
Andrew Forge: The Limits of Sight - Ephemera

Andrew Forge: The Limits of Sight

Fall 2020

Andrew Forge: The Limits of Sight Brochure

Fairfield University Art Museum

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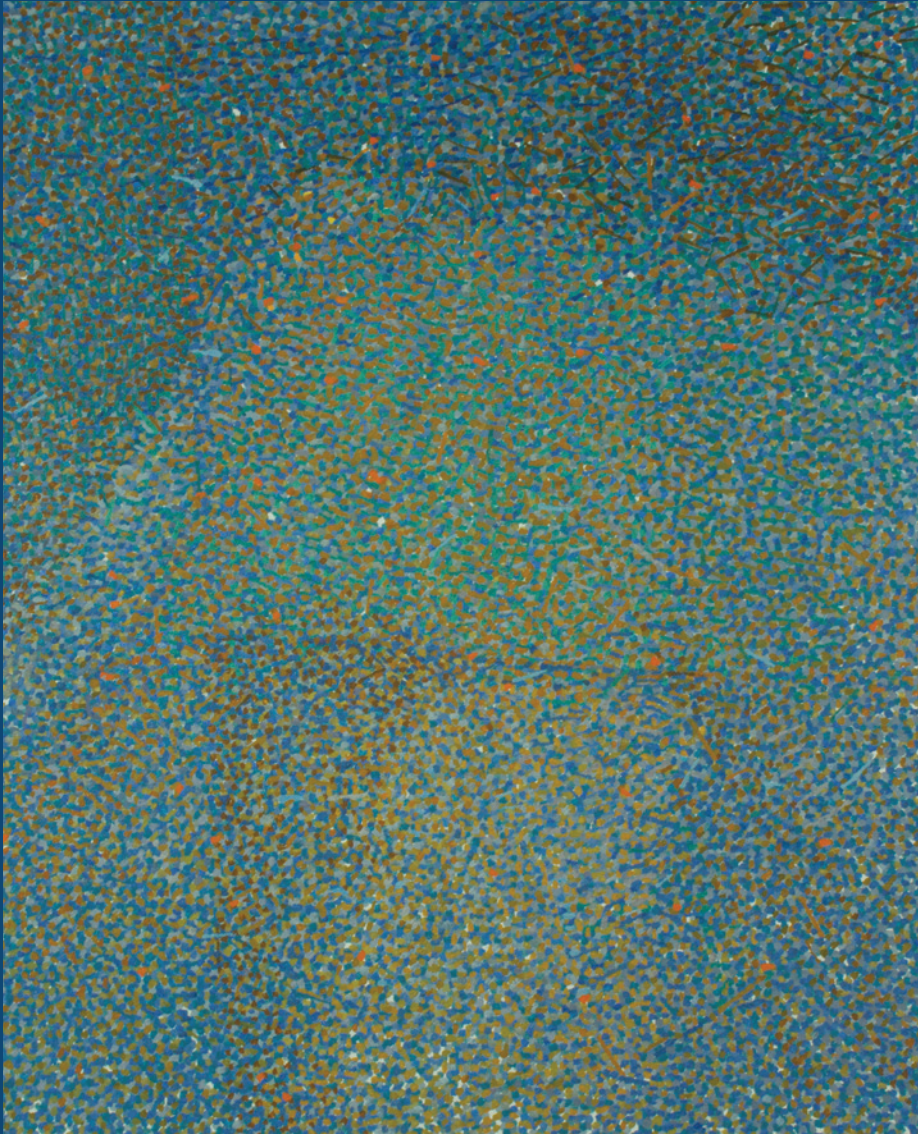
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Andrew Forge: The Limits of Sight



September 25 - December 19, 2020

Director's Foreword

We are so pleased to open the celebration of the museum's 10th anniversary with the presentation of *Andrew Forge: The Limits of Sight* in our Bellarmine Hall Galleries. This exhibition brings together highlights of the work of British artist Andrew Forge (1923-2002) beginning in 1973, just as he embarked on a new life in the United States. Forge was a painter and an influential art critic, as well as the dean and professor of the Yale University School of Art from 1975-1994. His highly personal abstractions distill his perceptions of place, season, and time of day into subtle orchestrations of pure color.

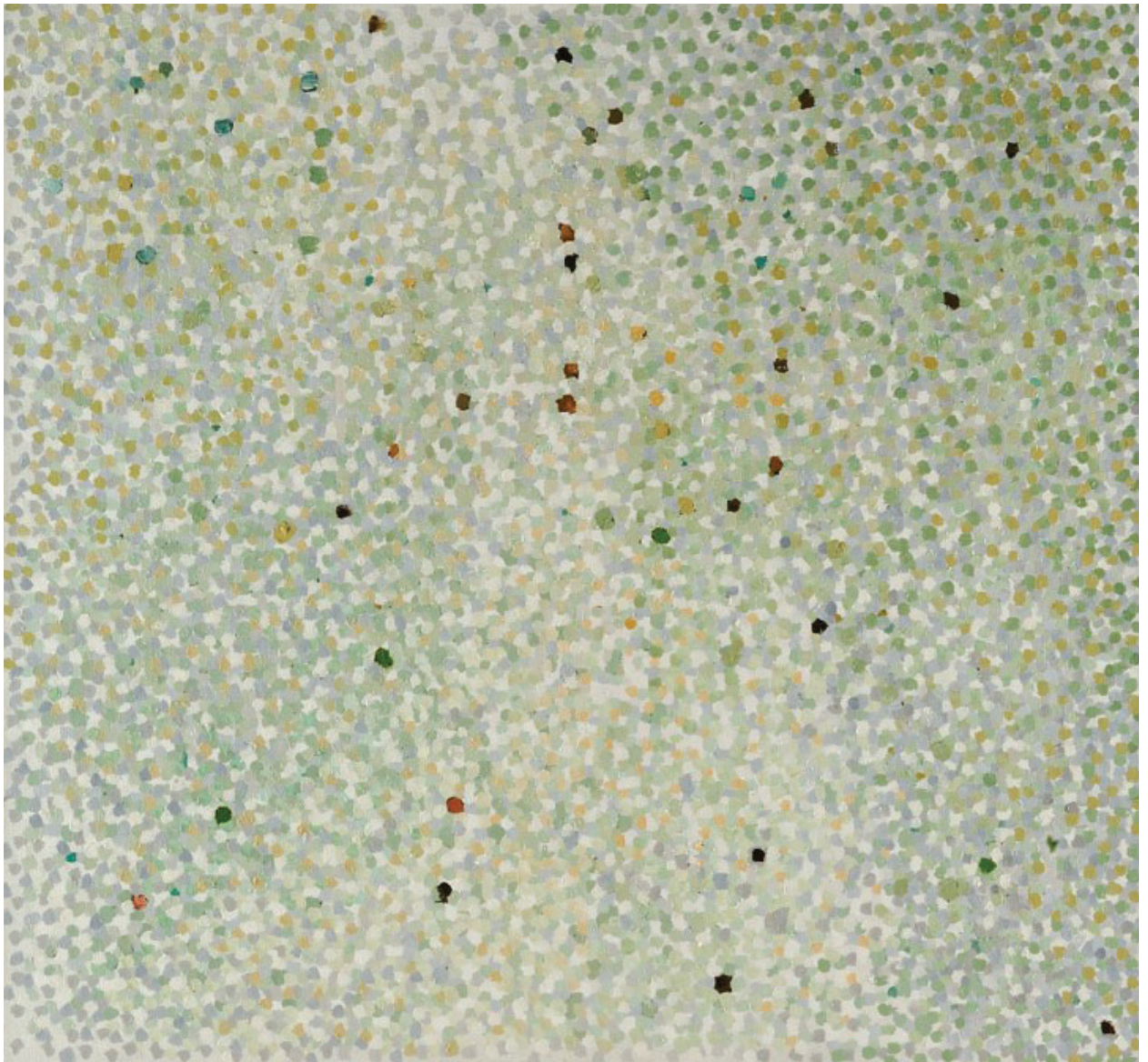
I would like to thank guest curator Karen Wilkin for her kind collaboration on this project, and for her thoughtful and eloquent essay. As she writes about Forge's work in this brochure: "We must look long and carefully at these complex sheets of multiple, intermingled hues, if we are to come to terms with their subtlety and richness, but even when we do, we always feel that something has escaped us. Their spatial mobility and their sense of pulsing light combine to make the dot paintings both irresistible and elusive. They appear to test the limits of sight." We are honored to present these sublime paintings and watercolors, to make the works accessible as a virtual exhibition, and to introduce Forge's work to those who are unable to visit the galleries in person.

I am grateful to each of the lenders who have made this exhibition possible, including numerous private collectors, the artist's widow Ruth Miller, Betty Cunningham Gallery, the Yale University Art Gallery and the Yale Center for British Art. Betty Cunningham was extremely helpful to us in the early stages of our work, and helped connect us to curator Karen Wilkin. I would especially like to thank Fairfield alumni Patrick J. Waide '59 (who introduced us to the work of Forge) and John Meditz '70 for generously lending to the exhibition and for both standing firmly behind the museum since its inception in 2010.

Thanks as always go to the exceptional museum team for their hard work in bringing this exhibition and its associated programming to life, especially as they dealt with the challenges created by Covid-19: Michelle DiMarzo, Curator of Education and Academic Engagement; Emily McKeon, Museum Assistant; and Megan Paqua, Museum Registrar. We are grateful for the additional support provided across the University by Edmund Ross, Susan Cipollaro, Tess Brown Long, and Suzanne Chamlin (Associate Professor, Studio Art and Faculty Liaison for the exhibition).

Carey Mack Weber
Executive Director
Fairfield University Art Museum





Andrew Forge: The Limits of Sight

"This is the basic fabric, woven with bated breath, achieved in intense concentration and stubborn will and longing. It is the upshot of an objective task *and* an inner picturing. One can only guess at the tension and turmoil spent on silent calm, or at the hours this timelessness cost. The final mystery of these paintings is that we feel intimations of that energy even in their stillness, and of intense life in their reserve."¹

Andrew Forge wrote these vivid sentences about the work of his friend and colleague, William Bailey, a painter of pellucid still lifes and figures, yet the observations could apply equally well to Forge's own abstract embodiments of his responses to the world around him – the "dot paintings" that established and sustained his reputation. Forge's slowly vibrating expanses of color, slowly constructed with repeated delicate touches of a loaded brush, are distinguished by the same contradictory coexistence of energy and stillness, intense life and reserve, that he itemized in his friend's work, despite the differences in their approaches. We might add, as well, another manifestation of the "mystery" that Forge saw as a merit of Bailey's paintings: Forge's canvases and works on paper are essentially non-representational meditations on the act of painting itself, yet they also seem uncannily evocative of the natural world and occasionally the built environment, without ceasing to be abstract.

I've quoted the passage on Bailey for several reasons, not merely because it does double duty in relation to the two artists' work, but also because it illuminates the challenge faced by anyone attempting to write about Forge's paintings. It is a truism that good works of art make words inadequate, especially works of art that, like Forge's, reveal their subtleties and complexities only through direct experience. The problem is exacerbated when those paintings and sculptures, again like Forge's, lack recognizable imagery or narrative content, elements that would allow a critic to take refuge in describing what has been depicted. Confronted by works of this type, the most reasonable and effective way to proceed, it seems, would be to say nothing and point. Add the fact that Forge, as his discussion of Bailey's work attests, was himself a formidable critic who set a high standard with his trenchant writing about the work of artists as diverse as Peter Paul Rubens and Claude Monet, Jackson Pollock and Euan Uglow, as well as about his own efforts. All of which means that writing about Forge's rigorous, elusive paintings can seem not only presumptuous but also unnecessary. It is impossible, for example, to improve upon his own description of how his pictures evolve:

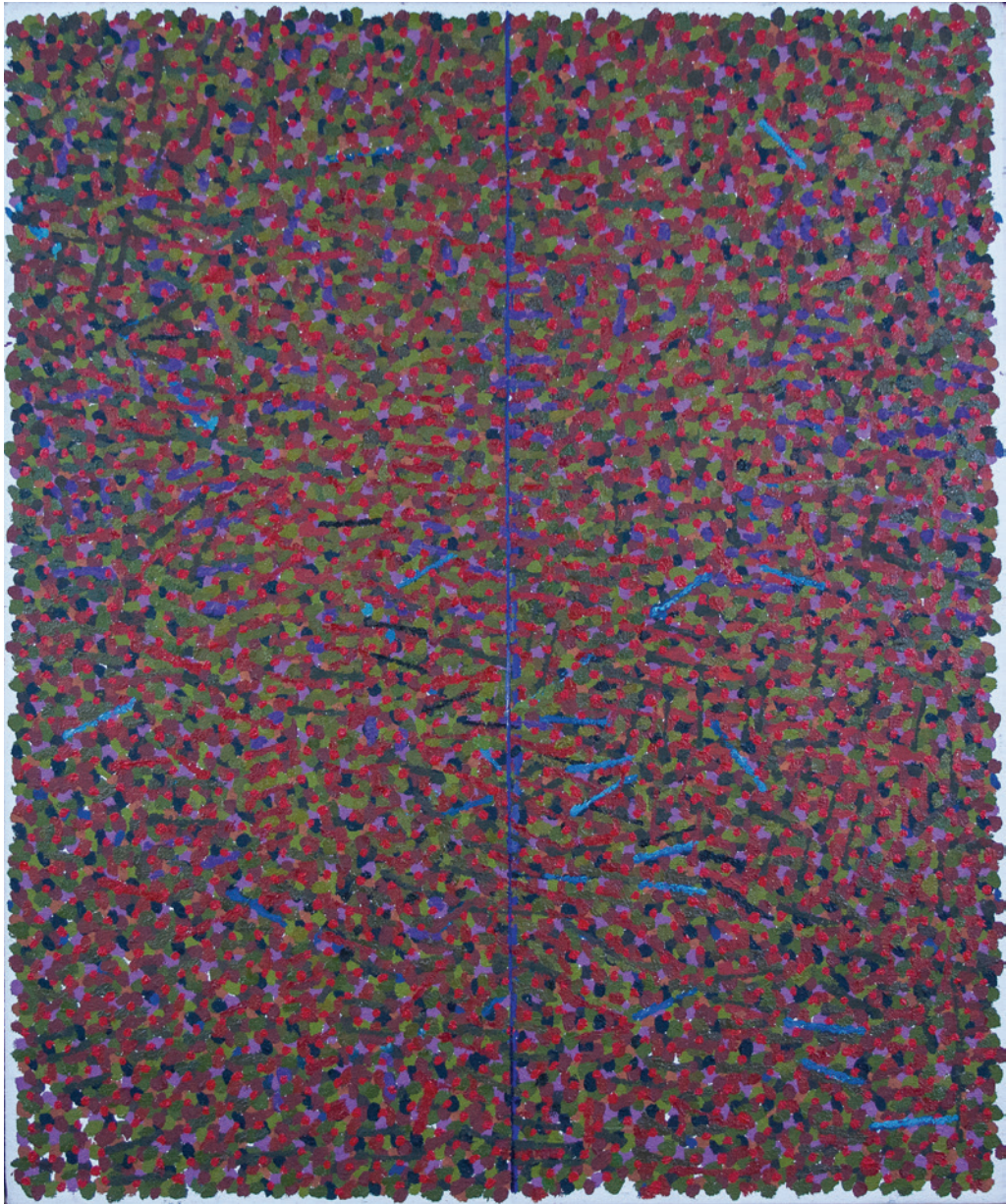
"Each painting starts with a single dot, and it grows as dots accrue over the field of the canvas. During the early stages, the formative principle is simply the vibration of the dots, whether in ordered constellations or randomly dispersed. As the white field of the canvas is covered dot by dot, color reveals itself; the light of the canvas must be rediscovered and reconstructed out of the interaction of the dots. Slowly, ways of reading the painting come up. Areas press forward or drop back. There are alternatives of substance and transparency."²

As if this wasn't sufficiently daunting, there is another important characteristic of Forge's mature works, the dot paintings whose making he describes so lucidly, that makes writing about them problematic – that, in fact, makes words wholly inadequate to coming to terms with them. Forge's paintings must be seen, in actuality. No reproduction, whether conventional or digital, no matter how technologically advanced, can capture their essential and distinctive qualities. And they must be studied for extended periods. "Time," Forge wrote, "is important with these paintings. They take a long time to make. I would like them to be looked at slowly enough to allow the viewer's eye to accommodate their

structure; and at as many different distances as the gallery allows.”³ Yet even when we look long and carefully at these complex sheets of multiple, intermingled hues, according them the time and close attention they insist upon if we are to grasp their subtlety and richness, we always feel that something has escaped us. The spatial mobility and the sense of pulsing light, driven by color, which Forge pointed to in his explanation of his methods and what he aims at, combine to make his dot paintings both irresistible and elusive. They appear to test the limits of sight. We yield to the allure of their atmospheric orchestrations of color at the same time that we are not quite certain that we are really perceiving them. Pools and pathways of chromatic harmonies become visible with prolonged looking and then subside into the all-over fabric of dots. When we view the paintings from a distance, hints of imagery – architecture, landscape forms – suggest themselves, but elude us when we come close to the surface of the picture. It’s as if we need a different kind of visual acuity than we normally use.

The closest analogy I can find to how we experience Forge’s canvases is with the way we see things in the absence of adequate light. If, while trying to navigate in near-darkness, we look directly at an object, it becomes increasingly indistinct; if we look slightly away, it becomes more intelligible – something to do with the way our rods and cones operate, I have been told. Forge’s hints of imagery work on us in a similar fashion. They seem to coalesce when we notice them from a distance or with a sidelong glance, but they can evaporate when we try to focus on them. Yet, this instability notwithstanding, Forge’s paintings can seem extraordinarily precise, as their titles often suggest, provoking a wealth of associations with our individual histories of visual experience. It must be stressed, however, that, specific as those titles are, the paintings they identify are never depictions in any usual sense of the word. Rather, they are fragile distillations of both ephemeral and concrete phenomena that have been seen, valued, and remembered: times of day, seasons, weather, qualities of light, architecture, even places. Forge creates, through his cumulative touches of color, equivalents of visual experience, extended or momentary, internalized, ruminated over, or barely recalled. I suspect that the relationship of the finished painting to the painter’s initial experience was neither simple or straightforward. There was Forge’s desire to conjure up something that compelled his attention in the first place, by means of a metaphorical, inflected expanse of shimmering colored dots. And there was also his concomitant openness to surprise, his alertness to what emerged as he worked. The play of light and color that Forge described himself as gradually bringing to life across the surface of the canvas could have triggered recognition, conjuring up an elusive memory of a time, place, or quality of light, virtually unwilling by the artist. We can be certain that Forge did not approach the canvas now titled *Monreale* intending to make an image of the medieval Duomo of Monreale in Sicily, with its astonishing Byzantine mosaics and marvelous cloister. We can hypothesize that he wanted to evoke a mood, a recollection of the resonance of a stimulating and remarkable place. I suspect, too, that his entire experience of Palermo, with its crowds, street markets, Baroque architecture, brilliant light, and fantastic baobab trees, somehow entered into the equation. But there is another possibility: that as the single dot with which the painting started was repeated across the canvas to become an extended sheet of flickering color, something about the emerging, pulsing hue made him think about the glittering golden interior of the cathedral, with its looming Christ Pantocrator in the apse and ranks of figures covering every surface of the walls. The result is an abstract, intensified version of all kinds of sensory experience, concentrated into its essence and transubstantiated into the material of paint.

The paradoxical specificity of Forge’s canvases should not surprise us. He was trained in perceptual realism at the Camberwell School of Art, London, studying with William Coldstream, and his paintings before 1963 were, generally



speaking, broadly stroked landscapes and human figures, often nude. In 1963, as Forge described it in an interview conducted in 1986, he had lost faith in what he was doing, even though he was receiving a fair amount of attention for his expressive, lushly painted work. A few years earlier, his compatriot and contemporary, the sculptor Anthony Caro, had found himself similarly dissatisfied with the expressionist, modeled figures that had won him early acclaim. As Caro later described it, "The figure got in my way. I didn't want to make imitation human beings."⁴ Caro's way of revitalizing his work was to abandon his usual materials and methods, in part because of a comment by the critic Clement Greenberg, during the young Englishman's recent, first visit to New York: "If you want to change your art, change your habits."⁵ Caro began constructing in steel, making open, linear structures that resembled nothing pre-existing and nothing he had done before. Forge didn't change his usual materials – he continued to employ paint on canvas – but he, too, changed his habits, beginning to work in a way unprecedented for him, like Caro, after returning from a stimulating trip to the United States. Forge is said to have described experiencing, in New York, "a physical openness and beyondness, a structure of unstructuredness, a certain different way of being in the world."⁶ Again, Forge's own description of the effect of those perspectives on his work cannot be improved upon. Forge recalled that he put the largest canvas he had on the easel "without any thought," picked up the smallest brush he had, and made a single mark on the untouched expanse. "It was a fantastic moment," Forge said, "because two things happened: that point looked back at me like an eye...but also it and the canvas were talking to each other...I felt it was the most real thing I had ever done."⁷

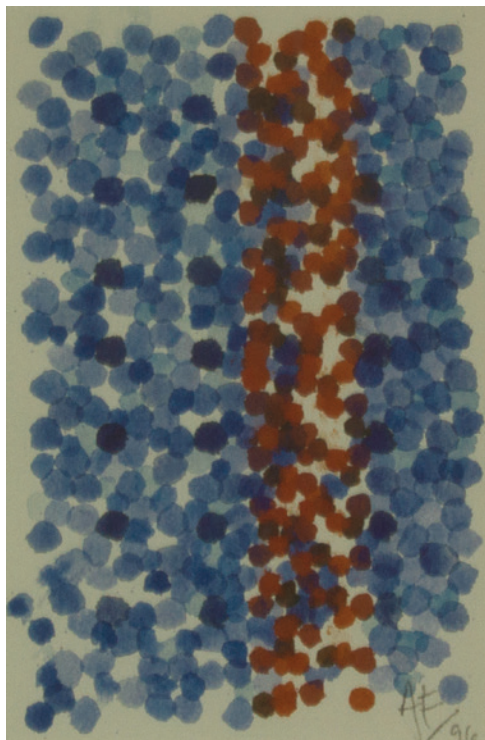
Forge's dots have nothing to do with pointillism. The dotting is an end in itself, not a means of description. From a close viewpoint, the fact of the touches of paint dominates. As we read across the surface, we are absorbed by the shimmer of the deliberately placed spots of pigment, captivated by the varied rhythms created by the dispersal of particular colors, and intrigued by the chords, harmonious or dissonant, created by groups of related or opposing hues. But we are always aware of the repetitive action of the artist's hand making each mark, even – or especially – when the swirling rhythms of the dots, which Forge referred to as "drumming," are punctuated by splatterings of short, straight strokes, which Forge referred to as "sticks."⁸ The dots and sticks coalesce into a rich, confrontational tapestry, declaratively on the surface of the canvas. From a distance, new spatial relationships reveal themselves, both fleeting allusions to landscape or the urban environment and non-specific layerings and pulsations that suggest not marks on a surface, but rather a mobile, fictive, unenterable space. Sometimes, dots of a particular color seem to detach themselves from the surrounding fabric and appear to hover against the expanse of the canvas, adding to the spatial multivalence. Forge was well aware of the ambiguities of his paintings and enjoyed their sensitivity to changes in viewpoint or distance. "A dot always comes at you like a finger," he said. "The more dots, the more frontal. But one of the things I value about working with dots is that it allows me to put things in two places at the same time...I've become very interested in the difference between how these pictures work up close and how they work at a distance...I want to acknowledge that in some way in the picture."⁹

Some years ago, when I was wrestling with this enigmatic statement in connection with an exhibition of Forge's dot paintings executed between 1985 and 1999, I came to the conclusion that the prime historical example of this kind of acknowledgement is Diego Velázquez's celebrated *Las Meninas*, in which the fusion of spatial structure and implied narrative becomes an equivalent for the beholder's relationship to the vast canvas. Like Forge's canvases, *La Meninas* is a painting about painting, both literally and metaphorically. Everything in the picture faces the viewer, including the image of the artist, at work on an unseen portrait of the king and queen; the Infanta and her attendants may have arrived to alleviate the tedium of posing. The royal couple is reflected in a small mirror on the back wall of the studio, just as

we, as beholders, would be, if the mirror were real. Not only does this conceit turn us into participants– even invisible protagonists– but it also makes the painted reflection signal our distance from both the surface of the canvas and the fictive far wall of Velázquez’s studio, an imagined location emphasized by the position of the figures, doorways, and other accoutrements within the illusory space. The optically unstable chromatic expanses in Forge’s dot paintings create similar spatial complexity with wholly abstract means, making us shift our focus from the dots as foreground incidents to the pulsing whole of the fabric of color they comprise and back again, so that we subliminally become aware of our relationship to both the physical painted surface and the suggestion of limitless space created by the hovering dots of color.

All of these subtle characteristics are present in Forge’s varied and inventive works on paper, both at the same time, as in the canvases, and separately. Some watercolors and gouaches are as layered and rich as the most achieved canvases, while others, while in no way seeming incomplete or tentative, can be read as dissections of the components of the finished canvases. In the paper works, we can easily study the relationship of relatively large dots and sticks, often so sparsely distributed that they seem to invite consideration as independent events, or we can savor the unexpected sequences of hues arranged in stacked bars, in a kind of elongated grid. The structure of Forge’s works on paper is usually more pared down, less dependent on accumulation, and more direct than the dotted fields of the canvases, and, as a group, the works on paper are notably more varied. While the works on paper are obviously self-sufficient and complete, seeing a group of them is also like being allowed to watch Forge think, as he tested possibilities and explored alternatives that would inform the canvases. Occasionally, I suspect, the configurations of works on paper were extracted from the canvases, to isolate them for future study, or to save them from being engulfed by the drifting dots.

However we choose to read Forge’s paintings and works on paper, whatever allusions we believe we grasp and whatever associations they provoke in us, his works remain endlessly fascinating and demanding. No words and, certainly, no reproduction can convey the uncanny presence of these fiercely intelligent, sensuous paintings. Forge used the word “mystery” to describe the elusive, contradictory qualities he admired in his friend Bill Bailey’s works. It’s a word that we might apply to Forge’s own efforts, to try to account for their uncanny ability to be at once seductive and intellectually challenging, to reward attentive looking, over a long time and at the same time, to test the limits of sight. A mystery, indeed.

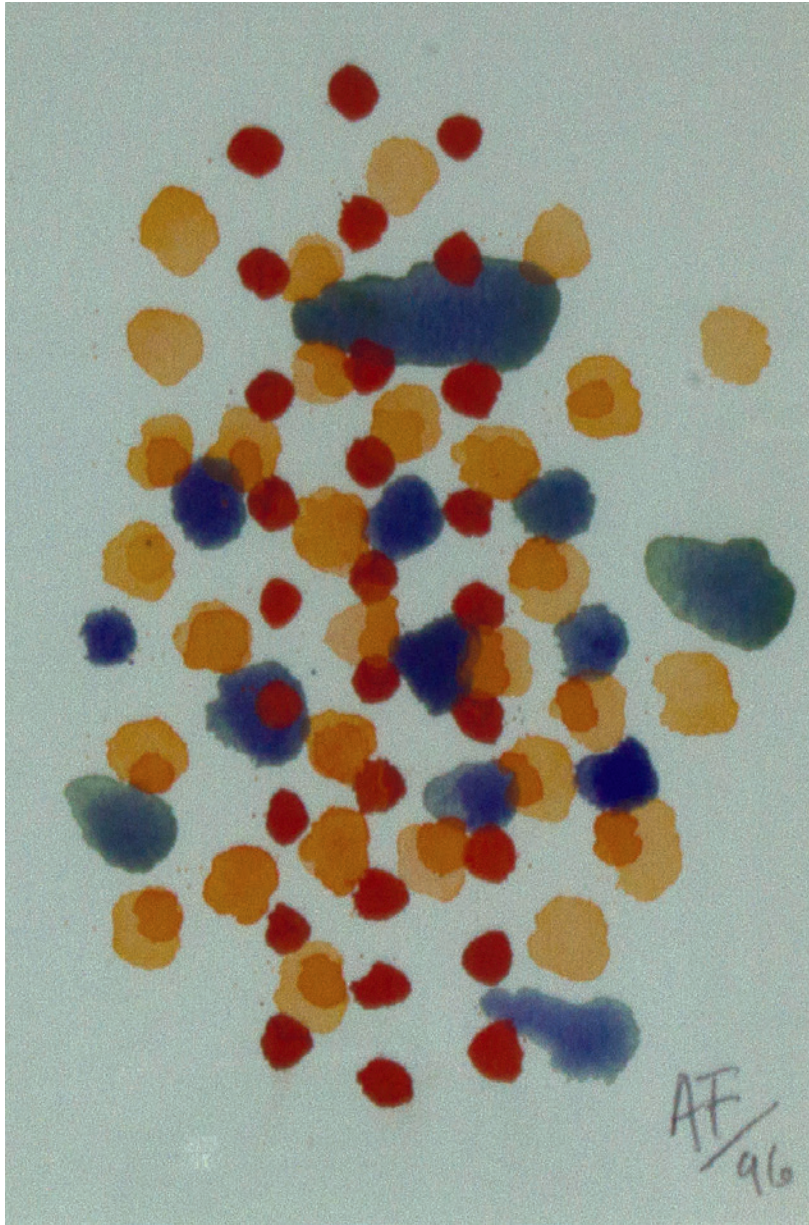


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Karen Wilkin
May/June 2020

Endnotes

- ¹ Forge, Andrew, "William Bailey: Studio Fictions," catalogue essay for *William Bailey: Studio Fictions*, Robert Miller Gallery, New York, 1999. In *Observation: Notation, Selected Writings of Andrew Forge, 1955-2002*, David Cast, ed., New York: Criterion Books, 2018, p 273.
- ² Forge, "Artist's Introduction," exhibition catalogue, *Andrew Forge*, New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1996, p 5.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Anthony Caro, conversations with the author, various dates, Fall 1997-Winter 2006.
- ⁵ Clement Greenberg, quoted by Anthony Caro, lecture at Hartford Art School, University of Hartford, Connecticut, in connection with exhibition, "Caro, Noland, Olitski," Joseloff Gallery, and related symposium, April 28-June 15, 1994.
- ⁶ Andrew Forge, quoted by Cast, "Introduction," *Observation: Notation*, p xi.
- ⁷ Forge, interviewed by Jacopo Benci and Silvia Stucky, Rome, 1986, quoted by Hollander, John, " 'Each Canvas as a Place': On Andrew Forge's Paintings," exhibition catalogue, *Andrew Forge*, 1996, p 11.
- ⁸ Forge, quoted by Kubovy, Michael, "Perceptual Tools for Looking at Andrew Forge's Paintings," exhibition catalogue, *Andrew Forge*, 1996, p 19.
- ⁹ Forge, quoted by Wilkin, Karen, "Andrew Forge: In Two Places at the Same Time," exhibition catalogue, *Andrew Forge: Paintings*, Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College, 1999, unpagged.





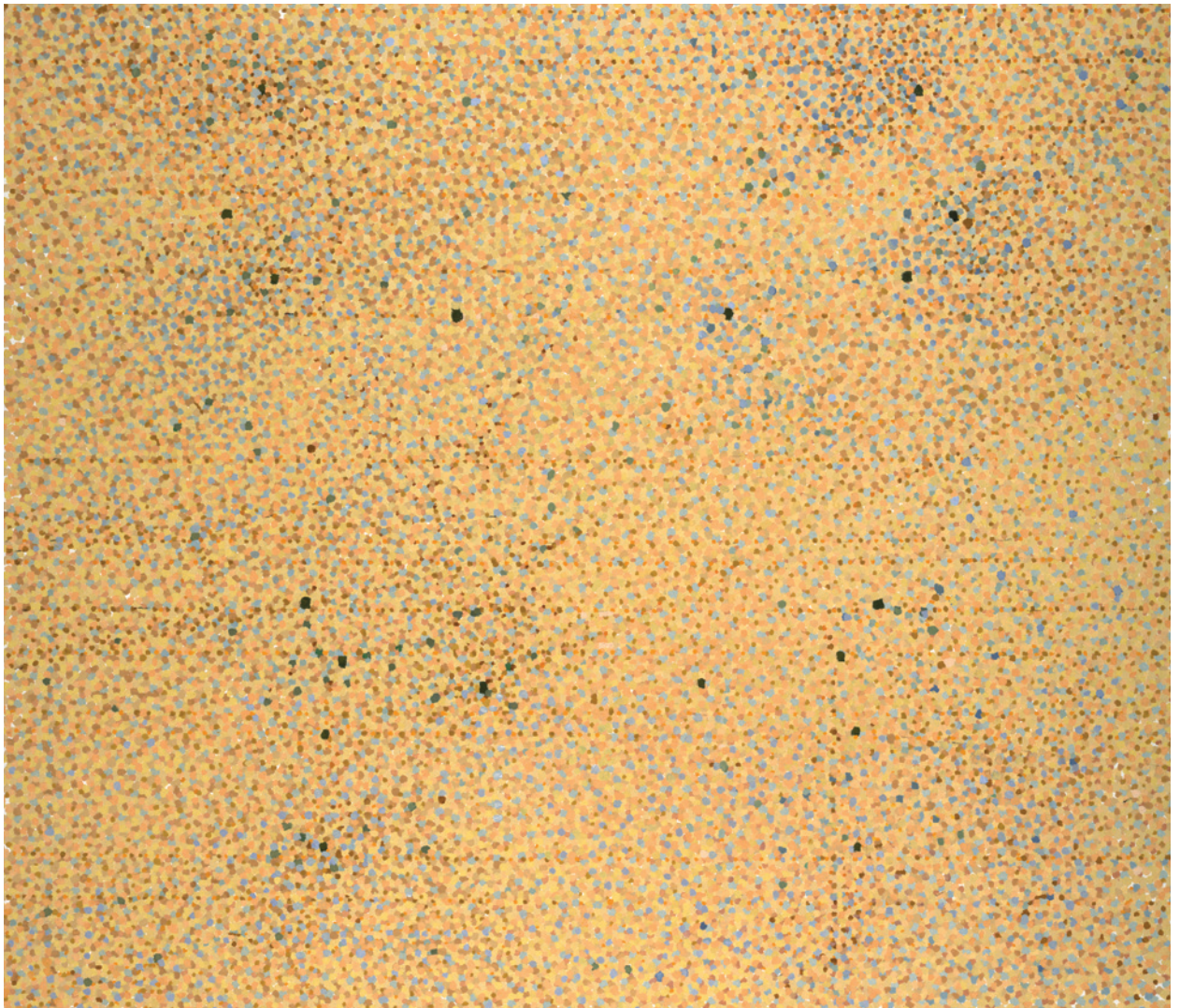
Timeline: Life of Andrew Forge

- 1923 Born in Hastingleigh, Kent, UK
- 1933 Educated at the Downs School and Leighton Park School, Reading, UK
- 1940-47 Ran his parents' farm at Hastingleigh, Kent, UK
- 1947-49 Studied painting at Camberwell College of Arts under William Coldstream, Victor Pasmore, and Kenneth Martin, London, UK
- 1949-50 Traveled in France, Holland, and Italy
- 1950-64 Taught painting and drawing at the Slade School of Art, University College, London, UK
- 1963 March 17–April 17, Trip to the US, arranged by the Department of State. According to the extant itinerary, Forge visited numerous museums and art schools across the country from Washington, DC, to San Francisco, and spent several weeks in New York. He studied contemporary art and architecture and met with museum directors and art historians, including Robert Herbert, Rudolph Wittkower, and Meyer Schapiro. He also met a wide range of artists – Grace Hartigan, Jack Tworikov, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, as well as Merce Cunningham and John Cage – among others.
- 1964-70 Head of Department of Fine Arts, Goldsmith's College, London University, London, UK
- 1971-72 Lecturer, Department of Art, University of Reading, UK
- 1973-74 Visiting Critic, Cooper Union, New York, NY
- 1974-75 Associate Dean, New York Studio School, New York, NY
- 1975-2001 Visiting Professor, New York Studio School, New York, NY
- 1975-94 Professor, Yale School of Art (Dean, 1975-83), New Haven, CT
- 1994-2000 Senior Critic, University of Pennsylvania Department of Art, Philadelphia, PA
- 1999-2000 Artist in Residence, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH
- 2000 Artist in Residence, College of South Carolina, Charleston, SC
- 2002 Died, Washington Depot, CT

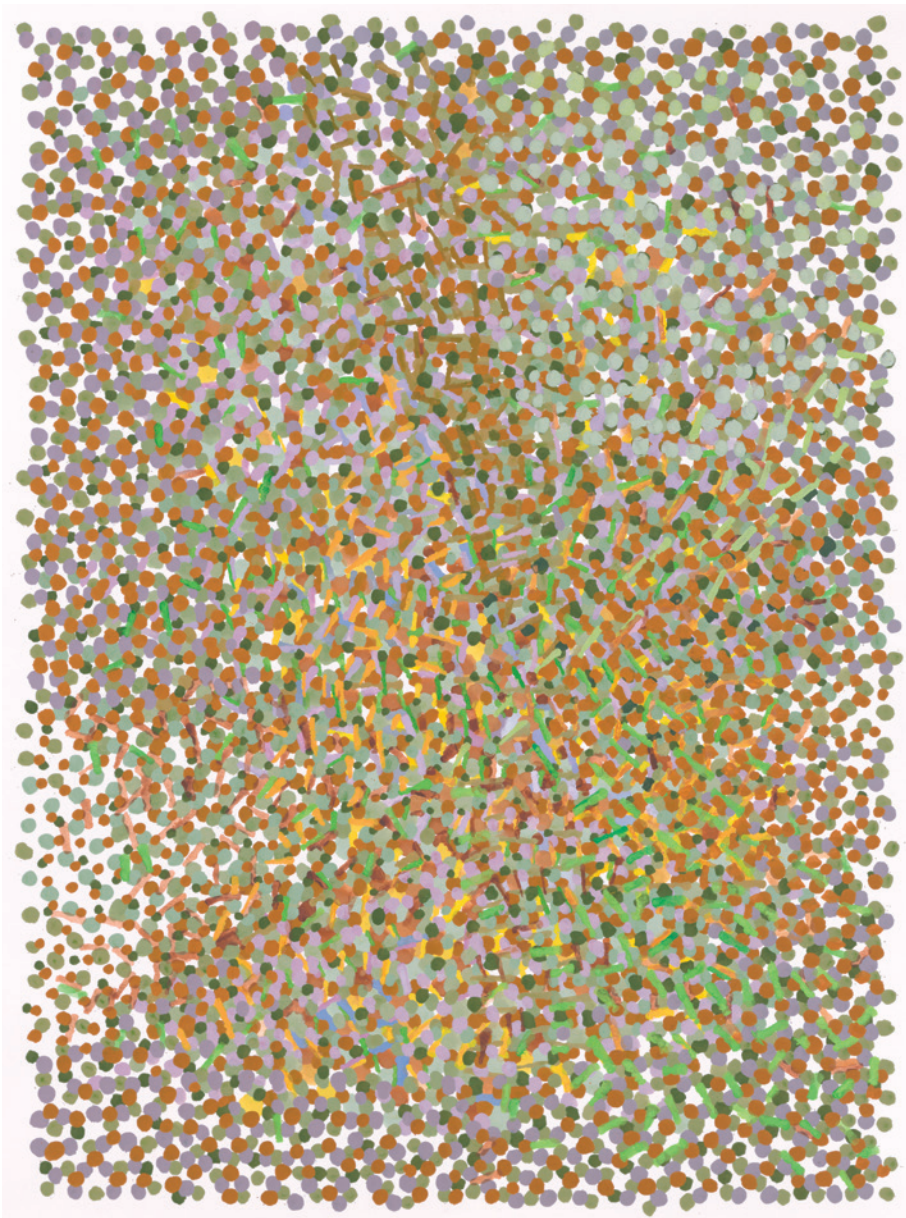
Exhibition Checklist

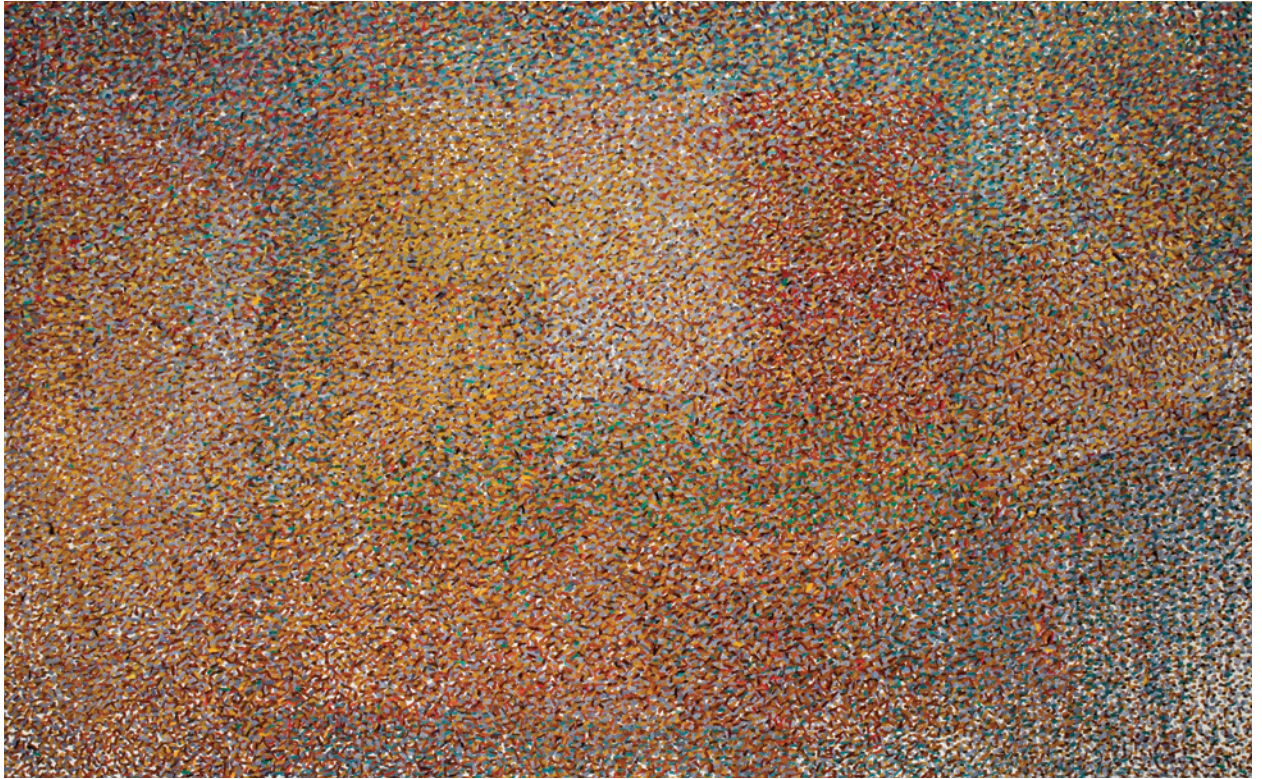
Paintings

1. *Winter, Kent*, 1973
Oil on canvas
40 x 60 inches
Collection of Patrick J. Waide Jr. '59
2. *Sous Bois*, 1979
Oil on canvas
24 x 30 inches
Collection of Natalie Charkow Hollander
3. *November*, 1980-81
Oil on canvas
50 x 80 inches
Lent by the Estate of the Artist,
Courtesy of Betty Cunningham Gallery,
New York
4. *Fallen Tree*, 1980-84
Oil on canvas
54 x 48 inches
Private Collection
5. *June*, 1984-88
Oil on canvas
50 x 80 inches
Lent by the Estate of the Artist,
Courtesy of Betty Cunningham Gallery,
New York
6. *Cloak*, 1985
Oil on canvas
36 x 42 inches
Collection of Patrick J. Waide Jr. '59
7. *Monreale*, 1985-88
Oil on canvas
44 x 36 inches
Collection of Ruth Miller
8. *Tree of Life (Clair)*, 1987-89
Oil on canvas
46 x 58 inches
Lent by Yale Center for British Art,
Given by the Artist
9. *Winter Solstice II*, 1989-90
Oil on canvas
20 x 24 inches
Collection of Patrick J. Waide Jr. '59
10. *Column, Paul*, 1991-93
Oil on canvas
40 x 32 inches
Collection of James Barron Art, LLC
11. *Meadow*, 1992
Oil on canvas
24 x 36 inches
Collection of Ruth Miller
12. *August*, 1994-96
Oil on canvas
46 ½ x 53 ⅔ inches
Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of the American
Academy of Arts and Letters, New York, Hassam,
Speicher, Betts, and Symons Funds, 1998
13. *September*, 1995-96
Oil on canvas
60 x 48 inches
Lent by the Estate of the Artist,
Courtesy of Betty Cunningham Gallery,
New York
14. *Fog*, 1999
Oil on canvas
48 x 60 inches
Collection of Patrick J. Waide Jr. '59



15. *Red Figure*, 1999
Oil on canvas
30 x 32 inches
Collection of Lisa and William O'Reilly
16. *Snow*, 2000
Oil on canvas
30 x 32 inches
Private Collection
17. *Heavy Hemlocks, II*, 2000
Oil on canvas
40 x 60 inches
Lent by the Estate of the Artist,
Courtesy of Betty Cunningham Gallery,
New York
18. *December*, 2002
Oil on canvas
64 x 48 inches
Lent by the Estate of the Artist,
Courtesy of Betty Cunningham Gallery,
New York
- Works on Paper**
19. *Untitled*, n.d.
Watercolor on rag paper
20 x 27 ½ inches
Collection of Graham Nickson and Dita Amory
20. *Gleam*, 1993
Casein and watercolor on rag paper
22 ¼ x 18 ¾ inches
Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Werner H.
and Sarah-Ann Kramarsky
21. *Shadow II*, 1993
Casein and watercolor on rag paper
23 x 15 ¼ inches
Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Werner H.
and Sarah-Ann Kramarsky
22. *Against Blue*, 1994
Casein on paper
21 x 15 inches
Private Collection, New York
23. *Untitled*, 1996
Watercolor on paper
21 ¾ x 14 ½ inches
Collection of John Meditz '70
24. *Untitled*, 1996
Watercolor on paper
5 x 8 inches
Collection of Patrick J. Waide Jr. '59
25. *Untitled*, 1996
Watercolor on paper
5 x 8 inches
Collection of Patrick J. Waide Jr. '59
26. *Untitled*, n.d.
Watercolor on paper
3 ½ x 9 inches
Collection of Patrick J. Waide Jr. '59
27. *Untitled*, 1997
Watercolor on paper
Watercolor on rag paper
7 ¼ x 5 ¼ inches
Collection of Natalie Charkow Hollander
28. *Untitled*, 1999
Watercolor on paper
22 ¾ x 14 ¼ inches
Collection of Mark and Laurie Frick





Exhibition Programs

Thursday, September 24, 4 p.m.

Opening Night Lecture: Andrew Forge: *The Limits of Sight*

Karen Wilkin, Independent Curator and Critic

Part of the Edwin L. Weisl, Jr. Lectureships in Art History, funded by the Robert Lehman Foundation

Wednesday, September 30, 6 p.m.

Gallery Talk: Andrew Forge: *An Artist's Perspective*

Suzanne Chamlin, Associate Professor of Studio Art, Department of Visual & Performing Arts

Thursday, October 22, 5 p.m.

Lecture: *How to Look at an Abstract Painting*

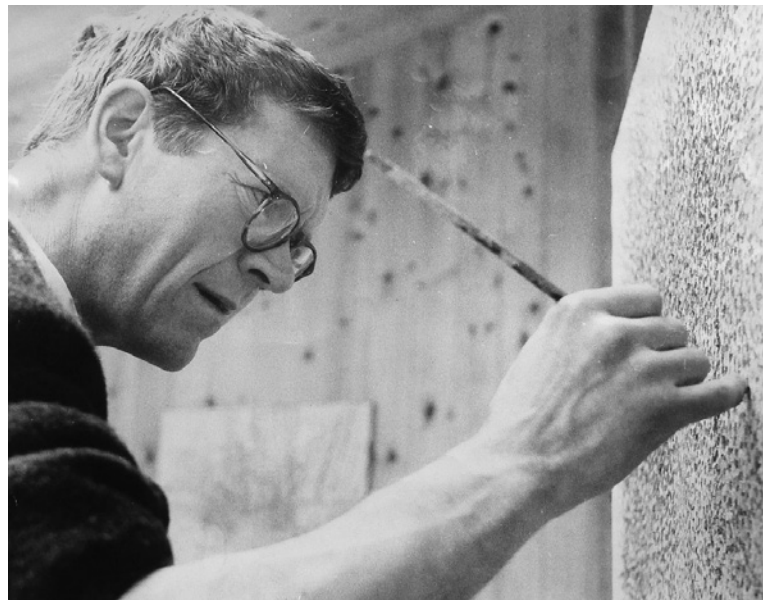
Danielle Ogden, Adjunct Professor, Art History & Visual Culture Program, Department of Visual & Performing Arts

Thursday, October 29, 5 p.m.

Lecture: *The Psychology of Art*

Jennifer Drake, Professor of Psychology, Brooklyn College

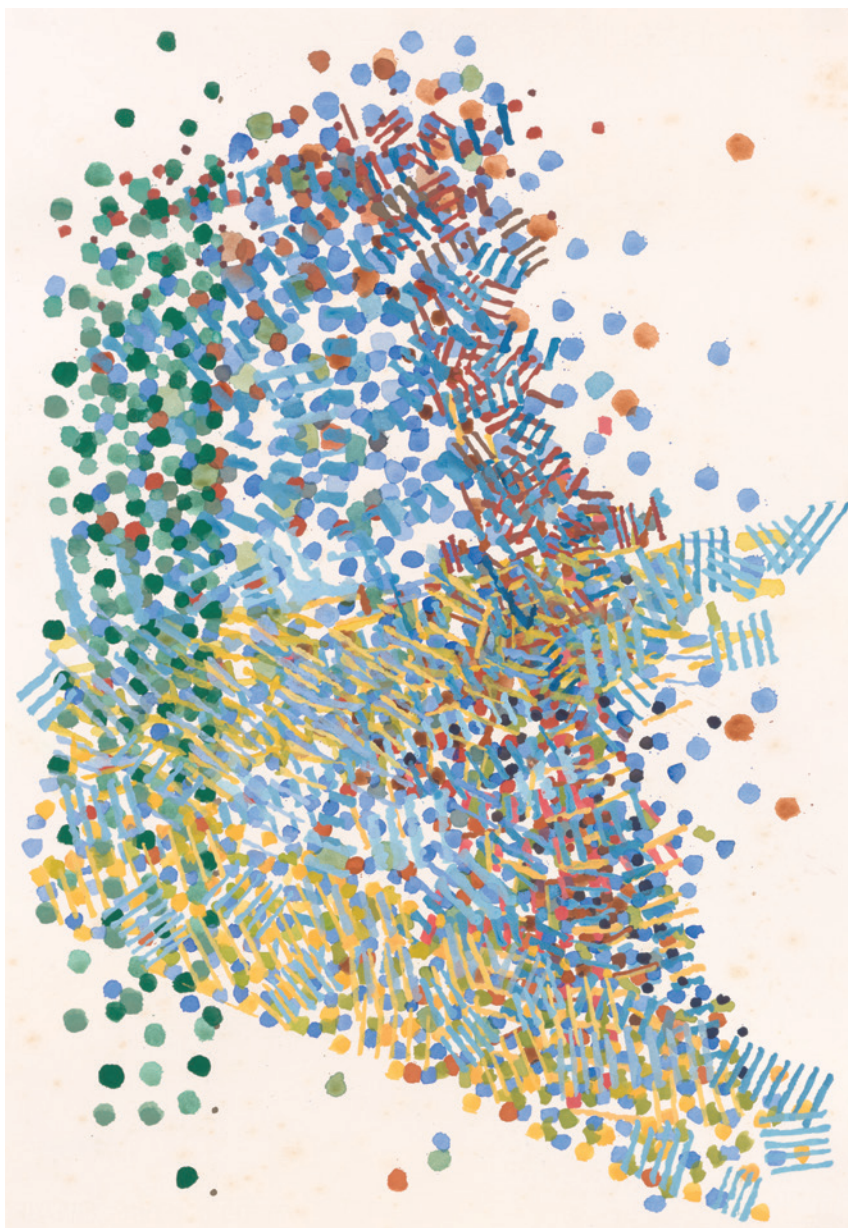
Presented in partnership with the Departments of Psychology Visual & Performing Arts

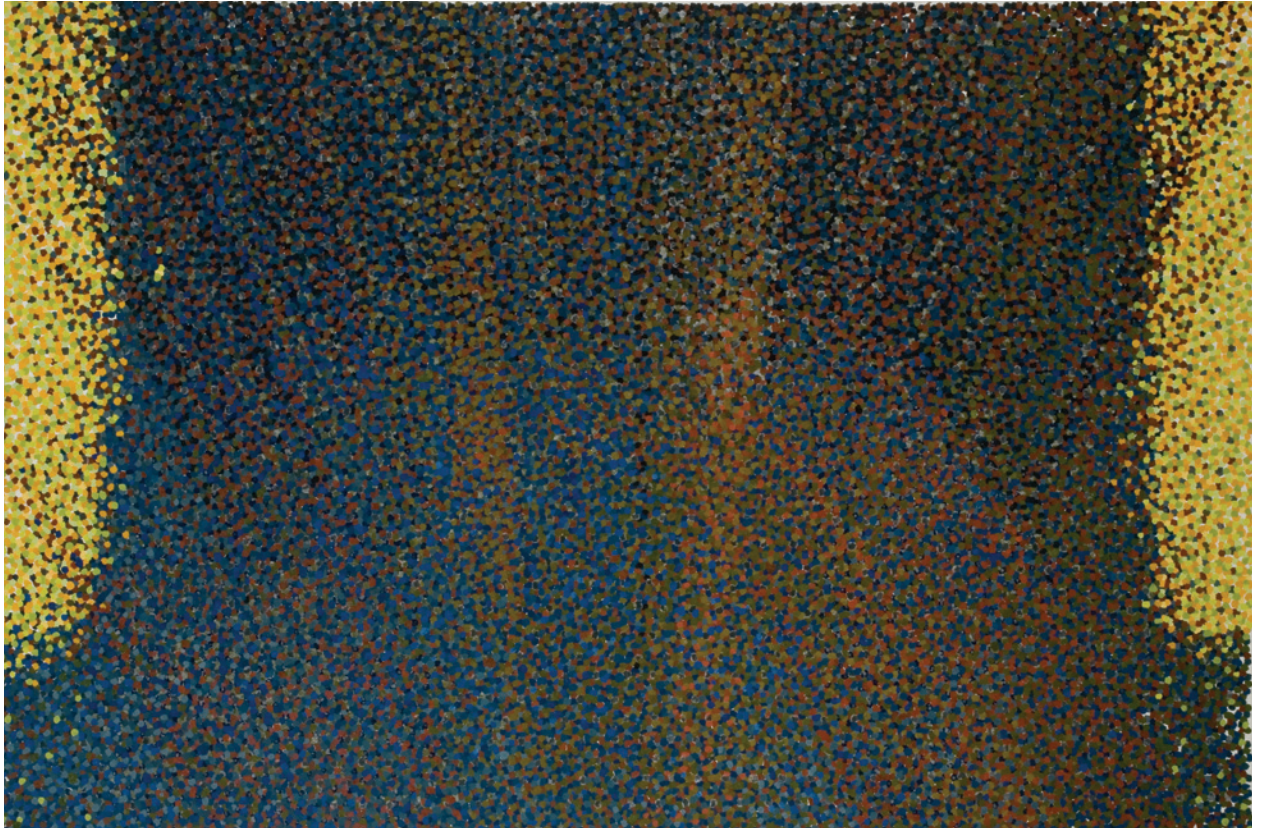


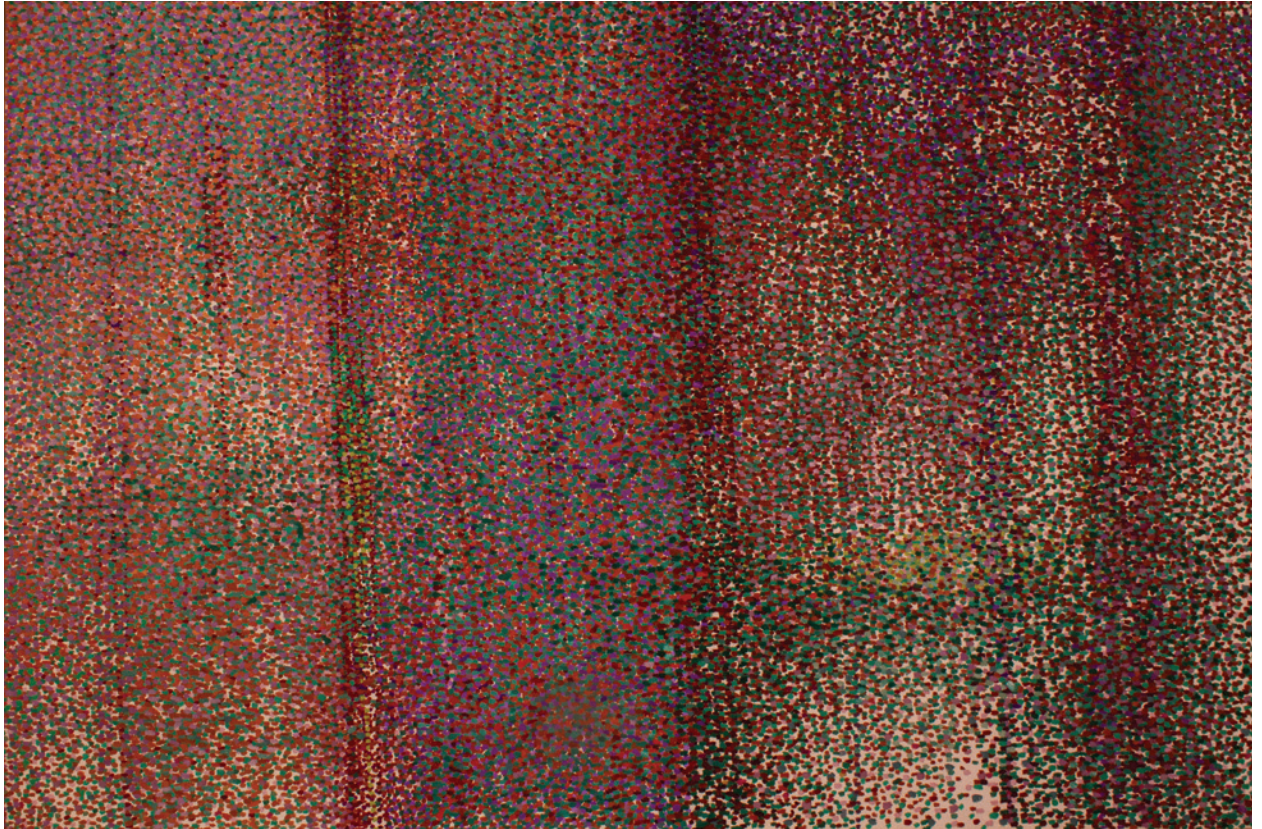
All events and programs are free and open to the public, but registration is required. Register at fuam.evenbrite.com or fairfield.edu/museum.

Front cover: Cat. 6

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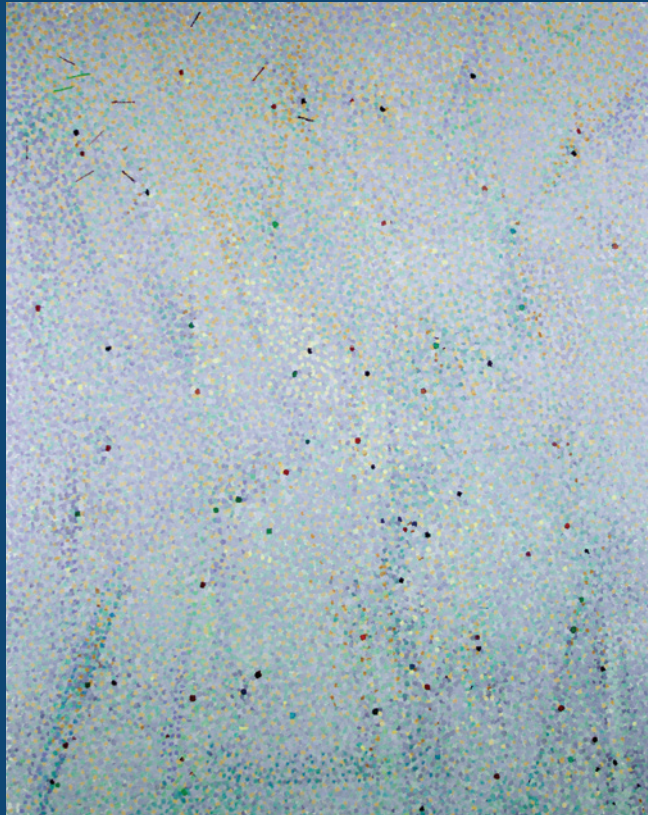




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ART
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CELEBRATING 10 YEARS



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NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE
HUMANITIES



Connecticut
Art Trail