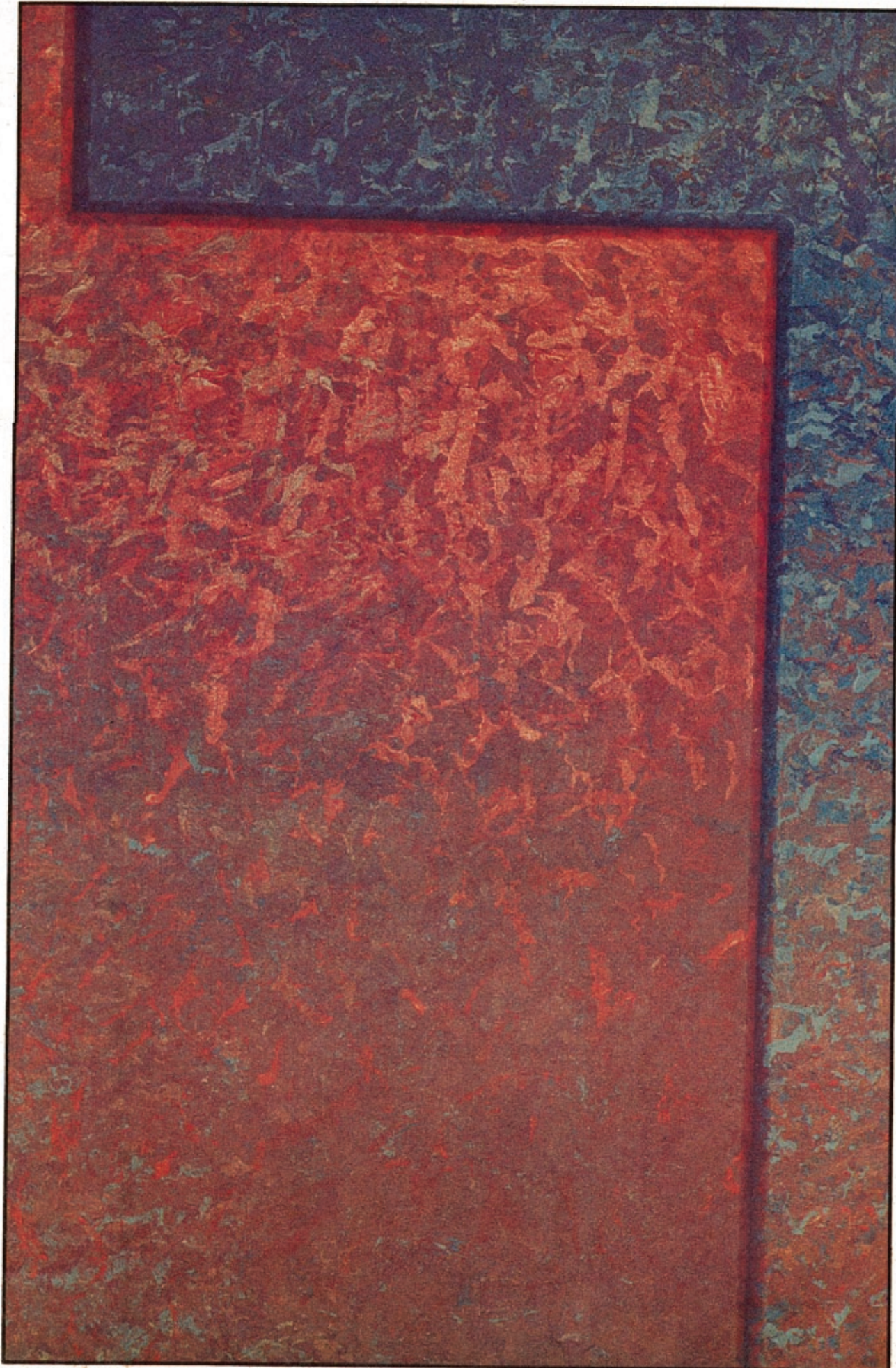


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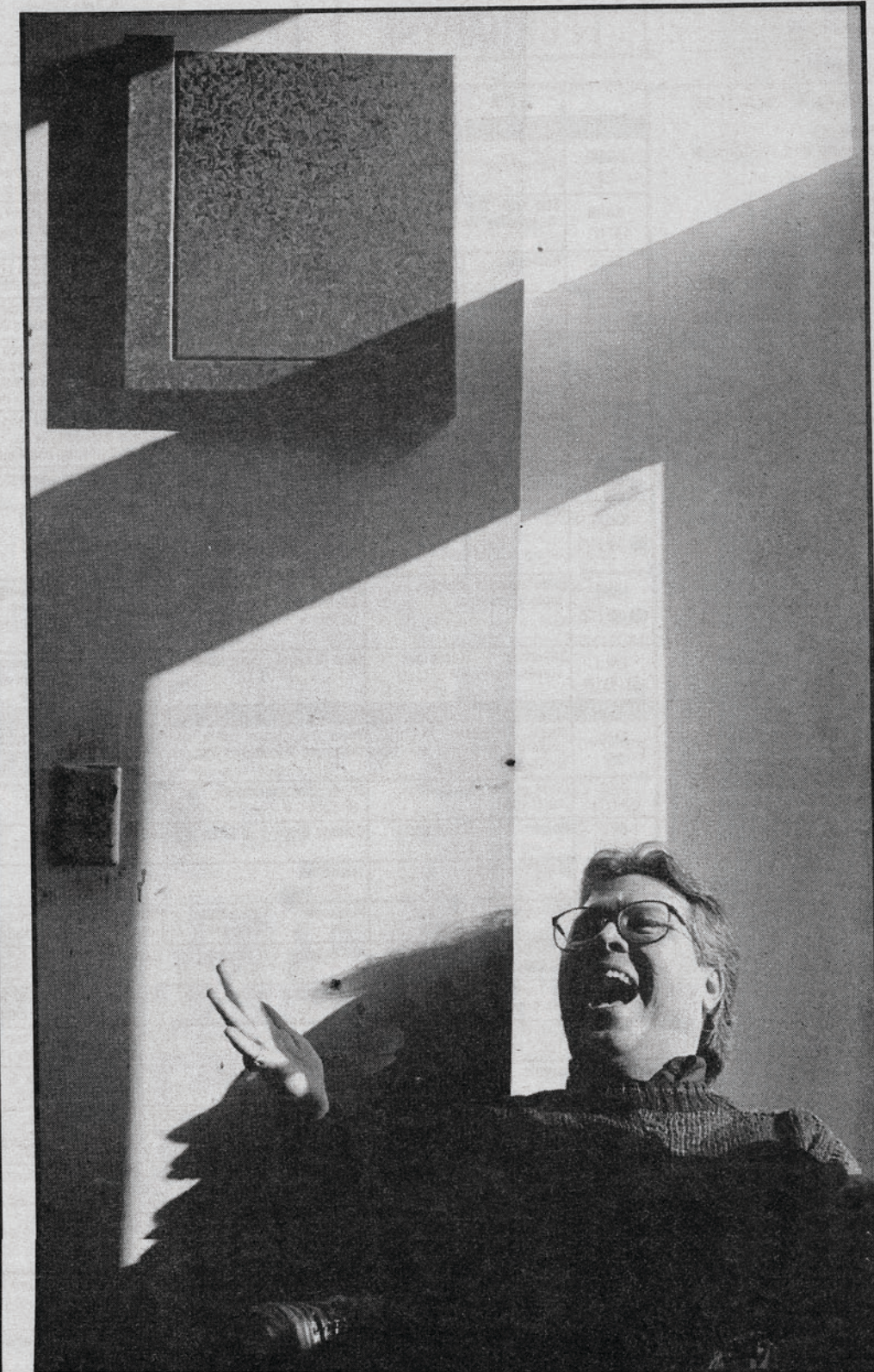
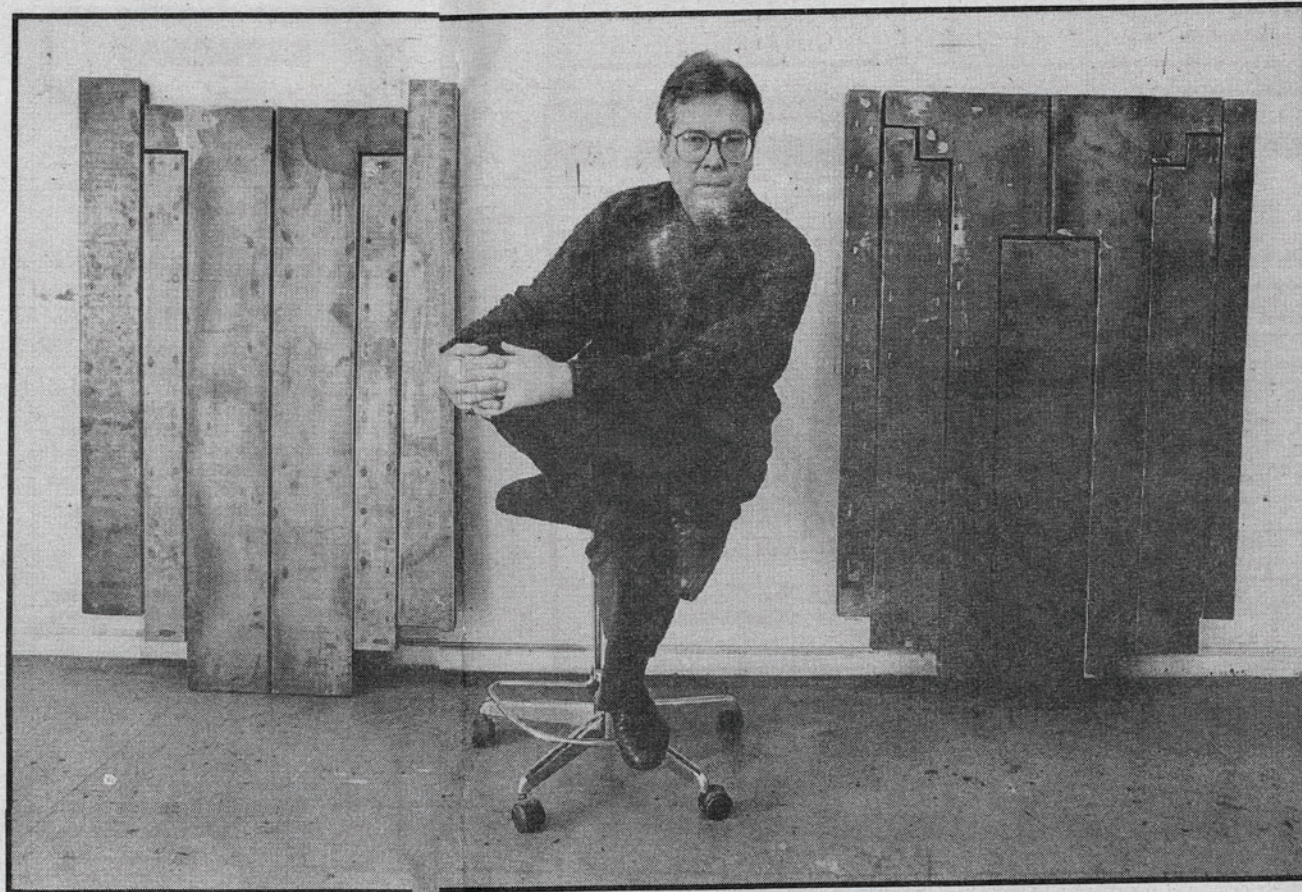
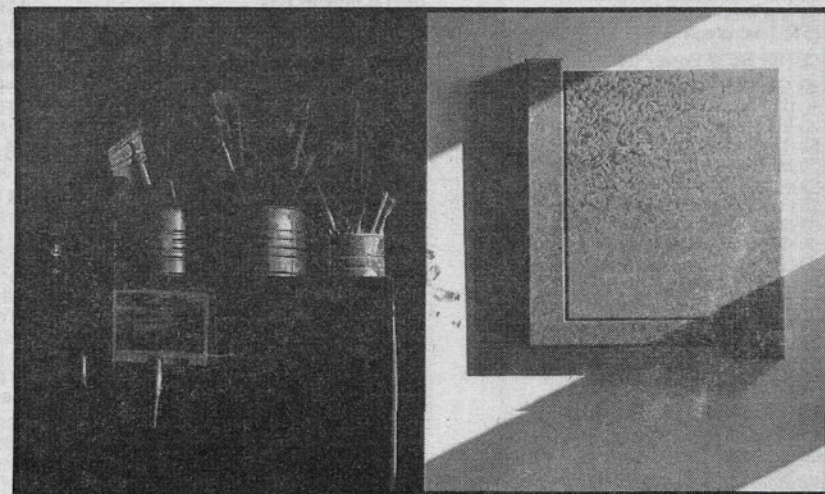
M A G A Z I N E



SoHo in Sedalia

A detail of the Douglass Freed painting 'Four Panel C Structure with Three Bars in Red, Orange and Blue, 1991.' The Sedalia artist's work will be on display through March in MU's Museum of Art and Archeology. Story on Scene Page 12.
David Pulliam photo

Douglass Freed, right and far right, poses with recent works in his Sedalia studio. MU graduate student Jim White, below center, surveys an exhibit of Freed's work at MU's Museum of Art and Archeology. White picked Freed as the subject of his master's thesis. Below, one of Freed's paintings hangs in his studio beside his brushes.



SoHo in Sedalia

Far from the East Coast art mecca, Douglass Freed attracts international attention.

Story by Olivia Mayer • Photos by David Pulliam

From his Main Street storefront turned studio in downtown Sedalia, Douglass Freed looks far more the part of a successful businessman than an abstract artist.

Dressed in rich-hued corduroys and a stately wool sweater, Freed is a fixture in this agribusiness community of 21,000. He has served on the board of the local Chamber of Commerce, acted as liaison to the state legislature for the Missouri Citizens for the Arts and since 1968 chaired State Fair Community College's art department.

No earring. No torn jeans and scraggly, unkempt hair. Then again, Freed isn't a struggling artist. At 47, this father of four is one of the foremost artists in the state. His solid regional reputation and national stature are evidenced by gallery representation on both coasts and in between. Some of his works, which can be found in museums and private collections nationally and internationally, command five-figure prices.

Though far from the art mecca of SoHo, he's content with life in Sedalia. "When I applied for a job here, I'd never heard of Sedalia, Mo. I didn't dream at the time I'd stay here that long," says the Ulysses, Kan., native. "But it's a very comfortable town."

In the nearly 24 years he's called the historic community home, he's become more than accepted. "Everybody takes pride in that I live here."

So, let's say you're willing to concede artist, but an abstract

painter? A watercolorist or landscape artist, sure. But the purveyor of thickly textured, architectonic structures enveloped in modulated color?

Freed's work is as paradoxical as Freed the man. His paintings are built from geometrically shaped canvases that carefully interlock like pieces of a puzzle. For each, he drafts a set of blueprints, meticulously drawn on a one-thirty-second-of-an-inch scale.

Then from ponderosa pine, he crafts each structural support before stretching the canvas over it. The process is restrained, calculated and measured.

The incongruity comes in phase two, the painting of his work. He hangs the multipaneled pieces, some of which span 5 feet by 9 feet, on the back wall of his spacious studio where he "lives with them" for maybe a week. Then, one by one, he takes each panel of each piece down, lays it flat on a work table and broadly brushes it with a solid hue of acrylic paint.

Then, clad in rubber gloves, he tears off portions from a roll of brown paper towels. Each wad he folds and manipulates to his liking and then dips it in paint and blots it on the canvas.

The painting stage takes maybe a week. Afterward, he bolts the pieces together. The result is classically structured pieces with lively, spontaneous color reminiscent of impressionistic paintings. His work explores "kind of the dualities of the clunky,

unexpected, awkwardness" juxtaposed against the romantic use of color, he says.

As far as what it is he is trying to say, that's easy. "First and foremost, it's purely an aesthetic object. There's no social, political overtures to it," says Freed. "It's not preachy. It doesn't address the problems of the world. There's no message."

But, he adds, on another level, it expresses spirituality. "What I try to do is create work that somehow becomes a trigger. In order to get something out of the work, you have to bring something to the work. What I try to capture in the work is some sense of mystery.

"You can't digest it in that 30-second look. That's a real essential thing."

He likens describing his work to describing garlic. "You could talk about it, describe what it looks like and feels like, but you really don't get it until you bite into it."

The same is true for his paintings. "When you begin to understand there's nothing to understand, you understand it."

Before MU graduate student Jim White, 29, began his master's thesis on Douglass Freed, he admits his preferences

in art didn't include abstract.

"I have never had a great affinity for abstract," he says. "Before, I liked pictures that told stories."

That's actually his personal reason for choosing Freed as his subject matter.

But his primary motivation for a thesis on Freed was the chance to study a living, accessible artist.

Although the subject of most art history theses are dead artists or nationally known artists living far away, White says he wanted the opportunity to study someone in person. "The basis of art history is to try to get to know the personality of the artist."

"I didn't know whether the department would let me do it," White says. "For one, he's alive, and secondly, he's a Missouri artist working at a community college."

Museum of Art and Archeology director Mort Sajadian and Christine Neal, associate curator of European and American Art, more than accepted White's thesis proposal. At White's behest, they agreed to an exhibit of Freed's most recent works.

"These were recent works which are such a radical departure from the pieces we have," Neal says. "They're so much more lively and there is so much more going on in these works."

That and the fact that Freed is one of the state's most

important contemporary artists were the main factors in the decision to host the exhibit.

"This is something that's not really being done by another contemporary artist," Neal says. "He's got his own direction that he's pursuing."

For his thesis, White spent countless hours interviewing Freed and studying his work.

He was first introduced to the artist through his studies and work completed on Freed by associate professor emeritus Vera Townsend, and he became intrigued while visiting a friend in Sedalia. There, White happened past the artist's studio, peered inside the large picture windows and spied Freed's more recent work.

"These were fairly extravagant compared to his earlier works," White says. "I wanted to find out from him how he got from the plain, geometric structures to these rich, luscious works."

Freed's earlier pieces are primarily monochromatic, and although structure has remained important, it has become more complex through his career.

What White found is that, throughout Freed's career, "he's learned from the process."

Surface, structure, texture and color have remained key ingredients, but as he has mastered one aspect, he has changed his emphasis to continue his growth. The museum

show includes his more recent innovation, works in steel. Again, Freed explores structure and surface and, to some extent, color. Two of the steel pieces have oxidized naturally, a third he covered in shoe polish for its finish, and the fourth was done by gun bluing.

White says the significance of his thesis lies in what Freed has been able to accomplish from his relative isolation in Mid-Missouri. "One of the reasons this show and my thesis are important is we're talking about a living artist who has decided to stay in Missouri even though he has obtained some national and international recognition."

If the history books 100 years from now mention him, the artist says, they will because of that reason. "The structure, that's kind of my contribution to the world of art, but I think my claim to fame has to come from being one of the most important artists outside the scene."

"Recent Works by Douglass Freed" will be on display through March 22 in MU's Pickard Hall. Hours are 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Tuesdays, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Friday and noon to 5 p.m. weekends. Admission is free.

Freed's abstract works on paper along with ceramics by fellow Sedalian Paul Allen will be on view through March 31 in the main lobby concourse, University Hospital and Clinics, 1 Hospital Drive.