



Haiku (1300), 2000, mold stain and oil on canvas, 60 x 60

HAIKU / INNUENDO

JANUARY 28 - MAY 27, 2001

Dialogue Between Artist and Curator:

Creighton Michael and **Judy Collischan**

JC: There have been several continuous threads running through your work, whether it be painting, sculpture or drawing. For you, what are these unifying factors?

CM: In both painting and sculpture, I've been interested in line, the process of drawing and expansion of basic units. The paintings are three-dimensional in the sense of a layering process. I move from the specific to the general—a reversal of the traditional means of working with an overall field and then adding details at the end. The paintings allude to a sculptural type of space. In fact, my sculpture was really drawing in space with steel or wood. In a funny way, the current works are constructed paintings.

JC: Was there a linear development to the chronology of your work in these various formats?

CM: Not exactly. Originally, I was a painter. In effect, I went from painting to sculpture by way of drawing. While continuing to make sculpture, I started painting again in 1990. At first, I didn't know what to paint. Painting did not evolve in the same way as my sculpture and drawing. It took me a couple of years of experimentation. Physically, I was not accustomed to a traditional painting format. I wanted my painting to have a unique identity, but to be related to the sculpture and drawing.

Eventually, the major influence was a pond we had outside an 18th century house in Croton, New York. This pond had a profound effect on me. It was another world—a substantial oval, but also a void—a world that could be seen but not visited. I watched schools of minnows, leaves floating on the surface, aquatic plants—duckweed, and leaves frozen in layers of ice. To me it suggested a relationship between reductive geometric form and the structures of nature. I remembered Yves Tanguy's ink drawings, his emphasis on the mark—his marks and shapes were often one and the same.

JC: Some of your work has involved organic matter and processes. Especially in the 1960s, there was an emphasis on diverse procedures and mundane media. Certainly, Dada lurked behind the unorthodoxy of artists like Walter de Maria, Robert Smithson and Hans Haacke. What or who activated your interest in unconventional methods and materials?

CM: I guess I was in high school when I saw an exhibition, a traveling show that came to Nashville. A work in this show had drawing done around mold—a kind of interplay with it. For years I thought the artist was Ivan Albright, but in doing some research, I couldn't find a reference to a piece like this one by him. I don't know who did this drawing, but that's where I got the idea. In the early '70s, I played around with mold and canvas. I even worked with blood, cheese, other substances that could grow mold cultures. Then I went on to other things. I became aware of Lee Bontecou's work that inspired a whole series of sculpture in the '80s. For me, she was a bridge between painting and sculpture, and I saw a parallel with the interplay of three and two dimensions in my work.

In the mid-'90s, I tried to have more interaction with nature in my work. I wanted to use some random aspect of nature, a feature that I had no control over. I even tried to get mice to eat paper. I soaked the paper in sugar water, but the problem with the mice was that they only ate the edges. I tried putting the same sugar water on canvas, and got this incredible bloom. I thought, "now what am I going to do with this?"



Haiku (1000), 2000, mold stain and oil on canvas, 60 x 60

JC: In your work, the process has generally been quite complex and rather fragile. Even in the mid-'80s, when you constructed sculpture, there was a sense of a step-by-step procedure that is even more prominent in the ongoing *Haiku* series. Could you describe the process involved in their creation?

CM: For the *Haiku* series, raw canvas is soaked, rolled around stretchers, wrapped in plastic, and put in a shed outside my home. Then it "cooks." It can only be done in the summer. After six weeks or so, there's enough activity that I can do something with it.

The stretchers are old one-by-twos left over from my work in sculpture. Back in the '80s, I made what I call "spider crates" that were open structures to hold sculpture for shipping. I wrap the canvas

around pieces of this wood. When it comes off, it goes into the washing machine where the mold is arrested and becomes mold stain.

These canvases are torn and pieced together so that the configuration takes on a random structure. The pieces are stitched from behind with beeswax thread, then the whole canvas is sealed in Rhoplex. Because of the nature of the Rhoplex, some areas become satin, some flat, so that you have this atmospheric play that starts to happen.

The *Haiku* paintings start with an accidental framework with a variety of options. At a point, I go back in with black paint and mingle my marks with the mold stain. I try to emphasize the natural structure and to create a situation where it's hard to tell which is nature's hand and which is mine. This ongoing series of work represents a marriage of natural and artificial, of casual and calculated form.



Haiku (1200), 2000, mold stain and oil on canvas, 60 x 60

JC: Serial emphasis is a modernist phenomenon that denies the historical "masterpiece" concept. One wonders at the reasons behind this change—psychological and cultural. Is the contemporary artist fearful of the finality and the ultimate challenge of a masterwork? Does a masterpiece connote years of work that is impractical in our world of instant communications and gratifications? What importance does working in a series hold for you?

CM: I work in series to take an idea and make it move through time. In that process, something happens to get me to go a new way. All of my images, no matter what the media, have been process-driven. There is a taking of an idea through time. It is an idea with permutations. At the same time, I am changing with the work; it's changing and it is changing me. A dialogue ensues.

JC: The mid-'90s was an important period for you in terms of turning your attention more to ideas in painting.

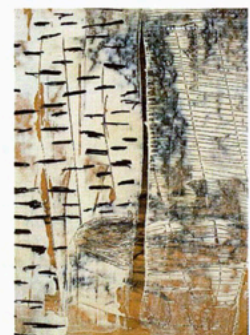
CM: The *Haiku* paintings were started in about 1996 and have been ongoing. The year before, I started the *Dust* paintings while continuing to make sculpture and drawings. These paintings were the beginning of the marking activity with paint and brush. The word "dust" became a metaphor for me, representing a basic unit—cosmic dust, return to dust, etc. I wanted to reduce painting to a basic unit—the mark. In all my work, I was working with reductive processes. At the same time as the *Dust* paintings that were about meticulous marks, I did a drawing series, that dealt with gesture. In a way, these works, titled *Narratives*, were a relief from the more systematic *Dust* works. In the fall of 1997, I started the first of the *Notation* series done on five-foot square canvases. Whereas the *Dust* paintings which were diptychs, had space in between the marks in the form of cloud-like shapes, the *Notations* covered the entire space in white marks on a dark field. Basically, I was developing a marking vocabulary.



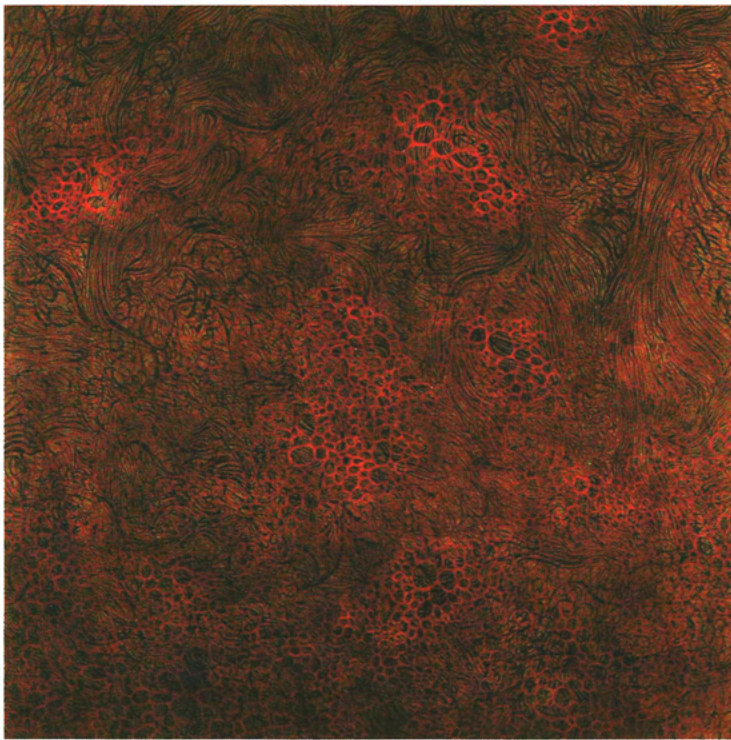
Notation, (1998), 1998
60x 60



Dust (198), 1998, 30 x 60



Narrative (496)
(detail), 1996



Innuendo (300), 2000, oil on canvas 60 x 60

JC: At this point, then, you were absorbed with monochromatic, minimalistic associations of black and white.

CM: In the next series of *Mesh* paintings, I added red. I wanted to see what would happen with color that could cause spatial and psychological changes. Let me go back to undergraduate school where an influential teacher introduced me to a Venetian painting technique. After the initial sizing, a wash of burnt sienna formed an undercoating followed by a glaze of black. I developed a variant of this technique.

Essentially, for the *Mesh* series, I used two grids—a line and a circle in a process of making marks. I've always been fascinated by Northern Renaissance painting—Albrecht Dürer—the clarity, light and sharp, incisive line. In this type of painting, you see the detail, but in the context of everything else. The line initiated the beginning

of a fragile grid, while the circles evolved into planes. The grids set up a spatial play wherein viewers looking into the work realize that they are also looking out. This ambiguity interested me.

Red started to come in, at first like a red canal or channel. It became a spatial device with its own symbolic overtones. To me, red held another possibility of ambiguity. It represented blood and violence, heat and fire, and sexuality. It packed a visual punch.

After the *Mesh* paintings, came the *Vestige* paintings. There were only four. In these there was more contrast and definition of form, and the space became quite molecular. The edges were popping and visually exciting to me. The *Vestiges* started to set up a relationship between circle in mark or line versus circle. I started to vary the gesture. Eventually, I wanted the gestural activity underneath to have more play so that the space would become more equivocal.

JC: Does your next step, the *Innuendo* series, combine deliberate mark with gestural activity?

CM: The *Innuendos* consist of marks and circles made in random patterns. Each painting differs in where they're placed. Sometimes lines work under the circles, sometimes they are set on the same plane. When the circles dominate, it looks like details of earlier work. The gestures come out as ghost imprints from behind the surface sometimes. One plays off the other. One of the conflicts I have is the relationship between image and form, and the opposite, which would be a collection of marks. It would become merely a design lacking in cyclical equivocation. What I like to do is neutralize the imagery to a level somewhere between form and formlessness.



Innuendo (400), 2000, oil on canvas 60 x 60



Innuendo (700), 2000, oil on canvas 60 x 60

JC: In sum, your work demonstrates an interest in proceeding via a series, an emphasis on process, intellectualization of sequence, and an interest in natural forms, especially texture, pattern and permutation.

CM: To me, the paintings have a life force—a reference to capillaries, movement, growth, undulation, and breathing. In part, this is due to their allowance of random, accidental or chance effects.

The circle and line seem basic like male-female. The circle can be seen as a bubble or the biological beginning of life. There is a strong sensuality of surface occurring because of the way they are painted. It's not erotic, but very romantic. There's a vagueness, a hinting at things, references. There's an insinuation that happens. An "innuendo" is an insinuation possessive of various connotations. Just as the Japanese haiku contrasts nature and artifice through metaphor, the paintings suggest associations. In a sense, they exist as metaphors for other meanings.

My deconstructing of the painting process examines the brushstroke as an element that becomes part of a collective image. It is making a stroke-by-stroke definition of darkness and visibility. For me, it is the creation of a world governed more by the intuitive than the analytical.



Innuendo (600), 2000, oil on canvas 60 x 60

CREIGHTON MICHAEL, American born 1949

Education

- 1978 Washington University, St. Louis, MO
M.F.A. (Painting / Multi-Media)
- 1976 Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN,
M.A. (Art History)
- 1971 University of Tennessee, Knoxville,
TN, B.F.A. Honors (Painting)

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2001 Freedman Gallery, Albright College,
Reading, PA
- 2000 Elmhurst Art Museum, Elmhurst, IL
- 1999 Galerie Trois Points, Montreal, Canada
- 1999, 97, 96 Kim Foster Gallery,
New York, NY
- 1999, 97, 94, 92, 90 Robischon Gallery,
Denver, CO
- 1998 Queens Museum of Art at Bulova
Corporate Center, New York, NY
Birke Art Gallery, Marshall University,
Huntington, WV
- 1997 Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery, Haverford
College, Haverford, PA
- 1996 Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN
- 1994 The Katonah Museum of Art,
Katonah, NY
- 1992 Littlejohn Contemporary Gallery,
New York, NY
San Antonio Art Institute,
San Antonio, TX
- 1991 Ruth Siegel Gallery, New York, NY
- 1990 Haines Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 1990, 88 Pence Gallery, Santa Monica, CA
- 1988 David Beitzel Gallery, New York, NY
- 1987 High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA
- 1987, 85 Craig Cornelius Gallery, New York, NY

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2000 Castle Gallery, College of New
Rochelle, New Rochelle, NY
Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase
College, SUNY, Purchase, NY,
- 1999 Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY
Central Arts, Tucson, AZ
- 1999 Robert Kidd Gallery, Birmingham, MI
- 1994 David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown
University, Providence, RI
Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, AR

- 1993 Weatherspoon Art Gallery, UNC,
Greensboro, NC
- 1990 High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA
(travelling exhibition)
- 1990 Mandeville Gallery, University of
California, San Diego, CA
- 1988 The Sculpture Center, New York, NY
The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary
Art, Ridgefield, CT

Selected Public Collections

David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University,
Providence, RI
The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY
Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO
High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA
Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute Museum of Art,
Utica, NY
Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College,
SUNY, Purchase, NY,
New York University, New York, NY
RISD Museum, Providence, RI
Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN
Weatherspoon Art Gallery, UNC, Greensboro, NC

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

All dimensions are in inches, height precedes width.

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canvas, 60 x 60
Haiku (1200), 2000, mold stain and oil on
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Haiku (1300), 2000, mold stain and oil on
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Neuberger Museum of Art
Purchase College
State University of New York
735 Anderson Hill Rd.
Purchase, N.Y. 10577
914-251-6100
www.neuberger.org