DOUGLASS FREED

The art of painting is a thundering collision of different worlds, which are designated to create new worlds in their conflict with one another. . .
Wassily Kandinsky, Music of the Spheres, 1913

By any accounts, Douglass Freed's career is an ongoing success story. Since he began exhibiting his art in the 1970s, his paintings and works on paper have been continuously shown and sold across the United States in hundreds of group shows and over fifty solo exhibitions to date. He's accomplished all this while working full-time, until quite recently, as an arts professional in academia and the museum world. He has also been married since 1965 to his wife Nina, and raised four children.

Freed was born in 1944 and grew up in Ulysses, Kansas, approximately 90 miles west of Dodge City. He has one older brother, and throughout his childhood, Freed recalls, his father always had good jobs. At the age of 23, while still in graduate school at Kansas State University in Fort Hays, Freed was asked to form a brand-new art department at the State Fair Community College in Sedalia, Missouri. He chaired the college's program until 2000, when he was then asked to be the director of the new Daum Museum of Contemporary Art, located on the campus. The Daum Museum opened to the public in 2002, and shortly thereafter became nationally known when a reviewer from the New York Times visited there and wrote a significant review.

Such a saga is almost unparalleled in the oscillating, highly fickle environs known as the artworld. It is even more astounding because Freed has accomplished all this while living his entire professional life in the town of Sedalia, Missouri, a place so obscure to most art powerbrokers that one of his New York dealers referred to him as a "third-world artist."

Part of Freed's artistic success, I believe, is because from the beginning his art has been unmistakably his own. He is an artist clearly of his time, and he is generous when crediting the art and artists who have had a decisive impact on his work. But in the end, his uniquely personal vision has never strayed, and much of its originality, he believes, is owed to the region he calls home. The vast expanses of the midwest, referred to bi-coastally as the "flyover" zone, has proved a reservoir of inspiration for Freed, just as it has, in the past, and in much different ways, for such notables as Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton.

The earliest paintings in Freed's retrospective exhibition, "Dispersion" (1973) and "Airiel" (1975), testify to Freed's abiding love of color-field painting, a form of abstract art closely associated to abstract expressionism in which, typically, large areas of paint are spread across the entire canvas. "Dispersion" owes a particular allegiance to the work of Jules Olitski (1922 – 2007), Freed notes. Olitski's best- known paintings consist of atmospheric blankets of colored spray paint, evoking landscapes and skyscapes that seem to spread into infinity. Freed tells the story of coming to Kansas City while still in

graduate school, and visiting the Nelson Museum (now the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art).

"I saw this amazing Olitski [painting] – it was really large, and it just blew me away," he recalls. ("Volya Radiance," 1969, 9 x 17 feet). The spatial quality of Olitski's art had enormous appeal for Freed in his own work. "I think it has to do with living my life on the western plains, with that unbelievable horizon line, and the kind of austerity where there aren't even any trees by the river,"[1] he observes.

The abstract-expressionist works of Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, and the structured geometric abstractions of Mondrian, with their philosophical and spiritual underpinnings, also affected him deeply.

Freed also emphasizes the importance, over the years, of the time he's spent perusing the Nelson Museum's superb collection of Chinese and Japanese art.

"My influences are visual ones," he states. "I respond to the quiet, meditative aspects of Asian art, and that feeling of the sublime that you get from some of the more monochromatic abstract paintings."

Freed became nationally known for the sectional paintings he began making in 1979. He spray-painted with oil on two or more panels at a time, which he subsequently combined into geometric forms that could be triangular, rectangular, or up to seven -sided. These works quickly found their way into some of the best known galleries in the country, including Greenberg Gallery in St. Louis, Douglas Drake Gallery in Kansas City, Dart Gallery in Chicago, and Vorpal Gallery in New York City. Working as a free-lance art curator at that time, I included Freed's painting in the 1979 regional exhibition "Kansas City Abstraction," which was reviewed in Art News magazine.

The most dominant art movement during the 70s was minimalism, and Freed's art, with its architectonic shapes and monotone palette, has some affinity with the reductivism of that art form, which was primarily sculptural. But minimalism's deliberate assault on the self-expressive qualities of abstract expressionism, along with what Freed felt was an accompanying "lack of soul," did not suit the end purposes of his art.

"I liked the object quality of minimalism, and I want my paintings to feel like objects," Freed says, "but I also want a painting that you can fall into, that has that sense of the sublime."

Many post- 60s abstract artists debunked the kind of spiritual or mystical associations that early abstractionists such as Kandinsky and Mondrian brought to the arena of abstraction. Artists like Frank Stella insisted that their art be seen as autonomous objects only; what you saw is what you got, with no theoretical, philosophical or spiritual underpinnings.

Most art historians of the time agreed. And yet, as some much needed revisionism takes place, the strictly formalist stance art critics made in the second half of the 20th century re abstraction now seems ahistorical. Painters as diverse as Yves Klein, Arnulf Rainer, Tom Wudl, and Matt Mullican referenced, respectively, rosicrucianism, Buddhism and christian mysticism, zen, and personal mythologies in their art.[2]

Sculptors Donald Judd and Mario Merz worked consistently with the Fibonacci series, an ordering system that while mathematical, is organic and essentially inexplicable. Dorothea Rocburne based her elegantly folded canvas and paper pieces on correspondences related to the Golden Section, a set of mystical proportions, also based in nature, that imply an ever-expanding cosmic energy.

Freed, while insisting that he is more intuitive than intellectual, admits to extensive reading during this phase of his career, including material on the Golden Section. Certainly, his work during this time resonates with that of the artists just mentioned, all of whom created art on the borderline between physics and metaphysics. Theirs was art with an underlying mystical sensibility, and this fusion of the empirical with the spiritual defies mere formalist theory. Freed considers the abstract paintings he made at this time to be some of his best work ever.

In the eighties Freed was producing an average of thirty spray paintings yearly. Almost all of them sold, many ending up in Europe as well as throughout the United States. It was at this time that he began to have notable health issues. He remembers attending the 1982 conference "Toxicity in the Arts," and began paying more attention to his practice of spray painting. But ultimately, even though he wore a mask while working, his doctor told him that the atomized mist of the oil spray was having a serious impact on his health.

Until then, Freed used layer upon layer of thinly sprayed oil paint to create all his paintings. After installing the separate panels that formed each piece on his studio wall, he would mix "lots and lots of colors" to produce the dozens of varied undercoatings for each element, spraying all the while to subtly shape the nuanced colors of his geometricized forms. He now had to stop spraying and begin using brushes, a critical change he found challenging.

By the late 1980s he also began using acrylics rather than oils. It was a much slower process than spray-painting. "Each painting," Freed recalls, "was painted over a process of many days. The brushstrokes also produced a more modulated surface, and I had to figure out how to not have the surfaces be so shiny. . .I still wanted to enable the viewer to fall into the surface [of the work]."

In addition to dabbing on the paint, Freed also used crumpled paper towels to activate the paint surface. Some of these works, such as "Guerrero" (1989) are vibrant and very appealing to the eye. But Freed became less and less happy working like this. "The paintings became more and more impastoed, with too much on the surface; they didn't do what I wanted them to do. I missed the visual push-pull effect of the earlier work, and the simplicity of the spray paintings."

By 1996 Freed was experimenting with figuration, using imagery such as clouds and bodies of water. Having returned to oil paint, he began to create one or more panels with scenes from nature, which he would juxtapose next to one or more panels of pure abstraction. This new avenue of expression proved regenerative, resulting in a fusion of Freed's chief concerns that continues to this day.

If Freed's first forays into landscape were tentative, that quickly changed. His lyrical depiction of waterfalls, forests, farmfields, and other non-populated natural sites soon ranked as some of the most compelling scenes of nature being painted, along with artists such as April Gornik. A wall in his studio is covered with various photographs he has taken, including aerial shots, of the kind of breathtaking topography he uses for studies. In some paintings, such as "Shroud" (2001) and "Memory Retrieved" (2003), he has even done away with individual panels of pure abstraction.

But Freed does not want to be thought of as a nature painter. "The world's worst thing to me is to be called a landscape painter," he says bluntly. "My paintings are as much about abstraction as anything else." He still utilizes multiple panels, which are always differently colored and individually painted, even if depicting a single view. The "push-pull" effect so important to his art i[1]s stronger than ever. And in the denial of what they purport to depict, for they are clearly not just representational, these works possess a true postmodern sensibility.

With this latest body of work, Freed says: " I can indulge my love of color-field [painting], and also add an element of ambiguity, because I'm also dealing with time and mood. I love how the two colors butt up against the other [in the different panels], so the viewer can fall into one space and then out the other."

The painterly dialectic that Freed has established in his current work enhances the underlying quest for spiritual meaning that, I believe, has been at the heart of his paintings from the start. His love of contraries resonates with the belief systems of Jacob Bohme, the 17th century German mystic whose world view significantly influenced Hans Arp and Wassily Kandinsky, among a host of other artists. Bohme experienced a number of mystical visions during which he believed he saw the spiritual structure of the world as sets of dualities that represent the pulsing of the universal heartbeat. Philosopher Ernst Bloch sums up Bohme's philosophy as: "That everywhere one thing opposes the other, not in enmity, but so that each thing be set in motion to make itself manifest." [3]

The resulting collisions ultimately lead to a state of "redeemed harmony," a place more perfect than the original unitive state of the cosmos. Douglass Freed's paintings are a vehicle to help us get there.

Elisabeth Kirsch
Art historian and Curator

NOTES:

[1] All quotations of Douglass Freed's are from conversations during a visit to his studio and phone calls during the month of January, 2011.

[2] Information about spirituality in the work of these artists is discussed at length thoughout the catalog The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890 – 1985, published by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986.

[3] Ibid., p. 245