

Abstract Art To the Glory of God

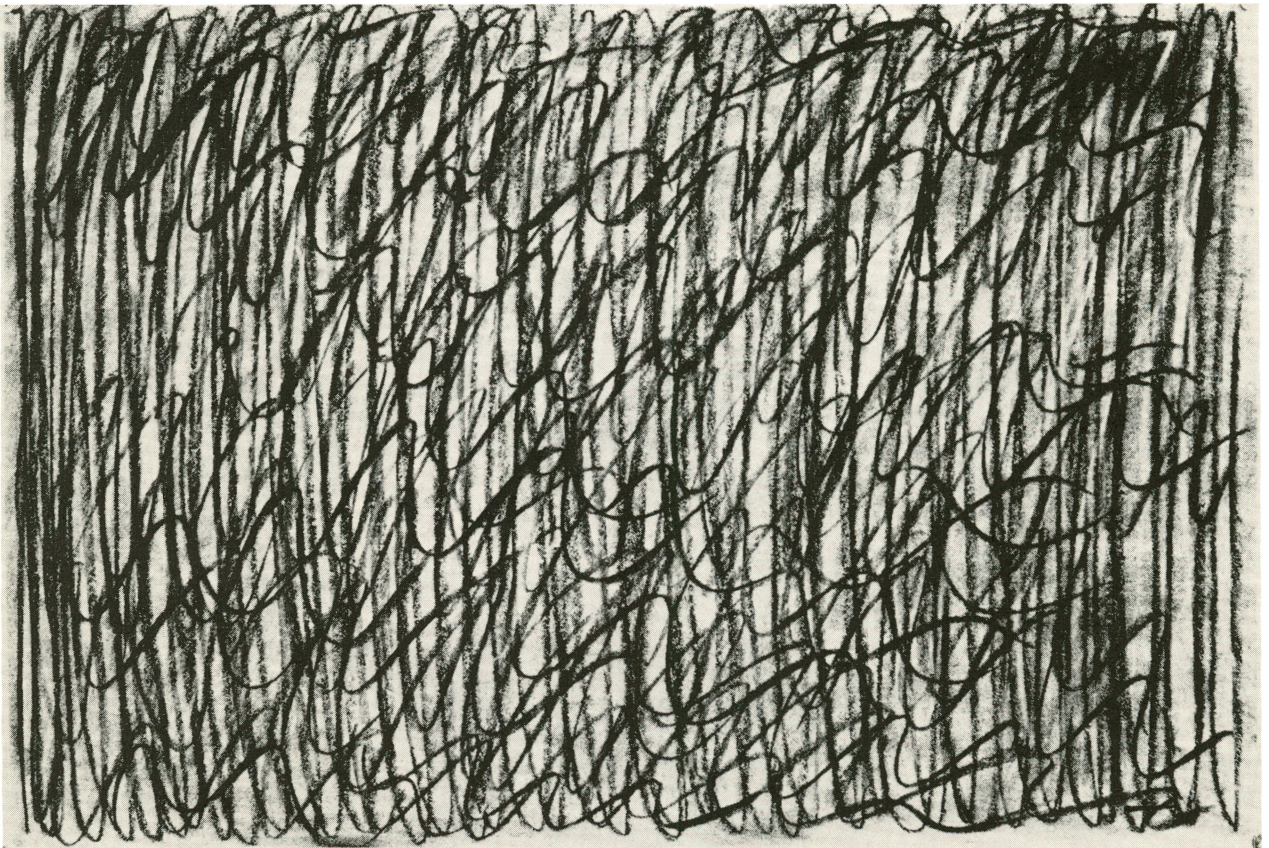
Jorgen Henriksen, an expressionist painter whose work, as he says, "combines complexity and simplicity," was born in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1945. His family moved to the United States in 1953 and resided in several cities over the next few years. Henriksen received the B.F.A. from the University of Illinois in 1970 and the M.A. in studio art from Hunter College, City University of New York, in 1972.

His paintings and drawings have been

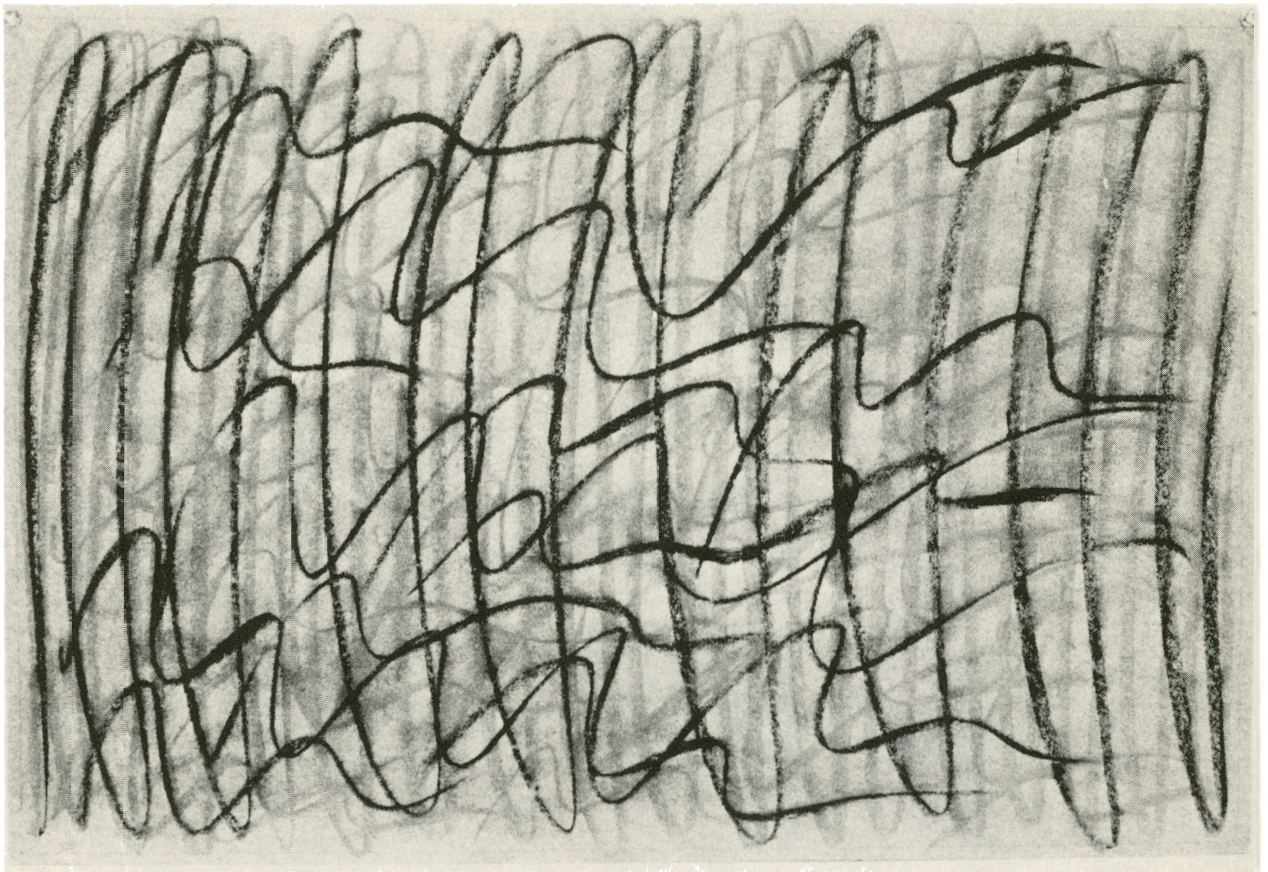
exhibited in a number of cities, including Copenhagen, New York and London. He is now teaching painting and drawing at the Brockton Art Museum School in Massachusetts.

The five paintings displayed on the following pages show the recent development of his style. The accompanying interview of the artist was conducted by two members of the SPECTRUM staff. Comments under the paintings are by the artist.

The Editors



Untitled, charcoal, 26"x37". "This drawing, and the next one, both made in 1971, show how line recedes or distinguishes itself depending on density."



Untitled, charcoal, 26"x37".

SPECTRUM: In your experience, do most people find abstract art difficult to appreciate?

Henriksen: Yes, this is the situation. All abstract art seems to be hard to understand for most people.

SPECTRUM: Why do people find abstract art perplexing?

Henriksen: There are several reasons. Most people have not been to art museums and galleries where they might have had a first-hand experience with abstract art. And most people have false notions about art that drastically modify their ability to evaluate abstract art—or any art, for that matter.

SPECTRUM: What are the commonly held false notions?

Henriksen: Just to mention a few: (1) that a particular style of art is better than other styles; (2) that the “indicator of artistic ability” is being able to draw or to paint in an accurate, realistic manner; (3) that “correct” perspective is essential to narrative art; (4) that only traditional and “respected” art media can be used in

the making of art; and (5) that abstract art is not concerned with beauty.

SPECTRUM: There are many different styles of abstract art. Do people in general find some styles more easy to understand than others?

Henriksen: Yes. Abstraction of simple composition and geometric composition are more easily understood because the compositional structure is very clear; however, complex compositions and organic compositions where the structure is not so clear tend to be more difficult for people to appreciate. For example, just recently, I found myself in New York guiding a group of SDA friends through an exhibition of William de Kooning’s paintings. They were large, about seven feet by six feet, and pure abstract. The paint had clearly been applied with expressive gestures, using large brushes, perhaps typical house painting brushes. The forms were interlocking and organic; the large range of colors were both cool and warm. And my friends admitted de Kooning’s work gave them a powerful sensual experience.

SPECTRUM: So what was wrong?

Henriksen: Well, one of my friends—who is no illiterate, by the way, in fact, quite knowledgeable in areas like music, theology and social science—said he was afraid he was “being conned” by the gallery’s pretending that these paintings were good art, or even art at all.

SPECTRUM: What did you say?

Henriksen: I assured him that he was not being “conned”; that there is an international consensus among artists, art critics and scholars that de Kooning is a master virtuoso.

SPECTRUM: But that didn’t satisfy him?

Henriksen: No. It only made it worse. I was pulling rank. So I began to talk about the paintings in detail. They were highly active; something like, in music, the polyphonic works of Bach. De Kooning’s basic arrangement of overlapping forms was similar in a certain respect to cubism (a style of painting which I knew my friend liked) with the difference being that the edges of forms were not straight but curving, giving the painting a feeling of organic, instead of geometric form. I admitted that the paintings came close to disorder, but de Kooning deliber-

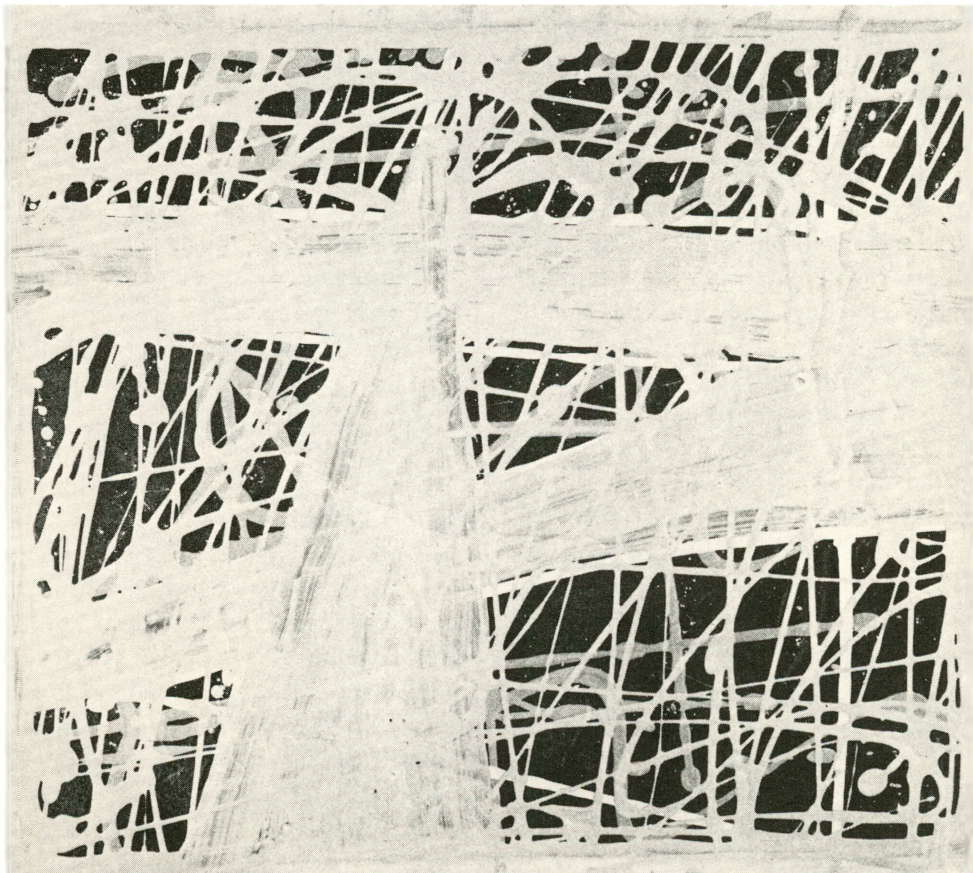
ately used techniques like painting with energetic speed, leaving splashes on the canvas, to create a feeling of spontaneity and emotional energy. Retaining order among all the organic forms that resulted took the skill of a very good artist.

SPECTRUM: Does such an explanation convince someone like your friend?

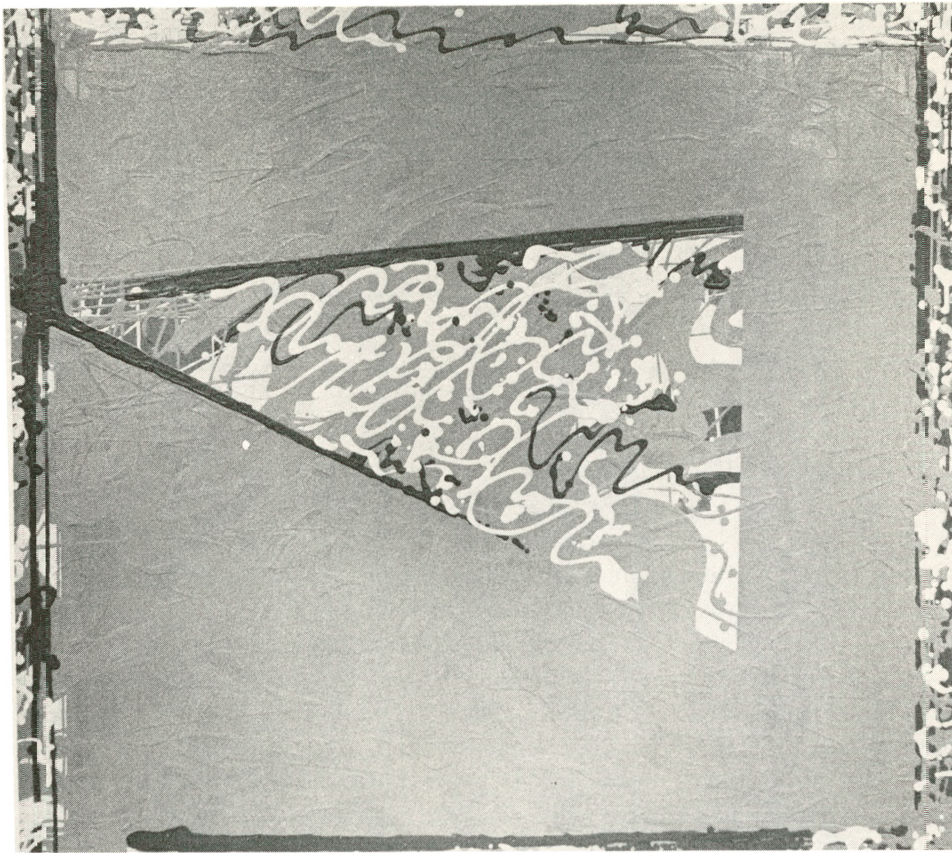
Henriksen: Not this time, unfortunately. Not then, anyway. But if he keeps studying the underlying composition of abstract “action paintings” he might get over his revulsion and he might (like many of my students and friends) even come to enjoy and be enthusiastic about abstract art.

S*SPECTRUM:* Are Adventists more often antagonistic to abstract art than non-Adventists?

Henriksen: While I have not taken a sociological survey, my experience and that of other Adventist artists whom I know indicate that Adventists have more of a bias against abstract art than do non-Adventists.



“Red on Black, 1973,” acrylic on unstretched, flexible acrylic sheet, 15”x17”. “Here the visual effect of form and line are accentuated as they play upon each other.”



“North Red No. 6, 1975.” acrylic on canvas, 47”x52”. “This work shows an approach to the interaction of geometric form and organic form.”

SPECTRUM: Why, do you think?

Henriksen: Because as a church we have a minimal interest in art as part of our religious experience, and also as conservative Christians we often suspect that what we are not familiar with in culture is evil. In fact, some SDAs identify paintings that happen to have a particular form—the abstract—with evil.

SPECTRUM: What do you mean?

Henriksen: Well, for example, a few years ago *The Ministry* had an article that talked of contemporary painting as a “crude portrayal of disorganized oblivion,” and “of human disorientation,” a “product of man’s apostasy.”¹ And *The Journal of Adventist Education* had an article soon afterwards that said “modern art as we know it today . . . cannot be pleasing to the Lord.”²

SPECTRUM: That goes even further than your friend locking at de Kooning.

Henriksen: Yes, it does. Of course, everyone has a right to express a preference in art, but it’s another thing for leaders to condemn artistic styles as ungodly. That has an enormously dead-

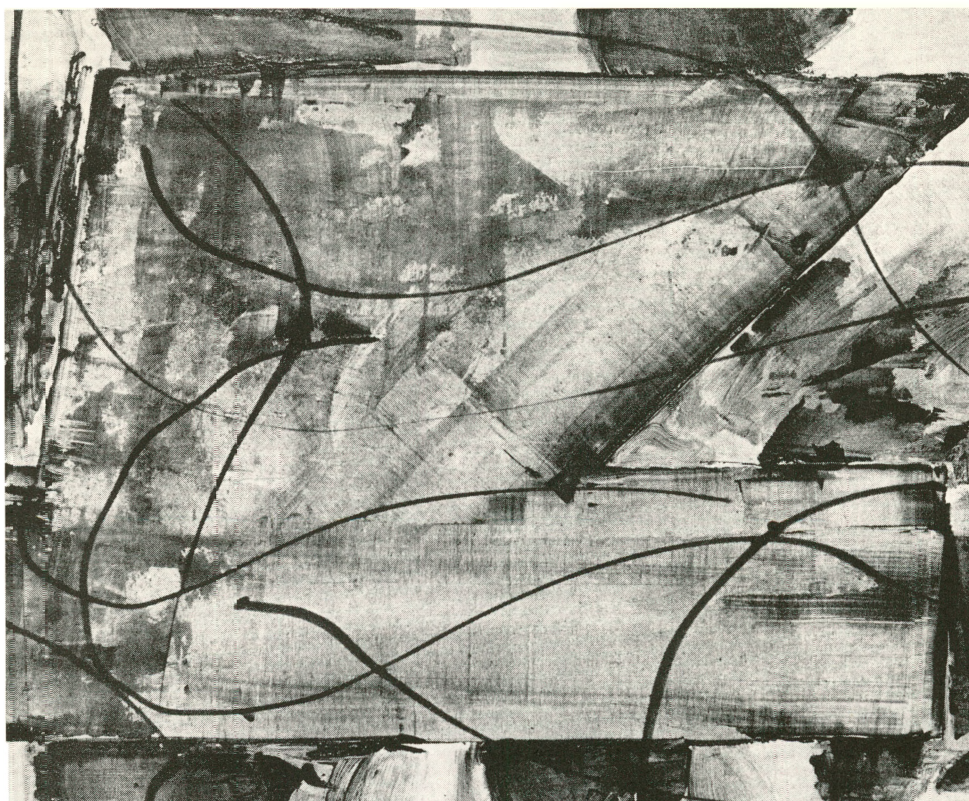
ening impact on an entire community’s ability to appreciate what they see.

SPECTRUM: But if the writers are right, aren’t they performing a service by saying so?

Henriksen: But you know they’re not right! That’s the point. They’re wrong about at least recognized masterpieces of abstract or semi-abstract art. Works like that are *not* compositionally a “portrayal of disorganized oblivion.” They are very carefully organized.

SPECTRUM: What about the point concerning distortion?

Henriksen: What does that mean? It is true that semiabstract painters like Paul Cezanne, Claude Monet, Georges Seurat and Henri Matisse did not paint “realistically” photographic reproductions. And it is also true that some paintings exaggerate or dramatize to combine visual elements with narrative to make a more forceful poetic statement: for example, many paintings of the crucifixion, such as El Greco’s *Christ on the Cross*. Modern painters such as Auguste Rodin, Edward Munch, George Rouault and Picasso similarly explore the relationship of the



"Group 6, No. 38D," acrylic on canvas, 4'x5'. "This painting, made late in 1975, again plays organic form against geometric form, the differences being the use of a very transparent paint, causing the visual characteristics of the paint to stand out more, and the less repetitive rhythmic quality of the lines."

abstract with the narrative, but in order to make more focused, powerful statements, not at all to distort.

SPECTRUM. Of course, completely abstract art doesn't distort because it isn't even dealing with what we see in our ordinary lives, or at least think we are seeing.

Henriksen: Exactly. Pure abstract art focuses exclusively on visual elements without distorting or being distracted by narrative.

SPECTRUM. Pure abstract, you're saying, doesn't distort reality; it ignores it?

Henriksen: But in a sense abstract art is realistic. After all, it shows natural color and real, existing form. In fact, abstract artists probably can't create a form that doesn't exist somewhere in nature. The forms exist somewhere, only on a different scale.

SPECTRUM: And obviously, you think the ability to see that kind of reality is "pleasing to the Lord."

Henriksen: Yes. Abstract art is spiritual by its very nature. It allows us to penetrate past symbols to the basic elements of visual experi-

ence, and to perceive how harmony is produced. As we contemplate abstract art, we can grasp the fundamental structures of visual reality. It can be the means through which we experience the God-given sensibility to organize and to create, to share in the basic harmony of creation.

SPECTRUM: Then, you wouldn't think it sufficient if attacks on abstract art turned to mere toleration. You want the Adventist community to recognize that abstract art is religious in its very nature?

Henriksen: Yes. Art, for me, is partly a search—a search for truth in visual phenomena, and thus a means to better understand beauty. For me, art is a profound way of experiencing the gift of human creativity, and to enter both the variety and unity of God's creation.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. E. E. Cleveland, "Modern Art," *The Ministry* (May 7, 1971), p. 64.
2. Joe Maniscalco, "Art and the Occult," *The Journal of Adventist Education* (October-November 1971), pp. 8, 9.