 1970), 46–50.
- Charlotte Curtis, “When Ethel Scull Redecorates, it is Art News,” *New York Times*, February 27, 1970, 33.
- Douglas Davis, “The New Color Painters,” *Newsweek* (May 4, 1970), 84–85.
- Peter Plagens, *Artforum* (May 1970), 82–83.
- Willis Domingo, “Color Abstractionism: A Survey of Recent American Paintings,” *Arts Magazine* (December 1970), 39.
- Grace Glueck, “A Happy New Year?” *Art in America* (January–February 1971), 26–27.
- Robert Pincus-Witten, “New York,” *Artforum* (April 1971), 75.
- Edward B. Henning, “Color & Field,” *Art International* (May 1971), 46–50.
- Carter Ratcliff, “New York Letter: Spring, Part III,” *Art International* (Summer 1971), 95–99, 105.
- Jeanne Siegel, “Around Barnett Newman,” *Art News* (October 1971), 42–43.
- Marcia Tucker, *The Structure of Color* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1971).
- James N. Wood, *Six Painters* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Albright-Knox Art Gallery), 1971.
- Hilton Kramer, *New York Times*, October 28 1972, 23.
- Jeanne Siegel, *Art News* (November 1972), 79.
- Kenworth Moffett, *Abstract Painting of the 70s* (Boston, Mass.: Museum of Fine Arts, 1972).
- James K. Monte, *Six New York Artists: Paintings* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Moore College of Art, 1973).
- Karen Wilkin, “Dan Christensen: Recent Paintings,” *Art International* (Summer 1974), 57.
- Ingeborg Hoesterey, “Ausstellung,” *Art International* (Summer 1976), 31–32.
- Donald Doe, *Expressionism in the Seventies* (Omaha, Nebr.: University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1978).
- Grace Glueck, “Dan Christensen,” *New York Times*, March 16, 1979, 24.
- John Ashbery, “Out of Left Field,” *New York Magazine* (April 2, 1979), 68.
- Donald Doe, *Dan Christensen: Paintings from the 70s* (Omaha, Nebr.: University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1980).
- John Elderfield, *New Work on Paper* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1981).

- Hilton Kramer, "Art: Show of New Works Sets Example at Modern," *New York Times*, February 13, 1981, 61.
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- Kay Larson, "Drawing on Strength," *New York Magazine* (March 9, 1981), 58–61.
- John Ashbery, "Pleasures of Paperwork," *Newsweek* (March 16, 1981), 93–94.
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- Valentin Tatransky, "Dan Christensen," *Arts Magazine* (May 1982), 11.
- Phyllis Braff, "11 East End Painters Illustrate Bold New Trends," *New York Times*, September 14, 1986, A1.
- Dan Cameron, "Before the Field: Paintings from the 60s, at the Daniel Newburgh Gallery," *Flash Art* 152 (May–June 1990).
- Phyllis Braff, "Social and Political Situations," *New York Times*, *Long Island Weekly* [supplement] June, 17, 1991, 17.
- Roberta Smith, "A Color Field Painter From the 60s to Now," *New York Times*, August 2, 1991, C23.
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- Lee Rosenbaum, "If It's Not Popular, That's Just Too Bad," *New York Times*, March 7, 1993, H, 33–34.
- Holland Cotter, "Art in Review—'1969: A Year Revisited,'" *New York Times*, July 15, 1994, C23.
- Holland Cotter, "Art in Review," *New York Times*, July 22, 1994, C24.
- Hearne Pardee, "Dan Christensen," *Art News* 94 (January 1995), 165–66.
- Karen Wilkin, "At The Galleries," *Partisan Review* (Fall 1999), 640–52.
- Helen A. Harrison, "Landscapes of Fantasy, and a Devotion to Color," *New York Times*, December 8, 2002, L121.
- Katherine B. Crum, *Dan Christensen—Reflections on a Retrospective* (Southampton, N.Y.: Parrish Art Museum 2002).

AWARDS

- 1992 Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant
 1986 Gottlieb Foundation Grant
 1969 Guggenheim Fellowship Theodoran Award
 1968 National Endowment Grant

MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

- The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio
 Eversen Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York
 Albrecht Art Gallery, St. Joseph, Missouri
 Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York
 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
 Art Institute of Chicago
 Dayton Art Institute, Ohio
 Denver Museum of Art
 Edmonton Art Gallery, Alberta, Canada
 Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco
 Greenville County Museum of Art, South Carolina
 Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
 High Museum, Atlanta, Georgia
 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.
 Indianapolis Museum of Art
 Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Missouri
 Ludwig Collection in the Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne, Germany
 Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
 Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, Florida
 Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
 Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas
 Museum of Modern Art, New York
 Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, Missouri
 Robert Rowan Collection, Pasadena, California
 St. Louis Art Museum, Missouri
 Seattle Art Museum, Washington
 Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln
 Toledo Museum, Ohio
 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

