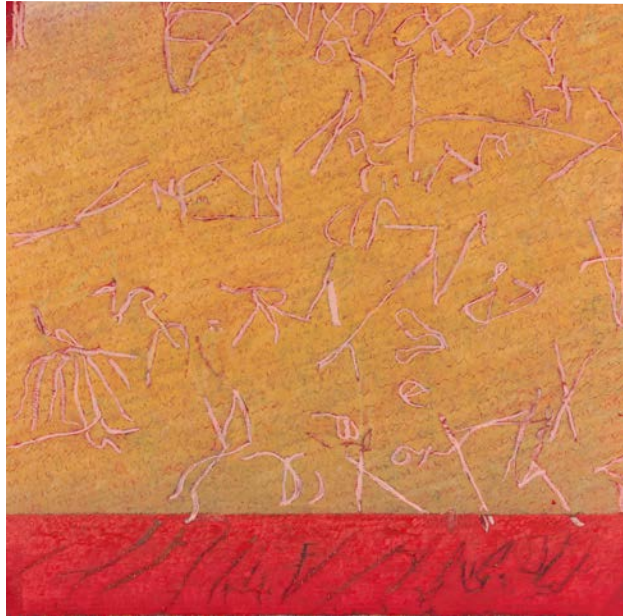


BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen: WARREN ROHRER

by David Carrier



Warren Rohrer, *Field: Language 2*, 1990. Oil on linen, 48 1/4 x 48 1/4 inches. Courtesy Locks Gallery.

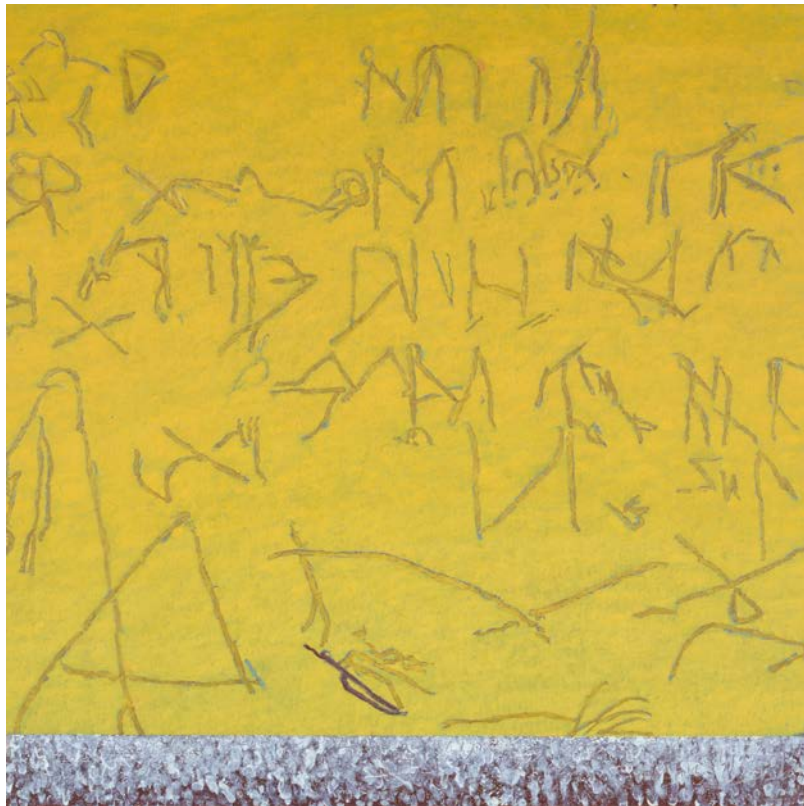
Figurative landscape art is inevitably tied to the site that it depicts. But often abstract painting is not. You can study Kazimir Malevich's monochromes or Barnett Newman's zips without making reference to the visual features of cities where they were created. Sometimes, however, abstractions too, are site-specific. This certainly is true for Piet Mondrian's late pictures, which reflect his exhilarated response to Manhattan's grids. And it is also the case for Warren Rohrer's paintings, which are eastern Pennsylvania landscape-based abstractions.

The Mennonites have been around for a long time. Rembrandt depicted some Dutch Mennonites. But this important religious community is not much represented in the American art world. Although not strict iconoclasts, Mennonites tend to believe that the all-consuming demands of art making are incompatible with the intense life of their religious community. Raised in Lancaster farming territory, in a Pennsylvania community near Philadelphia, Warren Rohrer (1927–95) was descended from many generations of Mennonite farmers. For a long time, he lived on a farm amongst the Mennonites. And so, becoming an artist involved some real personal struggle. And although he left that community, this tradition gave him close, lasting ties to nature and agriculture. This show of abstract paintings and drawings from the 1990s reflects this, his lived experience.

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Seen from a distance, Rohrer's late paintings may appear to be monochromes. One is blond, some are dark and one is white. But when you get closer, you see that marks are scratched through the very delicate surfaces. And Rohrer was a masterful painter of textures. In *Field: Language 7* (1990), which is golden, on the rectangular canvas are some short marks, and at the bottom is a rectangular panel marked with fingerprints. In *Field: Language 2* (1990) the field is dark brown, and the bottom edge red. And in *Field: Downstream 1* (1990), a diptych, some lines scratched through are white, while others are red. As the Mennonite farmers worked these fields, harvesting their crops and leaving behind some brown brush, so Rohrer showed both the colors of the farmland he depicts and, in his markings, the effect of the harvest. These paintings are very varied, for they record the changing seasons.

On the Locks Gallery website is a marvelous photograph of Rohrer looking at a field, which has been cleared. You can sense how much these rural sites meant to him. His



Warren Rohrer, *Field: Language 7*, 1990. Oil on linen, 54 1/4 x 54 1/4 inches. Courtesy Locks Gallery.

cuts into the surface, which are short lines, are a kind of writing, a hidden calligraphy which is not meant to be deciphered. As he said, his subject was the stroke. The titles of these paintings are suggestive. Rohrer mentions the fields and then adds some more words, which vary with reference to the strokes: "language," "downstream," a "screen," or an "extension." He thus adds to the bare abstracted reference to fields some hints about how to interpret his subjects. In that way, these titles interpret his marks. *Field: Downstream 1* (1990) is a diptych, with the marks on the right panel, i.e. downstream, blurred; in *Field: Screen* (1990) we see a white, winter landscape; and in *Field: Extension* (1992) the golden canvas, a diptych, has a pale, heavily marked extension at the bottom.

In the long chapter on landscapes as sources for abstraction in *Abstract Art: A Global*



History, Pepe Karmel argues that “abstract paintings often are disguised landscapes.” His examples include vortexes, waves, waterfalls, lines of waves, and other dramatic natural scenes. In this context, what’s striking by contrast about Rohrer’s sources is their inherently calm, essentially contemplative character. Dramatic subjects are foreign to his late art. Rohrer was very much a Philadelphian artist. He made use of the splendid resources of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. And for twenty-five years he taught at the Philadelphia College of Art (now the University of the Arts). But when, in 2016, I published a short book on him, I was surprised to discover that although he often exhibited and had a prominent role in the local art world, there was a relative paucity of literature about him. Philadelphia, although not far from Manhattan by train, has a very different art world. Thanks to the long-time loyal



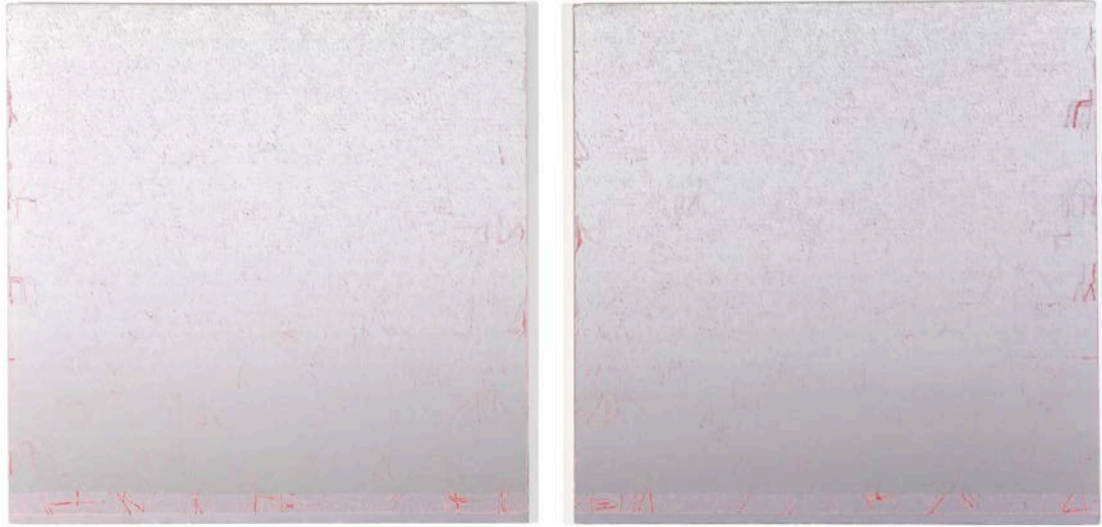
Warren Rohrer, *Field: Downstream 1*, 1990. Oil on linen, 24 1/4 x 48 1/4 inches. Courtesy Locks Gallery.

support of the Locks Gallery, Rohrer had the freedom to develop in relative, highly productive isolation.

In 1972, when young, Rohrer was much impressed by exhibitions of Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. But looking back, it’s not clear what their painting had to offer him. He found the visual resources he needed close at hand. Using GPS, I drove once out to the site of his onetime country home. As you would expect from the paintings, that Eastern Pennsylvania landscape is unpretentious, undemonstrative, and undramatic—to characterize it in negative terms. In that way, Rohrer’s art was authentically true to his religious heritage. Living and working next to the Mennonite community, he discovered how to make highly personal, deeply expressive abstract art. And that, it seems to me, was a great achievement.

When I was walking through this show, puzzled about how to synthesize my experience, Phong Bui entered the gallery, and offered to me some dazzling observations which I have happily borrowed and recorded. But of course he is not responsible for how I have used his ideas.

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Warren Rohrer, *Untitled 4*, 1993. Oil on linen, 54 x 113 1/2 inches. Courtesy Locks Gallery.

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