

The background of the page is an abstract composition of soft, overlapping watercolor washes. The top half is dominated by various shades of blue and purple, while the bottom right corner features a warm, earthy brown. The colors blend into each other, creating a sense of depth and movement.

Irene Monat Stern

*I Cast My Own Shadow*



# I Am Looking

I am looking

For that magical water

That sings

As it flows

That must ripple

in the air

I am looking

For a new voice

To sing

My own refreshing song.







Irene Monat Stern  
*I Cast My Own Shadow*

October 17–November 16, 2024

Essay by Jillian Russo

**HOLLIS TAGGART**

521 WEST 26TH STREET, NEW YORK, NY 10001

Stern with an untitled painting, circa 1970s,  
photograph by Jan Peter Stern





# foreword

Irene Monat Stern's stunning, ethereal, graceful paintings attest to her innate understanding of beauty and spiritual lightness and her extraordinary journey away from the suffering she witnessed in her early life. Enduring circumstances of unspeakable human and political aggression, Stern was able, through personal strength and perseverance, to create a regenerative life for herself. Testament to this affirmation of what art can communicate is evident simply by standing in front of her paintings and reading her personal writings.

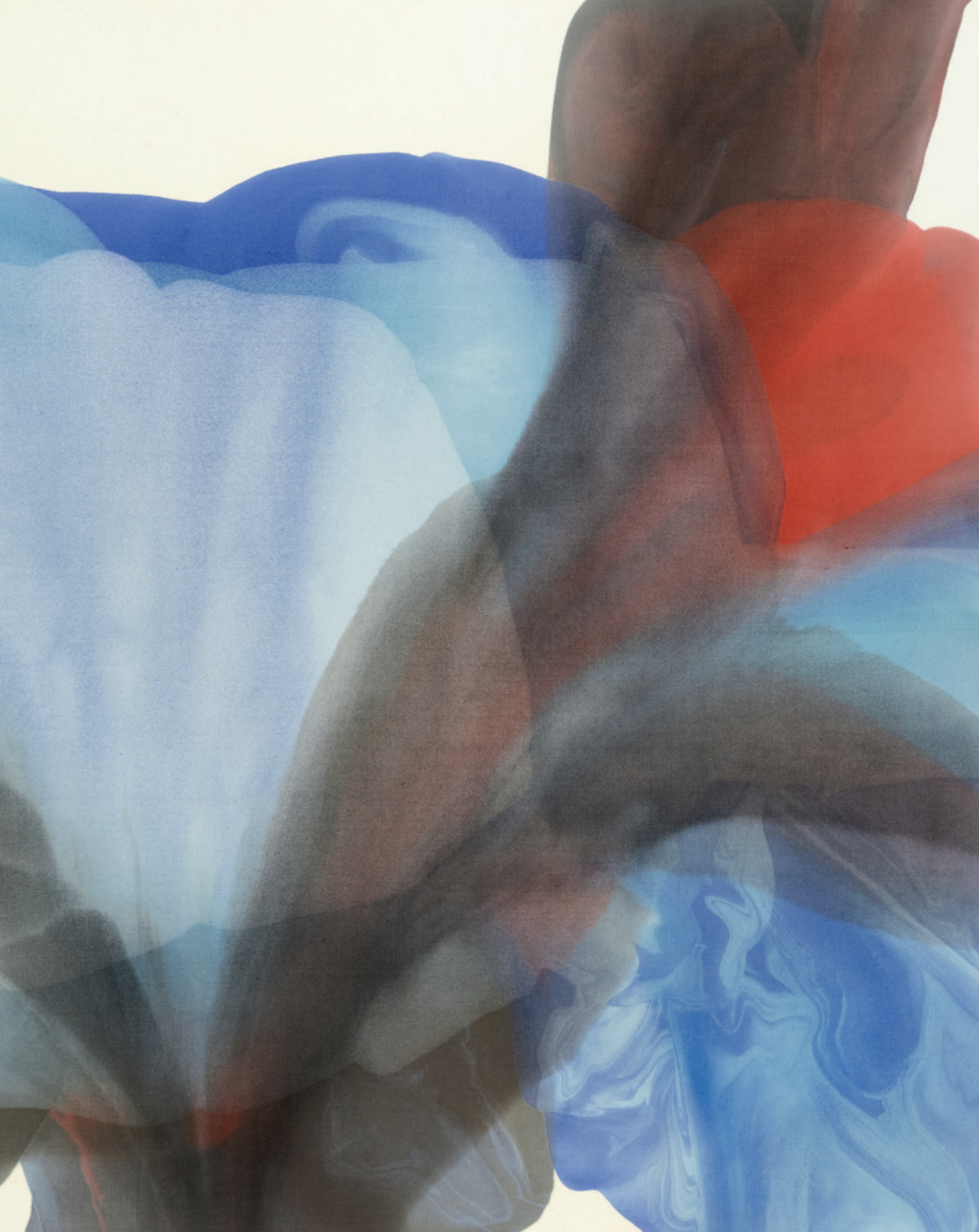
With a fluidity usually associated with watercolor, Stern's forms float across the canvas to build a diaphanous, integral whole. There is a masterfully controlled layering of transparent colors that come together to create a flowing chiffon-like composition. This gossamer feeling belies the complexity of a studied technique Stern developed. It is hugely difficult to physically and technically control the movement of these rippling layers and retain the lightness and sense of atmosphere she achieves. This is an extraordinary feat that makes her paintings uniquely identifiable. Her distinct manipulation of paint, color, form and unprimed canvas show her knowledge of the Color Field sensibility, while simultaneously setting her apart from her contemporaries.

This long-awaited exhibition presents ten glorious works that the gallery has not shown before. These alluring examples are coupled with excerpts from Stern's intimate musings which she recorded through poems and remembrances. They give us a further look at the woman behind her paintings. We are grateful to the Irene Monat Stern Estate, specifically to her sons Billy and Daniel who have generously shared these chronicles with all of us. They faithfully and respectfully preserve their mother's legacy from which we all benefit. Appreciation is also extended to Jillian Russo for her catalogue essay which eloquently explores the synergetic relationship of Stern's life, her art, and her writings.

Stern's work has elicited much interest from our audience since we first presented her paintings in 2016. We are always gratified by viewer's reactions when they stand before her work—those seeing it for the first time as well as collectors who are very familiar with it. There is an undeniable allure and refinement that immediately resonates and draws one into the vortex of Stern's surprising power.

Hollis C. Taggart

Debra V. Pesci





# Irene Monat Stern

## *Magical Flow*

Irene Monat Stern created her first Color Field paintings in the mid-1960s. Inspired by the light and flora of Southern California, where Irene and her husband, sculptor Jan Peter Stern, moved with their two sons in 1965, Stern's compositions feature diaphanous layers of acrylic paint, which unfurl across the canvas. Stern's fluid forms conjure organic phenomena such as cloud formation, blossoming foliage, or the path of water against the shore. Beginning in the 1990s, Stern began writing short stories, essays, and poems, many of which are centered on the natural world. In her poem "I Am Looking" she wrote: "I am looking / For that magical water / That sings / As it flows / That must ripple / in the air." The poem brings to mind the creative process, describing water as a generative force, enabling the development of "a new voice," expressive of an authentic sense of self.

For Stern, painting and writing provided an antidote to a difficult childhood in which she was trapped in Nazi-occupied Poland throughout the war, where she barely survived; most of her relatives didn't. Following World War II, she lived in Paris before emigrating to New York, where she met Peter, who was also a refugee, although he had been able to leave Berlin before the war began. The couple married in 1955, and in the late 1950s they both studied art at the New School for Social Research. Throughout their careers, Peter and Irene had a creative partnership that supported the development of both their practices, a rarity for artist couples during this era.

Like many postwar women artists, Stern had to strike a balance between her artistic pursuits and her family life. In the early 1960s, a successful solo exhibition propelled Peter's career to new heights, leading to large-scale corporate sculpture commissions for which he became well known. During this time, Irene worked on other creative projects, including abstract watercolor painting, dressmaking with Marimekko fabric, and textile assemblages. She did not begin to paint professionally until after her children were older and she had settled into her California home, which had a spacious studio.

Stern was now able to work on large-scale compositions while her children were at school; her career blossomed. Peter observed that "Irene devised her very own vocabulary of visual expression and her ways of physically achieving these results in an amazingly spontaneous, yet controlled way."<sup>1</sup> The couple exhibited together several times, including their first joint exhibition, *Irene Monat Stern Paintings and Jan Peter Stern Sculptures* at the Downtown Gallery in Honolulu Hawai'i in 1974. The following year, Irene received her first solo exhibition, *Irene Monat Stern: Acrylic Paintings* at Source Gallery in San Francisco. Major acquisitions of her work followed,

**Fig. 1**  
**Morris Louis, *Tet*, 1958.** Acrylic on canvas,  
94 1/8 x 152 1/8 in. Whitney Museum of  
American Art, New York, Purchase, with  
funds from the Friends of the Whitney  
Museum of American Art



**Fig. 2**  
**Georgia O'Keeffe, *Petunias*, 1925.**  
Oil on hardboard, 18 x 30 in. Fine Arts  
Museums of San Francisco, Museum pur-  
chase, gift of the M. H. de Young Family





including the General Electric and Citibank corporate collections as well as the Hirshhorn Museum and the National Gallery of Art.

Throughout her life, Stern relished spending time outdoors, whether it was in her backyard, walking along the beach, or on trips she and Peter took throughout Europe and to the American Southwest, including Sedona, Arizona, and Zion National Park in Utah. Stern's interest in nature and abstraction, combined with a literary sensibility, shaped her poetic style. She was very adept with words and spoke multiple languages, including Spanish, French, and Polish. As in the works of Mary Oliver and Pablo Neruda, two of Stern's favorite poets, she used celestial and botanical themes to describe the human experience. In the poem "It Has Been Raining all Week," Stern wrote: "The air was full of moist smells / Soon everything became damp / Absorbed in thought / I walked / Dark clouds moved in fast / One by one blocking out the blue patches of sky / A cold wind was blowing down my back."

A similar image that captures the mood of gray clouds forming in a blue sky appears in the paintings *Untitled*, c. 1975, and *Untitled*, c. 1970s (pls. 1, 2, 10).

Washes of pigment, including layers of royal blue, charcoal, and highlights of maroon, flow from one edge of the canvas to the other, as if pulled by gravity. Morris Louis pioneered this technique of manipulating paint in his Veil series, which he began in 1954 and returned to in 1957–59. Inspired by Helen Frankenthaler, he modified her process of working directly on the floor, tilting his canvases to harness the natural downward flow of medium in paintings such as *Tet*, 1958 (fig. 1).

While Stern's compositions demonstrate her knowledge of Louis's work, she controls her paint differently. In 1975, critic Judith L. Dunham observed, "The statements both artists make about the nature of paint differ. Stern makes acrylic seem weightless. It floats on white pristine canvas. It masses into rich areas with special depth that Louis' works lack. It is forced into the surface in many directions by an energy source beyond the paintings edges."<sup>2</sup> Moving her paint in different directions, Stern created a greater variety of overlapping shapes. Frequently, the pigment appears to travel from the bottom to the top of the canvas, defying gravity and emphasizing upward movement and growth.

The forms in *Untitled*, c. 1970s (pls. 3, 5, 7), created in plum and marigold hues, allude to floral motifs. Georgia O'Keeffe employed similar vivid colors in her works *Petunias*, 1925 (fig. 2), and *Yellow Calla*, 1926 (Smithsonian American Art Museum), transforming the curvaceous contours of flowers into sources for abstraction by enlarging them to fill almost the entire canvas. Stern acknowledged the parallel with O'Keeffe: "Someone commented to me that [my] paintings feel like gauze that's been cast into the wind. Another person said that my work makes her think of Georgia O'Keeffe had she gone further."<sup>3</sup> Building upon O'Keeffe's modernist compositions, Stern's organic forms highlight the lustrous and fluid quality of the paint itself. Still, her imagery is inspired



by the California landscape, just as O’Keeffe’s paintings were rooted in the hills of New Mexico or the woods and water of New York State’s Lake George.

Elements of local flora appear as symbols of liberation in Stern’s poem “A Dream...”: “I fly further than the sun / I rise high above the canyon / Palm trees swaying beneath me / Across the fields / Beyond the bright bougainvillea / Eyes fixed on the clouds / Moving silently / I cast my own shadow.” The poem pairs an image of the sun’s rays illuminating the canyon and the magenta flowers with the darkness of Irene’s silhouette. Contrasts of light and dark often appear in the paintings as well, which juxtapose vibrant yellows and inky blacks. These color combinations might be interpreted as representing the triumph of the pleasures of existence over the darker aspects of human experience, a narrative that was a part of Stern’s life story. Irene described her paintings as “optimistic expressions of our happiness and joy of life.”<sup>4</sup> The interplay of hot and cold hues is also a classic technique of Abstract Expressionist painting, popularized by influential painter and teacher Hans Hofmann as a means to create a sense of depth and dynamism on a flat surface.<sup>5</sup>

Three horizontal compositions (pls. 4, 6, 9) evoke for the viewer the ebb and flow of rivers and tides. Thin layers of earth-toned transparent color spread outward from a central line of paint, suggesting a river that cuts through the landscape, rising and falling, overflowing its bank and receding again. In her poem “Step by Step,” Stern used the image of a river as representative of the



Fig. 3  
Helen Frankenthaler, *Low Tide*, 1963.  
Acrylic on canvas, 84 × 81 ¾ in.  
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven,  
Conn, Gift of Susan Morse Hillis

passage of time. The mark of experience on our lives leads to loss as well as the development of a new perspective. "I worked out your loss / Like the burn / Of the revealed heart / Like the current / Endlessly cutting stone / Like the light / On riverbank rocks / Under the moon / Walking on sands / Returning alone / That night I saw / The world open."

Helen Frankenthaler's practice was informed, even more directly than Stern's, by her experience of living near the water. During summers in the 1960s, Frankenthaler worked from a Provincetown studio that overlooked the bay, and was inspired by the cyclical movement of the ocean against the shore.<sup>6</sup> In her painting *Low Tide*, 1963 (fig. 3), a tide pool formed in emerald and turquoise paint is encircled by mustard-colored sand. Although they shared similar sources of inspiration, Frankenthaler's technique (laying out canvas on the floor and applying paint from above while moving around it) produced very different results from Stern's gossamer washes of color. Frankenthaler's pigments are denser and less translucent, and drips and splatters, which do not appear in Stern's work, are features of her compositions. Although Stern worked with a wide range of colors, she confined her palette to several colors within one painting, allowing them to mingle with each other and produce a surprising variety of shades. She explained: "I like the discipline, I like to be limited by a few colors. It dictates the image, it tells me not to go too wild."<sup>7</sup>

Focusing the viewer's attention on the combination of a few hues, such as fiery yellows, eggplant purples, rusty browns, and deep blues, Stern asks us to take the time to savor the ever-changing experience of color, both in her paintings and in our lives. Color perception, as her luminous works illustrate, is connected to light, which is governed by the natural rhythm of earthly rotations, the transition of day into night. In her poem "It Has Been Raining All Week," she describes day slipping into night, drawing a parallel with the passing of a mood, the experience of getting unstuck, or the surmounting of an obstacle: "Suddenly / The earth turned / I felt the movement / In my legs and in my heart / The day was passing / It was getting dark / In the silent light of night / In the mute darkness / The moon came up over the trees / Now there was just the moon / There was just one color / White."

1. This quote and others from Jan Peter Stern and Irene Monat Stern can be found at "Quotes," [irenenonatstern.com/quotes-1](http://irenenonatstern.com/quotes-1), compiled by the artists' sons.

2. Judith L. Dunham, "Irene Stern Paintings," *Artweek*, May 31, 1975.

3. "Quotes."

4. Irene Monat Stern, "2004 Interview & 2011 Memorial (6 minute excerpt)," video at [irenenonatstern.com/gallery](http://irenenonatstern.com/gallery).

5. Hans Hofmann, *Search for the Real and Other Essays*, ed. by Sarah T. Weeks and Bartlett H. Hayes Jr. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967).

6. For more on the influence of Frankenthaler's Sea Barn studio on the development of her work, see Elizabeth A. T. Smith, "East End Light: Frankenthaler in Provincetown in the 1960s," in *Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 39.

7. "Quotes."







plates



# Step by Step

Step by step

I worked out your loss

Like the burn

Of the revealed heart

Like the current

Endlessly cutting stone

Like the light

On riverbank rocks

Under the moon

Walking on sands

Returning alone

That night

I saw

The world open.



Plate 1.  
*Untitled*, circa 1970s  
Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 75 in. (121.9 x 190.5 cm)

Plate 2.  
*Untitled*, circa 1970s  
Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 76 in. (152.4 x 193 cm)

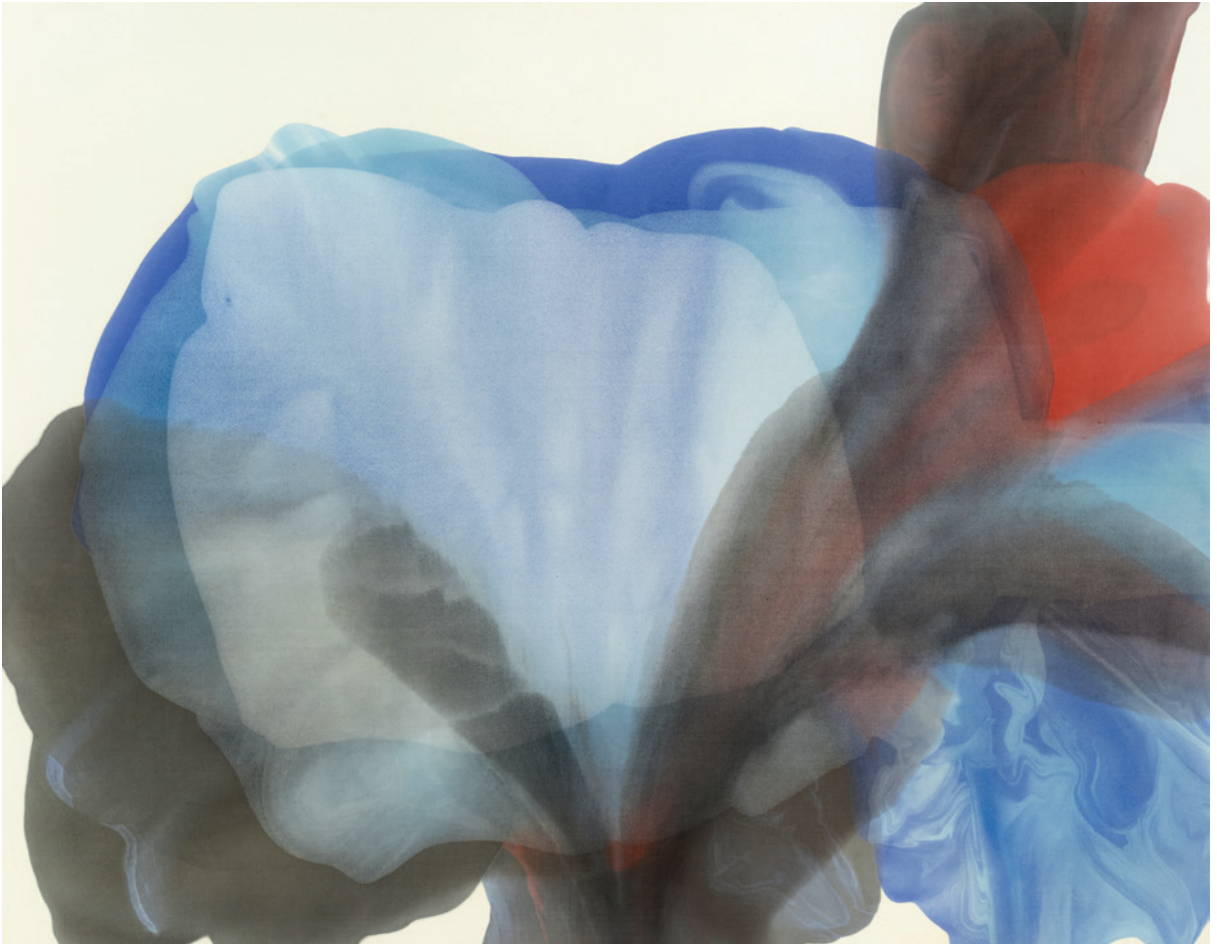




Plate 3.  
*Untitled*, circa 1970s  
Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 82 in. (152.4 x 208.3 cm)



Plate 4.  
*Untitled*, circa 1970s  
Acrylic on canvas, 52 x 73 in. (132.1 x 185.4 cm)





Plate 5.  
*Untitled*, circa 1970s  
Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 73 in. (182.9 x 185.4 cm)

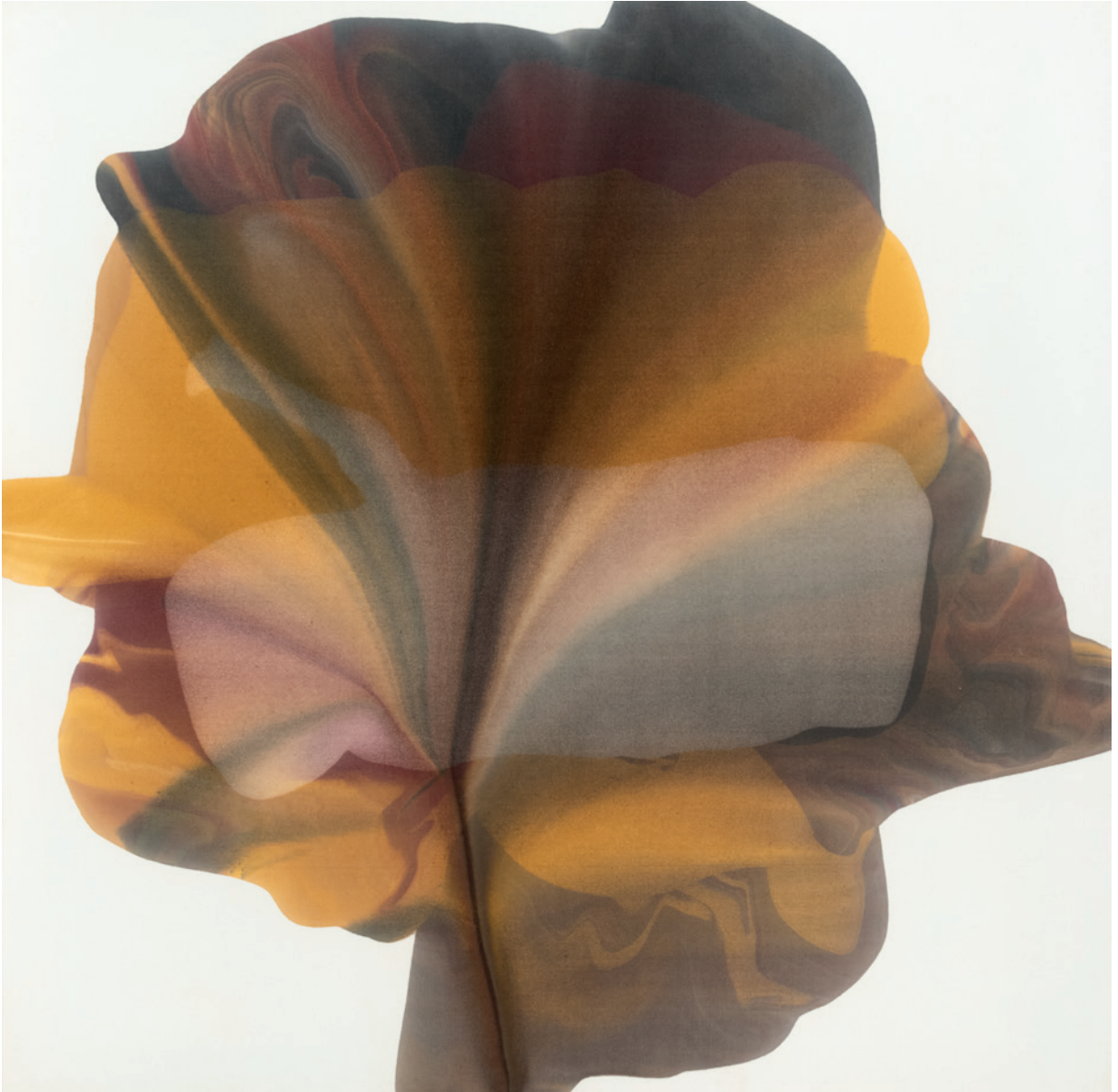


Plate 6.  
*Untitled*, circa 1970s  
Acrylic on canvas, 54 x 88 in. (137.2 x 223.5 cm)



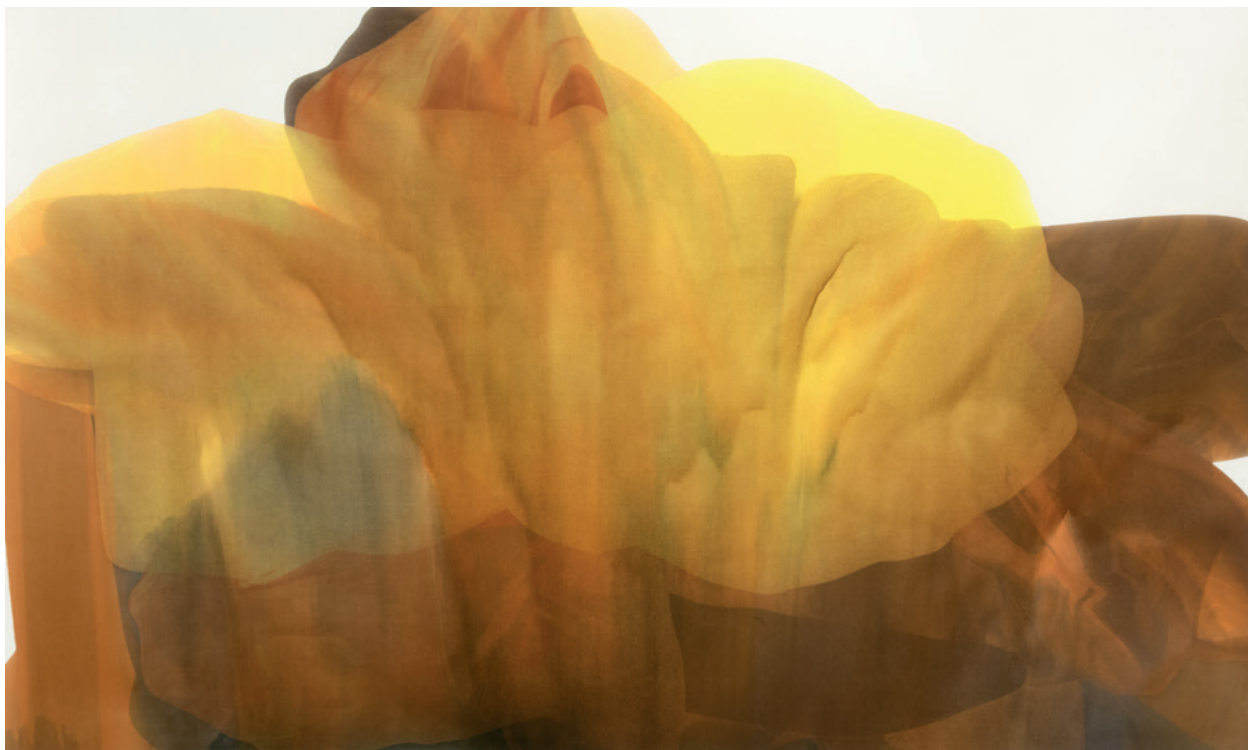


Plate 7.  
*Untitled*, circa 1970s  
Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 in. (182.9 x 182.9 cm)



# It Has Been Raining All Week

It has been raining all week  
The air was full of moist smells  
Soon everything became damp  
Absorbed in thought  
I walked  
Dark clouds moved in fast  
One by one blocking out the blue patches of sky  
A cold wind was blowing down my back  
I listened  
The leaves had been rustling  
From time to time I wanted to cry  
I wiped my face on my sleeve  
So much had passed  
Gone from memory  
Only the dew on the grass  
And the strong smells of the earth  
Remained forever the same  
I thought of the year just passed  
I thought of the stories I'd been able to write  
Still languor hung over everything...  
I inhaled  
My whole life lay before me  
I remembered all the spring times  
The days of purest joy  
Suddenly  
The earth turned  
I felt the movement  
In my legs and in my heart  
The day was passing  
It was getting dark  
In the silent light of night  
In the mute darkness  
The moon came up over the trees  
Now there was just the moon  
There was just one color  
White...





Plate 8.  
*Untitled*, circa 1970s  
Acrylic on unprimed canvas, 43 x 68 ½ in. (109.2 x 174 cm)

Plate 9.  
*Untitled*, circa 1970s  
Acrylic on canvas, 56 x 76 in. (142.2 x 193 cm)

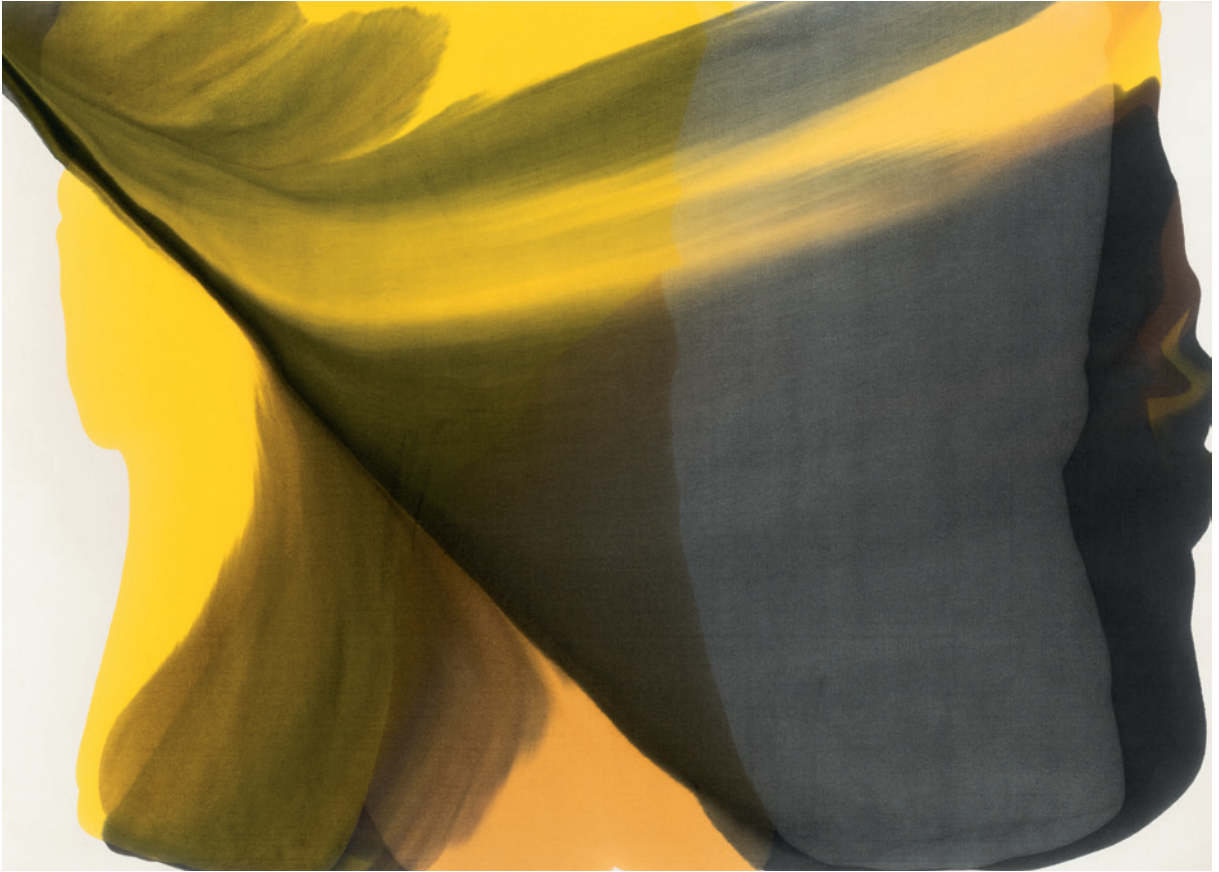
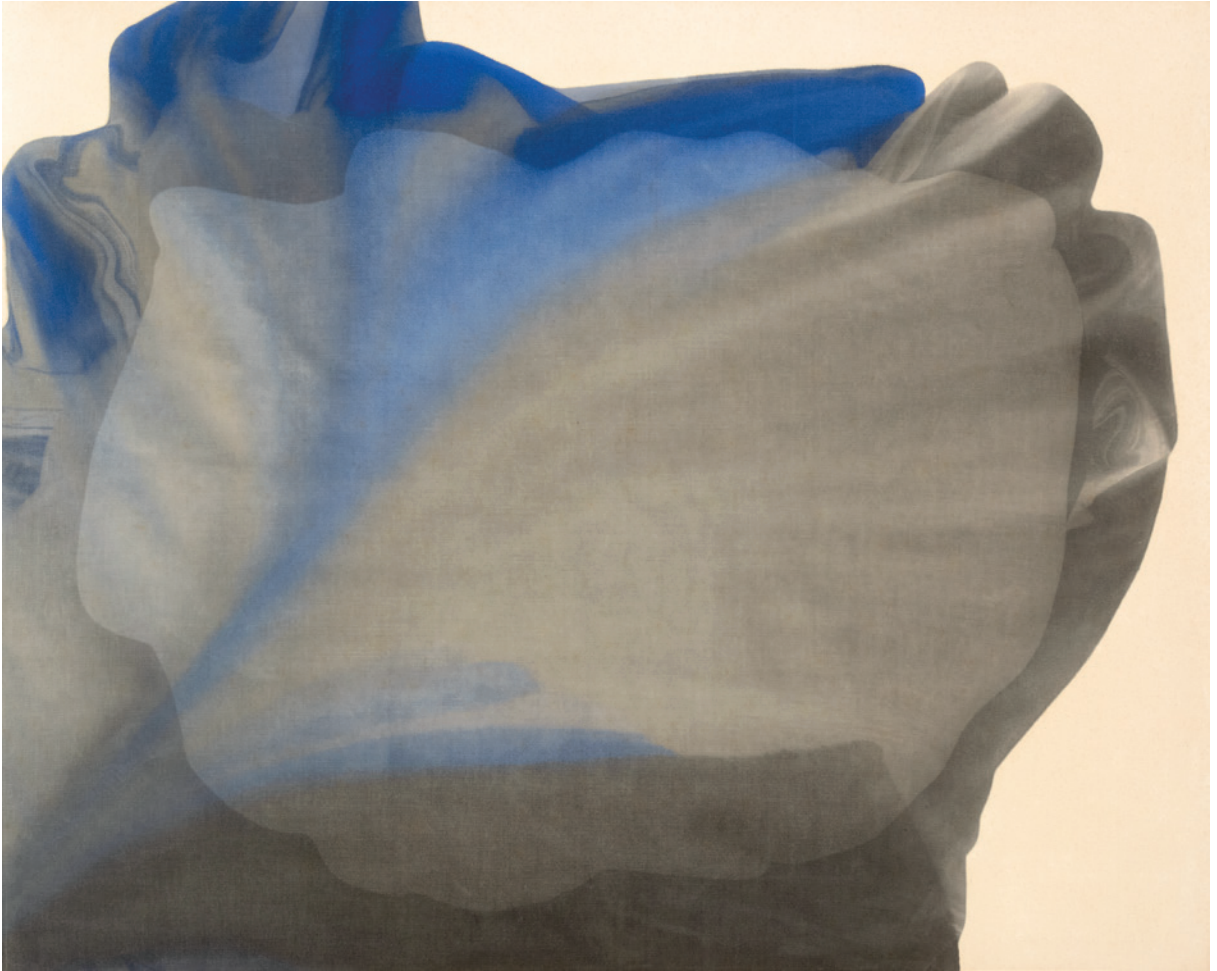
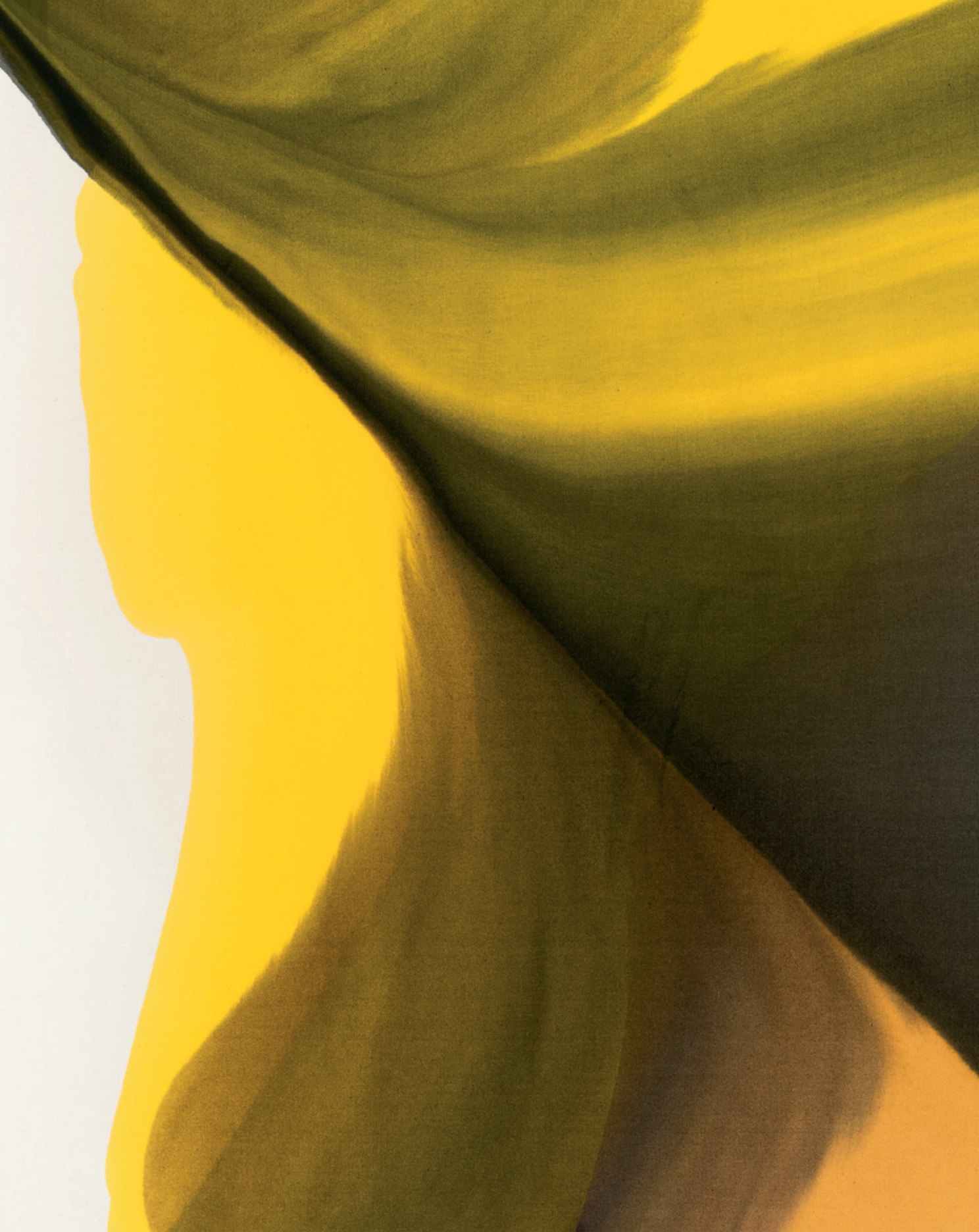


Plate 10.  
*Untitled*, circa 1970s  
Acrylic on unprimed canvas, 42 x 52 ½ inches (106.7 x 133.3 cm)

















# A Dream...

I fly further than the sun

I rise high above the canyon

Palm trees swaying beneath me

Across the fields

Beyond the bright bougainvillea

Eyes fixed on the clouds

Moving silently

I cast my own shadow

Everything smells of rain

And crushed Eucalyptus

In a clear moment

Before twilight

I look beneath me

I see our lives

The wind sweeps me back

To darkness.

# biography

Irene Monat Stern's luminous and elegant paintings evolved out of her early work in watercolor, a progression evident in the almost liquid flow of colors across her large compositions. In these works, tones melt together and "veils of pigment appear to fold over one another, creating illusory creases and hollows," as one critic put it.<sup>1</sup> The overall effect is one of slow, powerful visual rhythms. Stern's semi-translucent, gossamer colors billow across her surfaces, soaking into the unprimed canvas and evoking a variety of natural references—the movement of sunlight through diaphanous fabric, sublime landscapes, or a blossoming flower.

Stern's pure abstract forms call to mind the stained canvases of Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler, but her work embodies a unique elegance that differentiates it from that of her Color Field contemporaries. These "blooms" of pure color manage to be simultaneously serene and dramatic as they radiate warm, earthy tones. Responding to an exhibition at San Francisco's Source Gallery in 1975, one critic meditated on the relationship between Stern and Louis:

The statements both artists make about the nature of paint differ. Louis's stains and pours often follow the force of gravity, so that paint appears to be drawn by its own pull towards the periphery of the canvas. Stern, on the other hand, makes acrylic seem weightless. It floats on white pristine canvas. It masses into rich areas with a spatial depth that Louis's works lack. It is forced onto the surface in many directions by an energy source beyond the paintings' edges.<sup>2</sup>

Stern was born in 1932 in Poland and survived the Holocaust at a very young age. She moved to Paris in 1948 before relocating to New York in 1954. There she met sculptor Jan Peter Stern, whom she married in 1955. She took courses at the New York School for Social Research, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. The Sterns finally settled in Southern California in 1965, and it was there that both Irene and Peter's careers flourished. The couple had a very supportive artistic relationship and often exhibited together. Her painting activity dwindled beginning in the early 1980s, as she became more and more essential as a caretaker after her husband's Parkinson's diagnosis. She cared for him exclusively for the last twenty-five years of his life.

1. Judith L. Dunham, "Irene Stern Paintings," *Artweek*, May 31, 1975.

2. Dunham.

## IRENE MONAT STERN

b. 1932 d. 2010

### SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

1973

Brandt Library and Museum, Glendale, CA, *Color '73*, January 7–26, 1973.

Esther Robles Gallery, Los Angeles, *Annual Invitational Group Exhibition*, August–September 1973.

1974

American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York, 1974 (Purchase Award).

The Downtown Gallery, Honolulu, *Irene Monat Stern: Paintings and Jan Peter Stern: Sculptures*, December 17, 1974–January 3, 1975.

1975

Source Gallery, San Francisco, *Irene Monat Stern: Acrylic Paintings*, May 9–June 18, 1975.

1979

The 26th Street Gallery, Santa Monica, CA, *Jan Peter Stern and Irene Monat Stern*, February 1979.

1981

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Art Rental Gallery, *Additional Space Exposé IV*, July 18–August 30, 1981.

1983

Park Avenue Atrium, New York, *Irene Monat Stern and Jan Peter Stern*, November 1, 1983–Spring 1984.

2016

Hollis Taggart, New York, *Irene Monat Stern*, September 8–October 6, 2016.

2018

Hollis Taggart, New York, *Irene Monat Stern: Air of Twilight*, October 10–31, 2018.

2020

Hollis Taggart, New York, *Irene Monat Stern: Bloom of Life*, June 16–30, 2020 (online).

2021

Hollis Taggart, New York, *The Art of Discovery: Post-War Selections*, February 18–March 27, 2021.

2022

Hollis Taggart, New York, *Irene Monat Stern and Jan Peter Stern: Lyrical Modernism*, April 21–May 21, 2022.

2024

Hollis Taggart, New York, *Changes: Paintings from the 1970s*, February 15–March 16, 2024.

Addison Rowe Gallery, Santa Fe, NM, *Transcendental and Beyond: The Essence of Art*, June 28–October 31, 2024.

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### PUBLIC AND PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

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Daniel, Mann, Johnson & Mendenall, Los Angeles

The Eastman Kodak Company/Spin Physics Inc., La Jolla, CA

Financial Federation Inc., Los Angeles

First Federal Savings Association, Thousand Oaks, CA

Citibank, Los Angeles

Fluor Corporation, New York

General Electric Corporation, Fairfield, CT

Great Western Financial Corporation, Los Angeles

Hilton Worldwide Holdings, Inc., Beverly Hills, CA

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC

Hyatt Grand Central, New York

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The Mica Corporation, Los Angeles

National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

Pacific Life Insurance Company, Newport Beach, CA

William Pereira

RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA

Santa Fe Federal Savings and Loan Association, Del Mar, CA

Sheraton Universal Hotel, Universal City, CA

Marvin Smalley

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Sharf Sumner

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The Westin Bonaventure Hotel & Suites, Los Angeles



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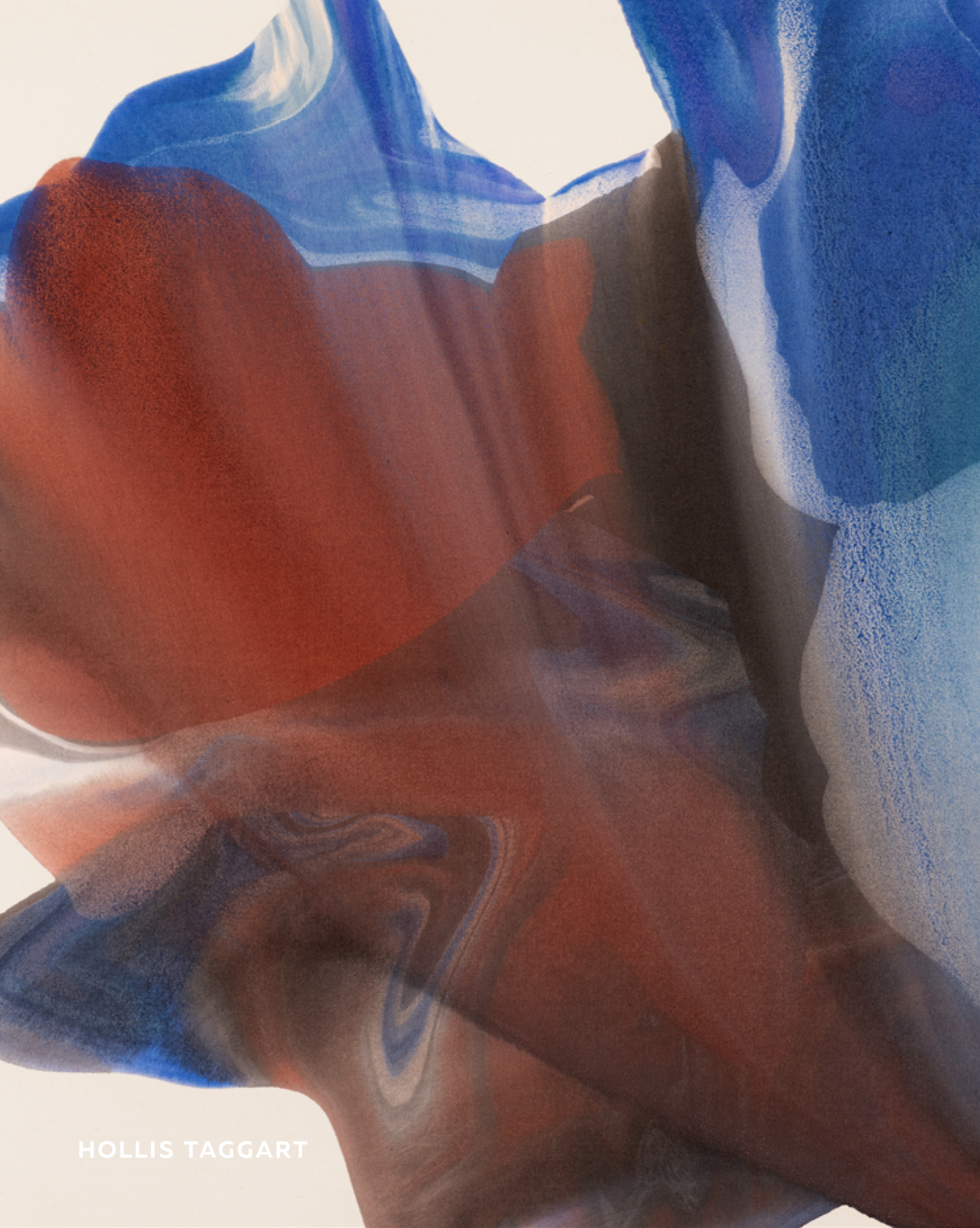
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Frontispiece: Irene Monat Stern, circa late 1960s, photograph by Jan Peter Stern  
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Page 36: Stern, *Hawai'i*, late 1970s, photograph by Jan Peter Stern  
Page 40: Irene Monat Stern, circa early 1970s, with her untitled painting (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.), photograph by Jan Peter Stern

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