

MORRIS LOUIS

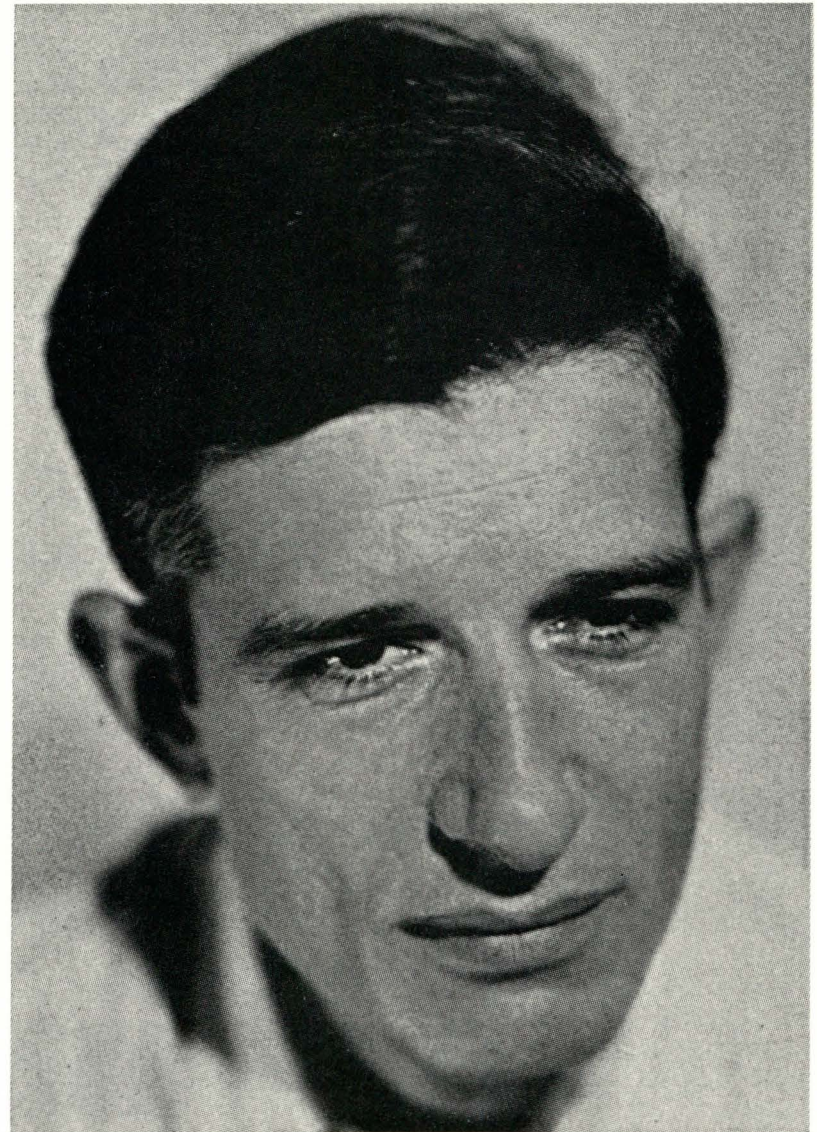


Cover: *Gamma Upsilon*
Cat. No. 6

MORRIS LOUIS

An exhibition organised by the Auckland City Art Gallery in association with the Honolulu Academy of Arts, the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, and the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, California.

MORRIS LOUIS 1912-1962



Exhibition Dates

Honolulu Academy of Arts April 30-May 30 1971
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne July 8-August 31 1971
Auckland City Art Gallery October 12-November 28 1971
Santa Barbara Museum of Art January 8-February 6 1972

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This exhibition, which forms part of the Auckland City Centennial programme, is undoubtedly one of the finest that this gallery has received from the United States.

I know I speak for the other three galleries participating in the tour of this exhibition when I express my sincere thanks to Mr Andre Emmerich of the Andre Emmerich Gallery in New York. Mr Emmerich has given invaluable assistance without which this exhibition would not have been possible. I should also like to acknowledge the assistance given by the trustees of the Morris Louis Estate and also that of Rosalind Krauss for her introduction to the catalogue.

Finally, my thanks to Mr David Armitage of the Art Gallery staff who proposed that this exhibition be held and has organised the tour.

Gil Docking

Director

Auckland City Art Gallery

April 1971

INTRODUCTION

ROSALIND E. KRAUSS

In the winter of 1954, Morris Louis sent nine canvases to New York for the inspection of the critic, Clement Greenberg, and for possible subsequent exhibition. They were paintings without precedent in the experience of either man. For Louis, they involved a notion of pictorial space that was radically different from anything he had conceived before, and a new method of paint application: the spilling or flooding of wave upon wave of color on to untreated and unprimed cotton duck to produce a play of fused and interpenetrated stains. For Greenberg, they meant the perception of colored fields in

which constant and irradant internal changes of both color and light or dark did not — almost magically did not — bring with them a recollection of natural space.

The quenching of illusionistic space is difficult: one almost automatically reads a change in level between two areas of different value or hue such that one area seems to stand in front of the other and to section itself off from the other as a discrete substance — as an object. And if the artist tries to avoid the invocation of real space by squelching all such distinctions, by simply spreading an even tone across the picture, nature still prevails. One's vision is that of penetrating unpopulated expanses or densities, like gazing up into the sky or looking into mist or fog. The illusion of something like landscape is replaced by the illusion of something like atmosphere. In neither case is color allowed to function in the establishment of what might be called the purely pictorial — discrete from the connotations of nature and intent on essentializing the values of the pictorial entity as such.

Louis's color in the nine paintings that he had done that winter in Washington, D.C., and in the subsequent series of "Veils" which he based on them (executed in 1954 and later in 1958-9) was differentiated all the way from minute changes within a single spill of pigment, like slightly varying pulse-beats of intensity, to major and abrupt intrusions of dark and light, like a flood gate suddenly opening. Yet the surface in these pictures, and indeed in all of the pictures he was to do after them, was perceived as continuous and without break. And the fields that were so formed, although they had all the sense of openness and suffusion of atmospheric or optical color rather than the opacity of local or surface color, did not give way to an illusion that one could enter them. Resisting entry, they maintained an alignment and thereby an alliance with the wall on which they were hung.

In describing the effect of this paradoxically spaceless openness, Greenberg first focused on Louis's technique, on the method of staining which left "the pigment almost everywhere thin enough, no matter how many different veils of it are superimposed, for the eye to sense the threadedness and wovenness of the fabric underneath. But 'underneath' is the wrong word. The fabric, being soaked in paint rather than merely covered by it, becomes paint itself, like dyed cloth: the threadedness and wovenness are in the color."¹

For a while, Greenberg's description of the way the color is perceived simultaneously with the flatness of the canvas so that those simultaneous perceptions function to cancel out illusion, was taken as an explanation for the success of the "Veils" as paintings, for the source of their pictorial as well as their evocative power. Yet Greenberg would be the first to point out that staining in and of itself is at most a medium or a language for making a pictorial statement, that it alone cannot account for the power of the "Veils" as pictures.

One is therefore driven back to the "Veils" to examine other aspects of their conception and of their making. And one of those aspects had to do with their extraordinary size. As soon as Louis determined to make paintings in which color would be liberated through non-illusionistic, unbroken fields, he turned to stretches of canvas of nine-foot widths, and then to twelve and fourteen-foot widths. Although the plumes and tongues of paint that constitute the "Veils" are predominantly vertical, aligning color with the uprightness of the wall, the pictures themselves extend laterally along the surface on which they are hung. Their format is horizontal; and the canting of the waves of color slightly away from the vertical at the edges of the veil images acknowledges this format and its intrinsic horizontality. Thus from the start, Louis imbedded the release of color within a surface that was mural-like that was oriented to the wall in terms of its continuity and its resistance to being bounded or enframed. The rhythmic momentum of mural-art or wall-decoration naturally resists centralization and the relationships between perimeter and centre that constitute the easel picture.

This built-in resistance to limits that the mural tradition possesses has clear benefits for the color painter. Most obviously it satisfies "the need to have the picture occupy so much of one's visual field that it loses its character as a discrete tactile object and thereby becomes that much more purely a picture, a strictly visual entity."² It is thus no accident that Louis's decision to adopt a mural format ran parallel to that of Barnett Newman, whose 1950 *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, for example, extended color eighteen feet along the plane of the wall. It was a decision that seemed logically tied to the problem of color, and as Greenberg has remarked of Louis, "the revelation he received became an Impressionist revelation, and before he so much as caught a glimpse of anything

by Still, Newman, or Rothko, he aligned his art with theirs."³

Yet Louis was, like Newman and Still, not interested in literally absorbing his art into the conditions of mural painting. For not only would that involve his color in a temporal scanning of the surface as one moved along it, but as well it would mean a piecemeal reading of color-units as rhythmic integers rather than seeing color in terms of the immediacy and unity that are the conditions of the single picture. It thus became Louis's problem, as it had been Newman's, to catalyze his color into an unmistakably pictorial perception of wholeness — without reinvoking the focused illusionism of natural space.

In order to re-assemble the means to pictorial unity within the precincts of the mural picture, Louis constructed the veil image in such a way that both colour and shape would operate in a manner directly opposite to the way they do in normal mural-art. Within a mural situation, momentum along the surface is normally a function of design — the rhythmic repetition of shapes set off by the intervals between them. While on the other hand, the suggestion of space is a function of more muted color and value gradations which re-inforce the lateral spread of the painting. The exhalation of one color differentiating itself from the next, interpenetrating to quell the sense of each color's absolute boundary, set up changing rhythms that seem sometimes to be delicate vibrations and sometimes appear as strong, wave-like pulses. And it is these rhythms that take over the design function without however fragmenting into the kind of sequence of isolated shape that characterizes design.

At the same time, vertical, tongue or plume-like configurations — the edges of which sometimes coincide with the changes in color but more often do not, since they are established by the suffused bleed of the acrylic medium — are felt within the color. Although these are repetitive vertical shapes, they are made to function in the service of a unified, single form which is both centered and responsive to the lateral boundaries of the picture. The canting of the plume shapes at the two outer edges of the image both acknowledges the edge conditions that are normative for easel painting and re-inforces the sense of cohesion of the image's un-seamed and uninterrupted surface: a maintenance of surface integrity that is the traditional function of local color.

The "Veils" were in Louis's work the first creation of an image

that would perform at one and the same time two seemingly opposed functions. It would allow the lateral spread of a wall of color, and would as well make manifest the pictorial nature of the relationship between center and perimeter. In the present exhibition, *Turning* is a forceful example of this as well as is the somewhat later and more effortless *Beth Sin*.

The relationship between the *Veils* and the series which is called "Unfurled" seems to underline Louis's method of inverting normal functions and reversing the roles of pictorial entities even when they are reconverted roles with which his own art had recently endowed them.

In the "Unfurleds", narrow streams of color flow inward from the two lateral edges of the canvas. Their symmetrical movement diagonally towards the bottom edge of the painting, forms two banks of color on either side of an immense expanse of naked canvas. Unlike the stains of color in the "Veils", the ribbons of pigment are not fused along their edges but are separated by sharply contrasting interstices of white canvas. These separations seem to etch the rivulets of color on to the bed of the canvas, disallowing one to read the bank they collectively form as an object in its own right.

The role the rivulets perform positionally is wholly relational: asserting the central expanse of white canvas as the focus of one's vision and extolling the limits of the picture in flames of color that are given a disturbing poignancy by being pushed to the peripheries of one's sight. The central expanse of white is neither a shape to be looked at in its own right, nor a background for the banks of color that flank it. It is nothing but a picture surface — nothing, that is, except a continuum that connects a center of focus with the definitions of its boundaries.

What one focuses on in these paintings is thus not an image nor yet even a surface but, extraordinarily, a sense of the syntax of pictorial art. And this syntax is made into something both abstract, because disassociated from the properties of either known space or objects, and sensuously compelling, because expressed in terms of color what is felt peripherally rather than seen directly. What results is a quality of lateral expansion paradoxically formed by its own premonitions of closure and a sense of the picture as a space that yields to the penetration of one's sight, yet which can never, even at this scale, be imagined as an atmosphere to be entered. Louis

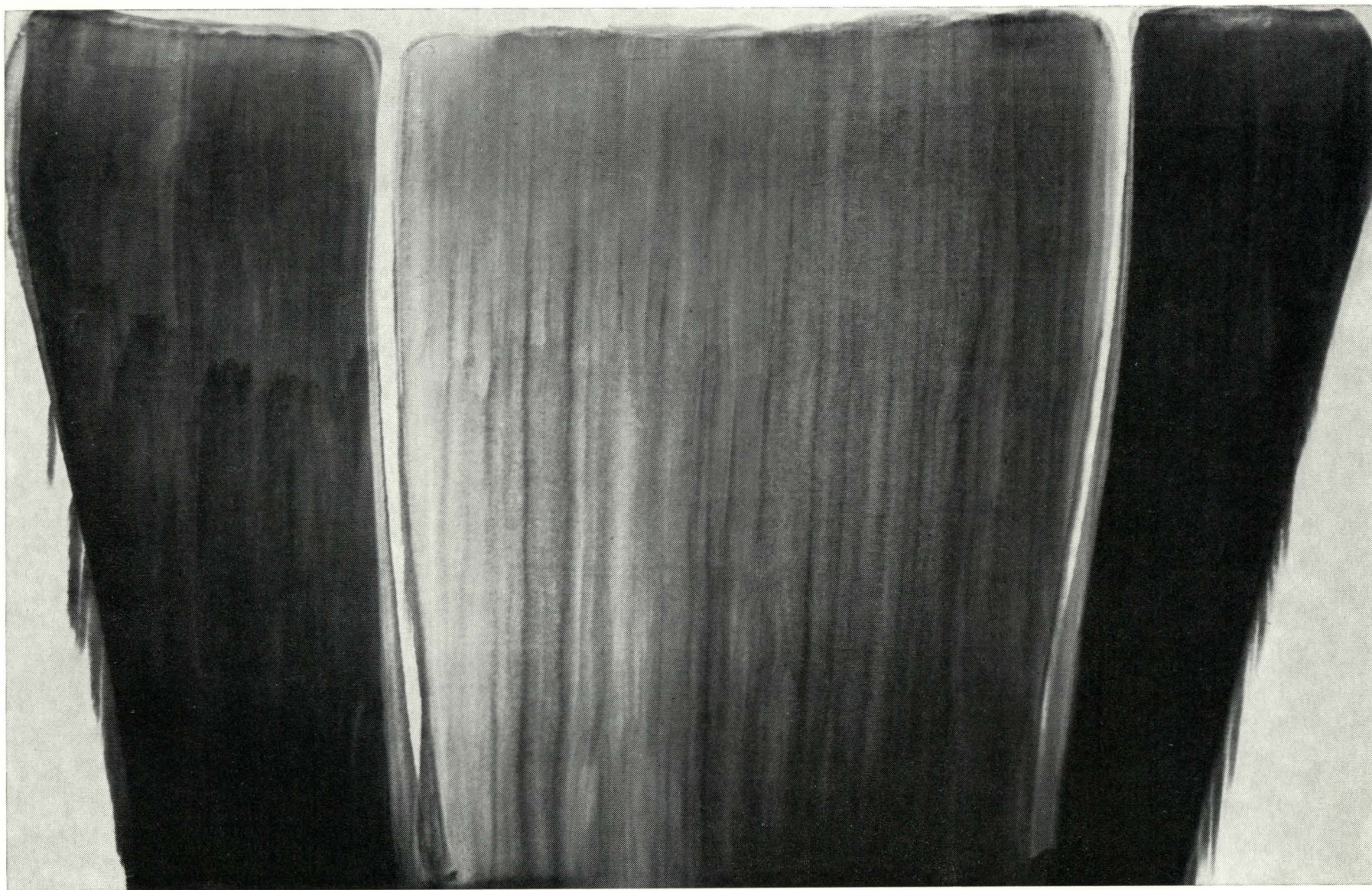
himself thought of the "Unfurleds" as his greatest achievement. They are certainly among the most radical color paintings of our time.

Notes:

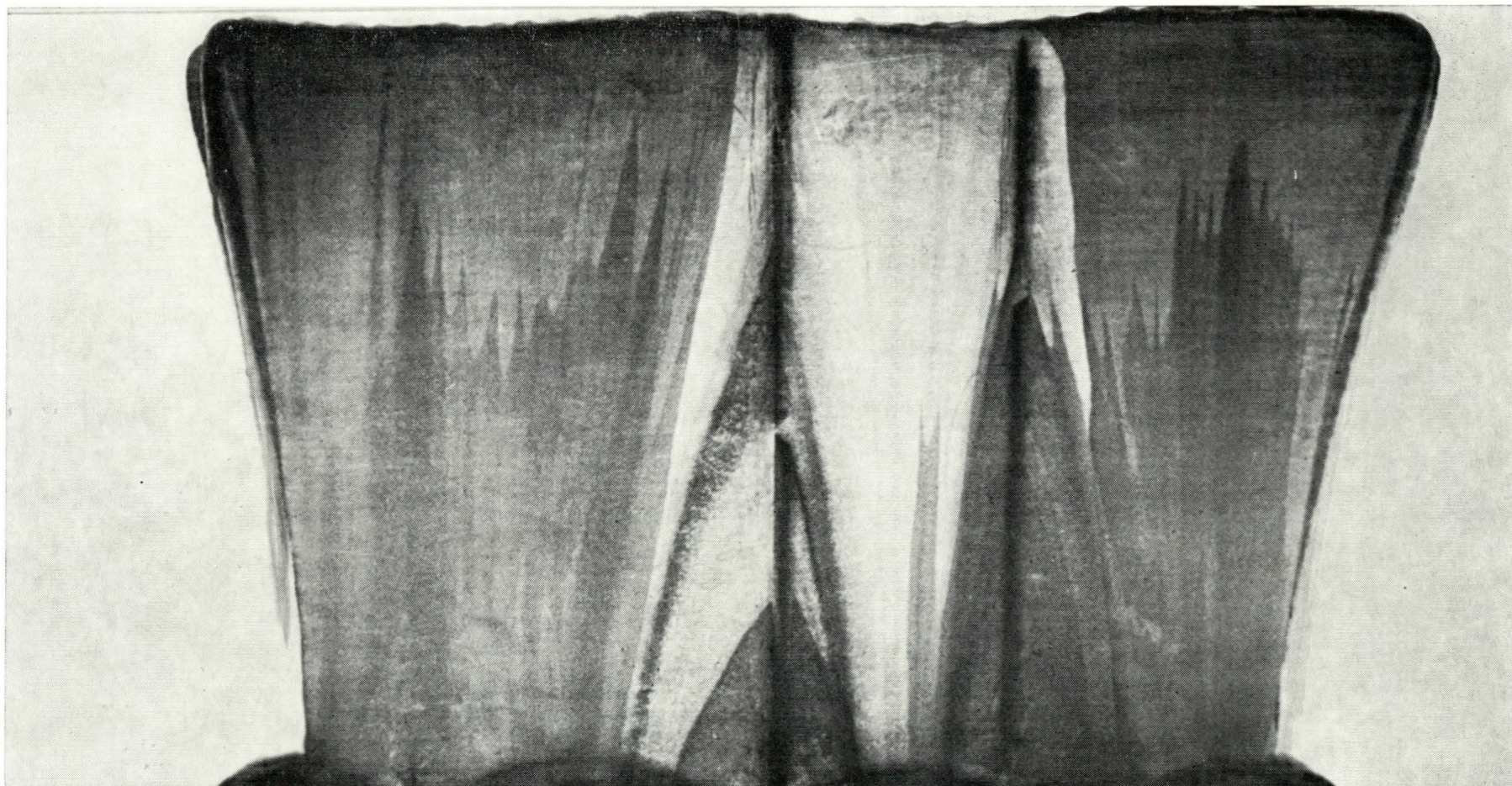
1. Greenberg, Clement, "Louis and Noland", *Art International*, Vol. 4, No. 5, 1960, p. 28.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*

CATALOGUE

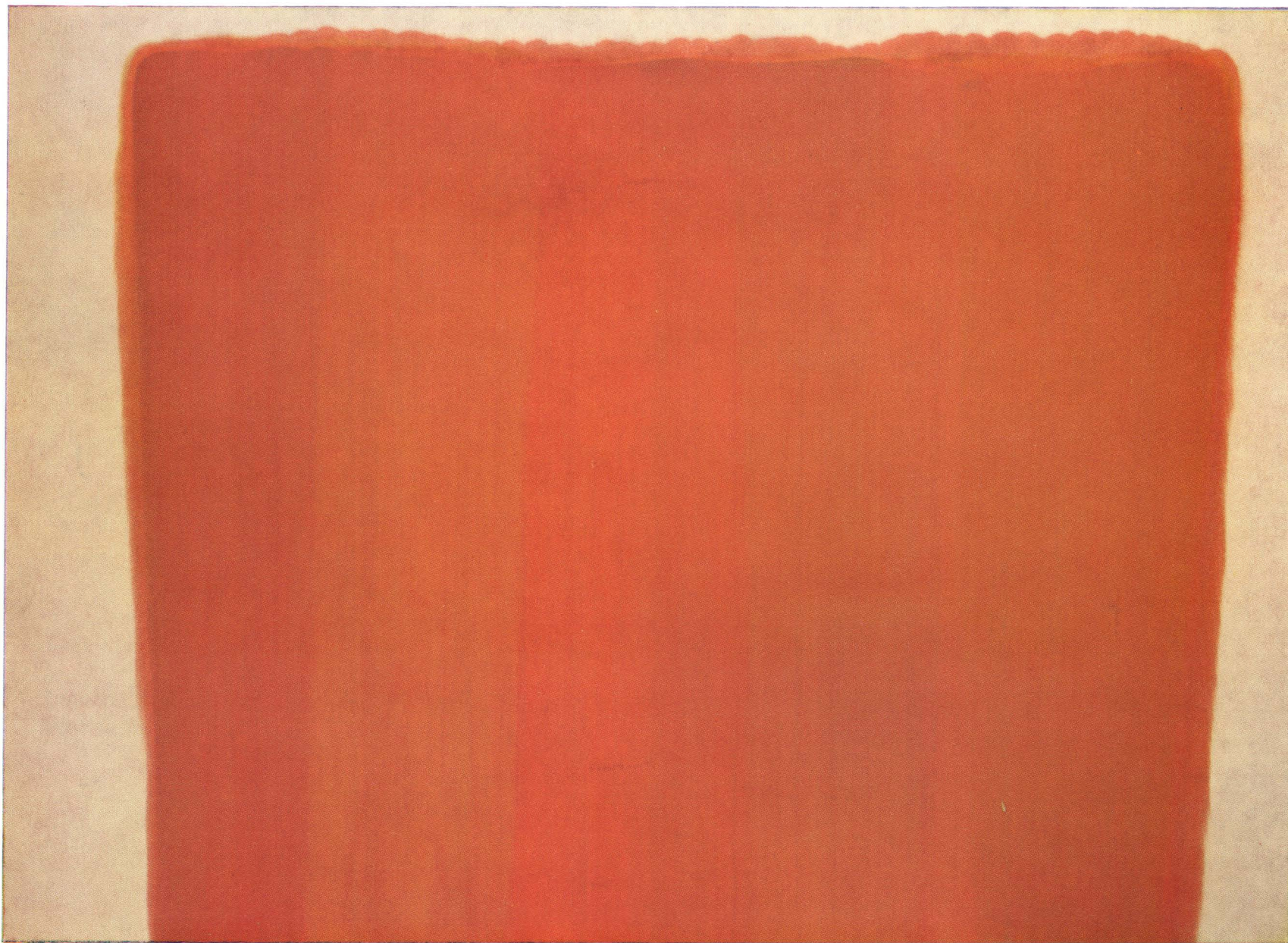
All dimensions given in inches, height before width



1 *Yad*, 1958
acrylic on canvas 91 x 140
lent by Andre Emmerich Gallery

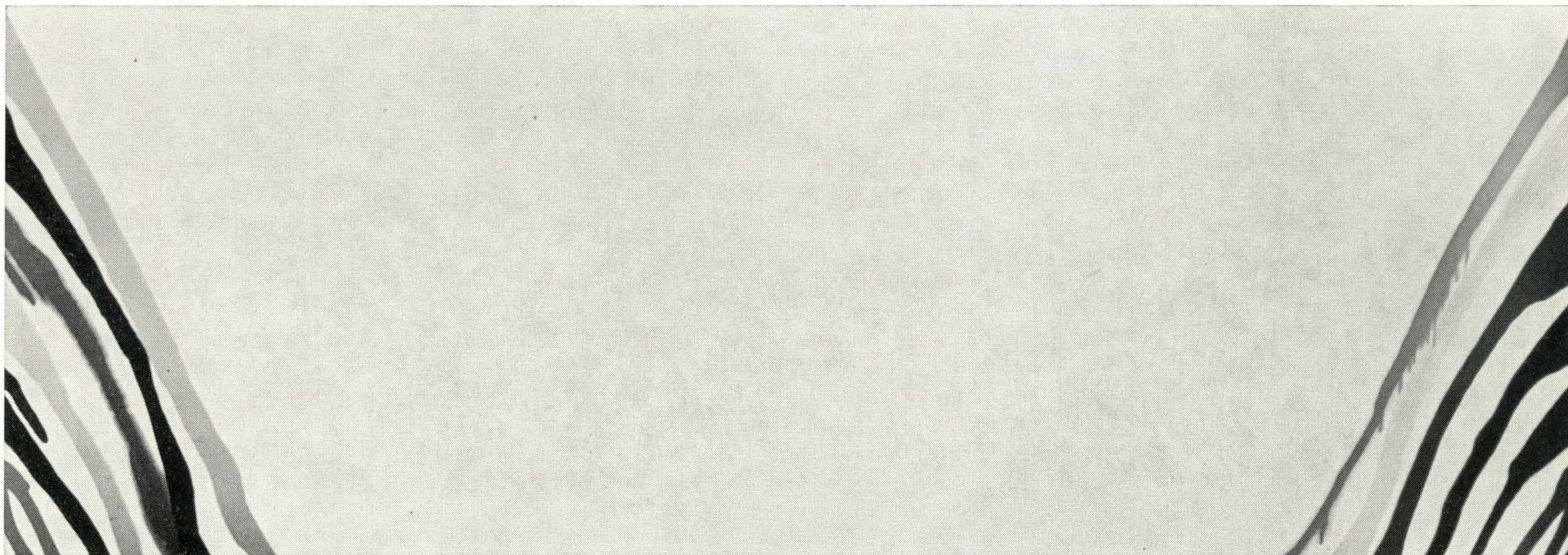


2 *Turning*, 1958
acrylic on canvas 92 x 176½
lent by Andre Emmerich Gallery



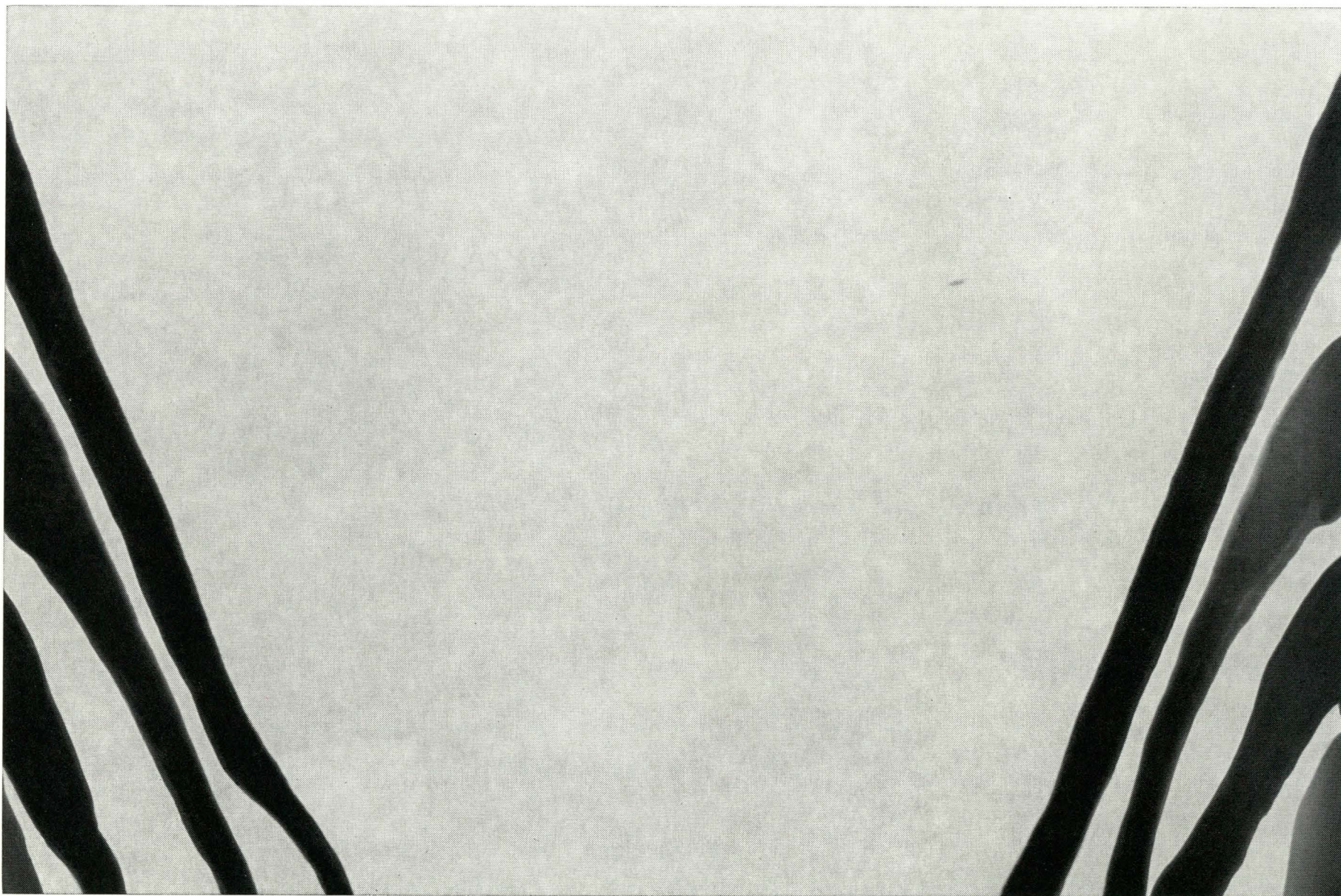
3 *Umbria*, 1959-60
acrylic on canvas 74 x 104
private collection

4 *Beth Sin*, 1959
acrylic on canvas 91½ x 112
private collection

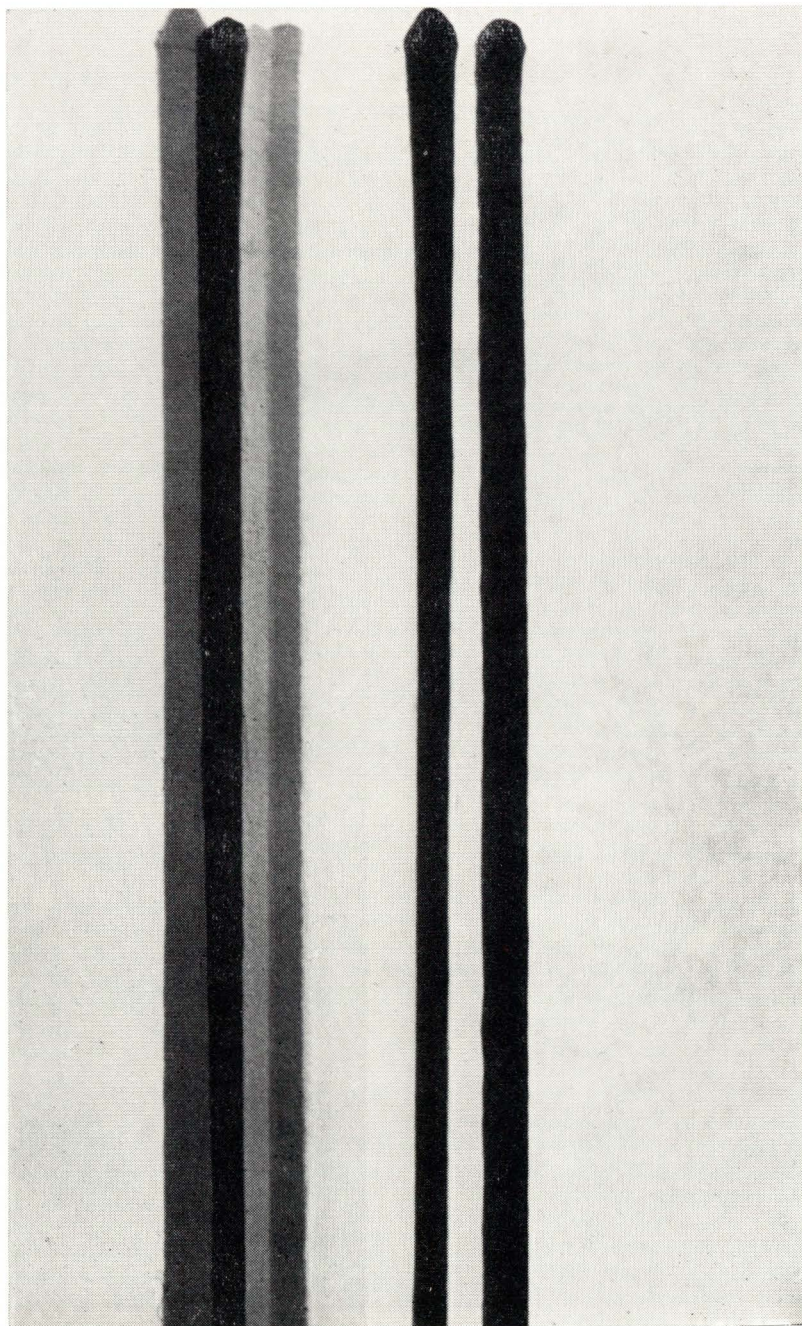


5 *Beta Nu*, 1960
acrylic on canvas 102 x 23
lent by Andre Emmerich Gallery

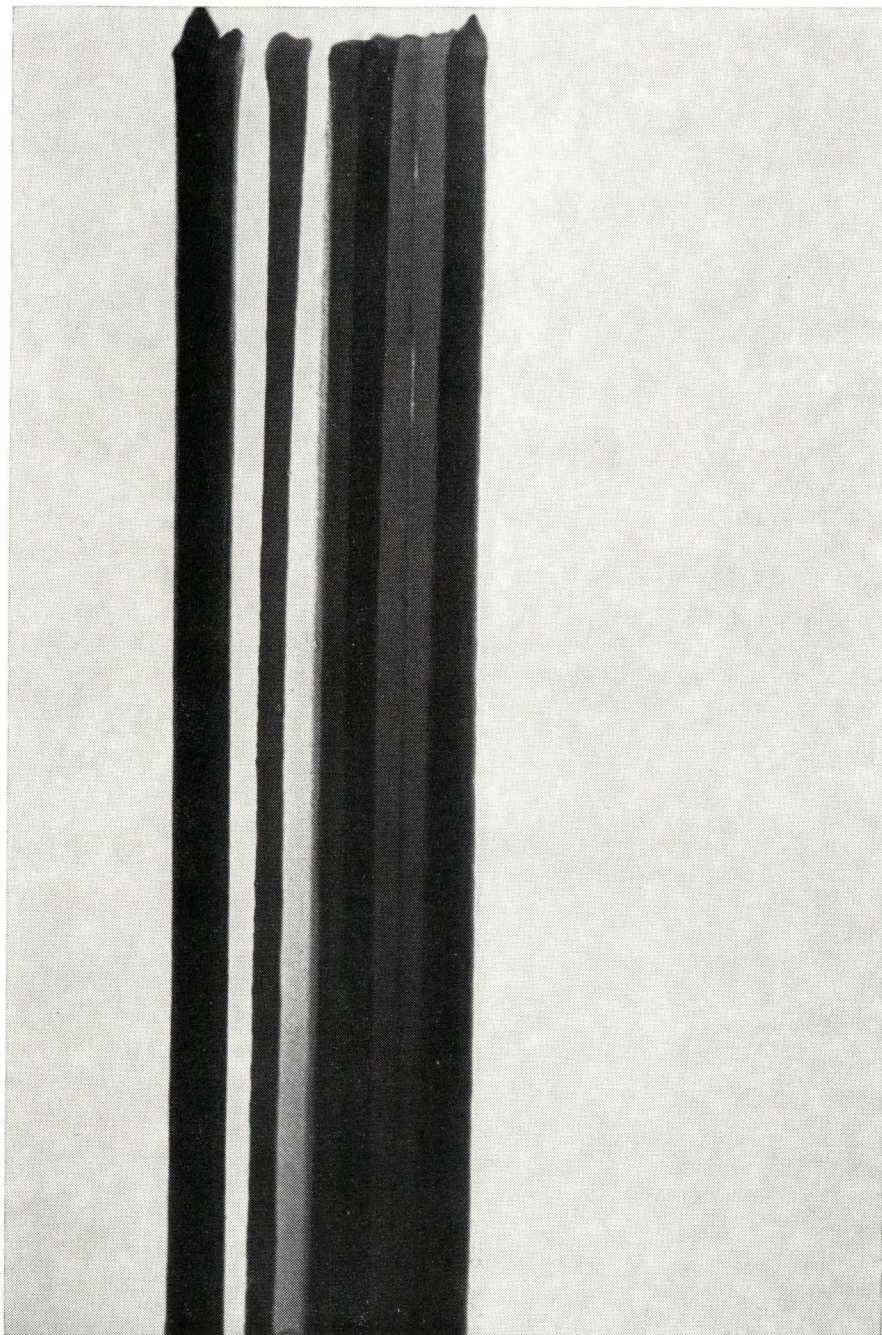
6 *Gamma Upsilon*, 1960
acrylic on canvas 102½ x 166
lent by Andre Emmerich Gallery



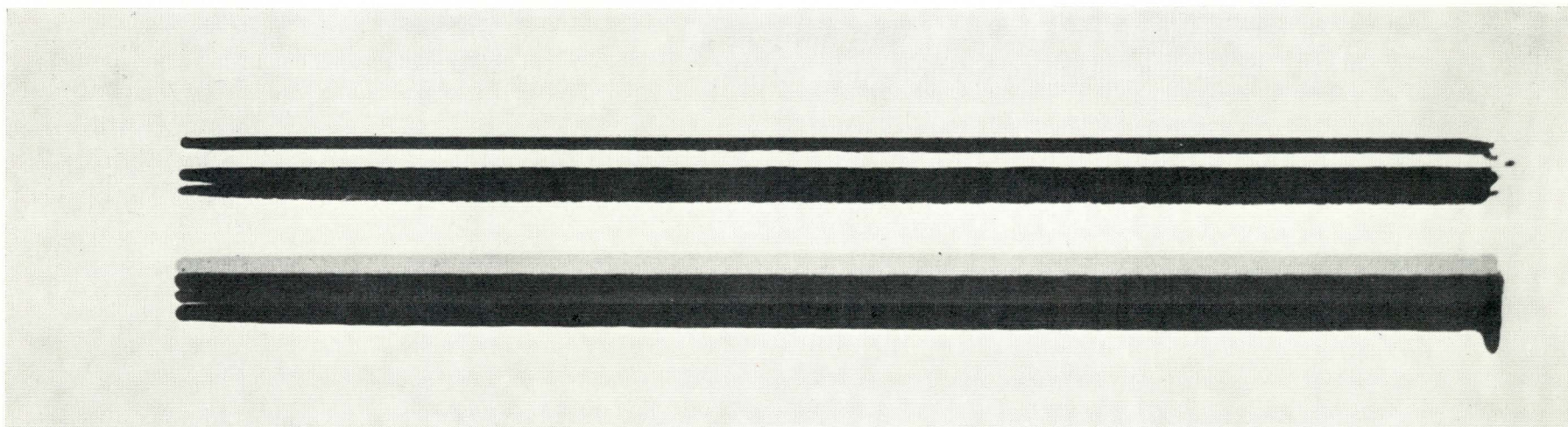
7 *Gamma Rho*, 1960
acrylic on canvas, $102\frac{1}{2} \times 164\frac{1}{4}$
lent by Andre Emmerich Gallery



8 *Split Spectrum II*, 1961
acrylic on canvas 80 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 48
lent by Andre Emmerich Gallery



9 *Tense Recession*, 1961
acrylic on canvas 80½ x 53
lent by Andre Emmerich Gallery



10 *Horizontal VII*, 1962
acrylic on canvas 27 x 96½
lent by Andre Emmerich Gallery

11 *82*, 1961
acrylic on canvas 80 x 100
lent by Andre Emmerich Gallery

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alley, Ronald. *Recent American Art*, Tate Gallery, London, 1969.
- Alloway, Lawrence. "Easel Painting at the Guggenheim", *Art International*, vol. v/10, 1961.
- Morris Louis, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1963.
- "Alpha Tau, A Late Painting by Morris Louis", *City Art Museum of St. Louis Bulletin*, November-December, 1968, pp. 2-3.
- Arnason, H. H. *History of Modern Art*, Harry N. Abrams Inc., New York, 1968, pp. 253; 620-4.
- "ART: Peacock Duo", *Time Magazine*, January 8, 1965.
- Artforum*, November 1967, pp. 41; 56-7.
- Ashbery, John. "Paris Notes", *Art International*, January 1961, p. 63.
- Ashton, Dore. "Esempi Recenti di Pittura non Oggettiva Negli Stati Uniti", *L'Arte Moderna*, n. 111, vol. xiii, pp. 81-120.
- "New York Commentary", *Studio International*, May 1967, p. 264.
- "New York Commentary", *Studio International*, July-August, 1968.
- "New York Commentary: The Art of the Real at the Museum of Modern Art", *Studio International*, September 1968, pp. 92-3.
- A Reading of Modern Art*, The Press of Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, 1969, pp. 155-6.
- "Say Uncle — The Opening of the National Collection of Fine Arts", *Arts Magazine*, vol. 42, no. 8, pp. 48-50.
- Baro, Gene. "Washington and Detroit", *Studio International*, July-August, 1967, pp. 49-51.
- Battcock, Gregory. "The Art of the Real — The Development of a Style: 1948-68", *Arts Magazine*, June/Summer, 1968, pp. 44-5.
- Minimal Art — A Critical Anthology*, E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., New York, 1968.
- Claman, Julian. "Some Observations on the State of the Arts in America Today: Painting and Sculpture", *Harper's Bazaar* SPOT CHECK: *Comment on Culture U.S.A.*, February 1969, pp. 2-5.
- "The Collection", *Art in America*, September-October, 1966, p. 40.
- "Diplomacy with Art", *Vogue*, May 1968, p. 262.
- Faulkner, Ray and Edwin Ziegfeld. *Art Today*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York, 1969, pp. 445, 447.
- Finley, Gerald. "Louis, Noland, Olitski", *Artforum*, vol. 1, no. 9, 1963, p. 35.
- Frankenstein, Alfred. "Masterpieces of Motherwell and Louis", *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle*, March 5, 1967.
- Freed, Eleanor. "A Windfall for Texas", *Art in America*, November-December, 1969, p. 78.
- Fried, Michael. "The Confounding of Confusion", *Arts Yearbook VII*, 1964.
- Morris Louis. Harry N. Abrams Inc., New York, 1970.
- Morris Louis 1912-1962*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1967.
- "Some Notes on Morris Louis", *Arts Magazine*, November 1963.
- Genauer, Emily. *The New York Herald Tribune*, March 19, 1966.
- Gold, Barbara. "Major Exhibit at Museum", *The Sunday Sun*, September 8, 1968, p. D1.
- Goldin, Amy. "Morris Louis: Thinking the Unwordable", *Art News*, April 1968, pp. 48-9ff.
- Greenberg, Clement. "Louis and Noland", *Art International*, May 25, 1960.
- Harrison, Charles. "Against Precedents", *Studio International*, September 1969, p. 93.
- "London Commentary", *Studio International*, April 1969, pp. 190-2.
- Hunter, Sam. "Action Painting: La Generazione Eroica", *L'Arte Moderna*, n. 110, vol. xiii, p. 67.
- "In the Museums, Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis and Anthony Caro". *Arts Magazine*, June/Summer, 1968, p. 56.
- Kramer, Hilton. "The Metropolitan Takes Another Step Forward", *The New York Times*, Saturday, May 25, 1968, p. 31.
- The New York Times*, Saturday, March 19, 1966.
- "Notes on Painting in New York", *Arts Yearbook VII*, 1964.
- "Kunst-Kassler Documenta effronet", *Der Spiegel*, July 1, 1968, pp. 42-5.
- Leider, Philip. "New York — Art of the Real", *Artforum*, September 1968, p. 65.
- Lippard, Lucy. "New York Letter", *Art International*, vol. ix/1, 1965, p. 35.
- Michener, Charles T. "Modern Master's Works Unfurled", *Seattle Magazine*, July 1967, pp. 40-3.
- Morris Louis: Veils and Unfurleds*, Contemporary Art Council of the Seattle Art Museum, 1967.

"New York Letter", *Art International*, November 1961, p. 56.
 "New York's Art Furor", *The Washington Post*, October 20, 1969, Section B, p. 6.
 O'Doherty, Brian. "Epilogue to a Too-Brief Career", *The New York Times*, September 29, 1963.
 "On Exhibition", *Studio International*, March 1967, p. 161.
 "On Exhibition — Germany", *Studio International*, vol. 176, no. 905, 1968, p. 214.
 Piene, Nan R. "How to Stay Home and Help the Balance of Payments", *Art in America*, May-June, 1968, p. 109.
 Pincus-Witten, Robert. "New York", *Artforum*, May 1969, pp. 61-2.
 "Previews and Reviews", *Art News*, April 1967.
Quarterly: Art Gallery of New South Wales, July 1968, p. 414.
 Reise, Barbara M. "Greenberg and the Group: A Retrospective View", Part I, *Studio International*, May 1968, pp. 254-7; Part II, June 1968, pp. 314-5.
 "Reviews and Previews", *Art News*, April 1969, pp. 13, 19.
 "Reviews in the Galleries", *Arts Magazine*, April 1969, p. 60.
 Robbins, Daniel. "At the Juncture of Two Traditions", *Quadrant Magazine*, vol. 18, pp. 41-54.
 "Morris Louis: Triumph of Color", *Art News*, October 1963.
 Robbins, Tom. "Seattle", *Artforum*, September 1967, p. 30.
 "Romantic Optic Symbols", *Metro*, Summer 1962, pp. 30-3.
 Rosenblum, Robert. "Morris Louis at the Guggenheim Museum", *Art International*, December 5, 1963.
 Schjeldahl, Peter. "New York Letter", *Art International*, April 20, 1969, p. 64.
 "Stripes, Paper Bags and TV", *The New York Times*, Sunday, May 5, 1968.
 Shirey, David L. "N.Y. Painting and Sculpture 1940-1970", *Arts Magazine*, September/October 1969, p. 37.
 Siegel, Jeanne. "Documenta IV", *Arts Magazine*, September/October 1968, pp. 37, 39.
 Solomon, Alan. "Americans in Venice", *The Art Gallery*, 1964.
 Stadler, Albert. "New Paintings," *Artforum*, September 1967, p. 30.
 Tillim, Sidney. "Evaluations and Re-Evaluations: A season's end miscellany . . .", *Artforum*, Summer 1968, pp. 20-3.
Time, March 25, 1966.
 Whitford, Frank and Robert Kudielka. "Documenta 4: A Critical Review", *Studio International*, September 1968, pp. 74-8.

One Man Exhibitions

Andre Emmerich Gallery, New York, 1961, 1962, 1964, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970.
 "Morris Louis 1912-1962", Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, City Art Museum, St. Louis, 1967.
 Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, 1967.
 The Washington Gallery of Modern Art, 1966.
 Staatliche Kunsthalle, Baden, 1965.
 Galerie Renee Ziegler, Zurich, 1964.
 Solomon Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1963.
 Kasmin Gallery, London, 1963.
 Galerie Muller, Stuttgart, Germany, 1962.
 Galerie Schmela, Dusseldorf, Germany, 1962.
 Galerie Neufville, Paris, 1961.
 Bennington College, Vermont, 1960.
 Galleria dell'Ariete, Milan, 1960.
 Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1960.
 French & Company, 1960, 1959.
 Martha Jackson Gallery, New York, 1957.

