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Hover by Kenneth Noland

Author(s): Michael Fried

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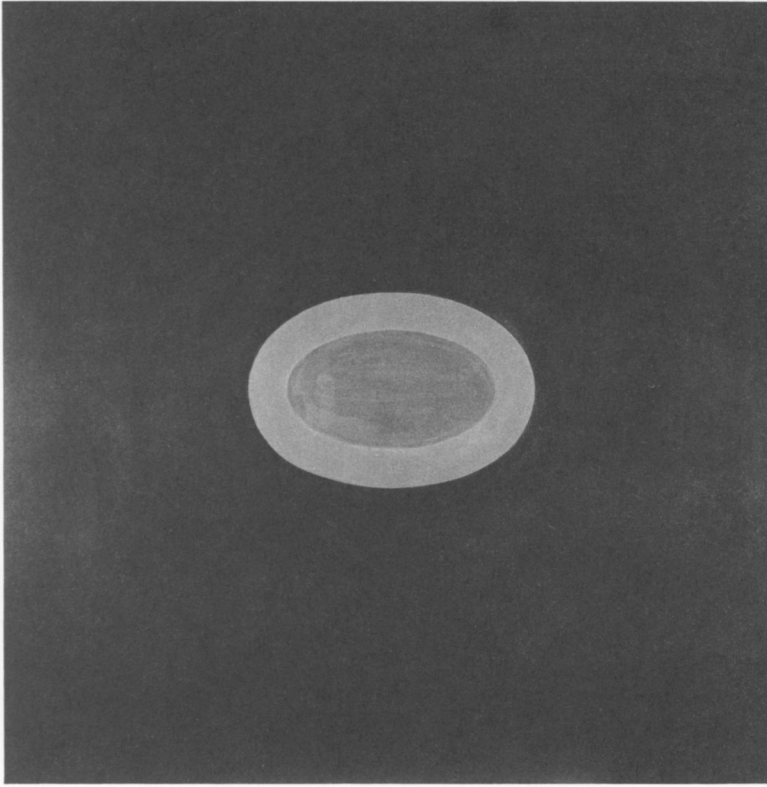
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HOVER BY KENNETH NOLAND

IN 1964 the Fogg Museum acquired the painting *Hover*, executed the previous year by Kenneth Noland.¹ Noland was born in North Carolina in 1922, attended Black Mountain College and studied in Paris with Ossip Zadkine in 1948–1949. During the 1950's he lived in Washington, D. C., where he was a close friend of the late Morris Louis. In 1953 Noland brought Louis to New York, chiefly to meet the distinguished critic Clement Greenberg; on that same visit both painters were deeply impressed by a large painting by Helen Frankenthaler, executed in a technique based ultimately on Pollock's dripped, all-over paintings of 1947–1950 as well as on his black stain paintings of 1951.² On their return to Washington, Louis and Noland resolved to explore possible alternatives to the painterly, gestural Abstract Expressionist mode dominant in New York at that time. The visit seems to have been decisive for Louis, then in his early forties: by 1954 he had adapted Frankenthaler's technique to his own vision, in which gesture and even traditional drawing were eschewed in favor of broad expanses of rich, smouldering color. Noland himself did not break through to his mature style until 1958–1959. These pictures were based on concentric-ring or radiating-arm motifs, the centers of which were situated at the exact center of the square canvas. This relation between the motif and the picture-support obtains in *Hover*. But the compact ellipsoid motif itself represents a significant departure from the radically symmetrical circular motifs preceding it.

1. 1964.35. Acrylic on canvas. 69 × 69 in.

2. Clement Greenberg, "Louis and Noland," *Art International*, iv (May 25, 1960), 26–29.



Hover by Kenneth Noland (Fogg Art Museum, 1964.35)

Noland, like Louis, makes his paintings by staining thinned pigment into unsized canvas. Following the precedent set by Pollock in his drip paintings of 1947–1950, no use is made of an easel. Instead, a length of canvas, almost always unstretched, is placed on the floor where the painter can work on it from all sides. The act of painting may consist of pouring or dripping paint onto the canvas, rubbing it in with sponges, rolling it on with commercial rollers or perhaps, as in *Hover*, even using a brush—whatever Noland feels is the simplest and most direct way of getting the paint into

the canvas.³ Even when a brush is used, no trace remains of individual strokes; and in general staining tends to reduce the role of personalized execution to a bare minimum. In this respect, as in others, the stain paintings of men like Louis, Noland and Jules Olitski represent a strong reaction against the bravura technique and personalized handwriting characteristic of the work of Abstract Expressionists such as de Kooning.

A similar reaction occurred once before in modern art, in Neo-Impressionist theory and practice. Here for example is Pissarro writing to Durand-Ruel, in what proved to be a temporary attitude of acceptance of Seurat's absolutist notions: "As far as execution is concerned, we regard it as of little importance: art, as we see it, does not reside in the execution: originality depends only on the character of the drawing and the vision peculiar to each artist."⁴ Even more surprisingly contemporary is the Neo-Impressionist critic Félix Fénéon's account of *La Grand Jatte*: ". . . here in truth the accidents of the brush are futile, trickery is impossible; there is no place for bravura—let the hand be numb, but let the eye be agile, perspicacious, cunning."⁵

In both Neo-Impressionism and the new stain painting, the reaction against bravura technique is related to a developing interest in color. In *Hover* the field is wine-red, the small central ellipse steely blue-gray and the elliptical band separating one from the other bright red. But no mere enumeration can begin to convey the subtle interactions of the colors, or the surprising intensity with which the bright red elliptical band makes itself felt. Using only three colors, Noland has succeeded in constructing a color-situation of great optical force. It should be observed, however, that this color-situation is not coercive in character but, on the

3. Many of the finest stain painters, such as Louis, Noland and Olitski, have made frequent use of plastic paints, which take an acrylic resin thinner. But the importance of such paint to their work can be, and in fact already has been, exaggerated. For example, Olitski has used thinned-down enamel, with results that are virtually indistinguishable from those obtained with plastic paint.

4. John Rewald, *Post-Impressionism from Van Gogh to Gauguin* (New York, 1956), p. 105.

5. John Rewald, *Post-Impressionism from Van Gogh to Gauguin*, p. 98.

contrary, remarkably reticent. Far from overpowering the beholder by the juxtaposition of high-keyed complementaries—one of the stock devices of what has come to be called “op art”—*Hover* tends to appear dark, subdued and perhaps uninteresting at first glance. It is only after the beholder has looked at it hard for some time that the colors begin to come fully alive, and to involve him in their life.

In many of Noland’s paintings the structure may be described schematically, apart from a consideration of color; but this is impossible in the case of *Hover*. More than in either the concentric-ring paintings which preceded it or the chevrons which came after, color in *Hover* plays a structural role of vital importance. This is necessitated by the relative arbitrariness of the ellipsoid motif, which lacks any self-evident relation as shape to the square canvas in which it is centered. The wine-red field appears to bring intense coloristic pressure to bear on the central motif; and this pressure seems both to account for its ellipsoid shape as well as for its suspension at the heart of the field. At the same time, the bright red elliptical band seems both to menace the steely inner ellipse (which virtually disappears as we stare at the painting) and to be on the verge of expanding into the field. The result is a perilous, constantly changing equilibrium that is at once coloristic and structural.

Finally, the reticence remarked in *Hover* is an index of Noland’s integrity as a painter—he is intransigent in his refusal to exploit obvious effects—and of a dimension of inwardness that has always characterized his work. Noland’s paintings are declarative without being declamatory, lucid but never obvious. They are charged with feeling and possessed of an experiential richness far in excess of their visible means.

MICHAEL FRIED