WILLEM de LOOPER

Paintings 1968 – 1972 | January 15 – February 26, 2022

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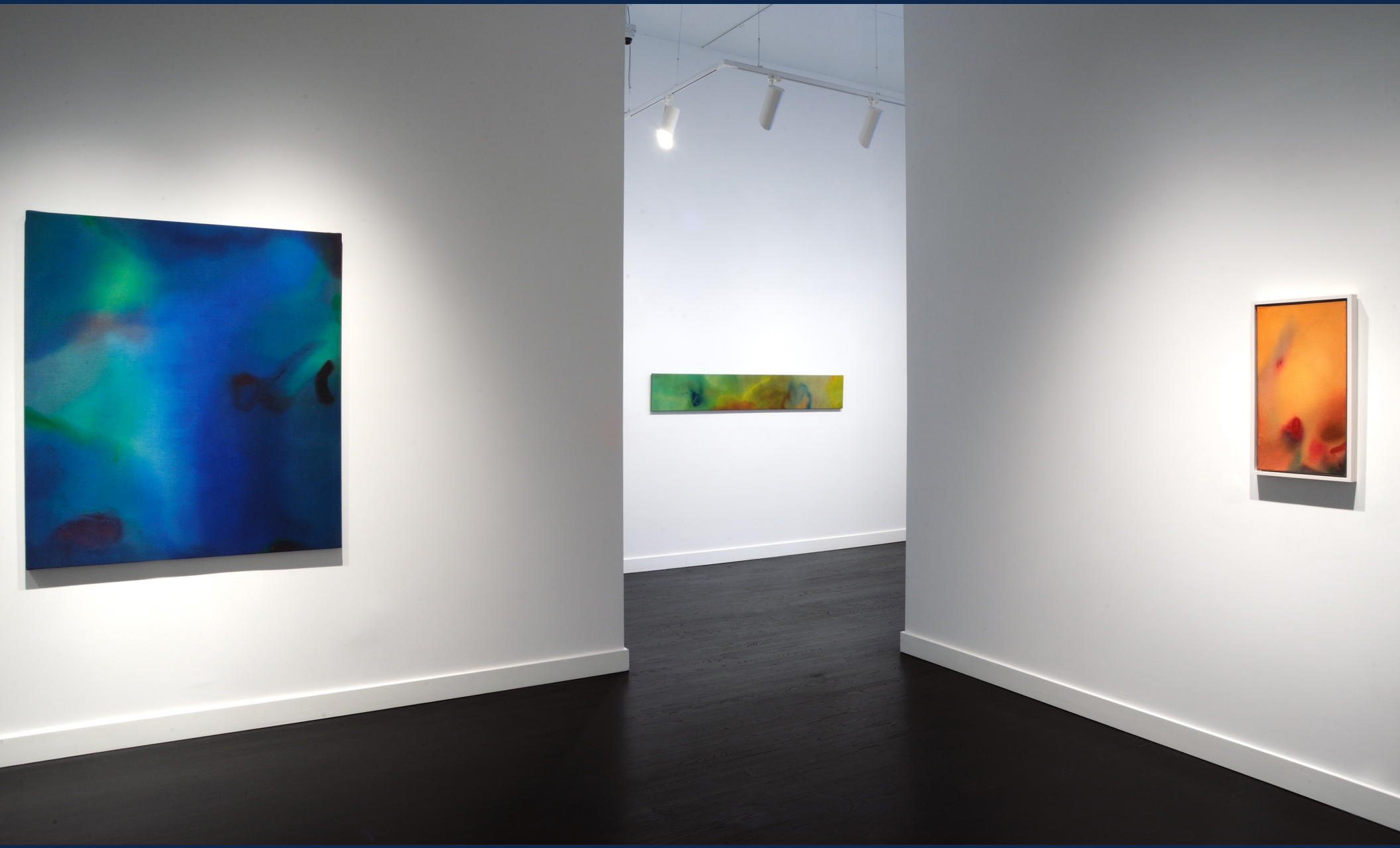


ARTWORKS

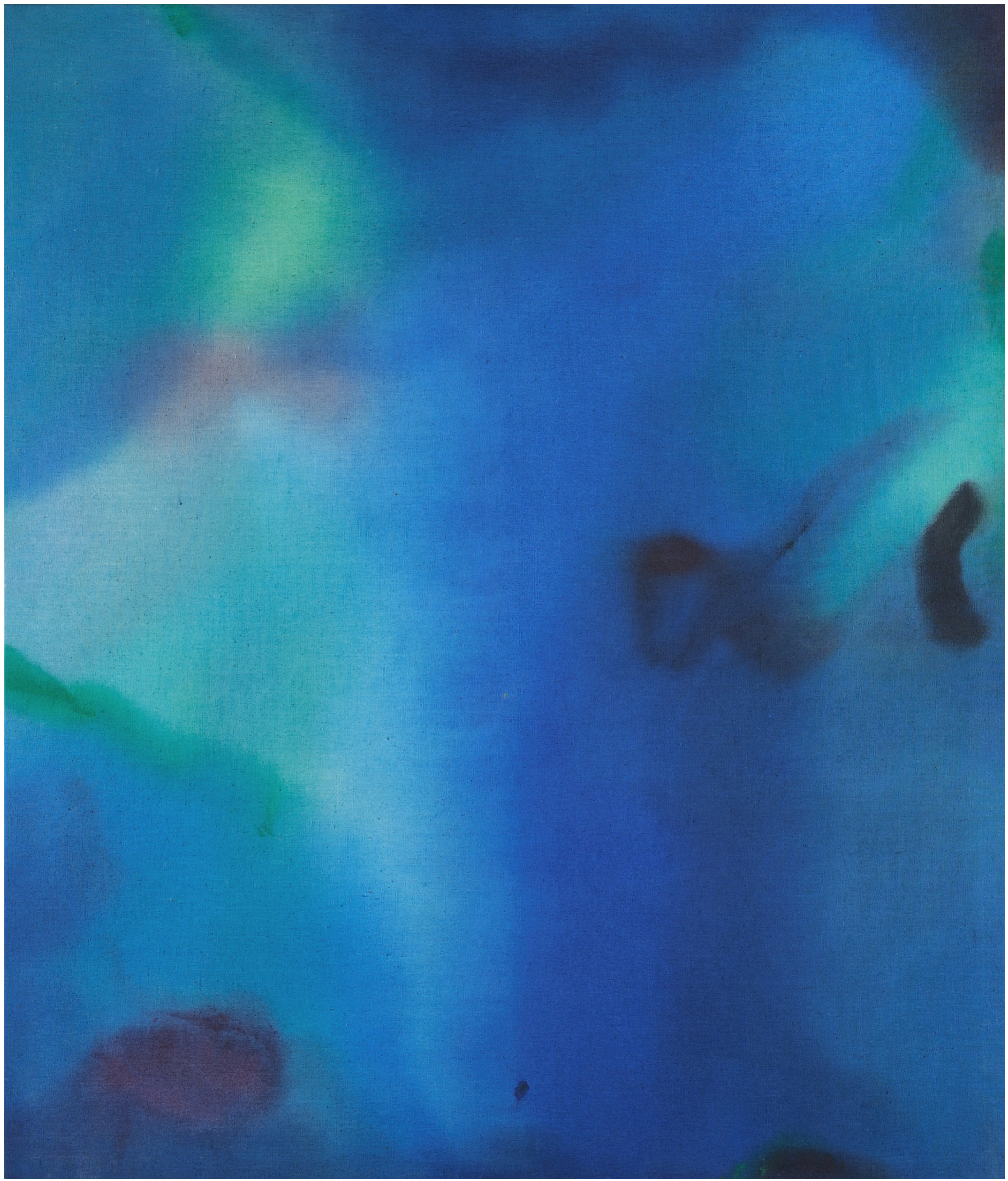
Into Night, 1971
acrylic on canvas
59 1/2 x 35 1/2 inches

Untitled, c. 1970
acrylic on canvas
46 1/2 x 34 1/2 inches

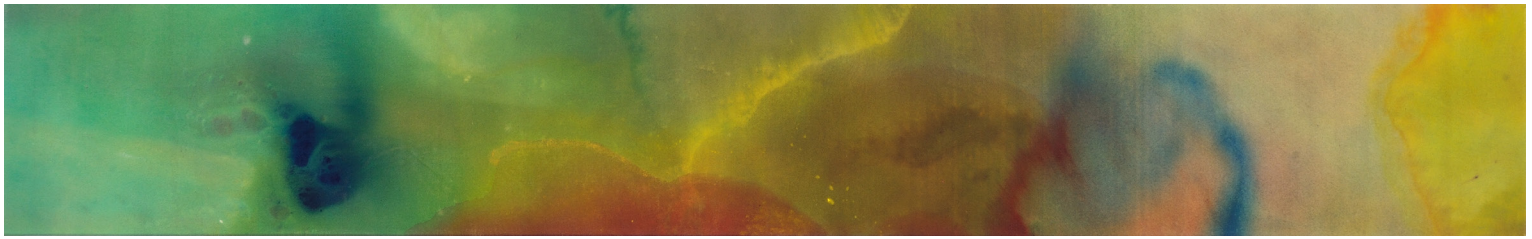
MEDI, 1971
acrylic on canvas
50 x 45 inches

Spring Sound, 1969
acrylic on canvas
24 1/4 x 12 1/2 inches

Pinetop, 1973
acrylic on canvas
71 x 29 1/2 inches

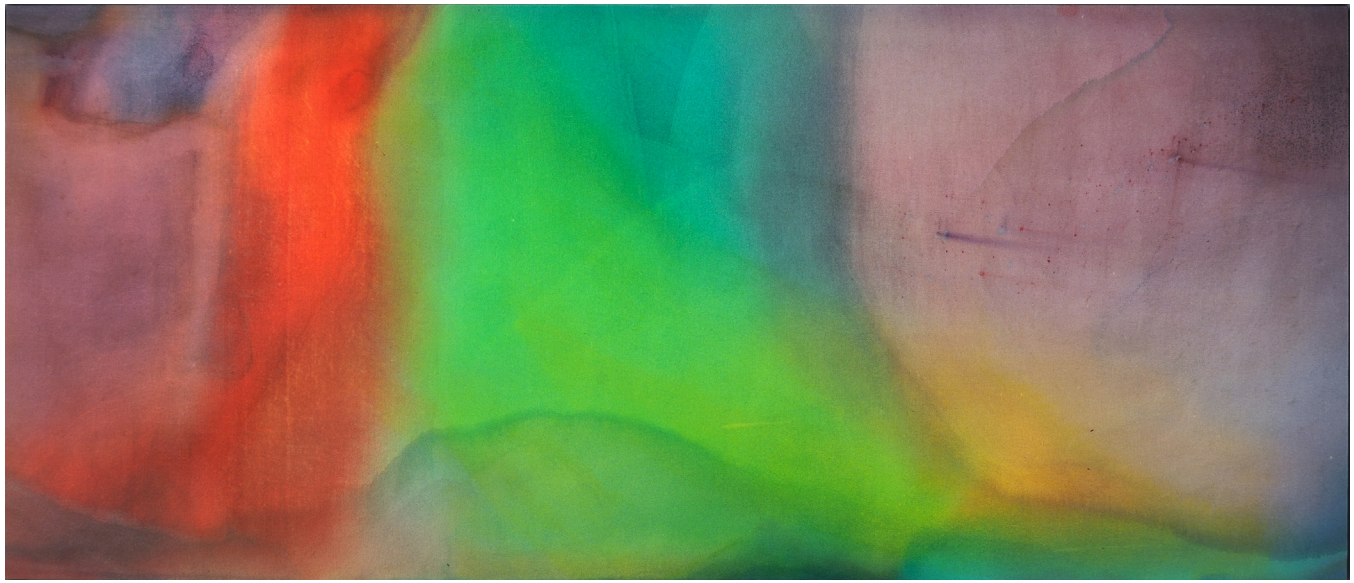


Trough Blues, 1968
acrylic on canvas
55 3/4 x 47 1/4 inches



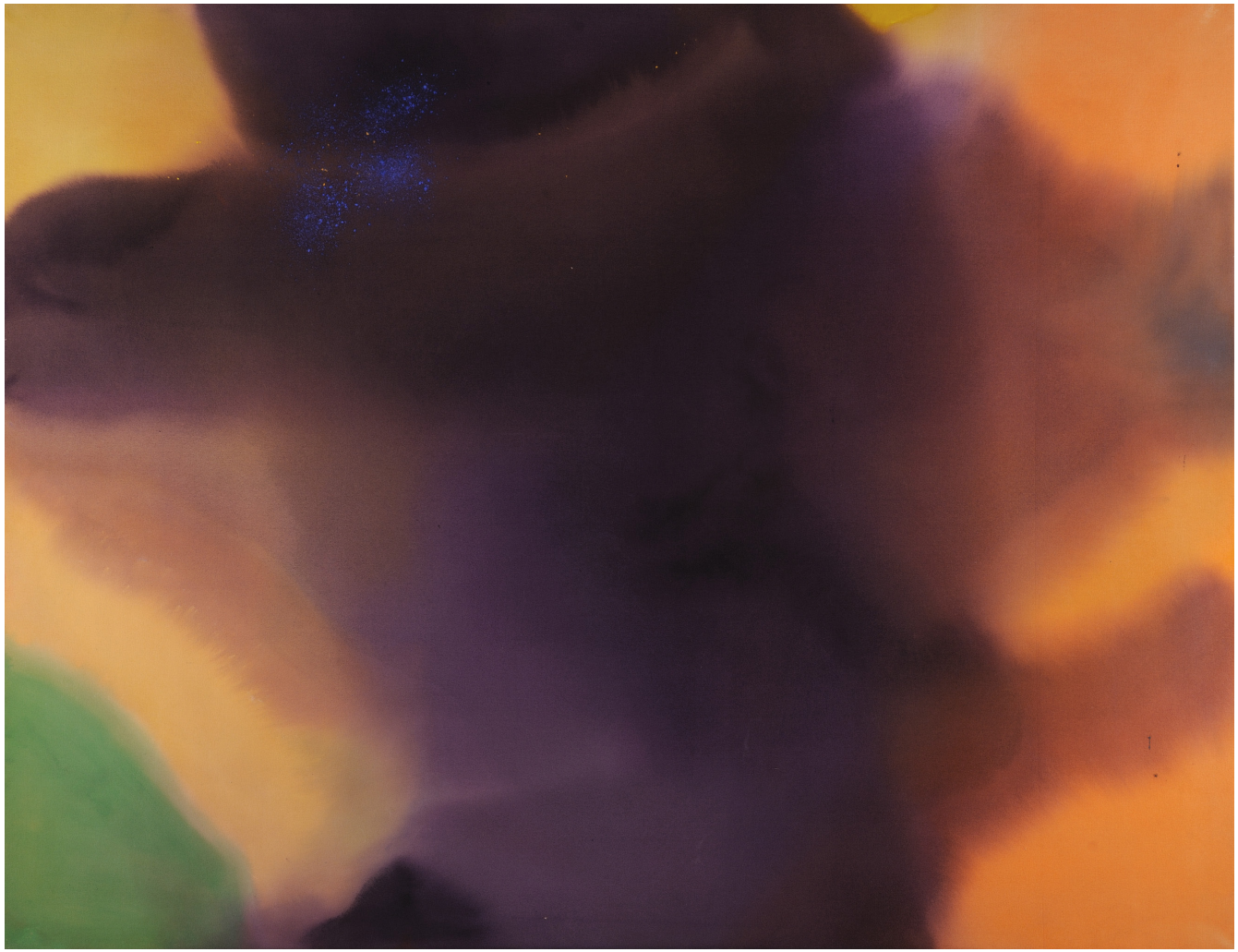
Untitled, 1969
acrylic on canvas
12 x 78 inches

Untitled, 1969
acrylic on canvas
68 x 67 inches



Untitled, c. 1968
acrylic on canvas
30 x 70 inches

Untitled, 1972
acrylic on canvas
46 3/4 x 46 1/4 inches



Untitled, February 1969
acrylic on canvas
55 1/2 x 71 1/2 inches

OPTICAL EXULTATION

By Kristen Hileman

In 1966, the year that Willem de Looper had his first one-person show at Washington DC's leading-edge Jefferson Place Gallery, abstract art was a profoundly dynamic pursuit, a space of radical creation. To focus on a trajectory beginning just thirty years earlier, abstract painting leapt from the boldly flattened figuration and patterns of Henri Matisse's *Large Reclining Nude (Pink Nude)*, 1935, to the severe all-over geometry of Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, 1942-43, and then on to the dizzying splattered energy of Jackson Pollock's *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)*, with many other legendary names and innovative compositions along the way. During these decades, artists experimented with unorthodox approaches to deploying color, applying paint, and imagining space. They set aside a centuries-old concern with representing the appearance of reality to question the nature of representation itself by investigating the intrinsic and unique qualities that painting as a medium held. De Looper's canvases from the late 1960s and early 1970s evidence painting's exuberant liberation to explore its own boundaries, his paint seeming to flow and vaporize into sumptuous meditations on the nuances of color and atmospheric space.

De Looper was born in 1932 in The Hague, where his family experienced the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands during World War II. In 1950 at age 17, he moved to Washington, DC to join his older brother Hans, who worked for the International Monetary Fund. Willem attended The American University, earning a BFA in 1957 from an art department influenced by faculty members Jack Tworkov and Ben Summerford, both gestural abstract painters.[i] However, de Looper's work of the 1960s more strongly responds to the paintings of Morris Louis. Along with Kenneth Noland, Louis came to be inextricably associated with the origins of the Washington Color School in the mid to late 1950s. Testing the possibilities of newly available plastic paints, including water-based artists' acrylics, from the dining room of his suburban DC home, Louis poured diluted paint onto raw, unstretched canvas, sometimes staining the fabric with delicate overlapping veils of color that blossom amidst the unpainted field, elsewhere creating discrete zips and diagonals of hue that pulse against negative space. Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, influential critics of the time, celebrated Louis's paintings for how they freed color from depictive functions so viewers could have a pure and direct optical experience.

Writing on Modernist art in 1965, Greenberg observed, "Where the Old Masters created an illusion of space into which one could imagine oneself walking, the illusion created by a Modernist is one into which one can only look, can travel through only with the eye."[ii] Greenberg's statement holds a sensual, intellectual, and even metaphysical promise of optical discovery, unencumbered by the mundane constraints of the body and limited only by the imagination and daring of the artist. For the twenty-first-century viewer acclimatized to a regime of interactions in which the world is flattened onto the surface of a digital screen,

a reengagement with the transcendent invention of this strain of mid-twentieth-century abstraction might stimulate more lyrical and non-literal conceptualizations of the spatial interfaces that define today's existence.[iii]

Expanses of vibrant color wrought by various techniques of staining unprimed canvas with thinned acrylics became the hallmark of the Washington Color School and many of the painters who exhibited at Jefferson Place Gallery in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including de Looper.[iv] Notably, in de Looper's works from this period, the raw canvas and negative space integral to Louis's and Noland's work have been entirely subsumed into mysterious mists of paint. Such is the case with de Looper's luminous, multivalent *Untitled (February 1969).* In considering this and related paintings, it is important to take the artist at his word in prioritizing formal qualities to produce imagery that does not seek to evoke a preexisting experience or embody a preconceived idea. In 2008, the artist reflected, "I think it might be obvious, but I go very much by feeling about color and about form. I have no idea how I come up with something like this, why this painting and the one before are so different in composition. . . . That's the mystery of art."[v] Nevertheless, as a contemporary viewer's eye enters the rainbow haze of the February 1969 composition, it is tempting to take a cue from art historian Alexander Nemerov and retrospectively read de Looper's abstraction as emanating from or emblematic of the social and political circumstances of its time. When writing about Louis four decades after his 1962 death, Nemerov described Louis's paintings, along with those of compatriots Noland and Paul Feeley, as "the most concerted vision of emotion within bounds—joyous, exuberant feeling yet subject always to rules and restraints—and thus were the most appropriate analogue to the [Kennedy] administration's own stately representation of pleasure and ebullience in a novel age of seemingly boundless gratification."[vi]

De Looper's colors are quite the opposite—unbound and fluidly melting into a psychedelic foam of the high and low aesthetics of the late 1960s expanded consciousness. Likewise, the painting's aerosol nature, its quality of pigmented particulates diffusing through undefined space, conjures up urban clouds of tear gas enveloping civil rights activists and student protestors, as well as artillery fire and defoliants in Vietnam. In 1974, de Looper realized *Sky Forms,* a performative work commissioned by the Kennedy Center for its *Art Now* festival in which a skywriting plane emitted spiraling vapor in different colors across the Washington sky. Despite the artist's ardent formalism, the brackets of World War II and the Vietnam War insinuate themselves as biographical context for this artwork created by an airplane and smoke. While such pieces by de Looper are beautiful, their beauty seems located in an instability that equates with their era. Even the petite and joyfully titled *Spring Sound* of 1969 has a smoldering air; glowing oranges and ember reds suggest barely contained combustion alongside spring blooms ready to burst.

The untitled February 1969 composition also reveals de Looper as a rule-breaker propelling the Color School forward. A tactile spray of brilliant blue enters from a corner of the work; one can imagine running a hand across the canvas to feel this visceral interruption of an otherwise smooth surface. Startling and contrary to standard Color School techniques of flat, stained color, de Looper's flicks of blue heighten the energy of the composition's other colors and emphatically remind viewers of the activity from which the painting was brewed. De Looper's words about a 1970 work are apt here: "The painting liberated me from the thought that either you are a color painter or you are not a color painter. You're just a painter, you see, and these things happen as you think about your painting and not the way another person thinks about it. The rules that you follow are the rules that you make for yourself."[vii]

One can discern enlivening variations in paint texture and opacity in several other works from this period. Many of the surfaces contain seed-sized blips of paint, incidences of process embraced by the artist. Glistening patches of impenetrable black rise from the otherwise ethereal surface of *Trough Blues,* 1968, a title that nods to both its palette and de Looper's passion for music. 1971's *Into Night* and a large untitled square canvas from 1972 challenge assumptions about stain paintings with passages in which the artist appears to have added white to purple paint, heightening the color's intensity and visually lifting it above the other colors of the compositions. In the 1972 piece, this effect forms a thick

rivulet along the painting's bottom edge, at once anchoring the composition and catalyzing the area above it into regions of receding and emergent space. A pleasure of spending time with de Looper's work is locating these gorgeous disruptions, pondering how they impact his compositions, and questioning how one's perception of the painting changes once they are discovered.

Writing in or around 1976, the artist's wife Frauke de Looper provided one of the most direct descriptions of how de Looper achieved the aqueous yet incident-filled qualities of his first mature body of works:

In staining a painting the artist pours diluted paint onto the raw canvas which lies on the floor. He then allows the liquid to flow in thin layers all over the painting. Like stains, the pigment mixes with the color underneath but it does not erase the underlying layer. This kind of painting might seem almost accidental. But it is not. With great skill the artist controls the liquid flows of paint and lets the excess flow off onto the studio floor."[viii]

De Looper yielded clues to his enigmatic process when he compared his early work to that of Sam Gilliam. Gilliam was a friend and fellow Washingtonian who showed with de Looper at Jefferson Place Gallery, and the artists traveled to Europe together in 1968.[ix] Whereas Gilliam, like Louis before him, worked on unstretched canvas, de Looper's canvases were stretched before he applied paint.[x] According to art historian Howard Risatti, the concrete boundaries of the stretcher bars provided de Looper with "resistance, something to 'push' against." Risatti further suggested that de Looper's desire to push against and through constraints led him to quickly abandon a foray into spray painting, a mechanical technique that all too easily resulted in an even dispersal of paint.[xi]

The glowing evenness of a work like *Untitled,* c. 1970, seems even more remarkable knowing that it was not a result of a sprayer or air gun. The experience of looking into the painting is like gazing into water capped with interlocking sheets of ice as a low-angled sun imbues the surfaces with golden light. Again, while de Looper's abstraction is non-referential, it is frequently infused with equivalences to the dynamics of nature—landscapes, topographies, and atmospheres—not unlike the paintings of Clyfford Still, an Abstract Expressionist of an earlier generation living 60 miles north of Washington in Westminster, MD in the 1960s. Horizontal bands of color align with how one perceives the earth, water, and sky across the human field of vision in *Pinetop*, c. 1973. The painting's tower of color is animated by de Looper's flows of paint and green-yellow highlights that oscillate between qualities of natural and electrified light.

At the same time, *Pinetop* and companion works from the early 1970s reflect a new feeling of structure in de Looper's compositions, one that would evolve into solid, ordered horizontals as the decade progressed. By the 1970s, De Looper had risen from museum guard to curator at The Phillips Collection, and his interest in artists was vast, ranging from British Romantics John Constable and J.M.W. Turner through Modernists Arshile Gorky, Paul Klee, and John Marin to the more contemporary abstractionists Sol Le Witt, Robert Mangold, and Miriam Schapiro.[xii] This unique position as a studio artist and curator allowed him to delve eruditely into both the material and intellectual problems of making aesthetic sense of paint and canvas. As de Looper remarked, "I don't know of anybody who has been as influenced by a whole museum as I have been. It went into my pores from the very beginning."[xiii] This internalized awareness of how gesture and hue form novel pictorial worlds, along with de Looper's talent and profound commitment to his art, effervesces onto the exultant surfaces of his canvases.

ENDNOTES

[i] The side-by-side "Chronology of the artist" and "Historical context" in curator Terry Gips's catalogue for the 1996 University of Maryland College Park exhibition *Willem de Looper: A Retrospective Exhibition, 1966-1996* is an invaluable resource on de Looper's life and career. In a 2007 interview with Jack Rasmussen published in the catalogue for Rasmussen's exhibition *Willem de Looper* at The American University Museum, 2008, de Looper mentions being particularly inspired by his studies with Ben Summerford, see p. 5.

[ii] Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (New Edition), ed. by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p. 777.

[iii] For the seminal critique of literalism in art, see Michael Fried's essay "Art and Objecthood," originally published in the Summer 1967 issue of *Artforum*.

[iv] To note, de Looper saw the Washington Color School label as being "applied from the outside . . . and perpetuated by whoever was writing for the [Washington] Post and the [Washington] Star and not so much by the artists." He continues: "In fact, having been in the Jefferson Place Gallery for all those years, I never found too much of a bond between many of those painters." De Looper/Rasmussen interview, p. 8.

[v] Ibid., p. 16

[vi] Alexander Nemerov, "Morris Louis: Court Painter of the Kennedy Era" in *Morris Louis Now* (exhibition catalogue), Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 2006, p. 28.

[vii] De Looper/Rasmussen interview, p. 11.

[viii] Frauke, de Looper, "Observations of an artist's wife," c. 1976, unpublished, p. 5; available through the de Looper Foundation for the Arts, Washington, DC.

[ix] They were accompanied by Frauke and Gilliam's wife Dorothy.

[x] "An Interview with Willem de Looper," David Schaff, Art International, ed. by James Fitzsimmons, Vol. XXI/6, December 1977, p. 48.

[xi] See Howard Risatti's "Chromatic Abstractions: Willem de Looper and the Art of Color" in Gips's catalogue, p. 15.

[xii] De Looper joined The Phillips Collection as a museum guard in 1959 and had attained the position of Chief Curator by the time he left in 1987. See Gips, pp. 56-68. Risatti describes de Looper's notebooks as filled "with studies of works by Paul Klee and John Marin that he saw at The Phillips Collection," ibid., p. 12, while de Looper conveyed his interest in LeWitt, Mangold, and Schapiro in his interview with Rasmussen, p. 15.

[xiii] De Looper/Rasmussen interview, p. 16.

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