KENNETH NOLAND

CONTEXT IS THE KEY
PAINTINGS: 1958–1970

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A RADICAL IN DEFENSE OF TRADITION: KENNETH NOLAND IN THE 1960S

BY ALEX GRIMLEY

At the start of the 1960s, painting seemed full of possibility. The energy, intensity, and scale of Abstract Expressionist painting had attracted international attention. The Museum of Modern Art had sent *The New American Painting* to eight European countries in the last years of the 1950s. Artists from across the United States and Europe were coming to New York City, which had become, inarguably, the center of the art world. By the end of the decade, Minimalists and conceptualists, land artists and photographers, all were declaring the medium dead, exhausted, irrelevant. What transpired over the course of the decade—for those artists dedicated to the pursuit of painting—was a project both radical and conservative. Radical, because painters had to develop work that could compete in power, presence, and persuasiveness—what Clement Greenberg called "quality" and Donald Judd called "interest"—with new intermedia and three-dimensional work (fig.1). Conservative, because they aimed to preserve the conventions of the medium and perpetuate its tradition of visual and pictorial effects—space, light, gravity, depth. Throughout the '60s, the medium of painting was transformed by abstract artists such as Morris Louis, Jules Olitski, and Frank Stella (figs.2 and 3). While these artists made painting more materialistic than it had ever been, using household and commercial paints, industrial tools, and relatively impersonal techniques to execute their work, they also sought to capture phenomenological effects more abstract and ethereal, more sheerly visual, than ever before. Nowhere were these tensions made more acute than in the work of painter Kenneth Noland.

The critical discourse surrounding Noland's work in the '60s—the so-called formalist criticism of Michael Fried, Kenworth Moffett, Rosalind Krauss, and others—focused on the historical context leading up to his breakthrough Circle paintings of the late '50s, and on the structure of his compositional formats: the Chevron, Diamond, Stripes, and so forth. Over time, the art historical understanding of every artist's work crystallizes; Noland's art has been subject, however, to a particularly rigid process of ossification, as it became bound up with the politics and fate of the criticism that valorized it. The authoritative tone, specialized vocabulary, and historicizing perspective of formalist writing had the gradual effect, over subsequent decades, of withdrawing Noland's work from its broader contemporary context and obscuring its centrality to the art of the period.

Before terms like "Minimalism" and "Color Field" were coined, and before Noland's work was irrevocably anchored to "formalism," he was featured each year of the '60s in exhibitions and essays by a diverse range of curators and critics still trying to pin down common qualities of the new abstraction. He was included in museum exhibitions as varied as *Abstract Expressionists Imagists* and *Sytemic Painting*, both held at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, *The Responsive Eye* (fig.4) and *The Art of the Real*, both held at the Museum of Modern Art, and Serial Imagery at the Pasadena Museum of Art.[1] His work was discussed and illustrated in epoch-defining essays such as Donald Judd's "Specific Objects," Clement Greenberg's "Post-Painterly Abstraction," and Barbara Rose's "A B C Art," and his paintings hung in surveys of recent American art all over the globe, from Buenos Aires to Tokyo, from Sydney to Montreal.

The style and substance of formalist criticism, with its cumbersome vocabulary and historical narrativizing, clouded the non-ideological clarity of Noland's work and reflected little of the artist's own attitude. "A lot of terms have been invented that for the time being serve a kind of convenience for writing," he explained, "but they don't define the art in any way."[2] The artist's statements on his own art have remained largely invisible, undermined not only by the monolithic writing about his work, but also by the artist's reticence; in contrast to the more voluble artists of his generation, Noland gave relatively few interviews and published even fewer statements. He was reluctant to theorize, hesitant to generalize. He employed with ambivalence the formalist lexicon used to describe his work; he understood its terms—surface, shape, flatness—in their practical significance, not for any conceptual or theoretical meaning. His comments on the categorization of his work reflect this outlook. "I think probably 'color-field painting,' what is generally meant," he hazarded, "is that the painting is mostly generated by color rather than by other means."[3] Asked about the historical thrust of his work, he employed personal anecdotes; explaining the painterly conventions his work engaged in, he asserted rules of thumb gleaned from experience. "You can say after the fact what you're doing, but, believe me, you can't project it ahead. It's a search. . . . It's work, yes, it comes out of the practice of painting, the practice of your art."[4]

One-Shot: Surface, Structure, Saturation

Out of the gestural Abstract Expressionism of the preceding two decades, an array of styles and techniques emerged in the early 1960s: stain painting, Hard-edge abstraction, serial imagery. Noland's work brought these together in a tough and robust synthesis. Having seen Helen Frankenthaler's earliest stained oil paintings in her studio in 1953, Noland began using the technique himself about four years later. Diluting paint to a watery consistency and soaking and staining it into the canvas weave became easier with the development of acrylic paints later in the '50s. In contrast to earlier oil painting, where the application of textured paint creates a closed and impassible surface atop the canvas, Noland found that staining suspended colors and forms *in* the canvas surface. From the start, the material texture of his paintings was indivisible; he made the two disparate, essential materials of the medium—paint and canvas—integral to one another, yielding a single, indissoluble surface.

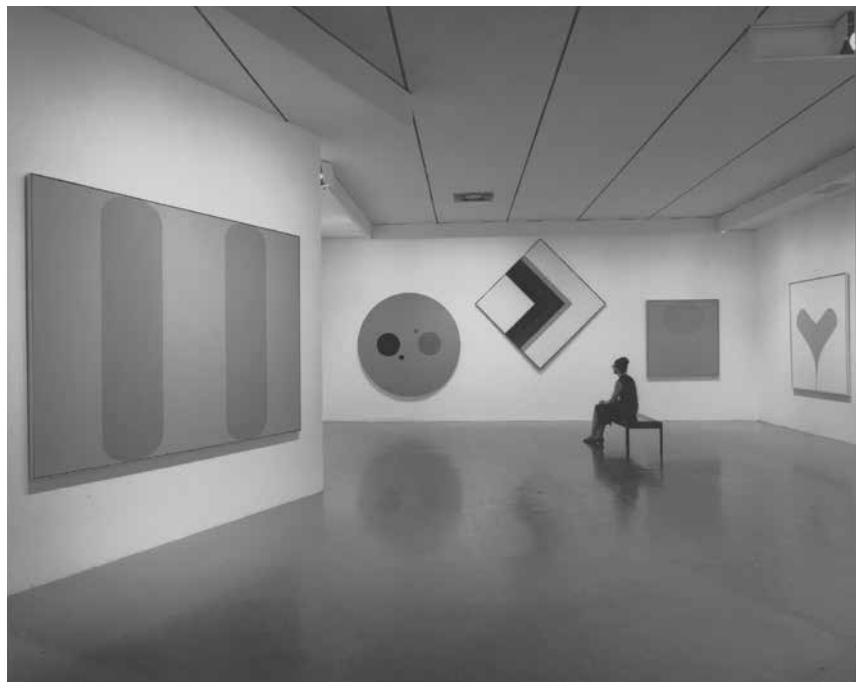

Fig.1 Donald Judd. *Untitled*, 1965. Brown enamel on hot-rolled steel, 22 x 50 x 37 in. (55.9 x 127 x 94 cm). Collection of the Judd Foundation, Marfa.

Fig.2 Middle left: Frank Stella. *Hyena Stomp*, 1962. Alkyd paint on canvas, 77 x 77 in. (195.6 x 195.6 cm). Collection of Tate Galleries, London.

Fig.3 Middle right: Jules Olitski. *Untitled*, 1968. Lithograph, 29 13/16 x 21 in. (75.8 x 54 cm). Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Fig.4 Installation view of the exhibition *The Responsive Eye* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1965.

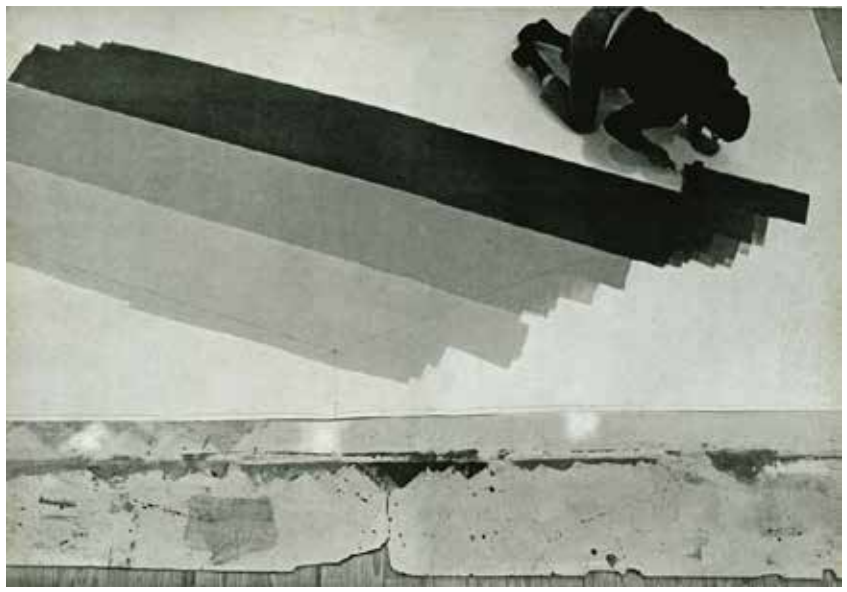

Fig.5 Noland using paint rollers in his South Shaftsbury, Vermont, studio, 1964.

Fig.6 The opening page of "Noland: The Spectrum is the Message," in *Time* magazine, p.73, April 18, 1969.

Noland matched the material specificity of his paintings with compositional formats and structures that were similarly clear and direct. He employed simple, singular motifs—circles, chevrons, diamonds, stripes—arranged in close correspondence to the shape of the canvas.[5] The circles issued from the center of the canvas and radiated outward; the chevrons were anchored to the painting's top corners; and the stripes spanned the full extent of the rectangle. The artist described these as "self-cancelling structures." For Noland, structure's efficacy was in rendering itself virtually invisible, making itself transparent to sensation. Such structures and formats afforded him the most expedient way to get to the handling of colors and the forging of harmonies between them. "In the best color painting," he said, "structure is nowhere self-evident or nowhere self-declaring."[6]

Noland understood that the fewer distinctions he established in a painting and the fewer decisions it evinced, the more urgent and immediate its sensory appeal would appear. Stated another way, his paintings comprise only the most necessary distinctions between pictorial elements and painterly materials, and each distinction is elaborated with emphatic clarity. The artist described his work as "one-shot" painting, a manner of working that put "the least amount of things in between the making of the picture and the result."[7] In a one-shot painting, every decision remains evident, so in each painting Noland made few, eliminating any trace of deliberation or arbitrariness. Decisions being few, final, and emphatically asserted meant that each came to bear unusual pressure. "There is this intensification that takes place," the artist explained.[8] Working on one-shot paintings kept Noland's vision sharp and his judgment acute. Both the concision of the structures he employed and the indexical nature of his stain technique ensured this condition. Because each of the artist's decisions was clearly registered on the canvas, it was imperative that they seem sensible, motivated, effective. "If you could get yourself together," he said, "if you know what you're about, [then] each thing that you did [could be] just done that one time with no afterthoughts and it had to stand."[9]

Noland usually described his art in concrete, material terms, invoking problem-solving and decision-making. He appreciated the abstract, intuitive aspects of his practice; in his eyes, conceptual formulas inhibited the exercise of aesthetic intuition. To an experimental artist like Noland, effective painting could not be logically deduced or systematically constructed; it had to be arrived at, achieved. Replacing intuition with system, theory, or formula was too easy a solution. To keep intuition from hardening into habit, he had to keep his means and materials flexible. Dedicated to no particular approach, he was open and noncommittal with materials; he had no special dedication to certain colors or specific shapes. "Sometimes I apply the paint with brushes, sometimes with sponges, sometimes with rollers," he said.[10] "There are a lot of good colors and materials out there. . . . The thing in painting is to find a way to get color down, to float it."[11] (fig.5) Finding a way meant practice over concept, effective means over ultimate ends. This searching quality—the artist's intuitive decisions frozen in material specificity—is felt positively by the viewer, as the sensation of an image perpetually arriving, becoming, transitory, suspended, tense, never fixed.

Abstraction: Color, Energy, Communication

"Geometric paintings are a dime a dozen these days," the art reviewer for *Time* magazine wrote in 1969, on the occasion of Noland's April exhibition at Lawrence Rubin Gallery. "One obvious difference, for anyone who has seen a Noland painting, is that he somehow imparts through his brush, his sponges, and his rollers a zest and vigor, a freshness and exuberance that other geometricists lack."[12] Two of Noland's recent Stripe paintings, *Vista* and *Via Gleam* (both 1968) were reproduced on the facing page (fig.6). Acknowledging that the paintings might look, to the casual viewer, "like mattress ticking," they enlisted the artist to provide some explanation. "In human relationships, you're involved with someone as long as something is developing, changing," he said. "Painting is the same way."[13] Noland's comments likening the experience of his paintings to that of an interpersonal relationship echo those from an interview he gave the previous year for a *New York Times* article about the Stripe paintings. Following critic Philip Leider's exhaustive description of *Via Blue*s, and above a black-and-white reproduction of *Stria* (both 1967), Noland was quoted: "Imagine yourself looking across a street at a crowd of pedestrians. Suddenly one of them glances your way. [It is] that quality of *connection* I'd like those colors to have—but abstractly."[14]

In December 1971, coming off his years-long experiments with the stripe format, Noland sat for two long oral-history interviews with Paul Cummings of the

Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art. Near the close of the second interview, he described the many meanings, functions, uses, and valences of color. He shared an experience of walking down a city block and noticing several facades painted by a public artist. "The cornices and [other elements] were being distinguished by different colors," he recalled. To Noland, this use of color provided a sense of uplift in contrast to the city's usual dreary gray monotony—it "spread and opened and cleared your environment,"[15] Though he often emphasized the materiality and tactility of color for his purposes as a painter, Noland also stressed color's abstract communicative potential, its ability to elicit empathic responses in the viewer: what he described as "sheer visual perceptual feeling."[16] His paintings never came close to representation, narrative, or anecdote. Being the consequence of color harmony alone, the emotional resonances of his work were more universal, more available. "We tend to discount a lot of nonverbal meaning in life," he noted. "Color can convey a total range of mood and expression, of one's experiences in life, without having to give it descriptive or literary qualities."[17]

Noland's interest in "visual perceptual feeling" and the centrality of color were the matrix of his painterly concerns; they indicate his commitment to the abstract quality of aesthetic experience.[18] A common use of the word 'abstract' is to describe a thing as it appears out of context—a disjunctive sensation, for example, as when a physical object becomes transparent to its sensory effect, or when, similarly, material is presented as sheer phenomena. "There's something about color that is so abstract," he mused.[19] One of color's main abstract qualities was the fact that it could impress itself optically as a tactile sensation. The force of this sensory discordance, the transit of a phenomenon among the senses, was Noland's preoccupation. It was a main subject of his art. "The representation I'm interested in is of those things only the eye can touch," he explained.[20] "The experience of color is tactile."[21] Using a different metaphor, he expressed a similar sentiment when he said of the experience of art, "your vision is being emotionally affected."[22]

Though Noland was willing, for the sake of discussion, to distinguish between aspects of his paintings, he always emphasized the holistic, intuitive approach he maintained in his studio. Asked to describe his practice, he invariably spoke of color. From the broadest to the most local considerations, color was central. Decisions as to a painting's shape and scale were figured by the "quantity of color."[23] He elaborated a painting's internal organization by considering "the pulse of each color finding its place."[24] Minute material considerations—the viscosity of the paint, the weave of the canvas, the tools for applying paint—he explained, were determined by "the nature of the color I'm going to use."[25] Color was the vector for a painting's kinesthetic impact. Color was the parameter where the sum of intuitive decisions about a painting's construction came finally to bear. Noland would refer to color as his "main impulse in painting."[26] It was nothing less than "a means of communication."[27] In short, color was for him the primary mediator for the array of abstract sensations a painting could elicit.

Noland studied painting with Ilya Bolotowsky at Black Mountain College, in North Carolina, during Josef Albers's tenure there in the 1940s (figs.7 and 8). His proximity to Albers, as well as his early interest in the work of Paul Klee (fig.9) and the Bauhaus, suggests that from an early age he understood the expressive interactions of color as empirical fact. Abstract, sensational, and intuitive, color was also for him concrete, positive material. The "speed" and "pulse" of a color was as tangible an aspect as its size and shape; all of these considerations—"perceptual realities"—fluidly determined one another in a painting.[28] "The use of color," he explained, "is

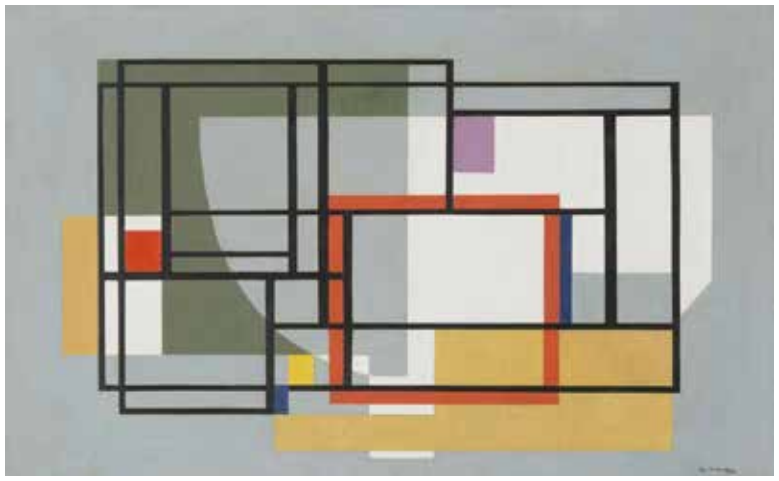

Fig.7 Ilya Bolotowsky. *Untitled*, 1946. Oil on canvas, 19 1/8 x 31 1/8 in. (48.6 x 79.1 cm). Collection of the Johnson Collection, Spartanburg.

Fig.8 Josef Albers. *Tenayuca*, 1943. Oil on Masonite, 22 x 43 in. (57.2 x 110.4 cm). Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Fig.9 Paul Klee. *The Way to the Citadel*, 1937. Oil on fabric mounted cardboard, 26 3/8 x 22 3/8 in. (66.9 x 56.8 cm). Collection of the Phillips Collection, Washington, DC.

very important as a clear way of communicating distinctions between one thing and another."[29] One aspect of color's phenomenological reality Noland persistently highlighted was its energy—its capacity to signify without reference, the persuasive kinesthetic response it could elicit. His use of color as resonant, vibratory material emphasized its tendencies toward recognition and sympathy. His paintings summon energy; they function as open-ended, meditative spaces for the senses to interact and illuminate one another. He described this immersive experience of sensory effects as the "floating quality" of his work. "Through perceptions there's a kind of suspension. When people look at paintings, their bodies get affected kinetically. . . . That's also true in music too—your body reacts. There's a feeling involved in that. There's an energy exchange."[30]

Noland intended his paintings to yield abstract sensations that would resonate sheerly and positively. He understood the abstract energy of color in his paintings as serving a humanistic social function. Alan Solomon was one of the only commentators to pick up on this aspect of the artist's practice, writing in his 1964 essay for the XXXII Venice Biennale that while Noland might have "turned away from political preoccupations, this attitude does not represent an escape from reality and responsibility." On the contrary he has "chosen to engage [himself] wholly in the richness and ambiguity of modern life, attaching a new importance to the value of individual experience." The work that issued from this worldview "is optimistic, not cynical," and it evinces "a deep awareness of the relativity of experience and feeling."[31] Noland intended the abstract experience of his paintings to serve a therapeutic function, to vivify and sharpen the acuity of the viewer's senses. "I think that sheer visual perceptual feeling, which is emotional, should be opened up more," he explained. "[O]pening up those different perceptual distances makes you able to perceive better emotionally."[32] The perpetuation of positive energy—making energy recognizable and accessible—was one of the functions of art that he particularly appreciated. "I think it's important for people to be able to focus freely and emotionally on things that are both near and at a distance," he explained.[33] Noland's recognition in color of vibratory material and sympathetic potential ensured that he utilized its abstract energy as experiential fact.

Sensation: Space, Direction, Speed

"I want my pictures to exist as sensation and not as objects," Noland said in a 1966 interview.[34] From his earliest Circle paintings, sensory impact was the artist's prime concern. By situating a sequence of circles in the center of the canvas, radiating toward the edges, Noland kept them suspended, weightlessly, in an ambiguous space, created not by illusion or representation, but rather by the interaction of color alone. Take *Blue, Yellow, Black* (1961; Pl. p.TK) as an example. Each colored band establishes a different spatial plane. The red circle at the painting's center seems at one moment to be situated near the far end of a visual tunnel, the yellow band around it receding as the outermost band articulates the surface plane. In the next moment those same circular bands read outward, the center circle extruding forward as if describing the top of a sphere, with the blue band defining its circumference. The depth is indeterminate, alternating between a vacuum and a volume. The spatial movement on this perpendicular axis gives way to a rotary movement on the parallel axis as your eye scans the sequence of circles. In this case, the black band seems neutralized as the contrasting warm inner hues bounce the eye back to the periphery. All of this occurs as the strips of unpainted canvas between the bands flash dull beige then bright white. The spatial relationship of the bands to one another and to the raw canvas surrounding them remains unresolved. Prolonged attention does not quell this destabilized effect. All of the forms are captured, suspended, at the moment of maximum tension.

In other Circle paintings, Noland renders the outermost enclosing band in a contrasting facture. In *Blue Extent* (1962; Pl. p.TK) the central cobalt-blue circle and dark green band that surrounds it radiate against the white band that encloses both. The outermost blue circle, painted thinly and with soft edges, glows hazily, like the halo that surrounds the moon on a humid night. Its relation to the sharply defined inner shapes presents an analogue for vision—the center is sharp and in focus, while the periphery fades and dematerializes. Noland imparts a sense of spiraling direction in paintings like *Whirl* and *Sunwise* (both 1960; Pl. pp.TK and TK) in which an aqueous outer band casts off a wake as it wraps around the perimeter. In the latter painting, the inner red-orange circle and blue band, both richly saturated, focus the eye as they pulse against the fluid ocher rings. The pulsation of color from the center gives way to a ceaseless rotary movement. During the same period that he was executing the Circle paintings, Noland experimented with other imagery using the symmetrical, concentric format, as in the sequential square diamonds of *Extent* (1959; Pl. p.TK) and the warm-toned *Citron* (1960–61; Pl. p.TK), with its circles nestled within an attenuated cruciform.

Naturalism informed Noland's palette throughout the early 1960s. Many Hard-edge and geometric painters working during that period used bold prismatic color or industrial paints (fig.10). In contrast, the tonal harmonies of many Circle paintings reflected the colors of nature. Noland sought to capture the ambience of daylight, the lambent glow of night, or the colors connoted by a season. The

Fig.10 Ellsworth Kelly. *Red Yellow Blue V*, 1968. Oil on canvas, 89 x 166 in. (226 x 422.9 cm) [irreg.]. Collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC.

palettes of *Winter Sun* (1962) and *Sounds in the Summer Night* (1962; Pl. p.TK) are both organized around blues and greens. But, as the titles suggest, the specific hues and harmonies diverge according to their reflection of particular times and seasons. The cool tonality of *Winter Sun* is imparted by the stark ultramarine blue and terre verte bands that wrap around a soft white center. The edges of these colors are crisp, sharply defined, and separated by strips of raw canvas; the entire sequence is frozen in the center of an otherwise bright, unpainted canvas. In contrast, *Sounds in the Summer Night* features a sketchily defined grayish blue ground billowing against the edges of the painting. The outermost circle of hazy cerulean is similarly soft, feathery, and, like the grass-green band and central mauve circle, warmly toned.

With the Cat's Eye series and early Chevron paintings that he embarked on following the Circles, Noland continued his exploration of naturalistic color tones and temperatures. *New Problem* (1962; Pl. p.TK) is comprised of a frosty hunter green against deeply saturated white, a stark wintry palette that contrasts with the pallid, springtime tones of *Lebron* (1962; Pl. p.TK) and the warm chord of *Three Thirty* (1964; Pl. p.TK). The rich hues of the painting *Night Green* of 1964 (Pl. p.TK) recall those of *Sounds in the Summer Night*, but the darker shades of the Chevron painting imply a later hour of the night. The color continuity between the two series is evident in the velvety textured, autumnal *Half Time* (1964; Pl. p.TK), with its softly defined edges, the earth-toned *Plunge* (1965; Pl. p.TK), and *Largesse* (1965; Pl. p.TK), which features a maritime palette.

In the larger and more emblematic Chevrons, Noland's palette became brighter and bolder, a trend which continued in his Diamond paintings of the mid-'60s. The earliest Diamond paintings contained chevrons on square canvases rotated 90 degrees. As he continued to experiment with the diamond form, he began using shaped canvases, creating a variety of elongated and attenuated formats that introduced an array of new visual effects to his art. While working on the Diamond paintings, he spoke of his concern with sequences of color. In most of these works, the colored bands are coterminous with the shape of the canvas; without an unpainted canvas ground surrounding them, the mass and direction of the color progressions are pressurized within the frame. The four diagonal bands of *Datum* (1966; Pl. p.TK) accumulate weight and density, and come forward visually, as they progress from pale gray-blue to dark teal. "I don't start from any specific place like the center or the bottom of the shape," Noland told Solomon in December 1965 while at work on the Diamonds. "It neutralizes the condition of shape because you only have an extension."[35] The expansive *Pent* (1966; Pl. p.TK) stretches horizontally to a width just shy of 16 feet. Its cooling, glowing palette brightens from slumberous purple to sprightly pea green, amplifying the sloping sense of direction.

Noland continued to further attenuate the Diamond shape in paintings with the two farthest points four times as far from each other as the closest points.[36] "Turning the points and making those the furthest extensions in space cancels out shape even more," Noland explained.[37] Though these canvases departed far from the traditional rectangle, "this does not mean that Noland is making 'shaped canvases,'" Bill Berkson wrote in his 1966 review. "The pictures are contained by the edges, and neither the wall nor the surrounding space is called into the game."[38] That is, all of the pictorial energy and pressure is confined within the boundaries of the canvas. The dramatically sloping edges and cascading progression of color in *Crest* (1967; Pl. p.TK) direct the eye swiftly around the picture. Scanning the surface pushes the eye from top to bottom, with no place for vision to rest or settle. Subsequent Diamond paintings with pinstripes, as in *Visit* (1967; Pl. p.TK), further exacerbate the speed of vision around the surface. "Most of my time is spent thinking about movement, somehow or another," Noland commented. "And I get strong impressions of trying to get things to extend."[39]

As the Chevrons pointed toward the Diamond paintings, the more attenuated Diamonds, with their parallel bands of color stretching across the surface, led Noland seamlessly into the horizontal stripe format that occupied him for the remainder of the decade. With these paintings, which the artist began in 1966, he synthesized the many pictorial issues and concerns that he'd handled throughout the previous ten years into a series of audacious, authoritative works. *Graded Exposure*, a painting Noland included at the first exhibition of his Stripe paintings at André Emmerich in November '67, and which was featured on the cover of that month's *Artforum,* announced his new interest in combining an array of prismatic colors on immersive, panoramic canvases (fig.11). In previous series, the artist had demonstrated subtlety and restraint in creating color harmonies out of a few related hues. Despite their wild spectrum of bold tones and contrasts in temperature and depth, the early Stripe paintings like *Graded Exposure* and *Color Pane* (1967; Pl. p.TK) integrated more thoroughly and rigorously the formal qualities that led Donald Judd to describe Noland as "obviously one of the best painters anywhere."[40] In the Stripe paintings, bands of color, areas of raw canvas, and the enclosing shape of the painting are all in congruence.

Fig. 11 Cover of *ArtForum*, November 1967, featuring Kenneth Noland's *Graded Exposure*, 1967. Acrylic on canvas, 88 7/10 x 229 in. (225.4 x 581.7 cm). Private Collection.

"You can only describe colors in tactile terms," Noland explained in his 1971 interview with Paul Cummings. "Thinness, thickness, which are visually touchable tactile factors. . . . [M]atteness, dryness, sheen, the relative coolness and warmth of color . . . all those descriptive terms are tactile descriptions rather than to do with the redness of red."[41] In Stripe paintings like *Sky Island* (1969; Pl. p.TK) and *Via Bound* (1970; Pl. p.TK), where colors flank one another without interstices of raw canvas, the surface becomes more difficult to fix or pin down and visually tactile effects take over. In *Via Bound*, the relatively transparent pale salmon pink and purple hues recede, floating hazily away from a scaffolding of Tyrian purple on top, central warm green, and slate gray at the bottom. These latter colors, opaque and densely saturated, are solid and heavy to the eye, and their lateral movement across the canvas is slower. A range of radiant cool tones vibrates between evenly spaced intervals of olive green in *Sky Island*. The shifting hues, from powder blue to teal, register as changing temperatures as they contrast by degrees with the steady green that separates them. The visual space of the painting is unstable; colors flash and flutter as your eye scans briskly across the surface. "In my work," Noland told Cummings, "spatial color is changing all the time."[42]

Noland's paintings increased in speed throughout the '60s, with each format leading the viewer's eye around the painting in a different way. Broadly speaking, the circles were characterized by rotation and depth, the Chevrons by tension, and the Diamonds by oblique sloping space. Common to many of these works was the contrast between the shape and direction of colors, and their suspension on large areas of raw canvas. In the Stripe paintings, however, the dozens of richly saturated bands, rhythmically distributed and often separated from one another by thin strips of unpainted canvas (which in paintings like *Via Infold* (1969; Pl. p.TK) is activated as a color itself) span the extent of canvases up to 30 feet in length. There is no place for the viewer's eye to pause, no impediment to run up against. The stripes careen across the canvas and the eye races with them. "Noland's pictures of the late sixties," the art historian Leo Steinberg later wrote, "are the fastest I know."[43] The total accord among elements in the Stripes does more than neutralize the material limits and enclosing shape of the painting: it virtually dematerializes them. The colors seem to float free of the support, suspended. "The thing is to get that color down on the thinnest conceivable surface," Noland explained. "A surface sliced into the air as if by a razor."[44]

"These paintings are the payoff," Noland told critic Philip Leider in 1968, while working on the Stripe paintings. While they featured the artist's most thoroughly self-canceling structure, and his freest and most ambitious play of color, they ultimately marked a return to convention, to the regularity of the rectangle. In contrast to the obdurate shaped canvases produced by younger artists and the general turn to three-dimensions (fig.12), Noland's paintings evinced to Leider a "profound conservatism in tampering with the basic conventions of the art of painting." The perpetuation of these conventions, rejuvenated and reinforced by innovation, was crucial to Noland. He emphasized this by contrasting it, implicitly, with the work of Minimalist sculptors and Conceptual artists: "No graphs; no systems; no modules. No shaped canvases. Above all, no *thingness*, no *objectness*. . . . It's all color and surface, that's all."[45]

A Radical Tradition

Noland's paintings of the 1960s synthesized a variety of influences into a wholly original, entirely personal style. Taking the large scale and materiality of Abstract Expressionism as a starting point, he developed an art whose impact was visceral, immediate, and available. He was at the forefront of a generation of abstract artists who integrated the visual and material elements of painting into works that were indissolubly whole. To some, the seeming finality and reductiveness of Noland's painting pointed away from that discipline and into three-dimensional mixed-media work. But what may have initially appeared as simplified and impersonal was in fact a new and radically holistic mode of address—a manner of painting in which paint, canvas, color, and structure were so bold and broadly asserted that each became, counterintuitively, transparent to all of the others. Painterly means and experiential ends interpenetrated and the effects of each were multitudinous, inexhaustible. That which seemed sheerly visual was at the same time emphatically material. The felt effects of Noland's paintings traverse your senses: "spatial color," the optic and the haptic, at once embodied and dematerialized, "things only the eye can touch," a tactile visuality—these feelings, the artist hoped, "would [present] a fairly pure way of experiencing nature."[46]

Throughout his career, Noland never lost sight of the aesthetic practice to which he was committed: the preservation of painterly conventions and the perpetuation of artistic quality. He sought the experience of experimentation, not merely the outward appearance of it: "Judgment comes in, and judgment is crucial," he said.[47] Pressed by an interviewer in 1972, Noland was clear: "The kind of painting that I'm doing is traditional painting."[48]

Fig.12 Robert Morris. *Untitled (Tangle)*, 1967. Felt, dimensions variable, approx. 9 ft. 8 in. x 8 ft. 10 in. x 58 in. (296.7 x 269.3 x 147.4 cm). Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

1. H. H. Arnason included Noland among the "abstract imagists" in his 1961 Guggenheim exhibition *Abstract Expressionists and Imagists*. He was subsequently presented in the Jewish Museum's *Toward a New Abstraction* in 1963 and in Clement Greenberg's *Post-Painterly Abstraction* at the Los Angeles County Museum the following year. In 1965, Noland was included in the watershed Op-Art exhibition *The Responsive Eye* curated by William Seitz at the Museum of Modern Art, while at Harvard that Spring, he was one of Michael Fried's *Three American Painters*. Lawrence Alloway placed Noland's work in the Guggenheim's 1966 show *Systemic Painting*. MoMA's *The Art of the Real* included work by him in 1968, as did *Serial Imagery* at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1969.

2. Emile de Antonio and Mitch Tuchman, eds., *Painters Painting: A Candid History of the Modern Art Scene, 1940–1970* (New York, NY: Abbeville Press, 1984), 80.

3. Ibid.

4. Diane Waldman, "Color, Format, and Abstract Art: An Interview with Kenneth Noland," *Art in America,* May–June 1977, 105.

5. Noland's studio practice throughout the 1960s entailed painting on unstretched canvases, then later cropping and sizing them, but the relation of the painted form to the enclosing shape of the canvas remained a preoccupation of his throughout the decade.

6. Noland, quoted in Philip Leider, "The Thing in Painting Is Color," *New York Times*, August 25, 1968.

7. "Kenneth Noland Interviewed by Alan Solomon (Dec. 1965)," transcript, Alan R. Solomon papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, box 1, folder 79, 5.

8. "Noland Interviewed by Solomon," 7.

9. De Antonio and Tuchman, *Painters*, 80.

10. Ibid., 84.

11. The first half of this quotation is from William Furlong and Mel Gooding, *Speaking of Art: Four Decades of Art in Conversation* (London, UK: Phaidon, 2009), 206. The second half is from Leider, "The Thing in Painting," emphasis added.

12. "Noland: The Spectrum is the Message," *Time*, April 18, 1969, 74-75.

13. Ibid.

14. Noland, quoted in Leider, "The Thing in Painting."

15. Oral history interview with Kenneth Noland, October 9–December 21, 1971. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Transcript, 46.

16. Ibid.

17. Waldman, "Color, Format," 104.

18. Paul Cummings, *Artists in their Own Words* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 152.

19. Waldman, "Color, Format," 103.

20. Noland, quoted in Robert Godfrey, *Music without Words* (Greenville, NC: Museum of Art, 2006), 20.

21. De Antonio and Tuchman, *Painters*, 84.

22. Cummings, *Artists*, 152.

23. De Antonio and Tuchman, *Painters*, 85.

24. Ibid., 84.

25. Ibid.

26. Cummings, *Artists*, 152.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 150.

29. Ibid., 152.

30. Furlong and Gooding, *Speaking of Art*, 205–206.

31. Alan Solomon, "The New American Art: Four Germinal Painters," in *XXXII Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte Venezia 1964, Stati Uniti d'America* (New York, NY: The Jewish Museum, 1964), unpaginated. Edited for clarity.

32. Cummings, *Artists*, 152.

33. Ibid.

34. Al McConagha, "Noland Wants His Paintings to Exist as 'Sensation,'" *Minneapolis Tribune*, March 13, 1966.

35. "Noland Interviewed by Solomon," 7.

36. Ninety-six by twenty-four inches was a size Noland often utilized during this period.

37. "Noland Interviewed by Solomon," 7.

38. Bill Berkson, "In the Galleries: Kenneth Noland," *Arts*, May 1966, 59.

39. "Noland Interviewed by Solomon," 7.

40. Donald Judd, "In the Galleries: Kenneth Noland," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 37, no. 10, September 1963, 53.

41. Noland, quoted in 1971 oral history, 43, and de Antonio and Tuchman, *Painters*, 84, edited for clarity.

42. 1971 oral history, 27. Edited for clarity.

43. Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 80

44. Noland, quoted in Leider, "The Thing in Painting."

45. Ibid.

46. 1971 oral history, 33. Edited for clarity.

47. De Antonio and Tuchman, *Painters*, 85.

48. Noland, unpublished interview with Cynthia Goodman, 1972, part 2, 8.