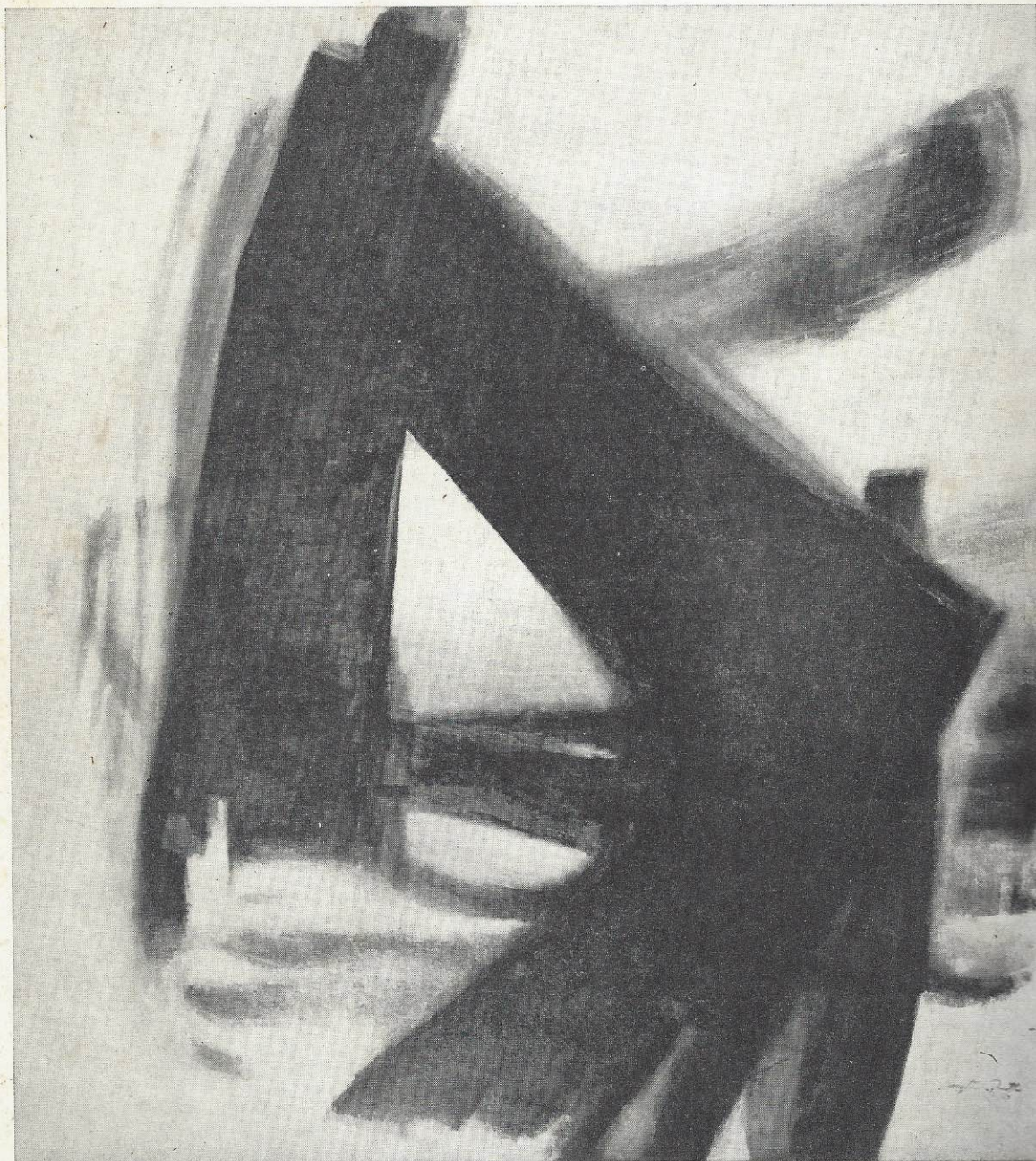


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Gunter Christmann
Ray Crooke Drawings
J. Carington Smith
Current Sculpture
Kalighat Painting

ART

AND AUSTRALIA



J. CARINGTON SMITH SOUTHERN SEAS 1967
Oil on canvas 54in. x 48in.
Owned by Ruth Carington Smith

Registered for posting as a periodical—Category B

Gunter Christmann

Elwyn Lynn

Someone once said of Georges Seurat and the Pointillists that they should not stop at painting even their frames with specks, as Seurat did, but, since they saw the world composed of myriad dots, consistency demanded that the gallery walls, the floors and furniture should be spattered.

Jibes and jokes rebound: Gunter Christmann's loft studio in Paddington is flecked and dotted with the acrylics that he flicks from brushes of different sizes and ages onto canvases he lays upon the floor: trousers, shoes, chairs, writing-table, walls, the glass louver-windows and layers of plastic on the floor are aswarm with spots and spatters, all accidental and all very neat. These tiny specks do not look like left-overs from his paintings; they seem momentarily to have escaped the deceptively loose web he weaves.

It cannot be said that his work would not have developed as it has done if his studio had been scrupulously cleaned each day, but one feels that the dissolvingly dotted chair leg, the louver panels and the see-through, bespeckled plastic on the floor have influenced his painting and are part of his early and continuing concern with uniting his painting with the wall until quite recently when he introduced some see-through, diaphanously bounded areas into his work.

Gunter Christmann, who has risen rapidly to critical and public notice since the mid-1960s, was born in Berlin in 1936, whither he will return in 1973 on a Deutsche Academica Austauschdienst scholarship, trained at evening classes at East Sydney Technical College from 1962 to 1965, tried everything at first: portraits, landscapes, still lifes, looked a lot at Paul Klee, became intrigued with Cubism and optical illusions. He tended, he says, periodically to narrow his interests, so concentrating on line drawing that his instructor thought it obsessive; then he turned to colour theory and has pursued it with an amalgam of scientific accuracy and intuitive inventiveness that has its progenitors in Monet, Seurat, Paul Signac, Philip Guston, Turner and, in the uniformity of surface made to pulsate by an almost imperceptible shift in shape or emphasis, Ad Reinhardt. It is, of course, a mode approached in quite different ways by Jules Olitski with a spray-gun and Sally Hazelet

Drummond with a paint-brush.¹ If one also mentioned Richard Pousette-Dart and recent work by John Peart, it would not be to diminish Christmann's originality but to place him well within a viable, modernist tradition of frontality, of form relying on colour-gestalt, of shallow surface and of an untrammelled engagement of the whole plane in making an *object*, but a seemingly diaphanous one denying its physicality.

On the catalogue cover to his November 1968 one-man exhibition at Central Street Gallery, Sydney (he has now had eight one-man exhibitions, five being at Central Street) he showed N. O. Rood's Pigment Wheel with Seurat's rather spidery sketch of it below.² It marked Christmann's public avowal of his dedication to Seurat's quest for the simultaneous contrast of colours, of dots, not so much firm, but melting at the edges, not so much complementary, as with Signac,³ that is, not with *creating* one hue from others but with securing an optical shimmer. His studio is likely to have colour-matching charts, a copy of Alfred Hicethier's *Colour Matching and Mixing*, Methuen's *Handbook of Colour* and, to redress the balance by giving due weight to intuitiveness, a catalogue of Mark Rothko's 1970 exhibition shown in Venice and the Marlborough-Gerson Gallery, New York.

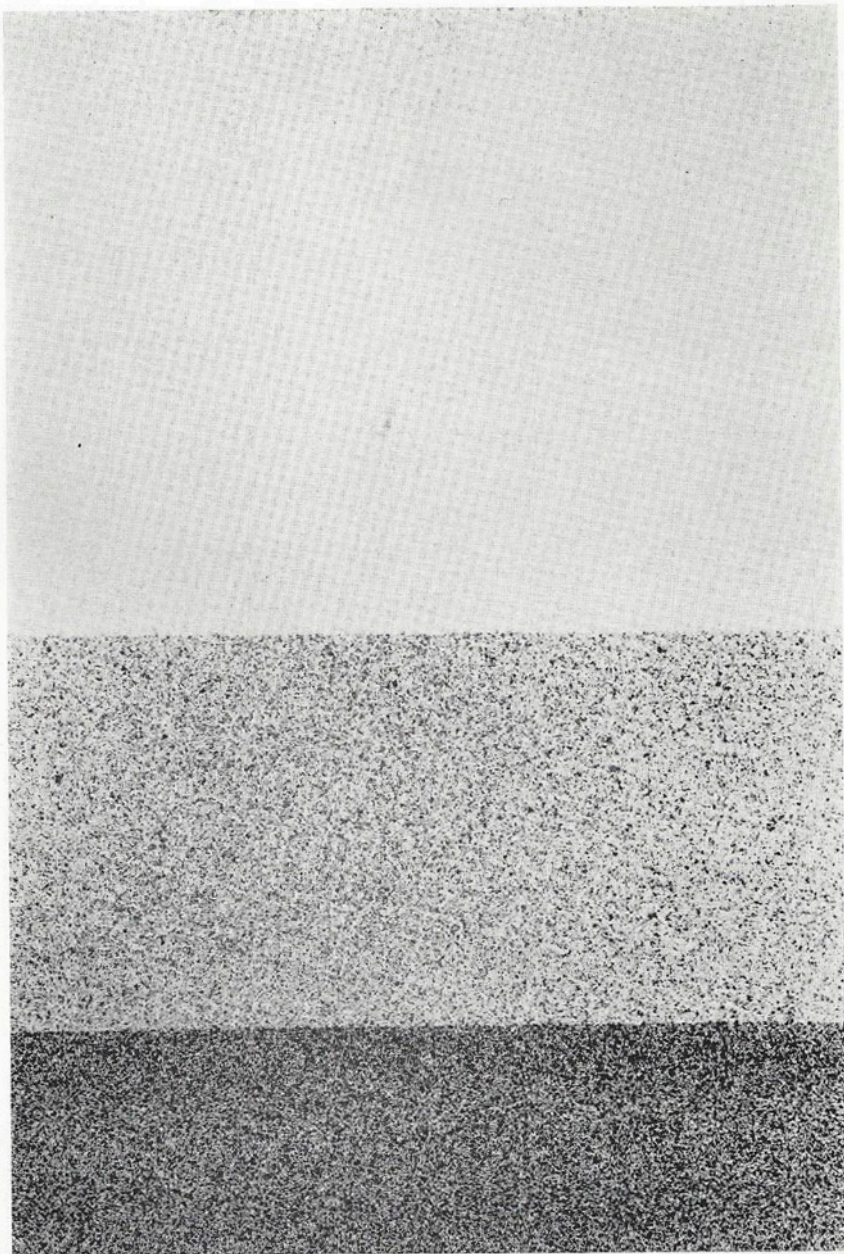
During 1971-2 he has been experimenting with some small works on paper that he calls 'studies after Rothko': they are all upright and all have horizontal rectangles or squares formed by flecks, but these areas usually float without linear division or support, though some are bordered. A yellow area may swim above a layer of green and, at the bottom, a blue; or the order from top to bottom may be yellow dots on pale yellow, a centre of purple and magenta and, across the bottom, dark chocolate with specks of red. Some works that are looser and less tightly packed are most promising for future development, the watercolour paper encouraging a new diffuseness in one work that has a top area of yellows roaming across white, a tightly clustered central area of ochre and a quite casually flecked bottom region of ochre with transient blue dots. He had, too, in 1970 painted *Rothko Bluebuster* which faintly suggested new intentions.

It was not always so, for in 1966 and 1967 his paintings were severely geometri-

¹For a full account of her work and attitudes, see *Art News*, April 1972.

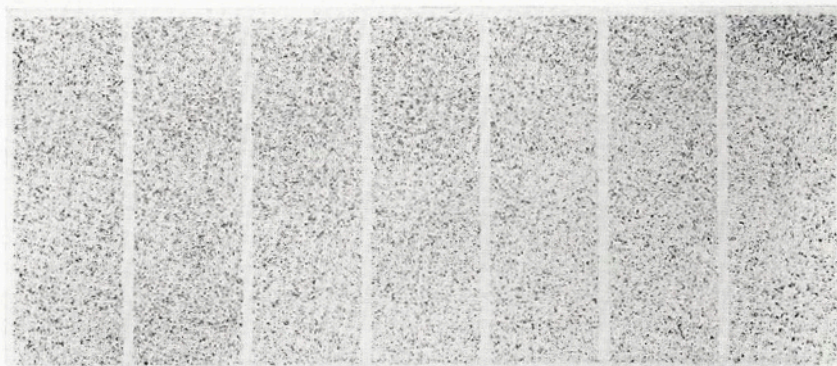
²In 1881 Seurat had obtained a copy of Rood's *Modern Chromatics* (New York, 1879), which was re-issued in 1881 and re-titled *Student's Text Book of Colour*.

³Signac was undeviatingly concerned with mosaics of generally complementary colour in which he built works of some Byzantine stillness. The closest Australian parallel would be the 'mosaic-veils' of Ralph Balson.



above right

GUNTER CHRISTMANN UNTITLED (1972)
Acrylic on paper 41in. x 28in.
Possession of the artist



right

GUNTER CHRISTMANN TO BE AWARE IN AUGUST
(1969)
Acrylic on canvas 34in. x 78in.
Private collection
Photographs by Douglas Thompson

cal, but the unexhibited *Satori* of 1967 was a tall, narrow work of horizontal layers that presaged the above Rothkoesque studies: there was, in this work, a lessening of the impactiveness of the colour, of its optical illusionistic mission that characterized previous works, ranging as it does through pale turquoise, yellow, whites on off-white, yellow and down to pale turquoise once again.

In the rigorous, often symmetrical shapes in squares that Christmann showed at Central Street in 1966 – most were the same size, were called *Composition*, and were in oils – the aim was undoubtedly at geometrical illusionism: one work optically dazzled with bars of vertical stripes of purple and green across the top and bottom and further, narrower bands of purple and green uprights, and pink and golden ochre verticals in between. It reads as eye-assaulting, but oddly enough the bottom area, though a replica of the top, appears restful. Similar works in the exhibition used vertical stripes, not at all like Gene Davis's accumulative, soporific arrangements, but as razzle-dazzle strips of, in one case, purple, yellow, pink and blue in varied orchestrations. One, in green and orange stripes, somewhat like Gunter Fruhtrunk's,¹ was a diagonal arrangement that revealed Christmann's disquiet with a Vasarely-like precision. Indeed, a work used on the exhibition poster and catalogue cover was a mid-green cross running out of kilter to a strict vertical-horizontal grid and narrowing and widening its beams as though accepting and resisting the pressures of its crimson-pink ground. In this, and in one other, it was clear that Christmann wanted both a more expressive and a more ambiguous surface than the array of stripes allowed. A subtle shift in greens that, like a pair of calipers, gripped a pink disc also signalled a turn from a too sharp or a too obvious colour confrontation.

This may not have been so apparent in another work, whereby two rectangles overlaying one another symmetrically in a square, the four sides of which were touched by the four corners of each rectangle, created an ochre centre and long triangles of orange and green with black as a background: even if one does think of Max Bill and Constructivism, what really happens is that one is conscious of a thin

layering, of a shallow current of movement sliding below as it does in his later, 'pointillist' works.

What I am suggesting is that it is not very meaningful to announce that Christmann changed styles: what looks like a style might be called a 'phase' and our problem, while acknowledging the usefulness of stylistic categories, is to see the generative, structural style of the artist,² consistency in approaches not being a matter of mere adherence to period styles.

What Christmann had been seeking, consciously or not, was an overall optical presence: for some time he retained coloured and organic structural elements in the forms of complete or three-sided borders, some looking like coloured-in areas, some resembling a natural growth of flicks and dots. This seemed somewhat a legacy of his 'geometrical' phase, and it could be argued that when he saw the Natvar Bhavsar one-man exhibition at Sydney's Gallery A in 1970 he may have realized that he had no need, any more than did Bhavsar, to have a vertical 'anchorage' in his shifting drifts of colour.³

Christmann became increasingly concerned with *locating* the painting on the wall; *Seblick II*, a tall, shaped canvas balanced half on a triangle as footstool, and *Red Front*, a shaped canvas with two trapeziums on each side of a central, dotted upright rectangle, were concerned with the presence of an object giving the wall a shape; but what was to be done with paintings where the surface was unbounded, yet quite cohesive?

One attempt, which questioned the wall's rectangularity, was the wedge-like canvas, *Shaped*, which moved from a bottom left of reddish hues through yellow dots, larger than customary (almost splashes), and a mauve-blue, made surprisingly from white and ultramarine, towards a right side of deeper blue and yellow. Though the painting draws attention to its shape it looks more unbounded than ever.

Christmann saw this as more of a problem than did his admirers – a not unusual situation. He glued unbordered paintings to the wall with a special easily-removable adhesive and, sometimes, whether there was a faint border or not, he drew a pencil-line frame around the panels as he did with the eighteen paintings he showed at

the 'XI Bienal of São Paulo' in Brazil in 1971 and again at Inhibodress Gallery, Sydney, in March 1972.

What happens with these pencil marks and the flat, pasted paintings varies in particular cases: in some it floats the paintings onto the wall; in others it simply emphasizes the granular or, as happened at São Paulo, the smooth presence of the wall. With those that had a suggested border already in the painted dots, it seemed to create another border. Some paintings, depending on the consistency and cohesion of the dots, looked like curtained apertures and others like mists that had momentarily formed rectangular clouds.

One would need a close examination of such matters and some analysis of Sol LeWitt's ruled, pencilled wall-compositions, before coming to conclusions. Certainly Christmann did need the divisions between his works which did not have the related flow of Ellsworth Kelly's thirteen panels, each of a different, uniform, uninflected hue.⁴ In any case the issue has been left in abeyance as Christmann has returned to using divisions, of a much more positive kind than hitherto, in his recent flecked paintings. One of these, *Spill*, painted in April 1972 and shown in Melbourne's Royal Agricultural Show exhibition in September, had an orange bar emerging as a glow across the top and a bottom area that spilled sparks into a wide, right-hand vertical composed of dark blue on black and red flecks on brown.

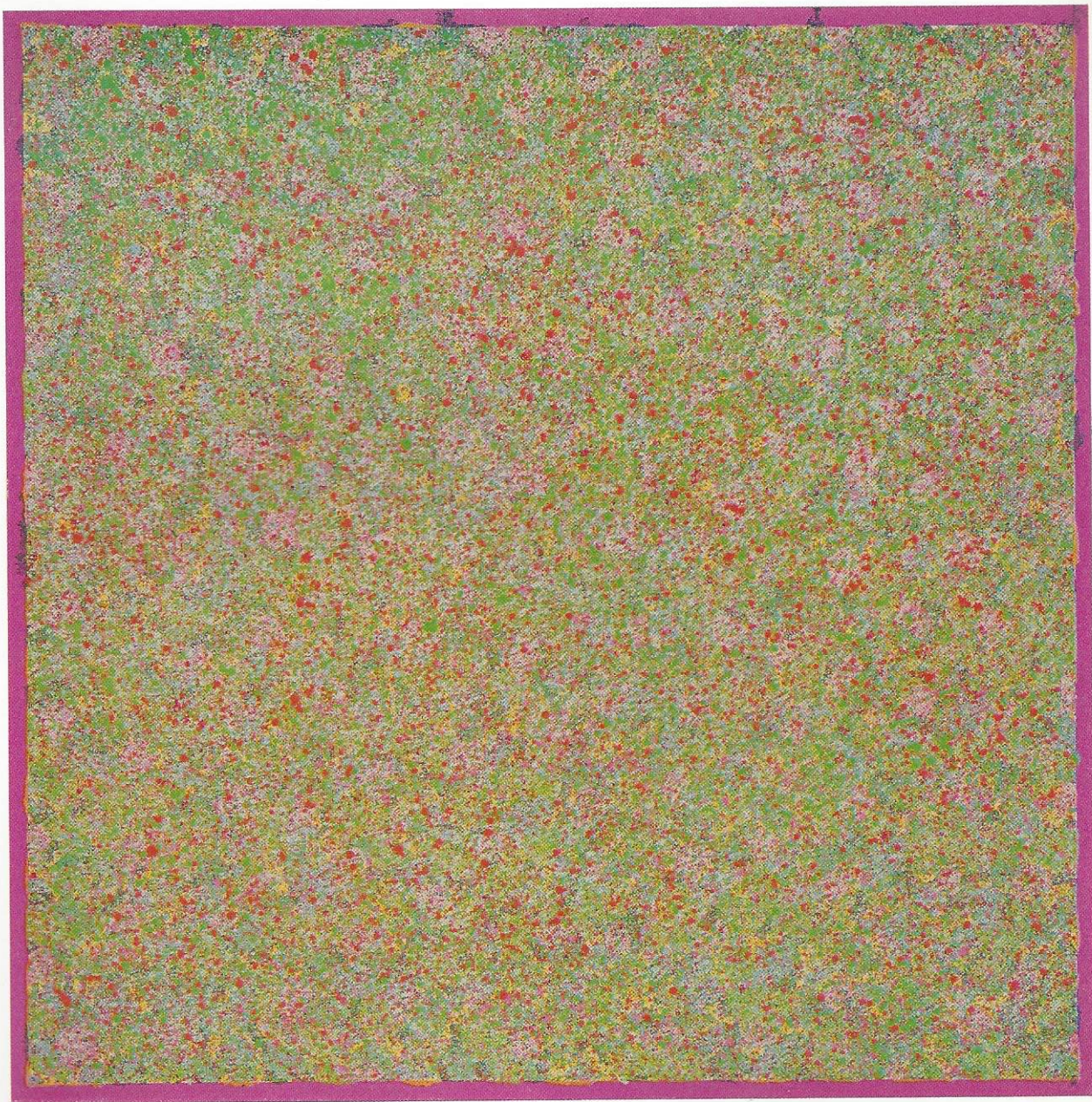
The parallel with Seurat should not be given too much stress but he, too, needed to give weight and direction to certain paintings like *Le Port de Courbevoie* in the Courtauld collection and his *Le Chanal de Gravelines*, *Un Soir* where the anchors gave anchorage to movement and the lamp-post

¹Christmann could hardly have been familiar with Fruhtrunk's work, not well known until 'Documenta IV', 1968, and not seen in Australia until 1969.

²It is not meaningful, either, to account for Christmann's phases by saying that he is simply succumbing to the 'style of the 1960s', which Wollheim would reject as a valid notion of style. In any case, it would be forcing matters to include in such a category: Hard Edge, Pop, Op, Funk, Earth Works, Kinetics, Relational Geometry, Lyrical Abstraction, Photographic Realism and Uncle Tom Cobley.

³Christmann had seen the Power Gallery's Natvar Bhavsar shortly before at Watters' Gallery, but that had two fugitive vertical stripes.

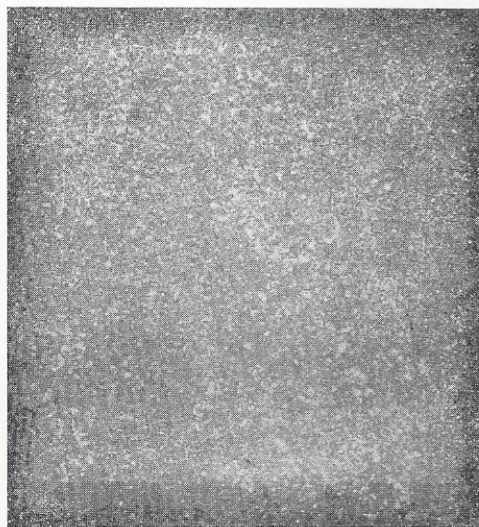
⁴Shown at the 'New York Painting and Sculpture, 1940-1970' exhibition, Metropolitan Museum, New York, 1969-70; they were large colour notations to be seen from various positions for quite different effects. Christmann's were related but each did not depend upon the other.



GUNTER CHRISTMANN ELEVEN a.m. (1969)
Acrylic on canvas 52in. x 52in.
Art Gallery of New South Wales
Photograph by Douglas Thompson

controlled the flickering light; one should not imagine that Christmann will follow Seurat's more formalistic control in *Le Chahut* or *Le Cirque*. Nevertheless, as his latest work, *Misty Spill*, indicates, he wants his flecks and dots to waft up and be directed by interior shapes quite unlike his previous verticals, borders and exterior pencil lines.

Indeed, in *Five, Four and Three*, a painting of three unequal, clearly separated rectangles, each atop the other, the divisions are decisive in marking off the three areas of palpitating grey. The specks of green, blue and pale orange are of the same intensity all over the painting, but appear brighter and looser at the top where they are painted over white, much



above

GUNTER CHRISTMANN RED ZETTEL (1970)
Acrylic on canvas 66in. x 60in.
Newcastle City Art Gallery
Photograph by Universal Photography

left

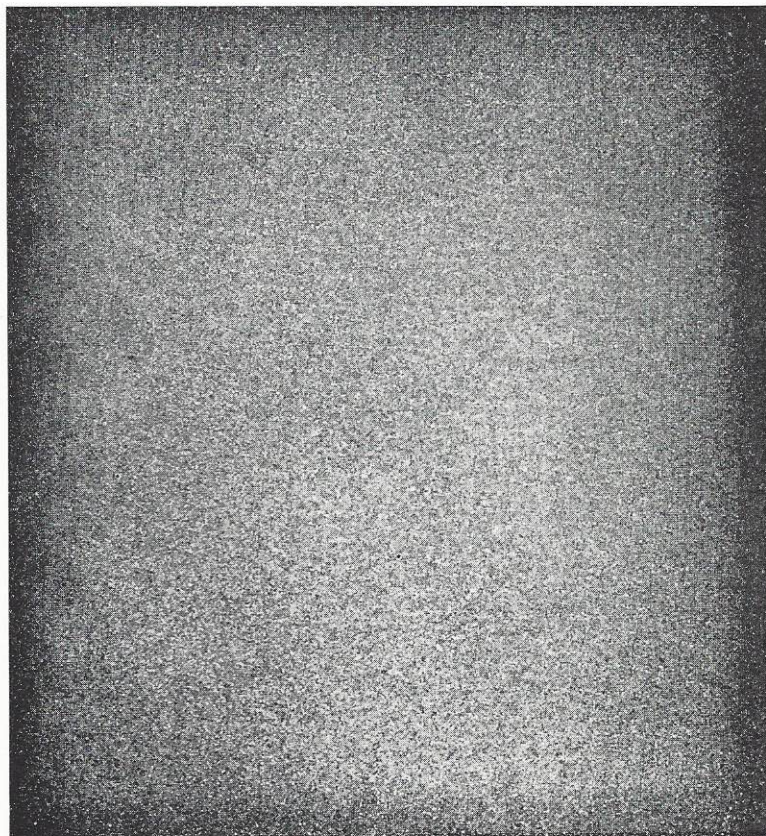
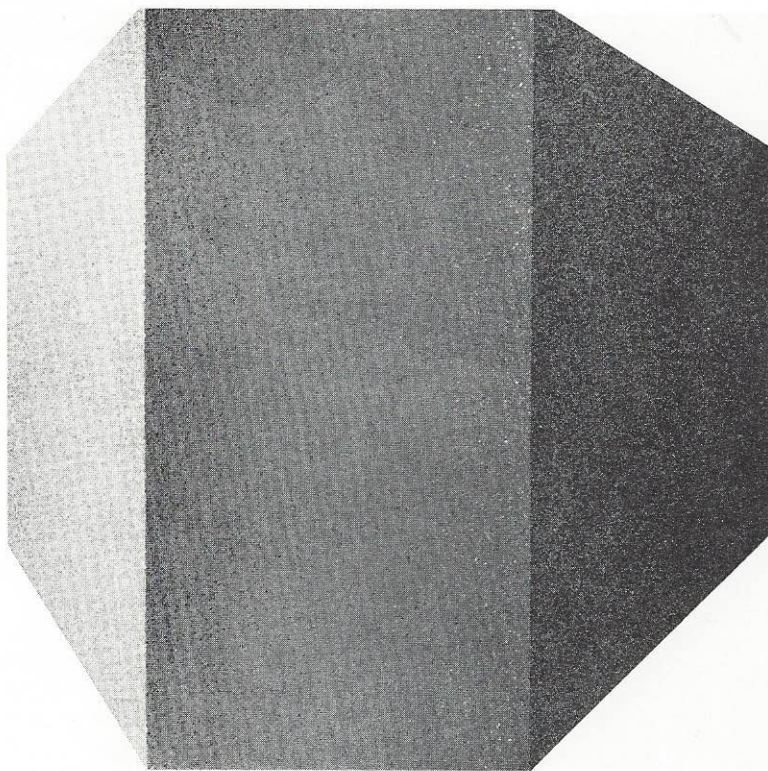
GUNTER CHRISTMANN SATORI (1967)
Acrylic on canvas 110in. x 21in.
Owned by Chandler Coventry
Photograph by Douglas Thompson

opposite top

GUNTER CHRISTMANN RED FRONT (1968-71)
Acrylic on canvas 66in. x 66in.
Private collection
Photograph by Douglas Thompson

opposite bottom

GUNTER CHRISTMANN SMOKE BELLY (1971)
Acrylic on canvas 66in. x 60in.
Owned by Chandler Coventry
Photograph by Douglas Thompson

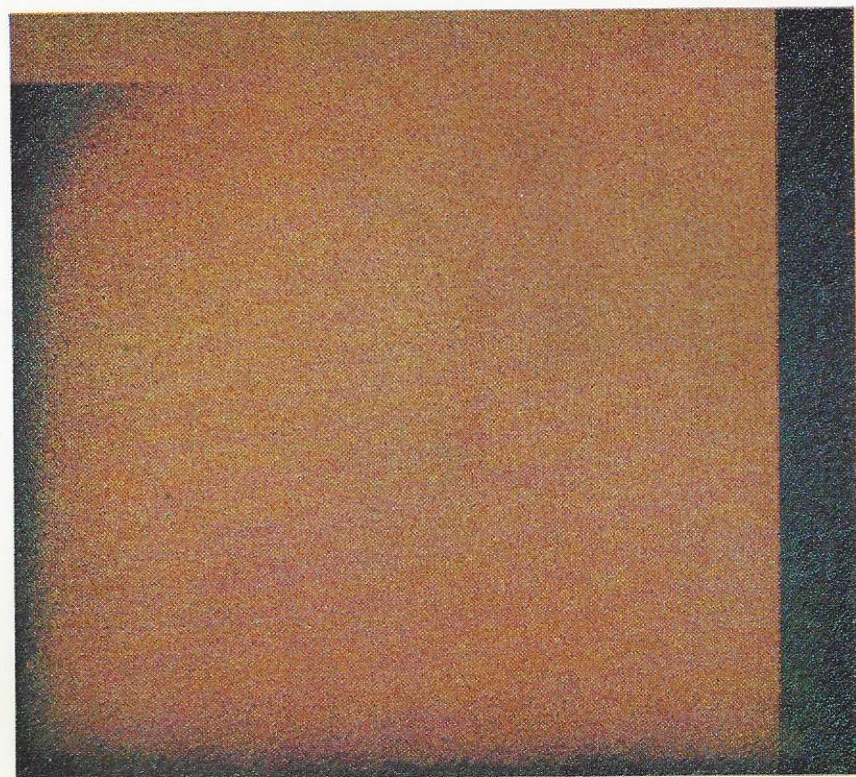


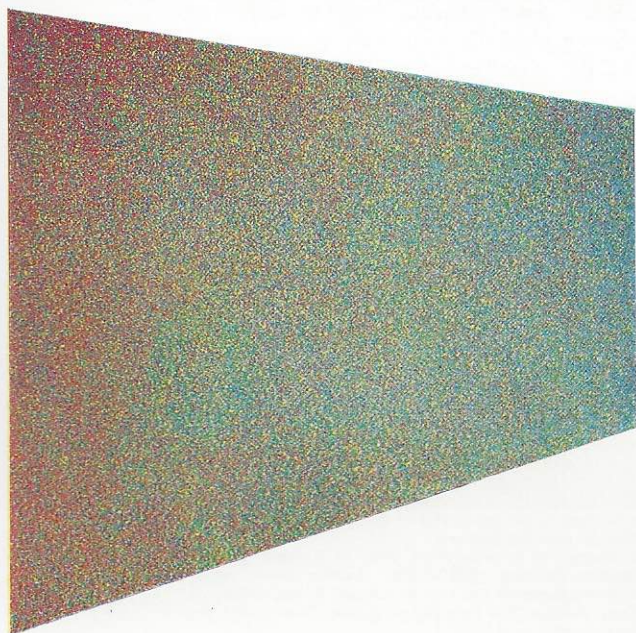
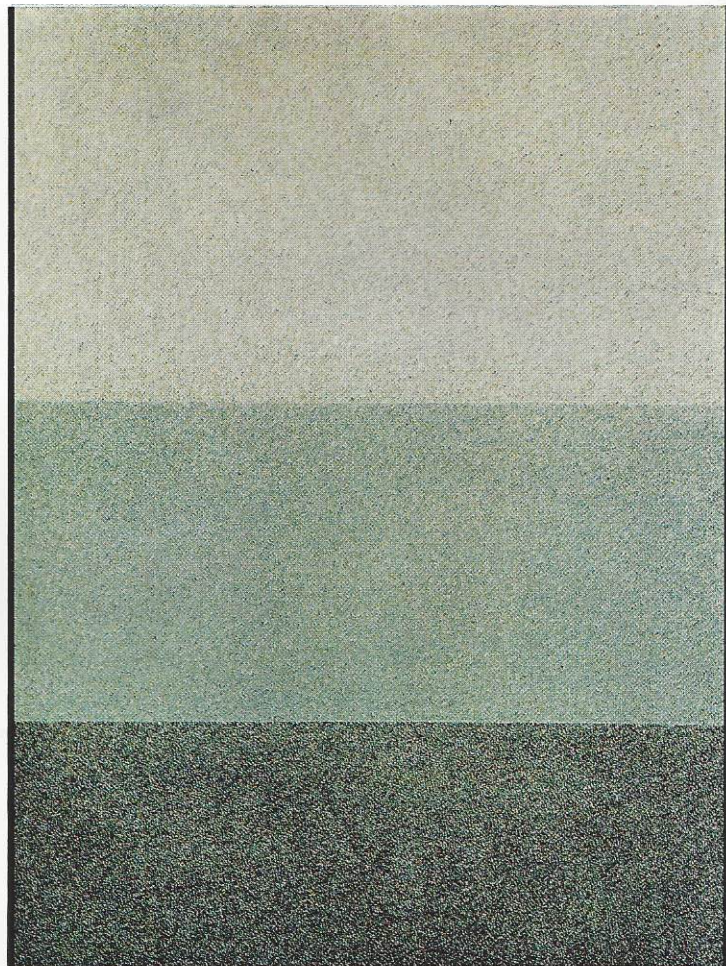
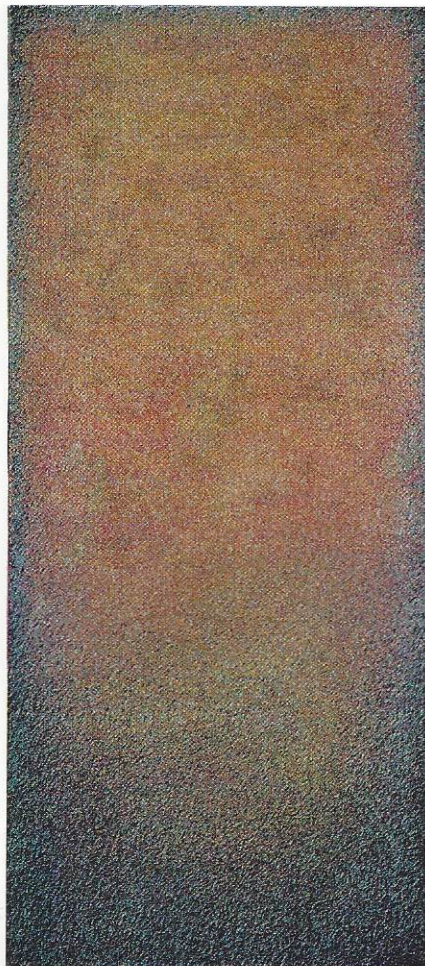
more compressed and darker in the central area where they are spattered on grey to form a pressed slab like a Dubuffet 'textur-ology' work, and quite dark on the lower section which was originally black. What he seeks now, in the same picture, with the same optical flicker, are areas of different rates of expansion and contraction, the top being most open, even and regularly pulsating, the bottom more mottled and compressed. The colour forms less into gestalt colonies; the eye is less invited to make shapes from dots of colour as was sometimes possible in his works between 1968 and 1971. In *Eleven a.m.* in the Art Gallery of New South Wales, a trembling palpitation of greens, red, orange, yellows, blue, mauves and pinks, the cerise, speckled border drives the mauves and, less so, the oranges, into constellations, while the greens remain dispersed. On the other hand, in *Over Blue*, of 1970, in the National Gallery of Victoria, the elusive patterns are wider and more inclined to vary. *Grey Rip*, also of 1970, shown in the Harald Szeeman selection in Sydney and Melbourne in 1971, is much less concerned with gestalt patterns, the border of dark blues and whites reinforcing the rather 'torn' appearance of the white flecks, a quite different effect from that in *Smoke Belly*¹ where the almost imperceptible dark border of charcoal and blue allows the dots to bunch into ephemeral patterns. They are indeed ephemeral; gestalt configurations in, say, black on white, are easy to figure, but those formed by colour and depending not so much on complementary mixing, but on reds attracting reds and greens attracting greens, and so on (to say nothing of the hues formed by overlays, stains and see-through effects), are most elusive.

Christmann's mid-period paintings – about 1968 to 1971 – do not allow one to focus on given areas for any length of time. In fact, they share with Lyrical Abstraction a sliding focus, a diminution of the roles of climaxes and axial directions.

The result is that Christmann is now working in three different, though related, kinds of painting: those like *Misty Spill*, those like *Five, Four and Three*, and a series,

¹So called because it swelled in the centre and one slightly darker constellation of spots, says Christmann, looked like a belly button.





opposite top

GUNTER CHRISTMANN *UNTITLED* (1966)
Oil on hardboard 48in. x 48in.
Possession of the artist

opposite bottom

GUNTER CHRISTMANN *MISTY SPILL* (1972)
Acrylic on canvas 60in. x 66in.
Possession of the artist

above

GUNTER CHRISTMANN *FIVE, FOUR AND THREE* (1972)
Acrylic on canvas 84in. x 64in.
Owned by W. R. Burge

above left

GUNTER CHRISTMANN *RAINY DAY OCHRE* (1971)
Acrylic on canvas 82in. x 36in.
Possession of the artist

left

GUNTER CHRISTMANN *SHAPED* (1968-9)
Acrylic on canvas 66in. x 66in. x 66in. x 36in.
Owned by Chandler Coventry
Photographs by Douglas Thompson

as yet untitled, where the border enhances the swelling drift of the centre.

Misty Spill, originally a soft orange, is flecked with greens and blues and a rare use of an earth colour, raw umber; red flecks of mid-cadmium and magenta make the bottom area, that grows slowly more shadowy, a deep purple, but the left side a pinkish orange. Down the right is a bar of deep, dark, blue-grey; the opposite side is a feathered dark purplish while, across the top, a wide bar of orange-yellow begins to form. This is the only internalizing of structure, as natural growth, that is concerning Christmann. Another concern is a close and crucial relation between horizontal areas, as in *Five, Four and Three* and the two side borders. In that work the three borders stay rigidly behind the three horizontal layers; in a new work of sharpest yellow, crimson and blue at the bottom, the lateral bars come forward with the yellow, remain stable against the crimson and retreat with the blue.¹

The last kind of work consists of a border on the top and sides with a more fluctuating area in the centre: one, bordered in purple, began as ochre and was transformed into violet with flecks of white, reds and greens that darken at the misty bottom and grow greener at the top corners. Amongst the most beautiful works by Christmann, it is an attempt, like *Spill* and *Misty Spill*, to refute the notion that his work is invalidated by a too shallow and a too precious surface in the sense that he does not take a risk with a sudden slash of colour as in an Olitski or a lively declivity as in a Darby Bannard: it swells and surges and takes new risks with flatness as does his *Smoke Ash*, of 1972, a much harsher work of specks of white and magenta on black and it is less an 'instant' work than more primary-hued pieces. The magenta and blue flecks appear only gradually and decrease the harshness of the whites, but increase their swarming activity, an activity that lessens the gestalt grouping in constellations. It looks something like the Milky Way, like a wide, floating, unstructured expansion and, in this, has its relations with his earlier colour-field painting – as do *Spill* and *Misty Spill* – as in the Field Exhibition of 1968: areas look like reservoirs of energy or fields of expansion and contraction rather than patterned

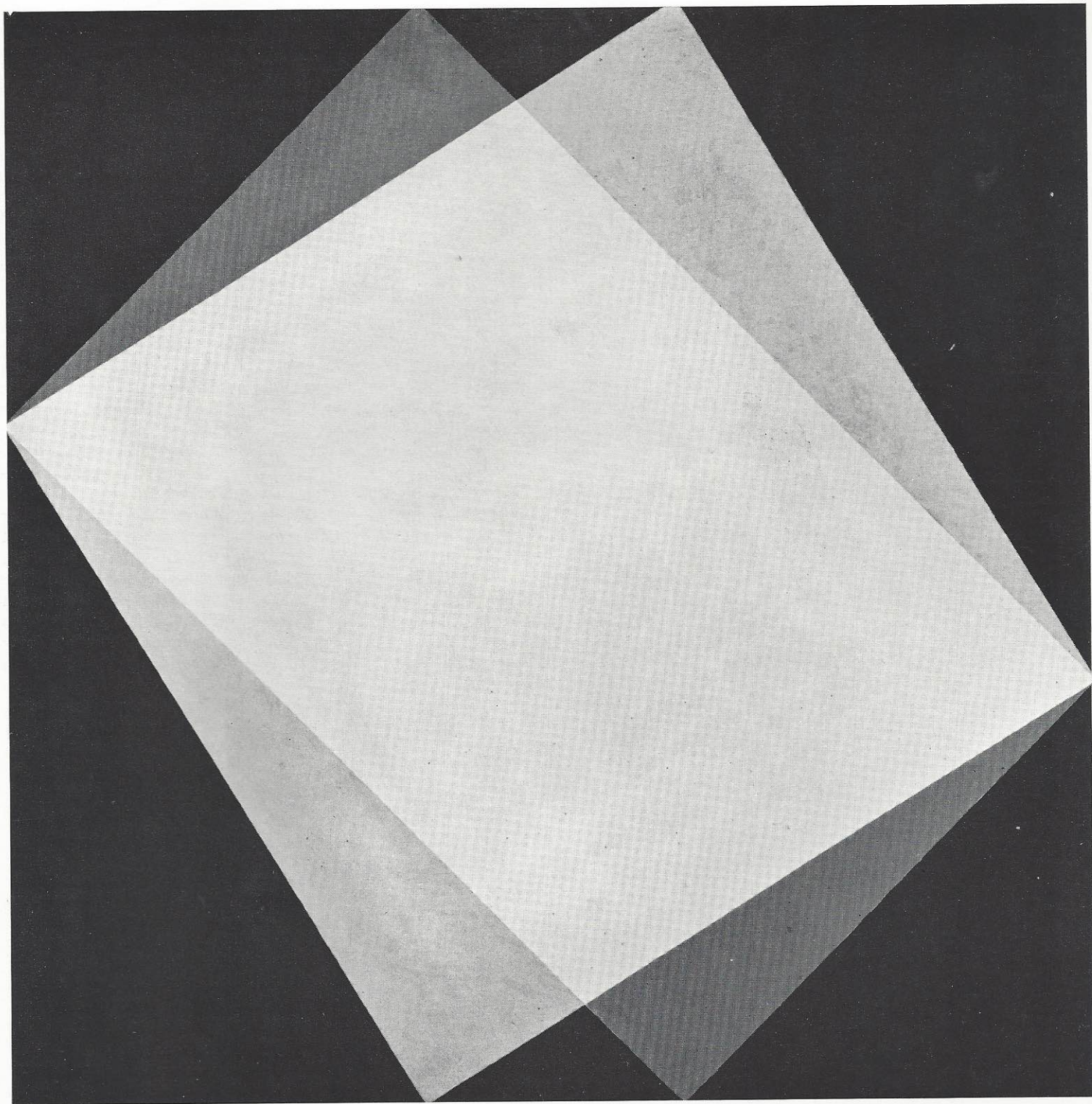
surfaces. The over-all optical, cohesive surface is no longer enough; the reliance on primary hues and concern with the relation of the work to the wall was a transitory absorption: with a new range of hues and a new approach to the centre of the painting, in a way that challenges symmetry by asymmetrical devices or a shading and shadowing that runs counter to the obvious symmetry, Christmann is rapidly expanding his approaches. Less pretty, more subtle, less balanced and more unpredictable, less concerned with critical shibboleths, his new work arouses the liveliest expectations.

The mainly formalistic analysis of Christmann's development pays little attention to its local context² (in any case, he is one of the few survivors of colour-field painting and, like Sydney Ball and David Aspden, has changed considerably) or its diversity of mood, atmosphere and symbolic suggestiveness. One can hardly plot this diversity from his titles: *Big Pink* or *Blue* are identification tags; *Lumpy Fat* is hardly even appropriate; but some, like *Heavy Birthday* and *Smoke Ash* suggest the work's meaning and some, like *Five, Four and Three*, indicate the creative processes and formal concerns involved.

The feelings embodied in his work are of the 'not-quite' or 'kinship' order: they are not quite about joyousness, melancholy, release, hesitancy or shyness; they are akin to expansive ease or cautious confrontation; they embody notions of a veiled life of oblique and subtle suggestions and of a tremulous untroubled uncertainty.

¹There is much more to these effects: for the first time Christmann has not covered areas, previously painted, with the same flecking. In the crimson area he used touches of a violet complementary to the yellow and in the blue area a green that was complementary to the crimson. What gives the equal intensity is the flecking with three primaries; blue, orange and green. Christmann is at pains to point out that his interest in colour theory has, in the final analysis, little to do with his practice.

²The context is broadly dealt with in Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting, 1788-1970*; another view, rather heavily emphasizing the role of Central Street Gallery, is in Terry Smith's 'The Painting of Gunter Christmann', *Art International*, March 1971.



GUNTER CHRISTMANN COMPOSITION (1967)
Acrylic on canvas 38in. x 38in.
Possession of the artist
Photograph by Douglas Thompson