

DOUGLASS FREED IN FIRST MATURITY: THE SYNTHESIS OF CLASSICAL STRUCTURE AND DYNAMIC FIELD

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Douglass Freed has developed a unique synthesis of linear architecture and expressive color, a synthesis between the classical affirmation of reason and that romantic awe which arises from the realm of our senses and emotions.

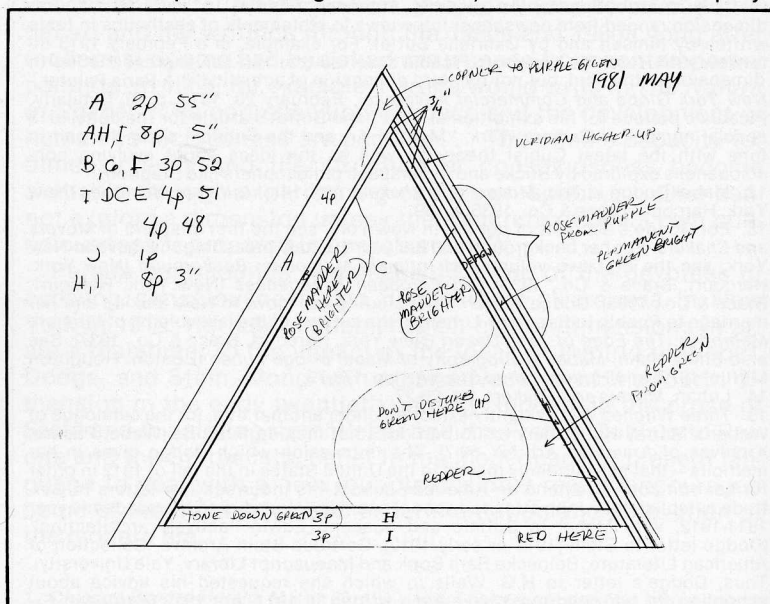
Douglass Freed is a painter of elegant surfaces, a designer of elegant structures. With exacting precision he crafts redwood and ponderosa pine into handsome, multi-sectional stretcher panels of geometric shape and classical proportion. He covers the panels with canvas, and sprays them individually with ten to twenty layers of oil paint progressively thinned with turpentine, a process which can require up to four months. He completes a work by joining its separate panels together into its overall rectilinear or triangular configuration. Freed creates big pictures with harmonious, close-valued, delicate modulations of hue, sometimes darkly intense, sometimes lyrically subtle to the point of immateriality. Like the works of Newman, Rothko, Olitski and the late Monet, these pictures depend upon their size for presence and for the expansive freedom which permits their shallow, luminous, atmospheric textures to breathe. What brands them as distinctive products of Freed's hand and sensibility is their muted ceramic richness (occasionally suggesting some kind of matte raku glaze) and their restrained, dignified sense of order. Freed has developed a unique synthesis of linear architecture and expressive color, a synthesis between the classical affirmation of reason and that romantic awe which arises from the realm of our senses and emotions.

The current series of Freed's work, the Encasements and Prosceniums, appeared late in 1978 and early in 1979. They have provided him his first vehicles for producing paintings of consistent quality and substance. They have given him his initial success in the art marketplace, and they constitute his first fully mature statement and body of work. This beginning of a national audience for Freed has come at the end of a typically long road of artistic apprenticeship. Born on December 24, 1944 in Ulysses, Kansas, Freed grew up with the notion and desire to become an artist, and he never considered another path in life. He recalls reading a *Saturday Evening Post* article on Jackson Pollock and other Abstract-Expressionist painters in 1953 or 1954, and being stricken, at about the age of ten, with a compelling sense of his own destiny and calling. As a child and youth he drew and painted constantly, developing ample facility in traditional, representational life-drawing. During his high school years, however, he turned more toward his innate proclivity for non-representational art. At every stage in his education Freed received encouragement, recognition, and awards for his work. He took degrees in painting from Kansas State University at Fort Hays and then found a job teaching art at a college in Sedalia, Missouri. After the student honors and prizes there followed the long string of group shows, one-man shows, purchase prizes in juried exhibitions, recognition in local, then in regional media, and finally, "major gallery representation."

Freed's odyssey has been the more-or-less conventional process by which artists in our society demonstrate their competence, prove their determination and knowledge, refine their

style and identity. Via these avenues, a few gradually win acceptance against the formidable forces of competition and rejection, and come to be taken seriously as "Artists." At thirty-seven Freed has arrived not as an overnight sensation but very much on his own chosen schedule and course. He is an artist in first maturity, still young in a field where the child prodigy is virtually unknown, and in which a "genius" may not be recognized as such until near the age of fifty (as in the case of Rothko, Newman, and Louis).

A nascent personal style began to emerge in Freed's painting of the early 1970s. From 1970 to 1972 he was working out personal interpretations of color-field spraying techniques. During this period he settled upon a method in which he used clothespins to gather canvas into folds or pleats. He would then arrange the canvas on his studio floor and spraypaint it with aerosol cans of Lucite. The peaks of the fabric folds would take the full color, which penetrated less and less densely and opaquely down into the troughs, which remained essentially bare. When the canvas was then stretched, the result was, in effect, a drawn image sprayed with atmospheric color. In this approach, Freed seems to have been concerned to observe a precept central to the traditions of post-war American modernism—namely, that drawing and structure should be determined in the process of painting itself, rather than predetermining that process in the manner of a plan or design. In 1973-74, Freed abandoned spray



Douglass Freed, Study for Triangular No. 6, 12 a.m., 1981. Graphite on graph paper, 8 1/2 x 11". Courtesy Vorpai Gallery.

cans of Lucite in favor of oil paints and compressor-driven air guns and brushes, but he continued to work in this gathered-canvas method.

While these early works lack substantial authority and often appear crude, some of them have a remarkable, raw vitality, while others, such as *Dispersions* (1974), are graced with the charming appeal of a storybook Impressionism, somewhere between Monet and Sendak. 1974 was a year of novel technical experiments for Freed, experiments that yielded a variety of curious effects. In the case of *Dispersions*, he flecked the sprayed, gathered canvas with denatured alcohol and turpentine, creating leafy, green patches of a tie-died character. Then he used brushes to scumble white over the vertical striations. The remarkable aqueous lusters of lavender and blue-green recall the late waterlily pictures of Monet, and strongly suggest a quiet pond scene deep in a forest of birch trees. The illustrative properties in his work of that period were, and remain, disturbing to Freed; they reflect his anxious feeling that his painting had been too purely decorative, deficient in emotive content, and excessively formalistic.

Like many young painters he was experiencing discomfort and uncertainty as to what his painting was about. Hence there appeared more traditional elements of representation, illusion, illustration that did not really lead him anywhere, certainly not

next, in 1975, to a very self-conscious form of "poetry" as a possible expressive enrichment. Influenced by readings in Zen philosophy and oriental verse and his viewings of the outstanding Sino-Japanese collections at the Nelson Gallery in Kansas City, he imbued his crinkled/sprayed canvases of this period with distinctly oriental flavors. He explicitly remarked and indicated his abstract references to the mountains, water, mists, and open spaces of Far-Eastern art by giving his pictures oriental titles, such as the names of Zen painters (Tohaku, Mu-Ch'i).

Freed's oriental excursions proved to be yet another dead end, but his interest in Zen drew him to a more productive involvement with the notion of "the sublime" as it has been applied in the literature to the work of Rothko, Newman, and Reinhardt. It was principally in the sanction of these artists, made accessible by his own growing insight and seasoning, that Freed found the confidence to return to absolute content and expression, which was what had motivated him to become an artist in the first place. The consultation of Rothko, Newman, and Reinhardt also led Freed to rethink the role of drawing in his art, to suppress it and place it in a newly subordinate position to color. Abandoning his deliberate attempts at visual poetry, he began in the latter part of 1975 to paint large monochromatic color fields, some with soft "zips" (stripes) in the manner of Newman.

One of the difficulties Freed encountered in his "Chinese" pictures, a problem endemic to all his gathered canvas work, was the tendency toward animated, or animation-like, characteristics in the drawing. Even when he avoided representational and illustrative effects, he was still troubled by the inherent tendency of improvised linear forms to take on lives of their own, like cartoon characters, and to inspire cartoon-like associations. Another matter that was becoming equally disturbing to Freed was the tendency of the sprayed color field to assume associations with landscape space or sky views, beyond his intention and control. By building up broad, open expanses of color, with their subtle shifts of texture, Freed was able to achieve some of the mood and meditative content he desired, while limiting the role of drawing to the occasional, quiet stripe—a neutral, non-animated form which tends to defeat the ballooning of the color field into "landscape." At the same time, he began to acquire a sense of how the shape of the picture format itself can be used as drawing.

In late 1976 Freed's painting took on yet a different direction, partly inspired by the work of Ellsworth Kelly. Freed began to construct pictures with individual canvas panels assembled in horizontal sequence, with each panel painted a single, uniform color. Color shifts within each panel are induced by the interaction of its color with that of the panels contiguous to it. Freed's work prior to 1976 had emphasized the direct act of applying paint. Now, in the processes of designing, constructing and assembling panels, he experienced a shift in his creative focus toward concepts of architectural draftsmanship and sculptural facture. The varied panel sizes of these pictures served to break up the window-view into pictorial space which Freed had come to regard as an undesirable aspect of the rectangular painting. At the same time, the multi-panel approach was also heightening his awareness of paintings as concrete, three-dimensional objects. In these works of 1976-77 Freed's drawing graduated to a more distinctly constructive role, and its "poetry" became more a specific matter of rhythm and meter, proportion, mass and balance, and less a vague matter of associative suggestion. It was from this structural, object-oriented integration of drawing and painting that Freed moved ahead to formulate a decisive personal identity and style.

It might be said that for every serious painter, the problem of integrating drawing and color in some effective, original, consistently viable way is the final or major barrier to full maturation. Painting means, above all, the handling of color, even if but one color is used. But visual art began, is rooted in, and always begins anew in the act of drawing. Though different styles of painting may emphasize one fundamental element over the other, when there is not at least some sense of both color and drawing present, at work and sufficiently considered, we feel a lack or deficiency. 1978 was the year of Freed's major "break-

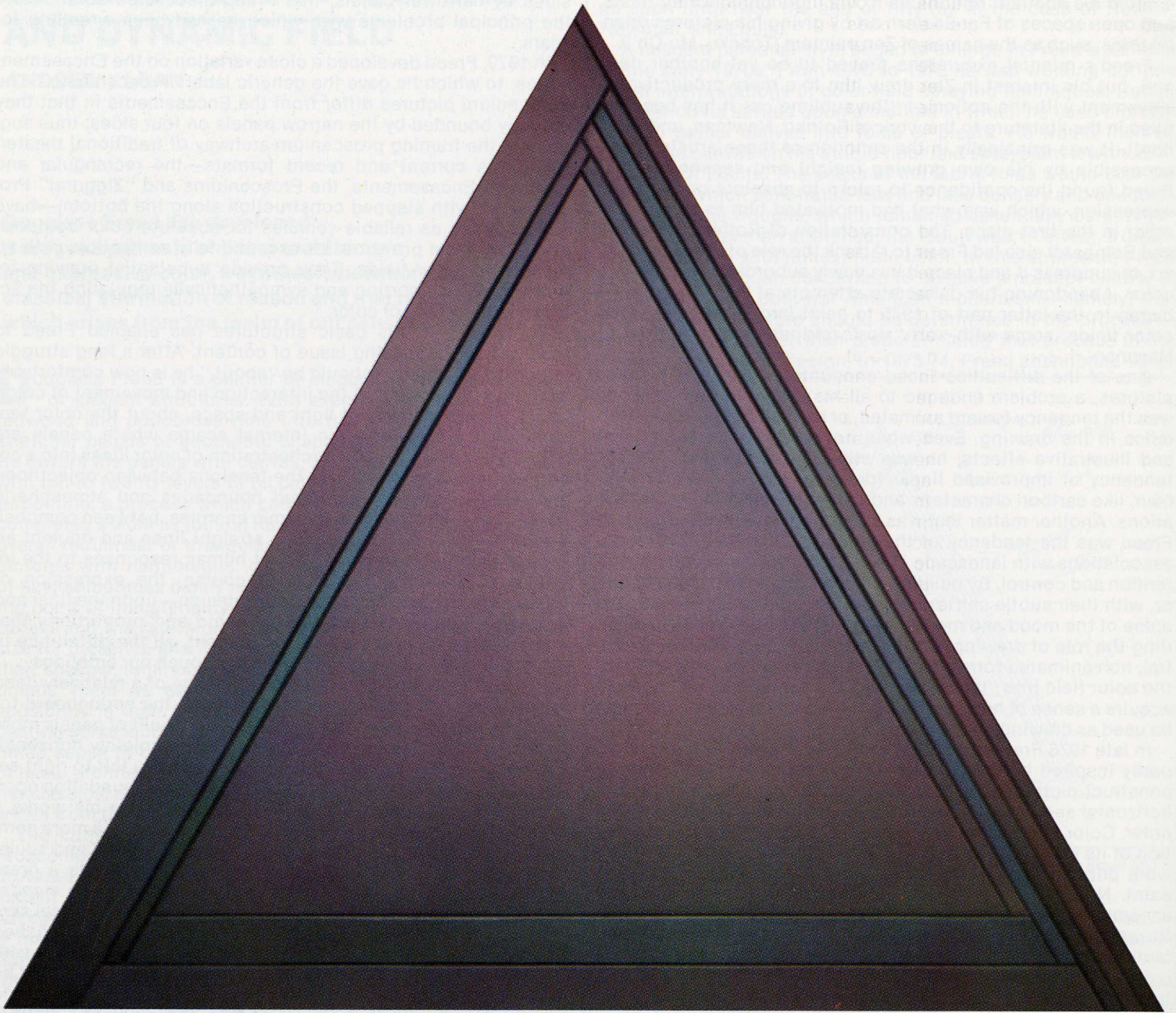
cult to say whether it was the fulfillment of his technical abilities that made possible his introduction of a significant new format, or whether it was the new format that enabled him to realize his capacities more fully. Whatever the chronological sequence, it was in the Encasement format, consisting of central panels painted in atmospheric mists of color, framed on three sides by narrower panels, that Freed discovered solutions to the principal problems with which he had been wrestling for years.

In 1979, Freed developed a close variation on the Encasement series, to which he gave the generic label "Prosceniums." The Proscenium pictures differ from the Encasements in that they are fully bounded by the narrow panels on four sides, thus suggesting the framing proscenium archway of traditional theater. All of his current and recent formats—the rectangular and triangular Encasements, the Prosceniums and "Ziggurat" Prosceniums (with stepped construction along the bottom)—have served Freed as reliable vehicles for absolute color composition. They have proven to be exceptionally compatible with atmospheric color fields. They provide substantial drawing interest while supporting and sympathetically regulating the action and breathing of color.

Confidence in his basic structures has enabled Freed to resolve that distressing issue of content. After a long struggle to decide what his art should be "about," he is now comfortable making art that is about the interaction and movement of color, about the resonances of light and space, about the color tensions that arise along the internal seams where panels are joined together, about the orchestration of color ideas into a coherent, unified whole, about the tensions between objecthood and image, between structured boundaries and atmospheric space, between static and dynamic energies, between composition and improvisation, between straight lines and opulent arrays of color, and above all, about human responses to the interplay of these forces. And of course, the expression of Freed's work depends also upon his design—upon the finer and grosser adjustments between elements and proportions that make worlds of difference in the content, all the difference in the way the pictures strike our eyes and touch our emotions.

Freed claims that it was, initially, the use of a relatively dark, horizontal "base line" panel that provided the springboard for his advances. His earlier assemblages were built of panels more or less uniform in shape and size, with a completely horizontal emphasis, as if they were meant to be read in a left-to-right sequence. The dark, narrow horizontal gave him a foundation upon which to build upward and outward. It also gave his works a stronger sense of grounding, which made possible a more compelling integrity and a more immediate architectural and sculptural unity of design. The opportunity to investigate a great variety of proportional interrelationships between the slender framing panels permitted the flowering of Freed's classical sensibilities. Drawing came forth as a more crucial, more cherished feature of his art, and his fine tectonic design renderings were preserved literally in the delineations of his paintings. In that he now hung his color upon a structural "underdrawing," he came more in touch with that classicist side of his nature—distinct from but now harmonized with the freer impulses of the color-field painter. Indeed, Freed found, as composers of music have often found, that solid, well-defined compositional structures and formats gave him a security, confidence, and guidance which helped him to liberate his vision, as well as to determine and control his modes of expression. It was in the Encasements also that Freed found a place for his sculptural instincts, for his love for the third dimension, and for his interest in the object nature of a work of art.

It is likely that his admiration for the sculpture of Jackie Ferrara, Beverly Pepper, and Ernest Trova has entered into his design and construction of the stretchers—often marvelous works in themselves—that function as armatures for his pictures. There is in these stretchers not only Freed's affinities for sculpture but also his considerable sensitivity to the craft of woodworking. Finally, it was in the 1978 Encasements that Freed settled into what has become his signature palette, which emphasizes the colors cobalt violet, venetian red, cadmium red



Douglass Freed, *Triangular No. 6, 12 a.m.*, 1981. Oil on canvas, 47 x 54". Private Collection. Courtesy Vorpai Gallery.

and blending of those four hues that has characterized Freed's painting of recent years.

To my eye, Freed's authority has been surest in the triangles and the ziggurat Prosceniums. The other rectangular formats have been less even in quality, although the best of them, such as *Proscenium #8: Anazazi* (1980), are certainly among his finest efforts. The triangular configuration seems to provide a more immediate feeling of unity and coherence; hence it presents fewer, less formidable structural problems. The triangle is perhaps more inherently resolved and more harmonious than elongated rectangles. It is less window-like, and it has more of the integrity of an iconic sign or object. The rectangular formats permit Freed to work in much larger dimensions, but the compositions can grow unwieldy. There are instances in the long horizontal assemblages where the variety of panels and the aggressiveness of the design interfere with the immediacy of visual impact, impede the action of color and our perception of it

Such irregularities are occasionally very effective, but are often less so. The "ziggurat" pattern seems best to address these problems in the rectilinear format. This shape has a natural flow which gives long, horizontal, multi-panel assemblages a more fluid continuity and helps to focus the actions of color. It obviates a related difficulty that Freed has at times encountered in some of the big, rectangular pictures, where the colors separate, get out of control, become lurid and neon. Like the triangle, the "ziggurat" also promotes the visual immediacy and instantaneity of the image, and provides an antidote to the implicit banality of rectangles.

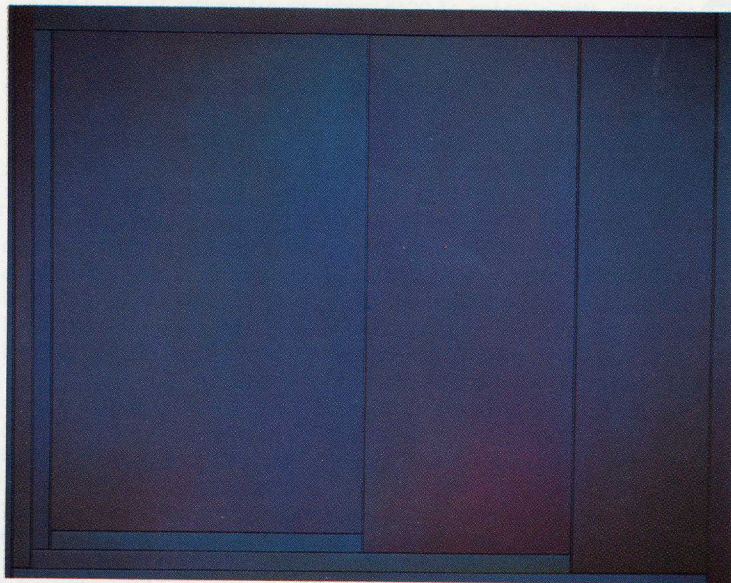
I find also that my taste in Freed's painting favors his darker compositions, with their velvety feeling and haunting, evocative sonorities. Though his very pale, powdery, pastel-like canvases have been well received, they often seem to me too slight. The darker tones also work well with the triangular and "ziggurat" formats, which appear so naturally to order their subtle, rich

12 a.m. (1981) offers a particularly masterful example of Freed's ability to balance geometric structure and intense color and to synthesize classical and romantic elements in this way. Here he has resolved the most complex movements of color into a dynamic equilibrium, a perfect harmony. The ingenious structural design of this painting consists of a set of resonant, seemingly numberless formal variations. The overall perimeter of the work—an equilateral triangle—encloses an equilateral triangular panel in the center. Because the vertical axes of these two triangles are not quite coincident, that is, slightly offset, the symmetry and stasis associated with the equilateral triangle are subtly disrupted. The slender, canvas-wrapped bars arrayed in rhythmic cadence along the right side of the painting and the other narrow panels combine with the central panel in endless triangular permutations. Although the image appears fairly straightforward at first glance, it quickly begins to challenge the viewer's perception.

Notwithstanding its mood of classical repose, it is virtually impossible to see this painting as a group of fixed, static shapes. It is a very precise geometry, essentially free of illusionism or optical gimmickry, that Freed has here devised, in order to create a subdued aura of mystery. The aura of mysterious occurrence is reinforced by, and reinforces, the orchestration of colors which forms its own cycle of infinite variations closely related to the design. Within the central panel, a warm glow of crimson along the left edge modulates almost imperceptibly through deep burgundy tones to a dusting greenish sheen around the lower right vertex—testament to Freed's finesse with the airbrush. Each of the narrow panels and bars embraces three or four distinct (yet again, barely perceivable) shifts of hue: viridian green shades into emerald, turquoise, and yellow green; deep blues transform into browns and reddish earth-tones. Each color and shift act upon those in adjacent panels to effect a remarkable dynamic of color. The patterns of design and the very matte paint finish aid Freed in keeping this elaborate color composition together, as they stress the plane surface of the image and contain that *trompe-l'oeil* impulse of a sprayed field to inflate a fluid space. The seams where panels are joined impart a quality of low relief, which contributes further to keeping the colors present on the surface, and serves also to enliven and enrich that surface.

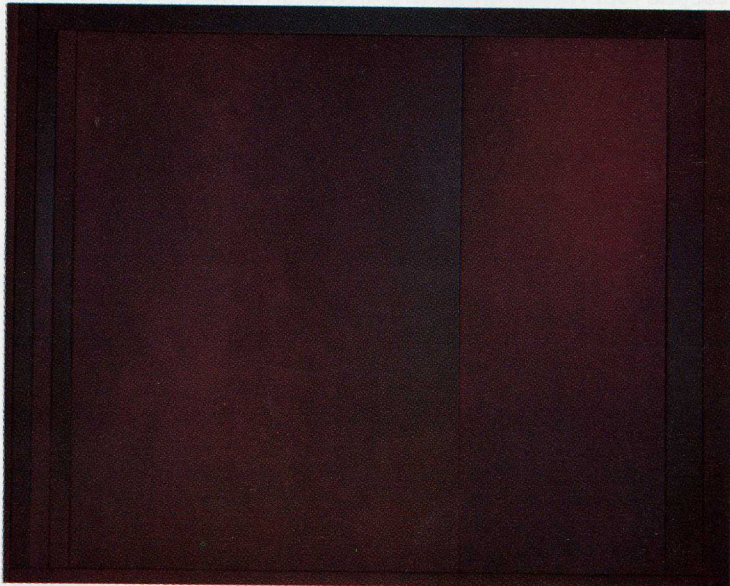
Triangular No. 6: 12 a.m. exemplifies, for me, Freed at his best. It is a confidently stylish work, an expression of timeless good taste, oblivious to what is merely faddish. It is the record of a series of intelligent, logical decisions that have yielded some of that content which Freed so admires in the art of Rothko, a meditative sense of some not-altogether-definable happening and presence. It is a painting of reserve, depth, and quiet assertion. It is at once an object of exquisite craftsmanship and an image of authentic affective power.

The next few years will be pivotal in Freed's career, as they are for any artist moving through first maturity. During this period, the "perfection" of his art—that assured, easy-seeming, but hard-won virtuosity which now serves him well—may prove to be a great danger. With the loss of anonymity, risks become harder to take. The tendency of fluency to metamorphose into glib cliché poses a predictable threat to an artist beginning to know success. Under the pressures of recognition and the ex-



Douglass Freed, *Ziggurat, Aztec*, 1980. Oil on canvas, 63-7/8 x 81-1/8".
Courtesy Vorpai Gallery.

Douglass Freed, *Proscenium #8, Anazazi*, 1980. Oil on canvas, 63-7/8 x 79 3/4". Private Collection. Courtesy Vorpai Gallery.



pectations of the marketplace, countless dreams of emblematic stature in the history of art have shriveled to the acceptance of ephemeral repute, academic prestige, or just making a living.

It is not, however, the role of this particular critic to play Nemesis to Douglass Freed. He is a man of extraordinary stamina, energy, resource, and determination. He has learned how to order his life to sustain the persistent and prolific making of art. He owns a great zeal for the fight, for the politics and business of art. A product of the Central Plains (like Pollock), he has that distinctively American impulse toward largeness, monumentality and openness, and a disregard for obstacles in his path. He has also that vitality, optimism, and enthusiasm-in-the-face-of-difficulty often associated with our heartland, which has long been viewed as a wellspring of American renewal. Whatever the odds, I would not bet against Freed's ability to attain any goal he might set. And I am one who cherishes in this