

IRENE MONAT
STERN AND
JAN PETER
STERN

LYRICAL
MODERNISM

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PETER FRANK

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FOREWORD

THE STUNNING, DIAPHANOUS PAINTINGS of Irene Monat Stern were brought to our attention six years ago by our friend and colleague Stuart Denenberg. We were immediately intrigued by the artist's exquisitely rendered compositions as well as her life story, and we successfully commenced showing her work. Her color-field paintings are elegant and ethereal, and her technique of manipulating paint is extraordinary. Colors overlap on the surface of the canvas yet remain veiled and luminous, almost evoking the fluidity of a watercolor.

Irene's pure abstract forms are often compared to the stained canvases of Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler, but her work embodies a unique elegance that differentiates Irene from that of her contemporaries. While Louis controlled his pigments on the canvas primarily using gravity and Frankenthaler deliberately moved her paints around the surface, Stern's handling of hues feels deceptively spontaneous as they dance across the canvas. Similarly, her palette manages to be simultaneously serene and dramatic as it radiates warm, earthy tones that reference nature.

Irene was born in 1932 in Poland and surviving the Holocaust moved to Paris in 1948. Six years later, she relocated to New York where she met fellow artist Jan Peter Stern; the two were married the following year. They eventually settled in Southern California in 1965, and it was there that both Irene's and Peter's careers flourished. The couple had a very supportive personal and artistic relationship and often exhibited together. Thus the idea for this exhibition which features work from both artists developed quite organically. The gallery has organized small boutique shows of Irene's work over the years, but this is the first large-scale exhibition that the gallery has presented.

Pairing Irene's paintings with Peter's sculpture touches upon a moment of art history. There is a synergy that is created in juxtaposing the graceful sculptures with the rhythmic flow of the paint on the canvases. Like his wife, Peter immigrated to this country, he from his native Germany.

Steeped in a European tradition yet influenced by the postwar torrent of new and exciting ideas, Peter developed a style focused on precise geometry and formal concerns. There is beauty and refinement to his sculptures, whether they are of modest scale or monumental in size. Some kinetic, others solid forms, the choice of metals and finishes and the perfect sense of balance coalesce to create an engaging simplicity that belies the complexity of the works.

The couple's sons, Daniel and Billy have been admirable guardians of their parents' work and the legacies of both these artists have been safeguarded by their efforts. We are grateful to the Stern family for allowing us to present Irene's and Peter's artwork and for their generosity and assistance with this exhibition and catalogue. After almost four decades, we are pleased to formally reunite the talents of these two artists.

Hollis C. Taggart

Debra Pesci

Irene and Peter with *Limits of Horizon I*, seven-foot-high by nineteen-foot-long polished stainless steel sculpture, Prudential Center, Boston, 1966. Photographer unknown



IRENE MONAT STERN AND JAN PETER STERN: LYRICAL MODERNISM

PETER FRANK

IN ITS TIME MODERNISM was generally regarded as an instrument of liberation. It represented the realization of artistic license, especially in the face of political co-optation and social opprobrium. And for many who suffered the apocalyptic cruelties of the epoch, modernist art was a reclamation of identity and purpose. The youthful experiences of Irene Monat Stern and Jan Peter Stern helped lead them to this art-ideal, a quintessentially modernist circumstance, as of course did their own minds and hands. The Sterns assumed the roles of artists—and recognized as much out of hope as of necessity that the role was a responsibility, not mere self-indulgence.

What we know as “modernism” constituted the abiding condition of the twentieth century. For many it was an aspirational stance that sought to advance reality into a palpable utopia. For many others it *was* reality, at once startling, dismaying, beautiful, and brutal. Modern life—*modernist* life—was miraculous and devastating: Science and technology allowed millions better lives while killing millions more in horrific wars. For so many, the concept of “modernism” had an ideological thrust to it, but it was the thrust of a two-edged sword, opening up democracy with one blade, untethering totalitarianism with the other. If modernism was a grand experiment, it cast humanity as both its lab technicians and its test animals.

Although art could be employed, knowingly, as propaganda and indoctrination, the modernist ideals of art practice always engaged, even propounded, the free will of the artist—indeed, the will toward personal sensibility no matter the patron. This is the credo we see advanced, however subtly, in Irene’s painting and her husband Peter’s sculpture. Their work reveals a trust in the stability and nobility of modern artistic expression and exploration, a trust propagated by artwork itself, serving to valorize the conception and realization of such artwork. For the Sterns and their peers, art was at once a kind of religion and a personal calling aimed at improving the world.

The Second World War manifested modernism as a season in hell—not just because it was a war of vast destruction, but because it was also a war of extermination, a war designed from its

Peter and Irene sit above the anodized aluminum screen panels of Peter’s *Relief Sculpture V*, a nearly nine-foot sculpture commissioned by Alcoa for their Chicago office, 1968. Photograph by Richard Gross for the *Los Angeles Times Magazine*



Left:
Irene, wearing her handmade dress of Marimekko fabric, in front of Peter's *Steel Sculpture Group* in Los Angeles, 1967. Photograph by Jan Peter Stern



Right:
Peter preparing to move *Moment of Sunset*, a thirty-five-foot mirror polished stainless steel sculpture for the 1964–65 New York World's Fair, from his studio in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York, 1964. Photograph by Guy Gillette



inception to identify and eradicate specific victims. Those who escaped or just survived the conflagration, most notably in Europe, were cut off from their previous lives. No one was left at home in great part because there was no home left. The continent was awash in displaced people, and many came to the more peaceful and promising shores of the Western Hemisphere, especially the United States.

Among the refugees fleeing Naziism and war for America's shores was a large contingent of avant-garde artists. The very presence of these aesthetic radicals in the United States had a vitalizing effect on the American art scene. American modernism had already been kicked into high gear by a previous generation (also rich in immigrants). However, it was the subsequent generation, the one that coalesced after World War II, that synthesized modernist ideas and attitudes into a coherent idiom grounded in national practice.

The postwar generation benefited from the relaxation of the American audience's heretofore reactionary reception. By 1950, the notion of modernism had finally begun to grip the American imagination. But both postwar refugees and those who came as children earlier brought a distinct perspective to artmaking, no matter how experimental. It was a perspective colored by world-weariness on the one hand, and on the other a faith that modernism itself would improve their lot, and ours. The Sterns are a case—or two cases—in point. Irene, born in southern Poland, had endured the crucible personally; Peter and his parents left their native Berlin before the outbreak of war. Both fled to escape further persecution.

After meeting in New York City and marrying in 1955, the couple lived in the Westchester, New York suburbs where they raised their two sons. Peter had emigrated with his parents to the City, and Irene had made her way there after several years in postwar Paris. Initially, both Irene and Peter were trained primarily in design and the applied arts rather than studio art, but at crucial (albeit very different) points in their lives they turned toward making non-functional objects.

Peter's initial education in industrial, in particular, design was training that would become critical when designing and fabricating large, free-standing works for outdoor spaces.

They both studied fine and applied art at the New School for Social Research in Manhattan. Notably, Peter took sculpture classes in 1956 and 1957 with Spanish-Dominican artist Manolo Pascual. Proving to be a fast learner and dedicated object-maker, he turned full time to making art in three dimensions. A solo show at the Barone Gallery on Madison Avenue in April of 1960 led to several corporate commissions and his first patrons, fabric designer Vera Neumann and her husband George.

Irene's turn to fine art came somewhat later. While she made art in various forms for much of her life, she did not work professionally as an artist until "the kids were older"—a refrain common to her generation of women artists. But another milestone also gave her "permission" to paint: the family's 1965 relocation to Southern California for the health of their older son and the more congenial climate. The move was made with a certain hesitation given Peter's burgeoning career as a public/corporate artist who needed access to ongoing personal and corporate patronage. But the transition turned out to be beneficial, allowing him to maintain his East Coast contacts while placing him within reach of a whole new clientele in the West—a clientele oriented towards the flow of indoor-outdoor space and the effects of intense Mediterranean light.

Southern California's friendly weather and more open lifestyle had a salutary effect on Irene as well: It afforded her, for the first time, access to her own studio. She could finally paint on the large, ambitious scale expected of American abstractionists. Like her husband's sculpture, Irene's paintings reflected the influence of the sub-tropical climate. Work she produced between the late 1960s and the early 1980s were unlike anything else being done in Los Angeles; they were very much of a piece with the abstraction then prominent on the East Coast. Employing thinned-out acrylic paints, Irene flooded her canvases with streaks and pools of pigment, much in the manner



of Helen Frankenthaler, Mark Rothko, Paul Jenkins, and especially Morris Louis. Hers was a stain-painting approach, with classic color-field results. But her paintings could not be mistaken for anyone else's. Irene did not consider color a self-referential, phenomenological entity; for her it was unabashedly evocative and metaphor-driven, a sensual celebration of both nature and vision just as her husband's sculpture had become. Whether the palette of any specific painting was sandy and sun-bleached or as deeply hued as tropical flora, the paintings celebrated nature unfettered by limitations of sight or thought.

Further distinguishing this body of work from its East Coast counterparts is the silhouetting of a few canvases where Irene cut around the contours of her stain-shapes, leaving a markedly irregular cloth to be exhibited unstretched. Again, there was contemporary precedent in New York for shaped-canvas painting by abstractionists as diverse as Kenneth Noland, Neil Williams, and Charles Hinman. But an unstretched canvas intended as an integral object hung flush on a surface was only to emerge in the wake of Minimalism in the work of such artists as Richard Tuttle and Manny Farber, artists Irene anticipated or paralleled from a distance of 3,000 miles. (Peter noted that these shaped canvases "are most effective as an image floating in space, in front of glassed-in views of nature, as in our living room.")

There is no doubt that both Sterns were aware of artistic trends among their New York counterparts. But they worked at a certain remove even when back east and maintained few close contacts with art-scene insiders. (One notable exception was James Wines, who, like Peter, was a sculptor engaged in public-space commissions. Wines went on to found Site, Inc., a "post-modernist" architectural design firm with a conceptual/comical bent.) Similarly, the Sterns maintained cordial but distant relationships with figures in the California scene even as they exhibited in two



Left:
Irene with an untitled painting, c. 1970s.
Photograph by Jan Peter Stern

Right:
Installation view of Peter's *Moment of Sunset*, Festival of Gas Pavilion at the 1964-65 New York World's Fair.
Photograph by Jan Peter Stern

prominent Los Angeles galleries, Ankrum and Esther Robles. They did strike up a warm friendship with San Francisco-based Ruth Asawa, a kindred spirit whose curvaceous "knitted" sculptures could be regarded as bringing together the voluptuous forms of Irene's paintings with the dedicated metal workmanship and material sensitivity characteristic of Peter's approach.

Irene's mode of painting conformed, however distinctively, to the specifically late-modernist idiom of color-field painting, and her husband's sculpture was similarly based in prominent, readily identifiable modalities that his relatively early (late-1950s) entry into the discourse of public sculpture actually helped formulate. In Peter's work, line and contour at once coordinate and contrast with surface and volume, allowing for the simultaneous construction and deconstruction of evocative shapes. Peter's formal language is not strictly geometric but is rooted in the evolution of non-objective form out of cubism. He professed the influence of prewar Russo-French constructivist Naum Gabo and of postwar Swiss geometricist Max Bill, as well as that of Japanese-American sculptor/designer Isamu Noguchi, and responded to the value they all placed on rhythm and balance, as well as to their experimentation with non-traditional materials and quasi-Bauhaus conflation of art and design.



That said, the expansive, sometimes extravagant breadth of Peter's forms, and his tendency to work spontaneously—more as a shaper and assembler of metal than as a composer of preformulated structures—place him squarely in the lineage of Abstract Expressionism. His contours are usually curved, whether in his early line-floating-in-space compositions (such as those in his Barone show) or in the free-standing pieces and architectural interventions he undertook on both coasts. His curvilinear work *Moment of Sunset* was featured in front of and within the interior of the Festival of Gas, one of the most attention-getting pavilions in the 1964–65 New York World's Fair. Peter's propensity for the curved line is also evident in the large bronze work *Windward* from 1963 installed in front of the Lorillard Building near Grand Central Station in midtown Manhattan. It was one of the first abstract sculptures to be placed in a public space in New York.

Another sculpture, *Mast-Sculpture*, in Manhattan, for St. Mary Byzantine Catholic Church on East 15th Street, features a tangle of swirls in which a bell nestles. The cluster clearly evokes both a bird's nest and the branches of a tree, further displaying the sculptor's response to natural form in a thoroughly urban environment, recalling many of Peter's early photographs of nature. He once stated that his first artistic engagement “was through photography, long before college, in which I mainly studied forms of nature and trees in particular.”

Despite the circumnavigations of their lives and careers—perhaps because of them—Jan Peter Stern and Irene Monat Stern were both able to realize bodies of work that were very much of their era, and recognized in their time. Their work, in its sophistication and knowing participation in an overarching discourse about art, nature, and history, remains vibrant and distinctive to this day.

The reputations of painter and sculptor alike, however, barely survived their passing. Their relative aloofness from the “art world” left them somewhat isolated, even as their not-infrequent exposure met with critical and commercial success. Similarly, while their move from the mid-century center of the art world to an exotic outpost must have been a stimulating experience, it was hardly a canny career move. And, cruelly, just as Los Angeles began to emerge from its artistic chrysalis



Left:
Installation view of Peter's *Windward*, a ten-foot-high-and-wide sculpture of bronze, Lorillard building, 200 East 42nd Street, New York, 1962. Photograph by Jan Peter Stern

Right:
Street view of Peter's *Mast-Sculpture*, a fifty-foot-tall mirror polished stainless steel bell tower, St. Mary Byzantine Catholic Church at Second Avenue and 15th Street, New York, 1963. Photograph by Jan Peter Stern

in the early 1980s Peter fell ill with Parkinson's Disease, and was eventually forced to give up his practice. In turn, Irene sacrificed her own artmaking to care for him. Their legacy has been kept alive by their sons, and the fruits of their labors are presented together here for the first time in decades.

The modernist principle of self-sustaining form as a response to nature courses throughout both Irene's and Peter's work. The vicissitudes of their early lives instilled a fierce determination to make art, and to dedicate their artmaking to a vision beyond artmaking itself. Ultimately, the Sterns escaped the wrath of modernism and, in part by finding one another, they tamed it and brought it to a lyrical expression.

Los Angeles

March 2022

PLATES





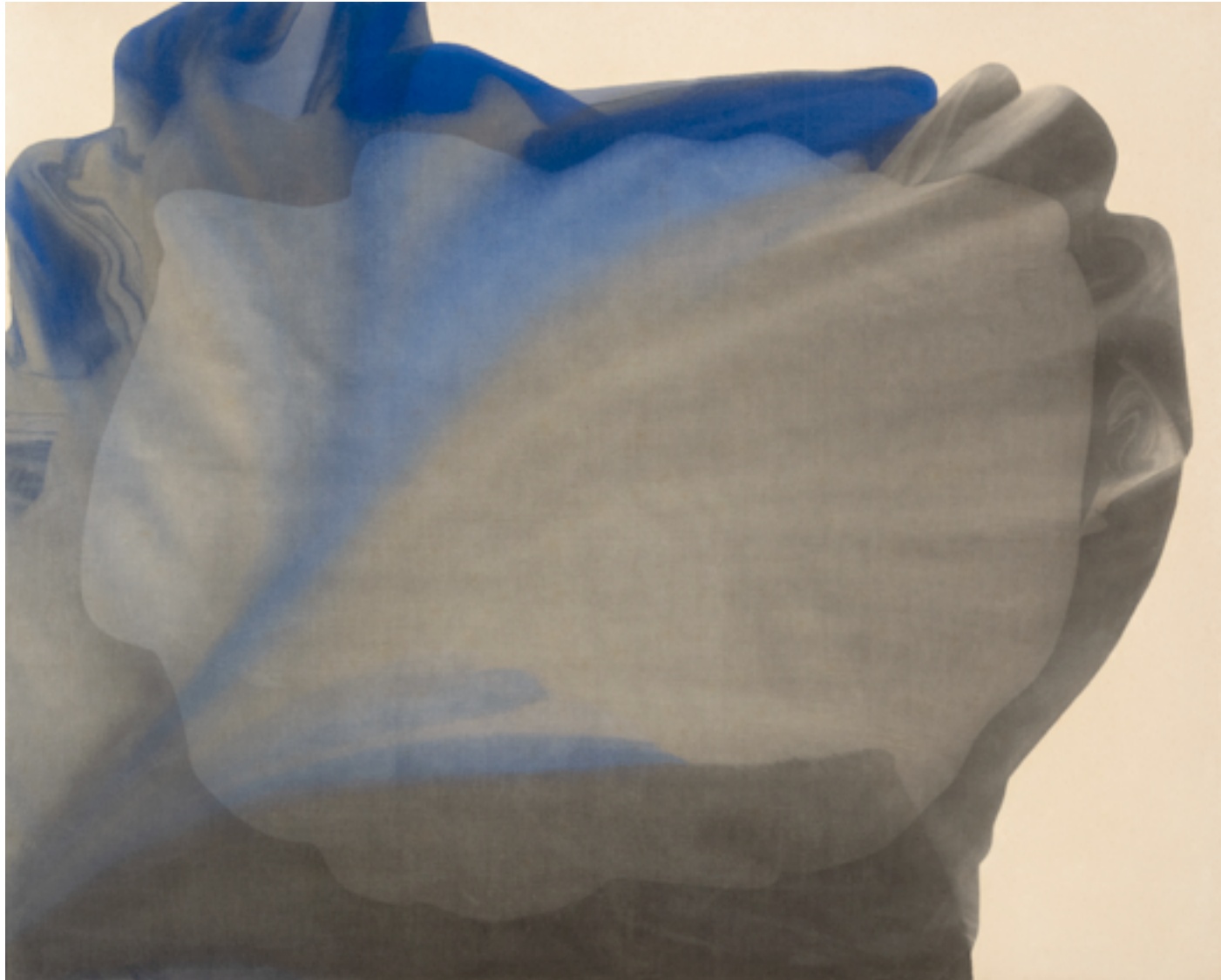
1 Jan Peter Stern
Untitled (Sculpture #1), 1978
Mirror polished stainless steel
14 × 13 × 6 in (35.6 × 33 × 15.2 cm)



2 Irene Monat Stern
Untitled, c. 1970s
Acrylic on unprimed canvas
57 × 94 inches (144.8 × 238.8 cm)



3 Irene Monat Stern
Untitled, c. 1970s
Acrylic on unprimed canvas
33½ × 42½ in (85.1 × 108 cm)



4 Irene Monat Stern
Untitled, c. 1975
Acrylic on unprimed canvas
42 × 52 ½ inches (106.7 × 133.3 cm)



5 Jan Peter Stern
Crystalline Light, 1978
Mirror polished stainless steel
6 × 14 × 14 in (15.2 × 35.6 × 35.6 cm)



6 Irene Monat Stern
Untitled, c. 1970s
Acrylic on unprimed canvas
50 × 68½ in (127 × 174 cm)



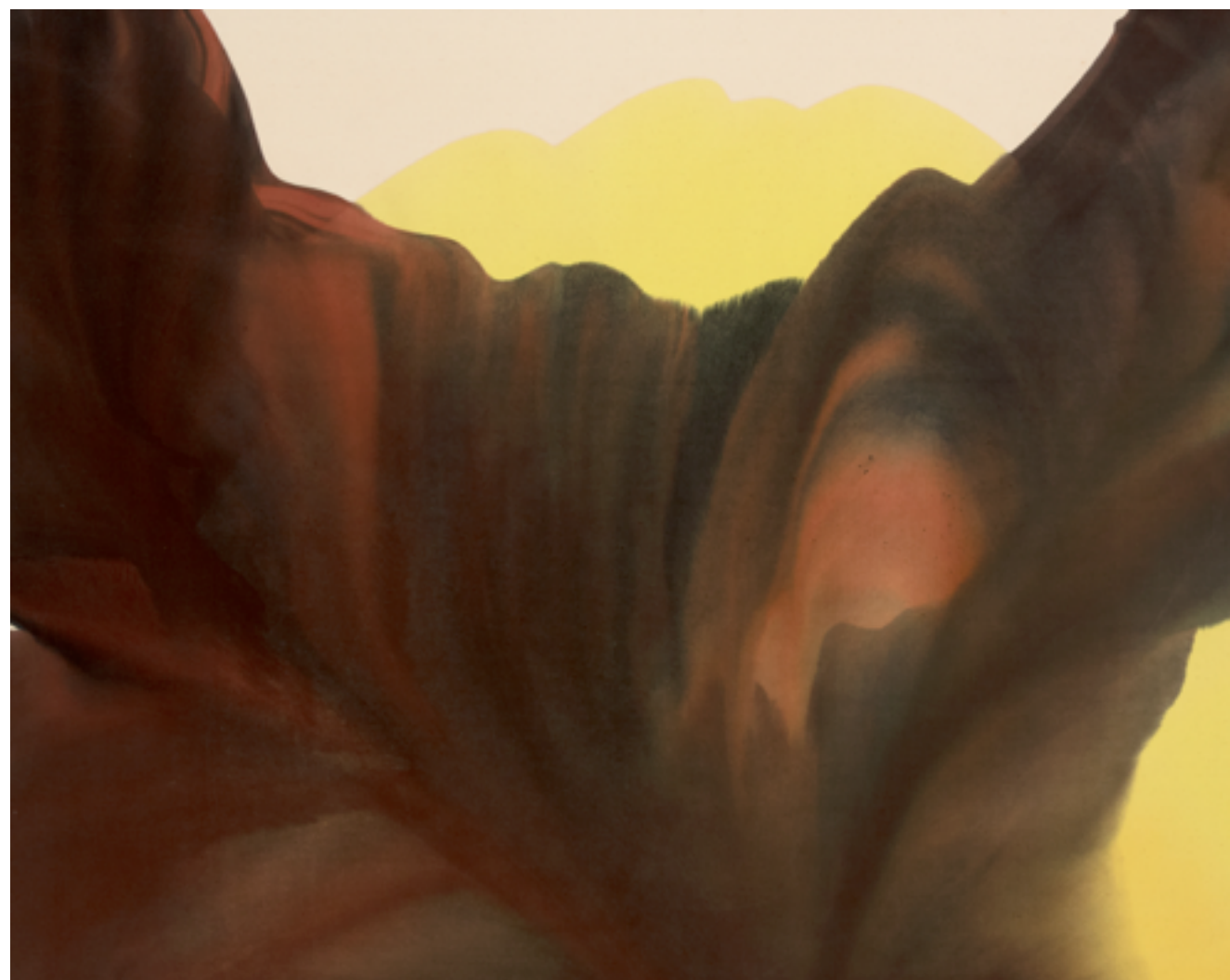
7 Irene Monat Stern
Untitled, c. 1970s
Acrylic on unprimed canvas
32½ × 79½ in (82.5 × 201.9 cm)



8 Jan Peter Stern
Rhythm of Steel, 1966
Mirror polished stainless steel
14 × 22 × 9 in (35.6 × 55.9 × 22.9 cm)



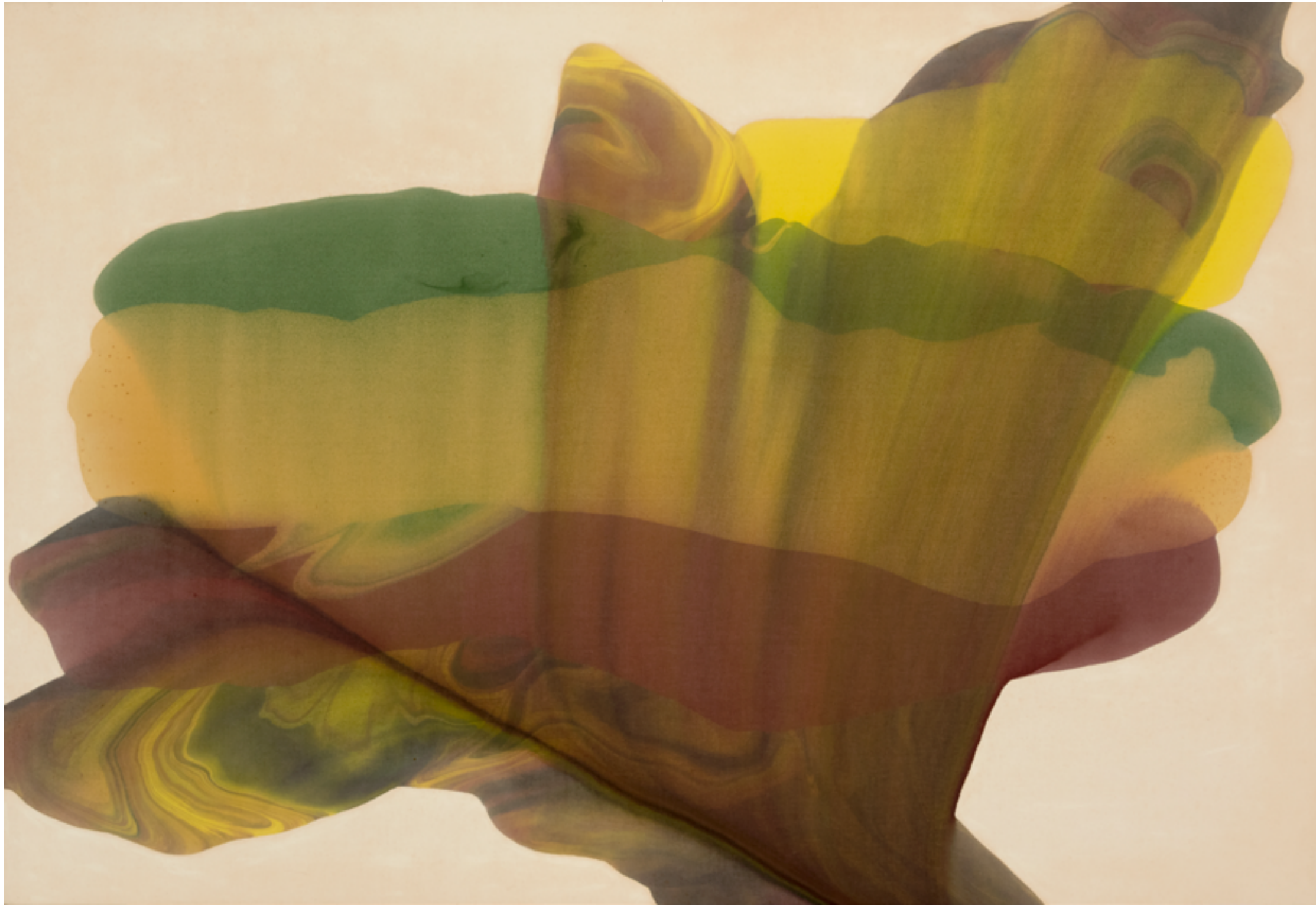
9 Irene Monat Stern
Untitled, c. 1970s
Acrylic on unprimed canvas
59 ¼ × 54 ½ in (150.5 × 138.4 cm)



10 Irene Monat Stern
Untitled, c. 1970s
Acrylic on unprimed canvas
41 ¼ × 53 ¼ in (106 × 135.3 cm)



11 Jan Peter Stern
Spherical #1, 1969
Mirror polished stainless steel
17 × 18 × 14 in (43.2 × 45.7 × 35.6 cm)



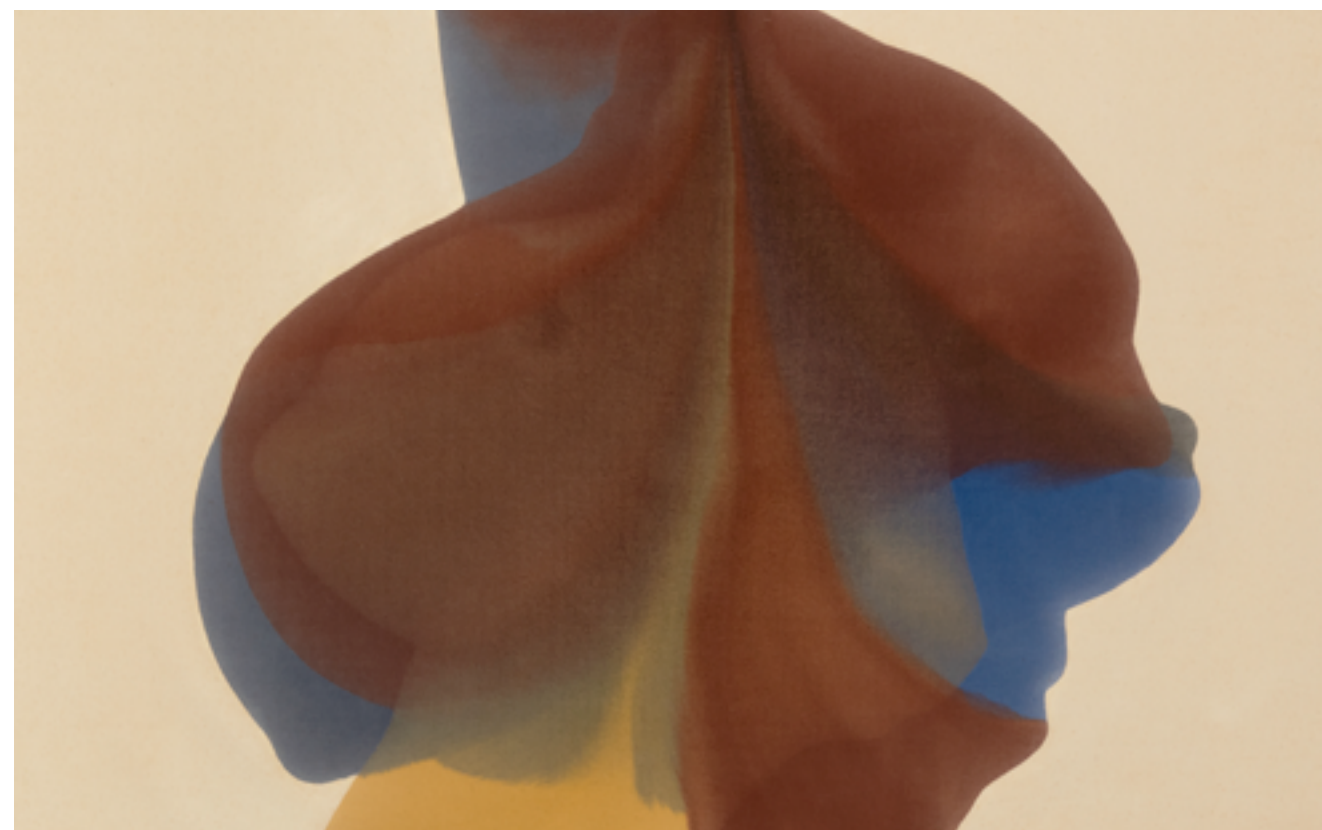
12 Irene Monat Stern
Untitled, c. 1970s
Acrylic on unprimed canvas
51 × 74 inches (129.5 × 188 cm)



13 Irene Monat Stern
Untitled, c. 1970s
Acrylic on unprimed canvas
54 ½ × 102 ½ in (138.4 × 260.4 cm)



14 Jan Peter Stern
Untitled (Sculpture #3), 1964
Mirror polished stainless steel
14 × 11 × 16 in (35.6 × 27.9 × 40.6 cm)



15 Irene Monat Stern
Untitled, c. 1970s
Acrylic on unprimed canvas
43 × 41½ in (109.2 × 105.4 cm)

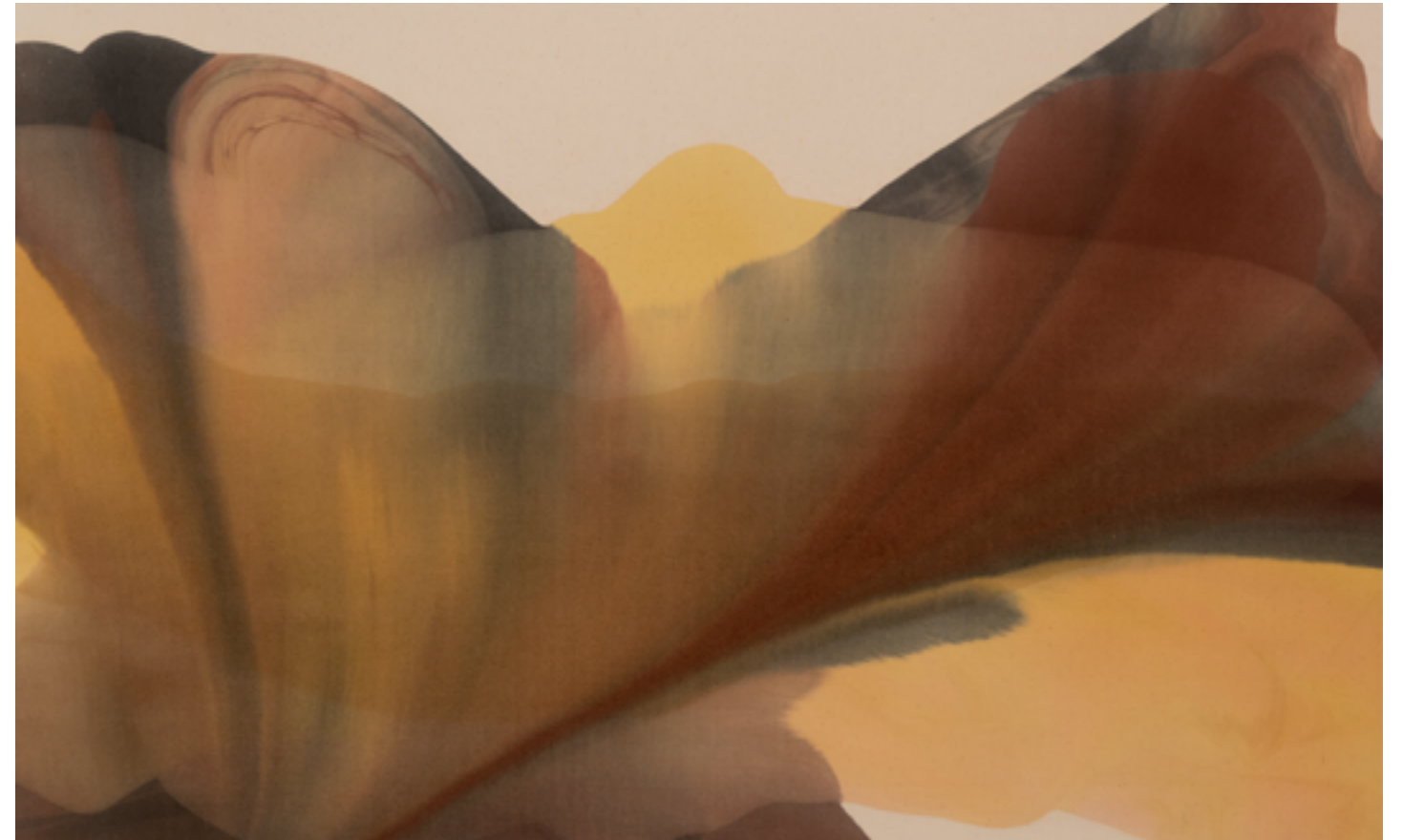
16 Irene Monat Stern
Untitled, c. 1970s
Acrylic on unprimed canvas
30½ × 49½ in (77.5 × 125.7 cm)



17 Irene Monat Stern
Untitled, c. 1970s
Acrylic on unprimed canvas
39 1/2 x 62 in (100.3 x 157.5 cm)



18 Jan Peter Stern
Blades of Grass, 1974
Mirror polished stainless steel
48 x 7 x 5 in (121.9 x 17.8 x 12.7 cm)
Edition 2 of 6



19 Irene Monat Stern
Untitled, c. 1970s
Acrylic on unprimed canvas
30 ½ × 50 ¼ in (77.5 × 127.6 cm)



20 Irene Monat Stern
Untitled, c. 1970s
Acrylic on unprimed canvas
30 × 68 inches (76.2 × 172.7 cm)

21 **Jan Peter Stern**
Relief Sculpture V, 1966
Anodized aluminum
102 × 32 ½ × 1 ½ in (259.1 × 82.5 × 3.8 cm)





22 Jan Peter Stern
Forme Anonyme, 1970
Mirror polished stainless steel
31 × 17 × 10 in (78.7 × 43.2 × 25.4 cm)
Edition 4 of 6



23 Irene Monat Stern
Untitled, c. 1970s
Acrylic on unprimed canvas
49 × 33 ½ in (124.5 × 85.1 cm)

24 **Jan Peter Stern**
Untitled (Sculpture #8), 1983
Mirror polished stainless steel
48 × 10 × 12 in (121.9 × 25.4 × 30.5 cm)





Irene, wearing her handmade dress of Marimekko fabric, in front of the installation view of Peter's *Steel Sculpture Group* for the *Sculpture of the Century* exhibition in Los Angeles, organized by the Aesthetic Research Center, 1967. Photograph by Jan Peter Stern

SELECTED EXHIBITION HISTORY

IRENE MONAT STERN

1973

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

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

1974

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

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

1975

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

1979

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

1981

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

1983

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

2016

Irene Monat Stern: Air of Twilight, Hollis Taggart, New York, October 10–31, 2016.

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

2020

Irene Monat Stern: Bloom of Life, Hollis Taggart, Online Viewing Room, June 16–30, 2020.

JAN PETER STERN

1959

Jan Peter Stern, Aluminum Corporation of America, Pittsburgh, February 1959.

45th Annual Fall Exhibition of Yonkers Art Association, Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY, November 1959.

1960

Jan Peter Stern and Al Goodspeed, Katonah Gallery, NY, February 7–March 9, 1960.

Jan Peter Stern, Barone Gallery, New York, March 29–April 23, 1960.

Jan Peter Stern, HUB Gallery, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, November 13–28, 1960.

1961

Group Exhibition, The New School of Social Research, New York, 1961.

Summer Exhibition, Joan Peterson Gallery, Boston, 1961.

1963

Alpha Group, Sindin-Harris Galleries, Hartsdale, NY, April 28–May 12, 1963.

1965

Group Exhibition, Westchester Art Society, White Plains, NY, February 14–March 2, 1965.

1967

West Coast Galleries Exhibition, Phoenix Art Museum, AZ, May 1967.

Group Exhibition, American Federation of Arts, New York, Exhibited State University College, Plattsburgh, NY, May 1967.



Sculpture by Jan Peter Stern, Ankrum Gallery, Los Angeles, May 22–June 17, 1967.

The Architect Chooses Art, American Federation of Arts, New York, Exhibited at the Boston Society of Architecture, September–October 1967.

Made with Paper, Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York, November 18, 1967–January 7, 1968. Traveled to Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, January 20–February 25, 1968, and City Art Museum of St. Louis, April 18–May 19, 1968.

Sculpture of the Century, Aesthetic Research Center, Century City, Los Angeles, December 1967.

1969

Art in Westchester from Private Collections, Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY, September 28–November 2, 1969.

1970

Solo Exhibition, Santa Barbara Art Museum, CA, 1970.

Group Exhibition, Marlborough-Gerson, New York, 1970.

1971

Group Exhibition, San Francisco Museum of Art, July 1971.

1974

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

1979

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

1983

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

2011

Gifted: Donated Works of Art from the Art in Public Places Collection, Hawaii State Art Museum, Honolulu, September 9, 2011–present.

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JAN PETER STERN

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Cover: Irene Monat Stern, *Untitled*, c. 1970s, detail (pl. 17)
Page 4: Irene Monat Stern, *Untitled*, c. 1975, detail (pl. 4)
Pages 18–19: Irene Monat Stern, *Untitled*, c. 1970s, detail (pl. 2)
Page 59: Irene in her studio, 1970. Photograph by Jan Peter Stern (left); Peter working on *Limits of Horizon*, Prudential Center, Boston, 1966. Photographer unknown (right)
Page 62: Irene and Peter with Peter’s sculpture in front of the GTE building, Santa Monica, California, 1973
Back cover: Peter and Irene sit above the anodized aluminum screen panels of Peter’s *Relief Sculpture V*, 1968. Photograph by Richard Gross for the *Los Angeles Times Magazine*

Irene Monat Stern color plates by Joshua Nefsky, New York
Jan Peter Stern color plates by Alex Hoerner Photography, Los Angeles

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