‘LIKE DUCHAMP, SQUARED’
The Double Edged Sword:
David Row’s Ambiguous Abstraction

by Christian Leigh

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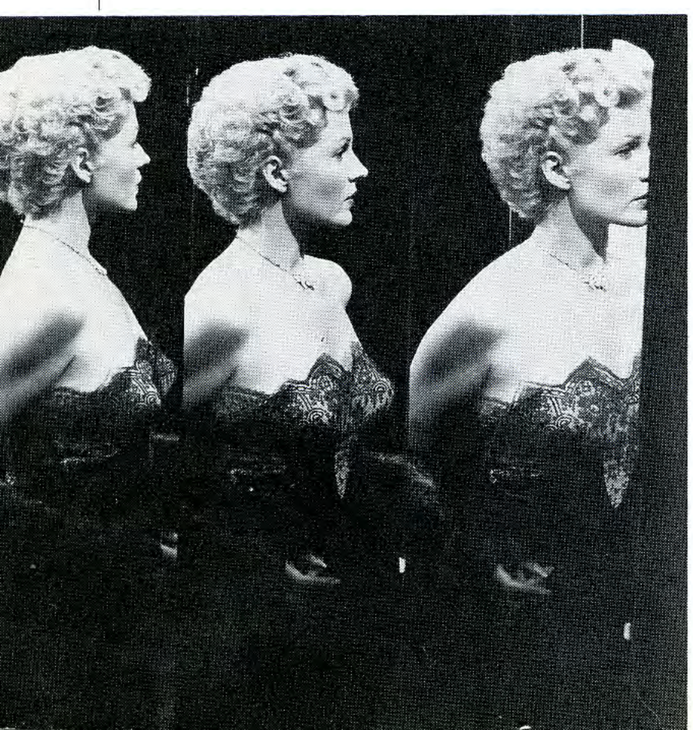
"Like Duchamp squared. In this context all actions take on a self-conscious, provisional nature....If there's a discipline, it is in the resistance to anything programmatic or formulaic, because rules and programs cannot be followed past a certain point. There's a kind of open-endedness and illogicality here, a sense that you can't quite grasp exactly what the program is, since the program is always violating the new sense of what it should be....I'd have to grant the subjective equal status with all other meanings. Using formal means to generate that level of response keeps the work alive after the immediate context changes with time. There's a distinction here between using formalism and being used by it."

—David Row[1]

Rita Hayworth in Orson Welles's film: "The Lady from Shanghai"
Columbia Pictures, 1948



David Row, along with a number of other artists working concurrently within the language of abstraction (these include Peter Halley, Ross Bleckner, Christian Eckart, Philip Taaffe, Sherrie Levine, and Jonathan Lasker), has been instrumental within an ongoing late-eighties art conversation concerning the use of painterly tropes perhaps more relevant to art historical rather than perceptual experience. While it would be elitist (not to mention banal) to avert one's proverbial gaze away from the beauty and objecthood of each of these artists's works, it would, at the same time, be playing Pollyanna not to make mention of the viewer-accumulated information that makes looking at , say, for example, a stripe painting by Ross Bleckner or a Christian Eckart "Regular Painting," so much more rewarding an experience. This is not to say, as a theoretical fascist like Yve-Alain Bois would, that we are participating in the politics of a cultural Endgame, but rather the opposite: That we are partaking in a new, hyper-hybridized spectrum of possibility; a game board

[1]James Hyde, Richard Kalina, David Row, "Roundtable—The Ambiguity of Freedom: Three Painters Discuss Abstraction Now," *The Journal of Art,* June/July/August 1991, New York.

Installation view
Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac
Paris

where in each viewer can bring to each work his or her own accumulated knowledge, and consequently, his or her own subjective reading, what Donald Kuspit called "Subjectivism." (Question: Does Modernism ever really end????) Or, to quote Montaigne, "We need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things." In a nutshell: What the viewer takes away depends upon what the viewer brings.

What makes this concept "radical," even nowadays, is that the suggestion of a reference system needed to decode these objects is diametrically opposed to the Warholism that declares art as populist rather than intellectual. Perhaps the idea of having to be active rather than passive carries with it a frightening, often paralyzing sense of gloom and doom. We have for so long been told that art is meant to entertain, that we tend to buy the popcorn even before we pay the admission price; inertia being a myth of partaking in the culture industries. This is augmented in the case of abstraction in that the very concept of abstract painting still suffers from an outmoded image created in the mass media (perhaps based on Jackson Pollock and his ilk) of the abstract painter as a madman carrying on

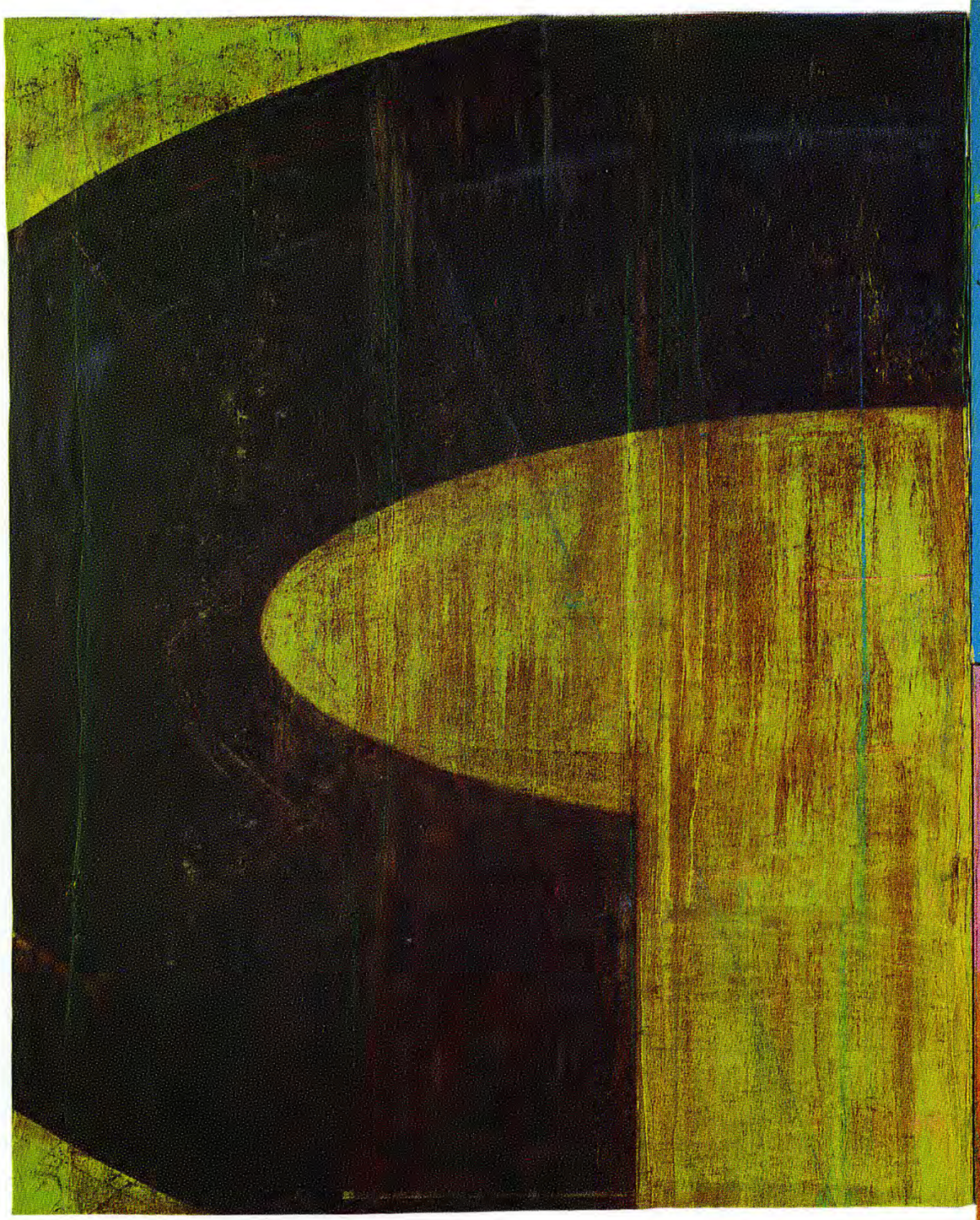
and waving his arms in to the night, with a paintbrush in one hand and a straight razor in the other, sprinkling and dripping paint this way and that, and claiming to see landscapes in the mist. If the introduction of a discourse-related, mandatory vocabulary has done anything at all, it has only gone farther to alienate an already hostile public from the work of its artists—the late-'80s artist is once again the stuff of *New Yorker* cartoons and situation comedies (Dick Van Dyke in a smock and beret, carrying a palette and twisting a funny, false French moustache); the beat poet once removed— now he wears a jacket and tie; he's a yuppie too.

As is so often the case in matters of discourse, what is most interesting about art is often what is used to publicly denigrate it. To look at a painting by Peter Halley without knowing the work of Frank Stella or the theories of Jean Baudrillard could leave one cold, just as looking at David Row's paintings without previous knowledge of Robert Mangold and Ellsworth Kelly and their contributions to the painting canon could very possibly leave one out in the cold. The experience of seeing is intensified and recreated via one's own

12 September 1991

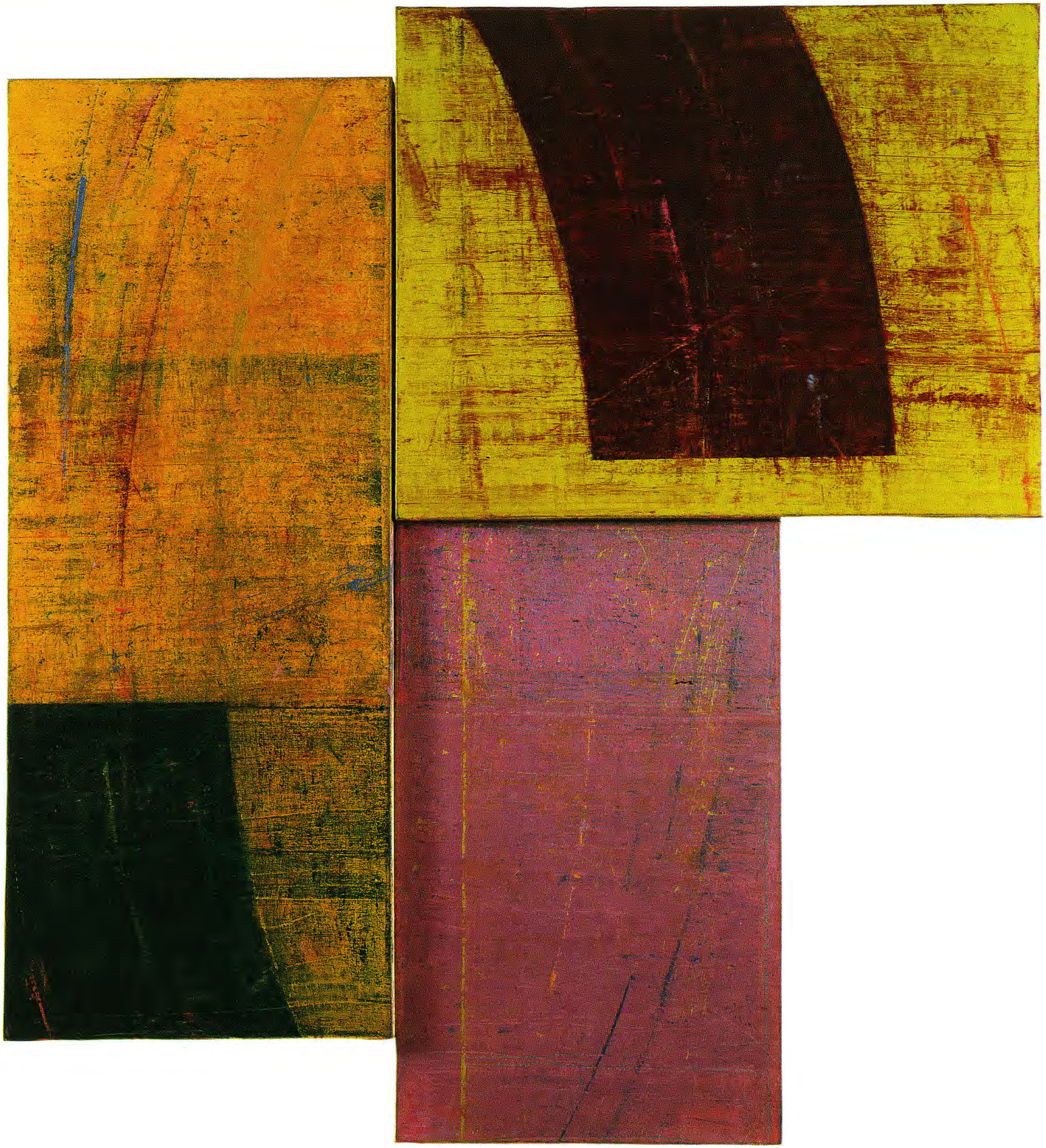
Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac Paris

Who's afraid of magenta, yellow, and cyan?
1991 133" x 161" Oil and wax on canvas



reflexivity and knowledge. This is as true, though less under attack, in various other culture practices. Reading Vladimir Nabokov is made a far more intense experience if one has read Kafka before, just as having read Nabokov intensifies the reading of Milan Kundera's work. Similarly, appreciating Robert Venturi and his theories is enriched by the understanding of Gaudi's incongruity just as Christian Lacroix's design owes to Balenciaga and Schiaparelli—I don't think you can truly appreciate Lacroix's use of hot pink if you don't understand what it meant to Schiaparelli before him. (I'm not saying you can't wear the dress. I'm only saying you can't *get* the dress.) What is Richard Rorty without Harold Bloom, Rainer Werner Fassbinder without Douglas Sirk, Barbra Streisand without Judy Garland, Eddie Murphy without Lenny Bruce, Stephen Sondheim without Kurt Weil, Edward Albee without Samuel Beckett, Woody Allen without Ernie Kovacs, Madonna without Marilyn Monroe? But then even the Warhol experience is vastly improved by accumulated knowledge—What are his Jackies, Lizs, and Marilyns if not icon paintings with a bizarre, jaded, warped, jagged edge?

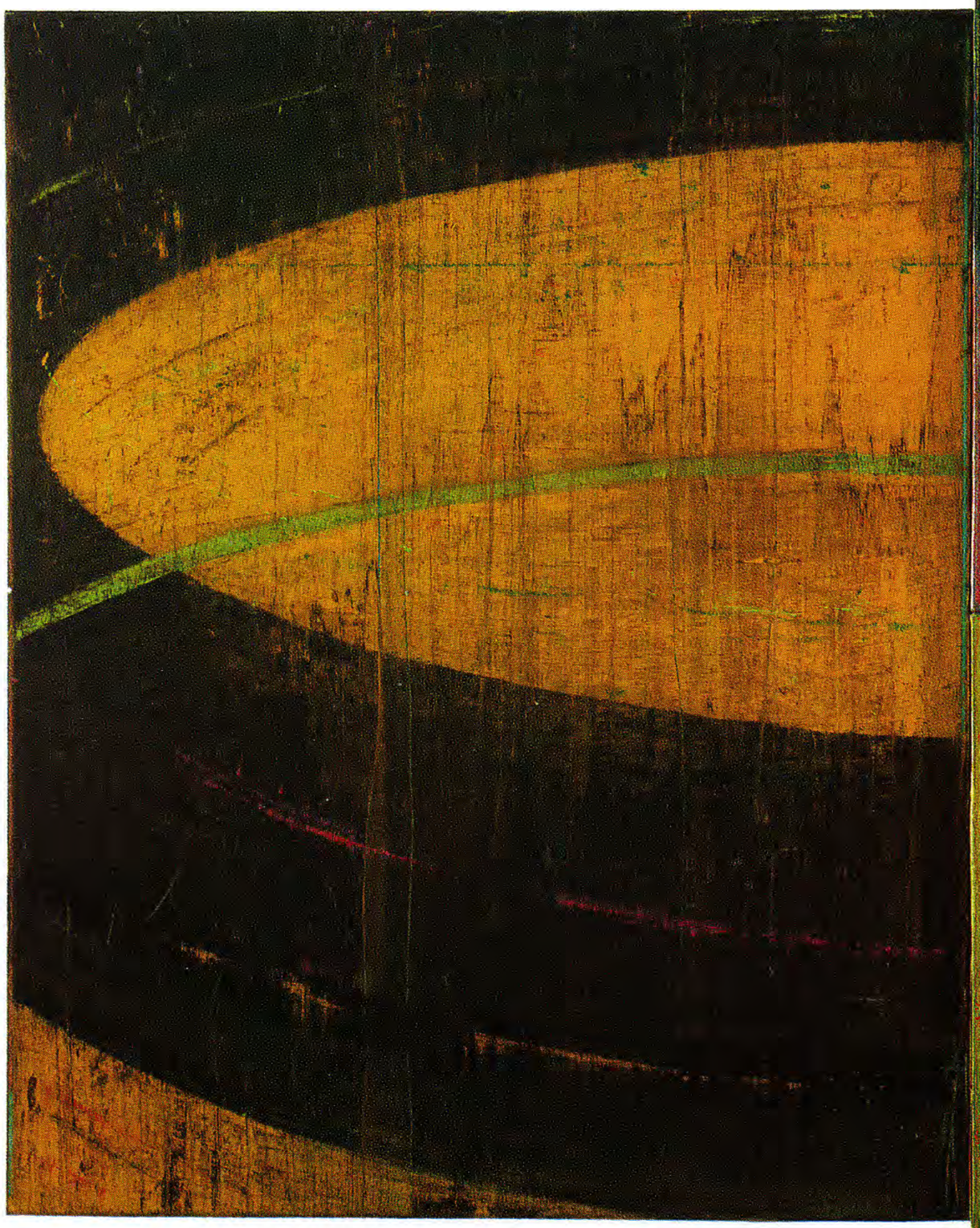
TANGO
1991 71" x 64" Oil and wax on canvas



Ironically, in the artworld, this double-edged sword works in two directions, cutting both for brilliance and stupidity. Artists are attacked not only for knowing too much, but for not knowing enough at the same time. There are those detractors who immediately bring up referenced-source-material as if the artist in question were not aware of it. The old "How can he/she make work like that after Reinhardt, or Palermo, or Ryman, or Marden, or Mondrian, or Newman, or Martin, or Polke, or Richter, or Albers or Knoebel, or...whoever?" How are we meant, then, to reconcile the problem of accumulated information and the use of it being at once overinformed and underinformed? This is one of the primary challenges faced by artists at this time—to make a work that is at once autonomous yet clearly informed by past models; a work that is not over-indebted but is still organically derived from its history of discourse-related-objecthood, and perhaps most importantly, a work that makes all of this clear without leaving a trail of too much paper all over the place proclaiming it so.

David Row's paintings directly take on these issues by building a foundation on to which both form and content

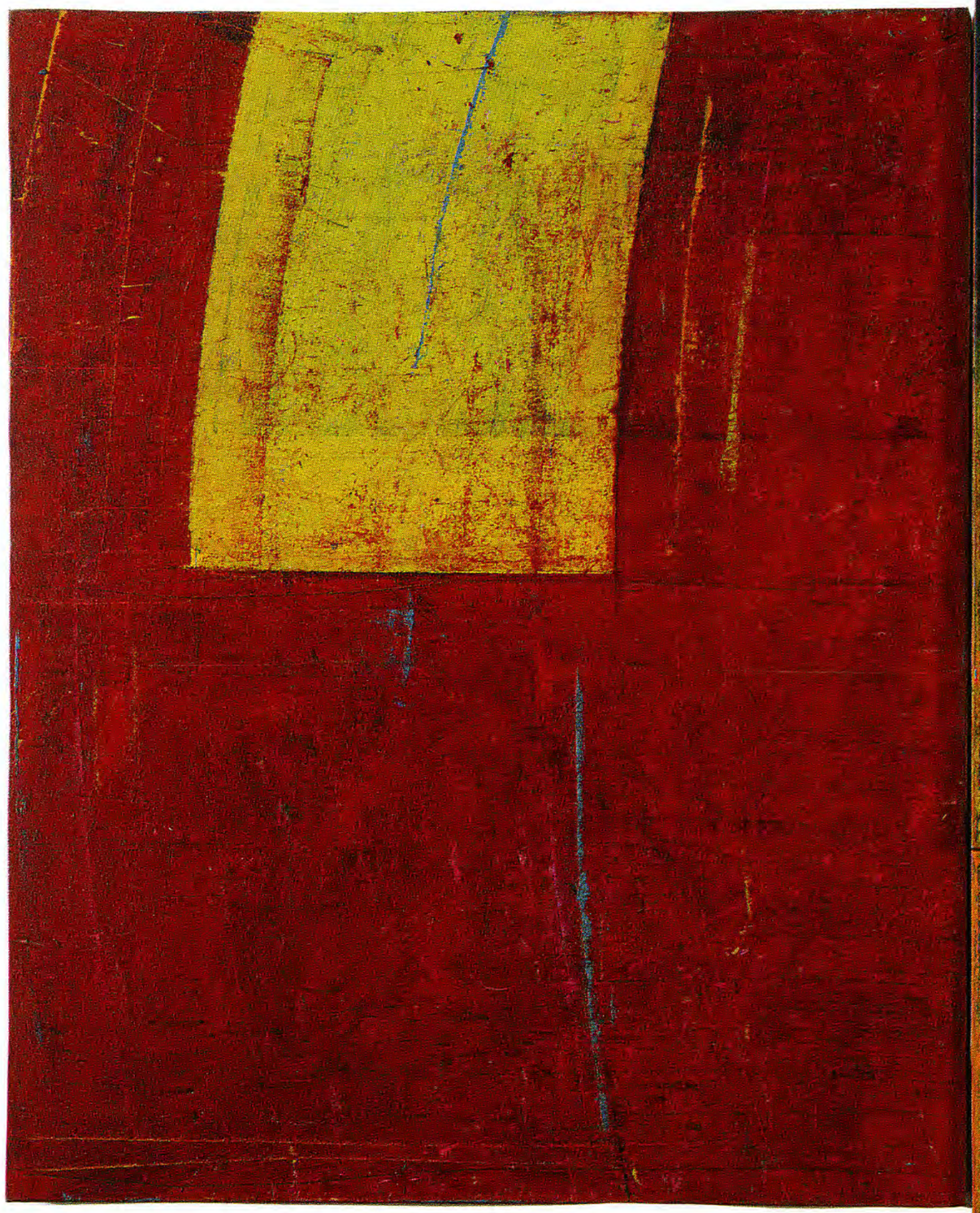
PARALLAXIS
1991 68" x 80" Oil and wax on canvas

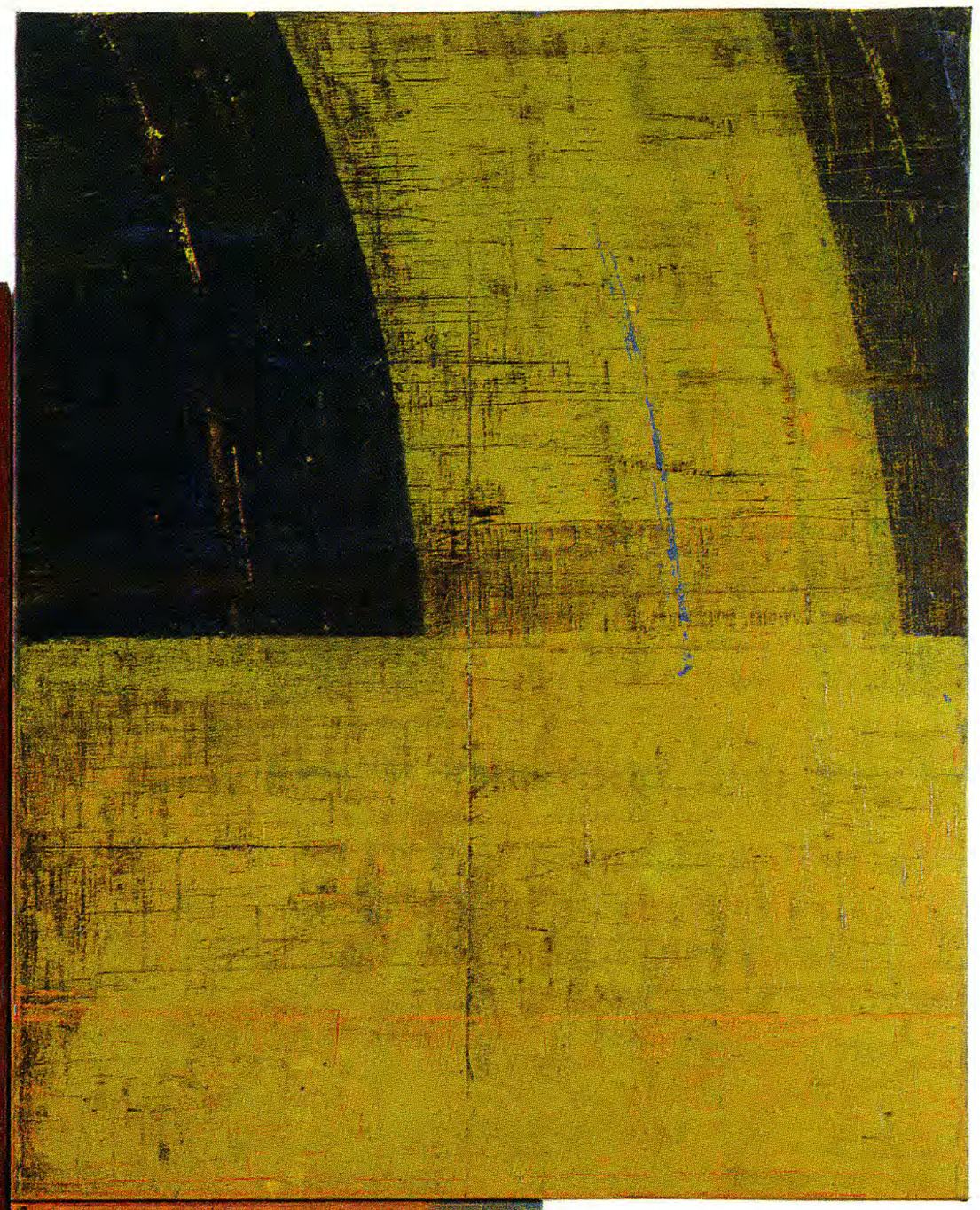


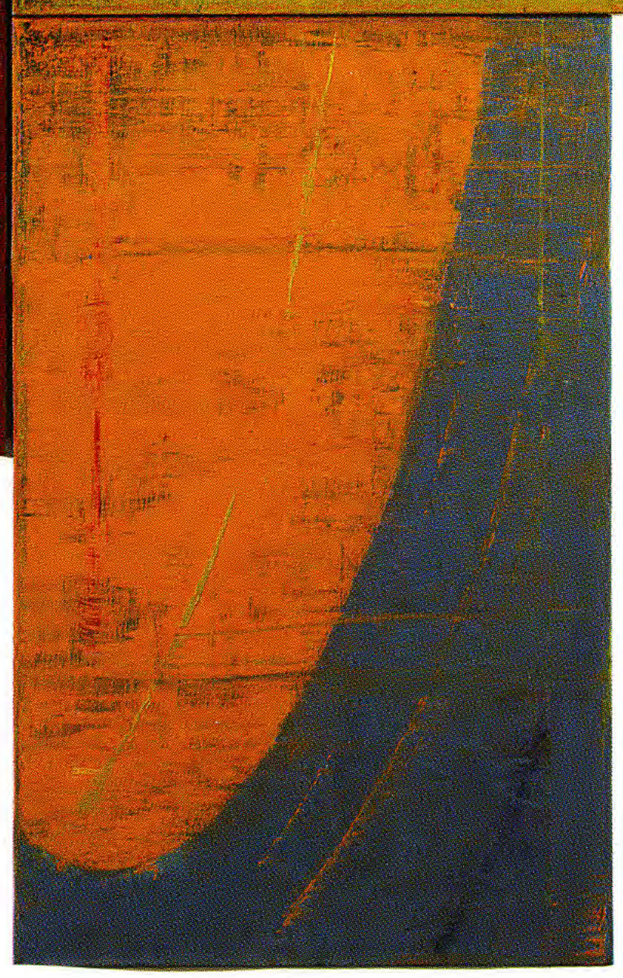
are hinged so as to call attention to structure. The paintings, in fact, resemble a number of paintings cut up, mixed up, and put back together, as if, in his painting's "wholeness," Row is mocking any idea of the formulaic or programmatic. What you get in these objects is little easy satisfaction—they're puzzles, really, and there's a certain degree of sadistic (or masochistic) pleasure involved in the solving. We know quite surely that these puzzles cannot be put together in any way so as to satisfy any predetermined Formalist demands—Greenberg wouldn't care for them. They are at once blurred so as to suggest one would have to squint to make the many layers of often obliterated, hidden paint sharpen. But even in this case, the only sharpening would take place for each viewer in an autonomous, subjective way.

The brilliance of Row's pictures lies in their insistence on each viewer's right to a set of subjective, individual criteria with which to base any judgment of success or failure on. To my mind, it's most amusing that the automatic ambition of looking at a picture is to resolve any incongruities apparent, as if there were a check-list for satisfaction somewhere. It is precisely this

CRAYOLA
1991 77" x 76" Oil and wax on canvas



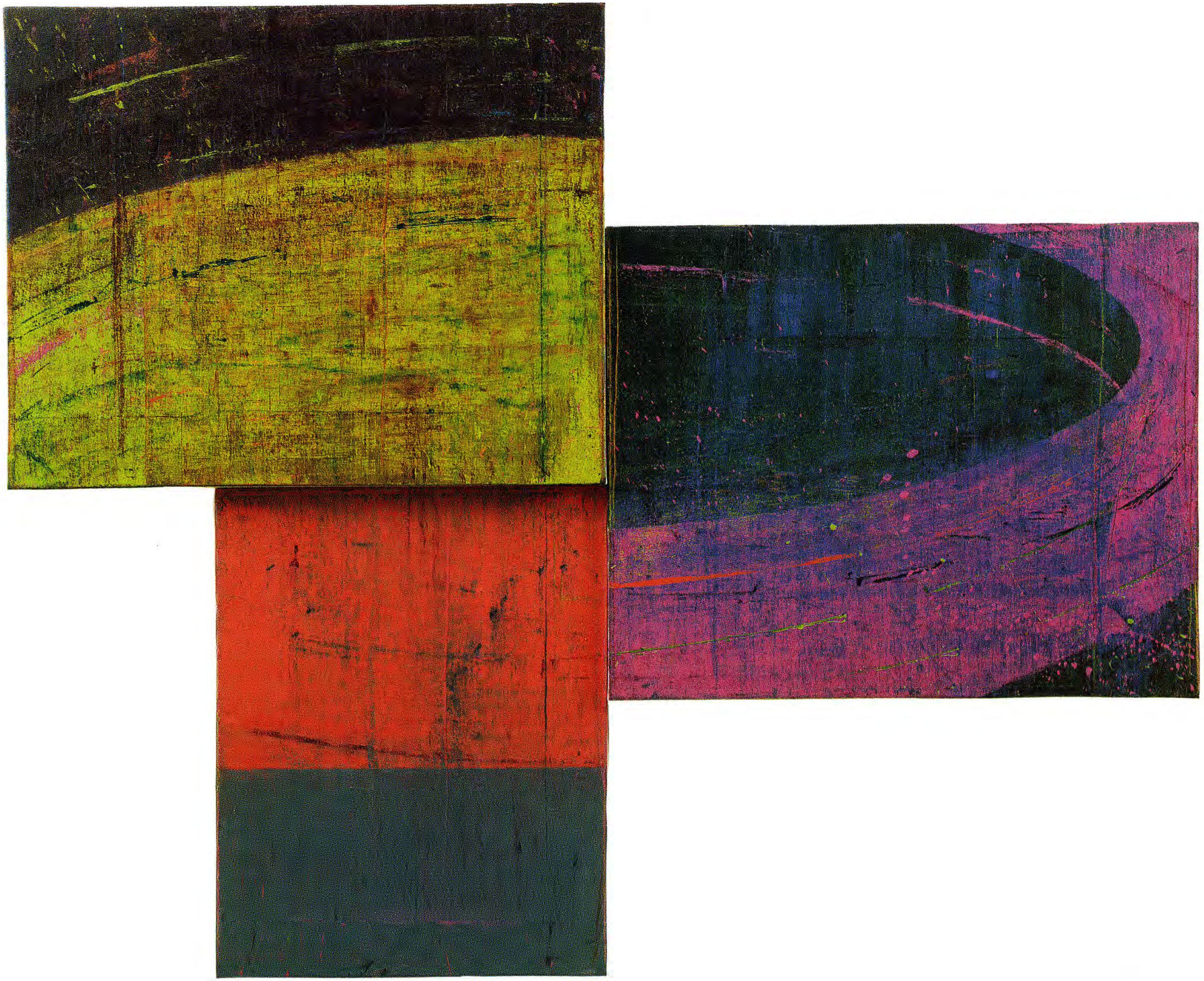


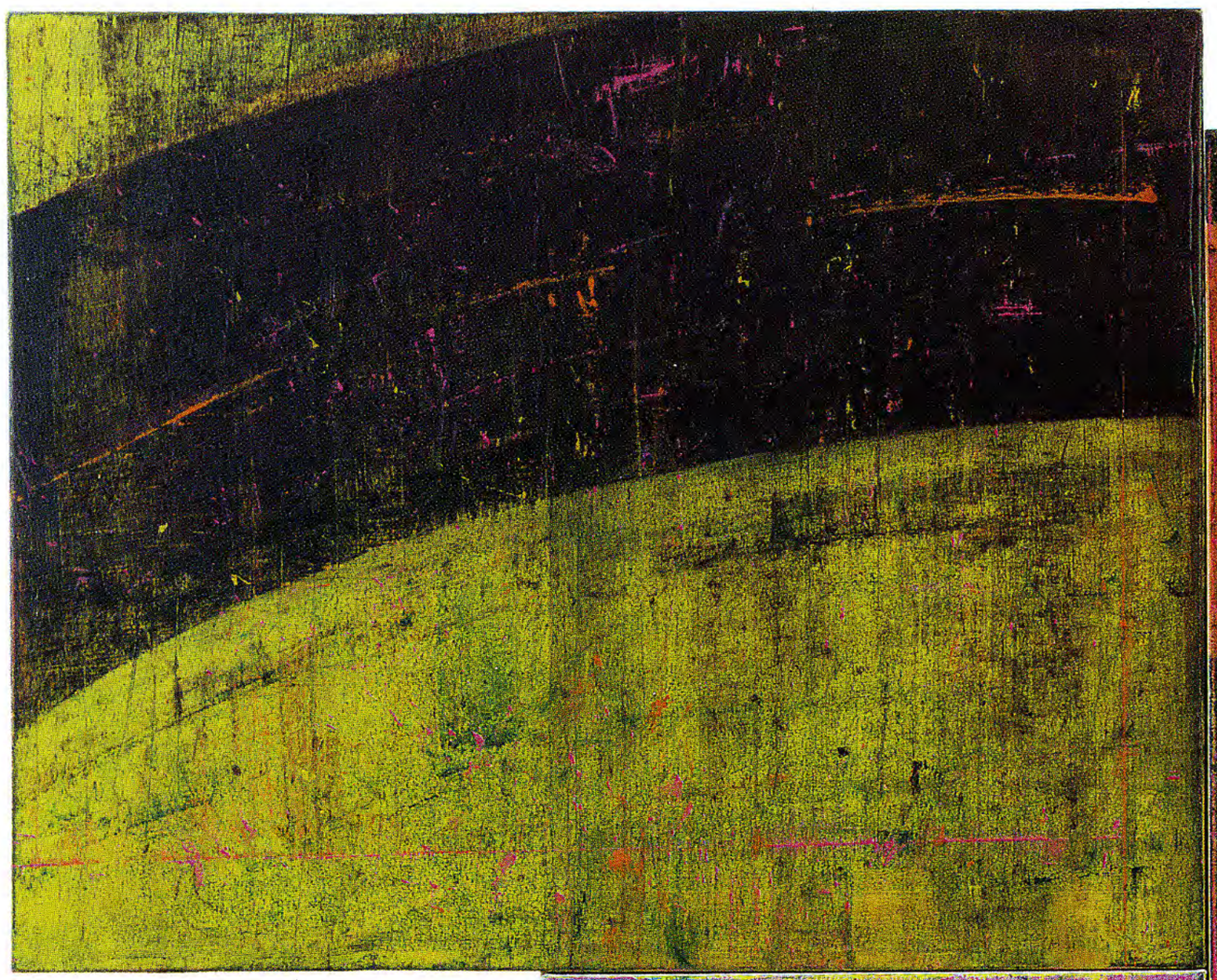
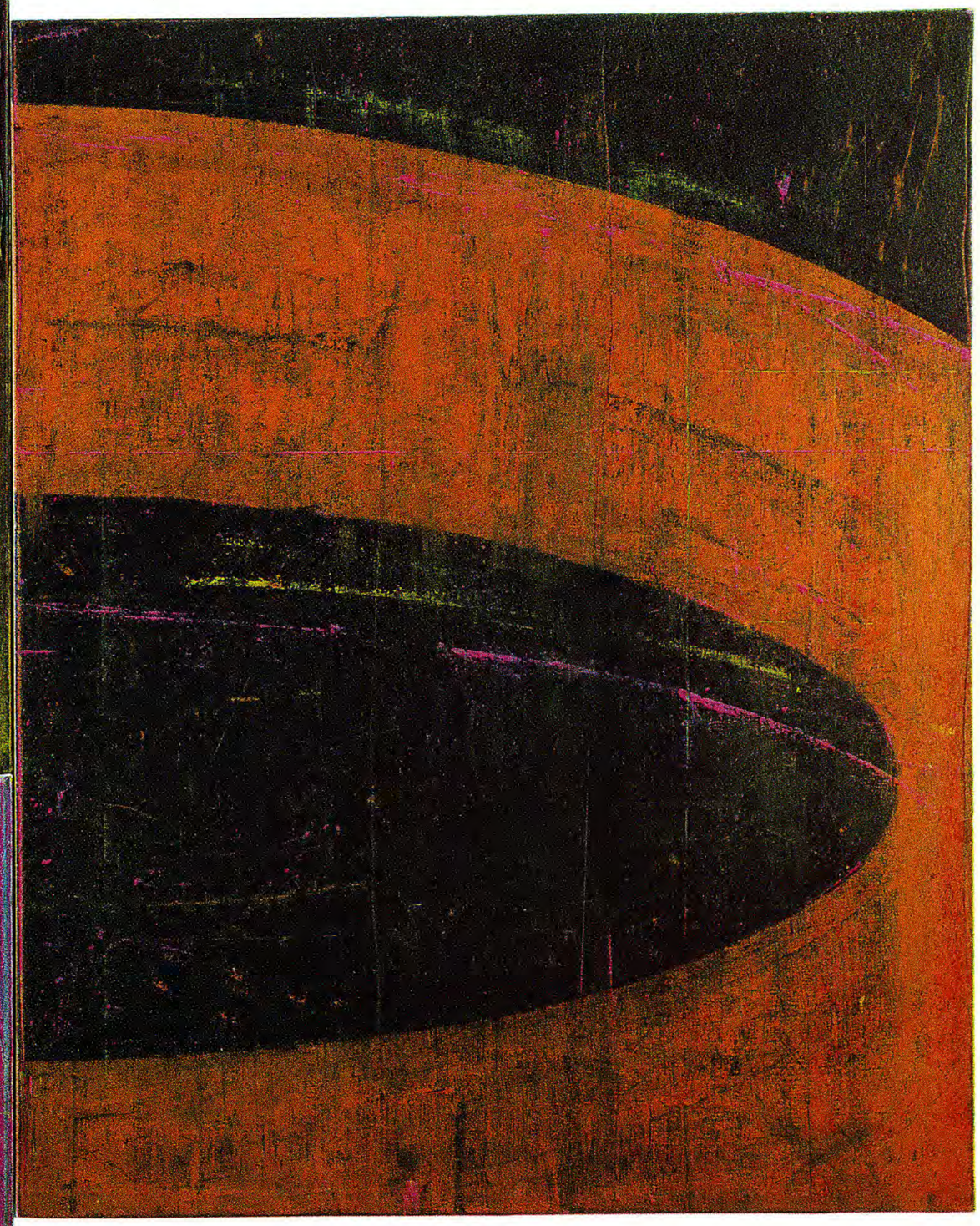
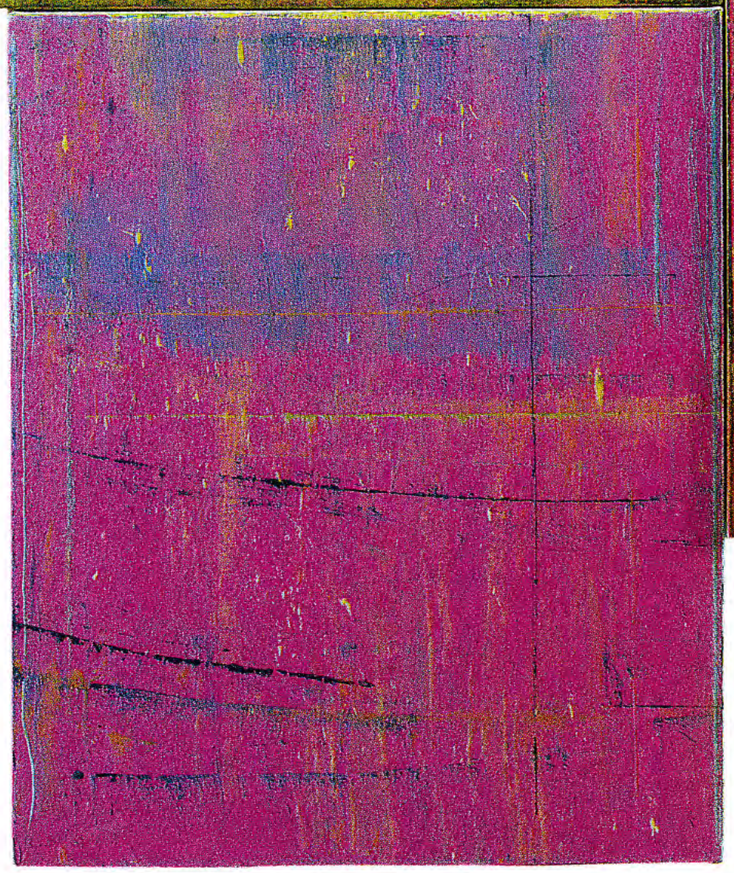


ingredient in Row's work which subtly shifts the focus of the work from abstract painting to abstraction itself—the payoff comes in the form of a coy, reticent ambiguity, a particular sort of ambiguity which reminds me of Orson Welles's deep focus. This is perhaps most clearly stated in Row's broken maze paintings, in which it is always apparent that the panel needed to complete the picture's "wholeness" is missing; displaced. At times, it's even occurred to me, in a funny sort of way, that maybe Row had mistakenly placed the correct panel with another askew painting; that maybe if someone mixed a few of these paintings up together they might actually end up with perfect pictures. But then that would take all the fun away. Row's paintings are most satisfying when and where they do not work out. It's that knowledge of obvious failure that is most generative. Row's impossible puzzles posit painting as an ongoing exercise in finding new ways in and out of the maze—like Jack Nicholson running after his loved ones in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*.

And yet Row's puzzle does not stop there, at the endless end. His esoteric nod toward art historical fare only serves to enrich the complexity and contradiction

DEEP FOCUS
1991 49" x 60" Oil and wax on canvas



of his project. A recent series of paintings, which make use of excessively loud and brash bright colors (greens, pinks, reds, yellows, oranges) immediately recall early deKooning, Sam Francis, Calder, Ensor, and the icons of Pop art. Once again it is in their brashness that these paintings find their comforts. Row's project subverts all classical expectations of the genre he is working in, in a sense, by throwing all caution to the wind. His actions are daredevil. His interest in making beautiful objects is matched measure for measure and pound for pound by his interest in (and fear of) destroying those same objects. The brilliant dichotomy is located in a bittersweet ambivalence best exemplified by his painting and covering and repainting and recovering—the continual destruction of the surface, which has becomes Row's signature. The picture, we, the viewer, end up with, resembles something like the reflection in a funhouse mirror—the distortion is there, but then so is the source; it is the source itself distorted, and ambiguity reigns supreme.

QUARK
1991 66" x 85" Oil and wax on canvas