



Figure 54 . Bob Paige . *El Paso Still Life* . Acrylic on Illustration Board . 18 x 24" . 1967

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### BAREFOOT AND STONED ON THE BLISS-FILLED STREETS OF NEW YORK

1967 - 1969

The apartment at 35 Bedford Street in the West Village just off Houston was a fourth floor walkup in a building with a wide, urine-stained staircase. It had two tiny bedrooms, a tiny living room, and the tiniest kitchen imaginable, with a rickety shower stall standing on a platform between the sink and the fridge. The W.C., no bigger than a phone booth, was in the corner of the kitchen. We washed and brushed our teeth — and I shaved — in the kitchen sink. The apartment had been painted so many times that the grooves in the woodwork were barely visible. Once the lights were out at night, the roaches took over the kitchen. You could flick on the light at any time and surprise ten or twenty or more, roving over the floor and counters. Lynn was crying a lot.

Following a suggestion from Ritchie Serra, my friend from Yale, whom I had looked up when we arrived, I was using my VW bus to move furniture. Mitch, my brother-in-law, worked with me. We had an ad in the *Village Voice* that read, "Light moving. Two men and a bus. \$10 per hour." I got a lot of phone calls from the ad, mostly from young career women, restlessly moving from one small walkup to another. On a good day, we could make \$35 each.

Mitch, an early casualty of the new drug culture, would often meet me for work stoned on heroin or amphetamines. Typically, after we had climbed to the clients' apartment and seen the piles of boxes and surveyed the furniture, Mitch's shoulders would droop, and he would moan, "Oooooooooooh, Bob, I can't do this. She's got too much stuff... and this place is five flights up... and how are we going to get her couch down that narrow winding staircase... Why don't we just..."

And I would calmly interrupt his moaning and firmly say, "We have to do this, Mitch. She's counting on us, and besides, we both need the money." Then we would lumber up and down the stairs with all of her junk. Miraculously, everything would fit in or on top of the bus in one or two trips.

Driving from one part of Manhattan to another was also a problem. The traffic was often so bad that one time in the midst of being detoured and stuck in a huge gridlocked jam, I actually broke down and cried tears of rage and frustration.

Often feeling defeated and tired, trudging up the final staircase of the day, I would tense up, knowing that things were not happy at home. Looking haggard those days, Lynn would be upset about something: the cramped apartment, our lack of any friends, my absence for many hours each day, the general squalor of the neighborhood, or our desperate lack of money. When she wasn't crying, she was looking gloomy and preoccupied. I tried unsuccessfully to tell myself that things were all right. Things were not all right.

Les Shenken was in New York. He had given me an address in the East Village before he left El Paso. I couldn't locate him at that address, but I taped a note to the wall above the mailbox, and about a week later he called. When Les came to visit us a few nights later, he told us that his walk from the East to the West Village had shaken him.

"Man, the vibes around here are really scary. You got some strange dudes in this part of town. I don't know how I'm gonna get back to my group."

Not having noticed any difference in the "vibes" between the East and the West Village, I wondered about my sensitivity but decided to change the subject.

"Group?" I asked.

"I belong to a commune called the OuttaSight Electric, There's about twenty of us. We have a band, and we do light shows and stuff. I'm one of the moving crew."

"Oh, you're a moving man," I said. "So am I."

"Yeah," he said, leaning back stiffly and turning his head. "But it's different. I'm part of a larger organism. We live in a world of our own. Our rules are not like yours. We're not into materialism or individuality or any of that stuff. Our leader is like the sun. He's a great, knowing guy."

He paused to scratch his leg. "We take acid together, and we reach levels of oneness that you could never comprehend. We've given up on all the stuff that you're still into. You're just as middle class as you ever were."

He was rubbing his face as if there were flies buzzing around it. "You're only an ordinary working stiff, stuck in your own ego, pushed around by karmic forces that you don't even comprehend. My group and I have risen completely above all that."

He looked around the room. "You know what? The vibes here are really getting to me, and I'm scared to go out in this neighborhood. Do you think you could drive me home?"

This was not, I told myself, what I came to New York to be a part of. I studied Les's pudgy face, his drooping eyes. Scared of his own shadow, he was working as a go-fer for some guy he worshiped like a god, yet he was looking down on me! I had given up a good job and a nice house with a garden to come here to live in squalor, and I still couldn't get respect from the hippies.

"I'd normally be glad to," I said quietly, hiding my anger. "But I've had a long day of work, and my muscles ache, and if I give up my parking space now, I'll have to circle the neighborhood for an hour when I get back. And I'm just plain tired."

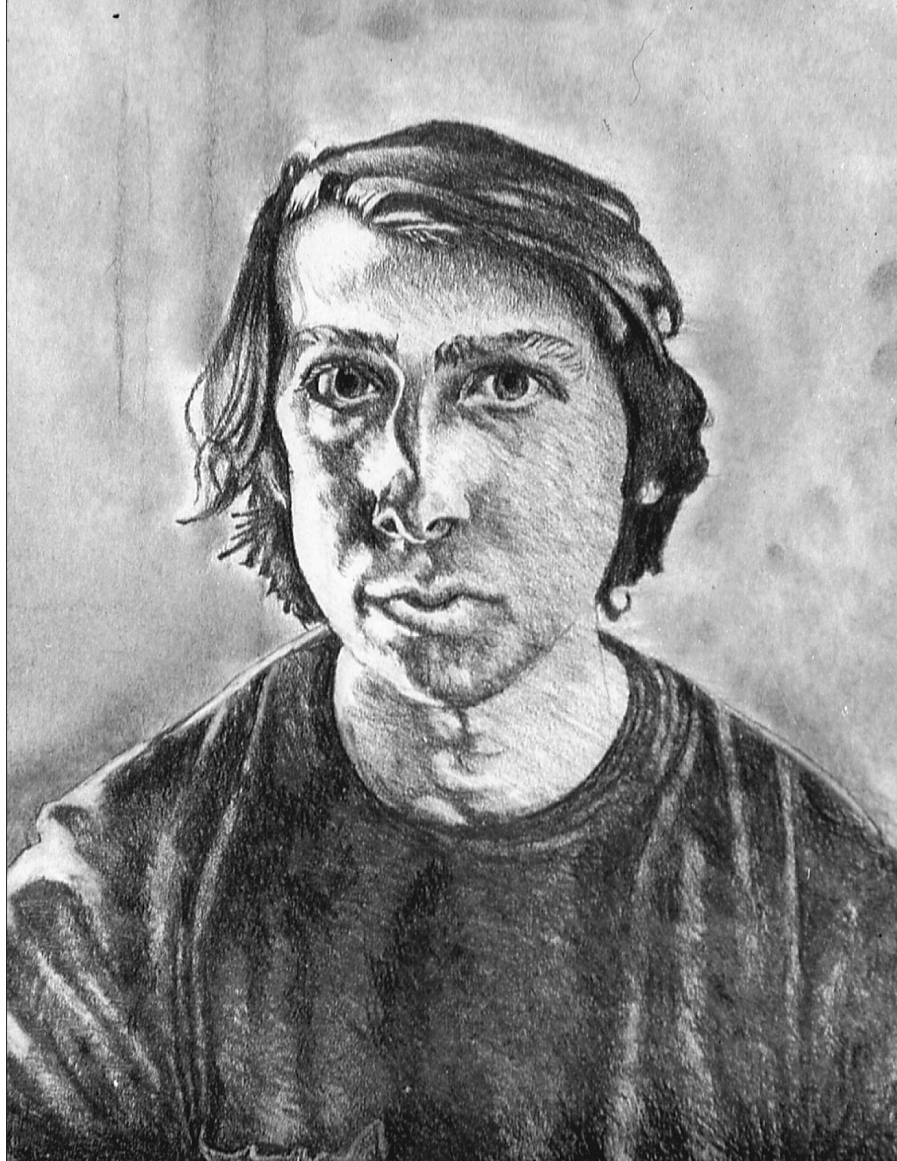
Les repeated his request, and so I responded further. "I guess I'm not as sensitive as you are. I can't feel the difference in the "vibes" between the East and the West Village. Maybe, Les, you've gotten too overly freaky from taking too much acid. Maybe you should lay off that stuff, at least for a while until you get your perspective back."

Les left, never to return. We lost touch, and I never saw him again. Lynn and I felt increasingly isolated. Our mood was dismal.

One night I was feeling restless. Lynn and David were asleep. I lay in bed, eyes open. Eventually, I got up quietly and sat on the bed in the semi-dark room and stared into the mirror propped up on the dresser in front of me. I reached for a pencil, put a piece of typing paper on my lap and looked into my eyes for a long time. Then I began drawing my face (Fig. 55). I drew what I saw but allowed distortion, exaggerating the curve of my nose and adding dark tones to the long hair and T-shirt. Working intuitively, I didn't plan or even see the emotional content of what I had produced. After a couple of hours, sleepiness overcame me. I put the pencil and paper down and got under the covers.

I found an unheated studio downtown below Canal Street that was just a couple of subway stops away from the apartment. I felt guilty when I went there because I knew we couldn't afford its rent and that Lynn and David wanted me with them as much as possible.

I had an old wooden worktable standing against one of the gray walls of the dingy room and began looking at and drawing myself in a mirror



that I had found on the street. I was also drawing at home; from Lynn, and myself in our bedroom mirror.

Just holding the pencil and looking at my (or Lynn's) face, I got into a mood. The pencil moved, and I followed where it led, making lines and tones that interested my eye. I didn't care about correctness of proportion nor about a well-organized composition. I just allowed anything to happen. The resulting image often surprised me, reflecting a feeling that I didn't know was there. Even the most bizarre images that I produced in this period seemed, while I was doing them, to be just fun and interesting. Later, looking at them, I saw the fear and alienation that was their real content.

These drawings were done in stages. First was the perceptual stage, in which I looked at Lynn or myself and drew for an hour or two. I pinned

Figure 55 . Bob Paige . New York Self-Portrait . Pencil on Paper . 8.5 x 11" . 1967

the drawings to the wall of my studio, as many as 20 at a time. When I was in the mood to draw I perused the wall and took down a piece that struck a chord in me and worked on it some more. I would work on the drawings many times, sometimes over months, until I felt that I had exhausted their possibilities.

One night I got Lynn to sit still for me for a few minutes. Days later, in the studio, I pulled the drawing down to work on it. This time my hand had a restless calligraphic style. As it moved quickly over the paper, my mind moved still more quickly, running through choices of what to emphasize. The hawk-like profile of her head, drawn with an exquisitely thin line, filled the page. The rhythms of her tousled hair kept me entranced for hours (Fig. 56, *Lynn New York Portrait*).

Ritchie, my friend from Yale, had put me in touch with Phil Glass, the musician/composer, who, like me, was doing odd jobs around the city to scrounge a living so he could compose in his free time. Phil would borrow my bus every now and then for a job, so when Louie Finkelstein, who was now the head of the Queens College art department, called and asked me if I would do some house painting for him, I asked Phil to work with me.

As Phil and I drove uptown in the bus to Louie's brownstone on 83rd near Eighth Avenue, he told me that he was sick of the music establishment and felt more comfortable around artists. He was a serious student of Tibetan Buddhist meditation and had already visited Tibet several times.

I had heard Phil in concert at Queens College a few weeks earlier. His music was very much in the avant-garde. He had gone beyond the old symphonic structures with their beginnings, middles, and ends to a form that was hypnoti-



Figure 56 . Bob Paige . Lynn New York Portrait . Pencil on Paper . 8.5 x 11" . 1967

cally repetitious, with subtle shifts of emphasis that led imperceptibly to variations in mood. It was good.

Phil and I were going to paint Louie's huge living room, for which Louie had selected a bright chartreuse color, commenting as he opened the paint can, "I love color."

We kept the radio on while we painted, usually to a rock station. There were long silences between us as the lively sounds permeated the air, and then abruptly Phil would exclaim, "Listen! Did you hear that?" Lost, as usual in a dreamworld, I would shrug and look stupidly around as if to say, "What?"

But I knew what he meant. Phil's ears were alert to interesting sounds at all times. It's the musician's equivalent of the pointing that my artist friends and I did. Walking down the street, we would often stop each other to point something out. Like Phil, we would say, "Hey man, look at that!" In a sense, artists are continually meditating about visual (or aural, in Phil's case) happenings. Perhaps an observed color scheme, tonal movement, or quality of line will be used later in a piece of art.

During the lunch break of our second day on the job, I worked up my nerve and asked Louie if he would look at some of my artwork.

"Can I come?" Phil asked. "I'm interested in artists, and I never heard an artist's critique."

The three of us went into the foyer, and I gently laid a small acrylic painting on the table; it was my breakthrough painting of the vase of flowers on the chair that I had done in El Paso. Louie and Phil gazed at the sharply focused, minutely detailed painting. I stood stiffly behind them and placed a recent drawing of Lynn next to the painting. Louie picked up the painting and frowned at it as though he were reading a dense text.

"You've got a problem of focus here, young man," he said, going on to point out some places in the painting that didn't work for him. He took exception to my handling of the chair back, commenting that its vaulting energies were not consistent with the more restrained handling of the flowers. Throughout the short critique I could tell that he didn't like the painting.

I kept my face impassive, as I always did when I was uncomfortable.

"Yeah," I murmured. "Mmm." I cleared my throat and quickly said in a barely audible voice, "How about this?" nodding at the drawing of Lynn. "I'm doing these things lately." My hands were stuffed deep in my pockets to keep them from visibly clenching.

Louie glanced quickly at the drawing and then looked away. With his head tilted upward, looking down at me, he said in his rich, erudite

baritone voice, "Typing paper, huh? That's a new one. Unfinished, hmmm... I don't know if I agree with showing unfinished work." He put the drawing down and looked at me, clearly disdainful, with heavily lidded eyes, as if to say: These works are not worth my attention.

"That's fascinating," broke in Phil, "so that's how you guys look at paintings..."

As I slouched back into the living room to continue working, Louie and Phil turned away, deep in discussion. I left the two works on the table in the foyer until later.

That night, after spending a long day in Louie's living room, and feeling low, I took the subway to my studio. Slumped in my seat, I mused about Louie's comments.

Louie Finkelstein was a second generation Abstract Expressionist. As a fierce debater at the Club for many years, he had worked out positions related to issues in contemporary art. Invested in the perpetuation of his point of view, he had become a defender of the status quo. At the time that I showed him my seemingly innocuous artwork, he must have been feeling besieged by the host of new art movements that were breaking on the art world in quick, successive waves. As a "good student" of his I must have disappointed him by leaving the fold. My painting, with its perceptual bias, its careful precision, its effort to create light, space, and form, must have seemed to him like an abandonment of his hard-fought and hard-won principles. Moreover, since my work didn't go on to break new ground but instead seemed to look back into the past for its inspiration, it must have struck him as reactionary.

As I walked through the rainy cold night toward my studio, I realized that his perceptions were correct. I *had* abandoned his principles. I had not even used them as a stepping stone to the next thing but had gone to perception and to the art of the past for my inspiration. I had truly turned my back on him. Seen in this light, his cold response to my work was understandable.

However well I could understand his motives, that wasn't enough for me to overcome the hurt I felt. At the time, feeling rejected wherever I turned, I had little emotional strength to deal with Louie's feisty manner. I knew that he enjoyed a good fight and had I stood up for my work, he would have engaged more with it and perhaps seen it in a different light. But, unsure of the worth of the painting — and my own self-worth — I couldn't defend myself.



The studio was cold, so I kept my coat on. I walked past the chair and the table with the still lifes on them and over to the worktable and the drawings pinned to the wall above it. I unpinned a drawing of myself, sat down with it, picked up a ruler and a pencil and began putting horizontal lines behind me (Fig. 57, *New York Self-Portrait with Horizontal Lines*). I thought they would enhance the haunted look on my face.

Later, some time in the spring, Ritchie Serra, came to visit me in my studio. I had been to his loft studio down by the Fulton Fish Market.

It was a huge unfinished space about 20 x 100 feet on an upper floor, reachable by a freight elevator and that had been used for many decades to store trucking industry equipment. Ritch had put in Herculean labor to clear it out and make it livable. Among the junk, he had found a cache of large rubber belts that he had bent and twisted and hung on the wall. Muscularly gestural, the complex, six-foot-high forms that he had fashioned were a next step from Abstract Expressionism. On that day, in his loft, his hanging sculptures nearby, Ritchie's conversation was all about making it in the art world. He was ambitious, energetic, aggressive, and forthright, and his work looked good, positioning him as a young Turk.

On his visit to my place, we stood at the drawing table in my cold room with its sloping wood floor. Hair cut short, wearing a red plaid work shirt, dirty jeans, and heavy workman's boots, Ritchie was medium-sized, rugged looking, and powerfully built. As he leaned over the rickety table, looking at the small drawings on the wall, he exuded a sense of purpose and force. The drawings seemed to shrink under his hard gaze.

Shifting my weight from foot to foot, hands in my pockets, I spoke in a soft voice: "The little pencil portraits were done here. The flower things were done in El Paso. We had a garden there with lots of flowers..." My voice trailed off as I pointed at the El Paso still lifes hanging on the wall nearby. Ritchie's feet were planted firmly on the wood floor. He was silent.

Finally, he spoke. "You and I spent a lot of time in school with tough, avant-garde teachers and classmates. I remember your work. You were spilling and pouring paint. I remember your ideas for doing big abstract things. You could do good Hard-Edge abstraction like Al Held. He's got a piece in the lobby of a building in Midtown that's 30 feet tall by 50 feet long. You should be doing stuff like that." He paused. "Flower painting is for little old ladies."

Looking away from the painting, he said, "New York is a tough town, and you're a hip guy, Bob. Check out what's going on in the galleries, stretch up a big canvas, and go to work. Get with it!"

I knew I had taken a chance showing Ritchie my little flower paintings and tiny portraits, but I liked him, and by this time I knew who I was artistically.

"I know, Ritchie." I said. "But I don't feel that way." I was looking down and talking in a low voice. "I'm not brash and tough and confident..." My voice got lower as I leaned over to look at the drawings, reaching one hand hesitantly toward a small, emotional, expressionistic head.

Figure 57 . Bob Paige . *New York Self-Portrait with Horizontal Lines* . Pencil on Paper . 9 x 8.5" . 1968

I dug my hands into my pockets and stared at the floor. He turned away.

After he left, I took down a small drawing (*Black New York Self-Portrait*, Fig. 58) and began working on it. I scrubbed and scratched furiously, the pencil pressed so hard that I could feel the texture of the wood table underneath the thin paper. The tiny, 7 x 6 inch, drawing of my head became black with marks all over my face and hair. The eyes became question marks in a face that seemed to be splitting apart. A strange light radiated from the background.

Mitch and I were lifting a big trunk. It was so heavy that we couldn't quite lift it high enough to slide it onto the bed of the bus. We stood there for a full minute, each on one side of the trunk, its bottom edge ripping at our fingers, laughing hysterically before we mustered the strength to make the final inches. I felt something tear in my lower back.

From that point on, I had an increasingly painful backache. I continued to do moving work for another month or so, but when I got to the point where the pain was shooting down my leg, I knew that I had to stop.

I sold the old bus for a few dollars and took a job waiting tables for the Longchamps chain in a new restaurant that they had opened on the Upper East Side called Le Boufferie. In addition, I got two part-time teaching jobs.

So, for my second September in New York, I rode the subways and buses from job to job, teaching at the 98th Street Y one night a week, the Ridgewood School of Art in New Jersey two days a week, and working a scattered schedule of lunches and dinners at Le Boufferie. Of the three jobs, I liked waiting on tables best; at least I got exercise.

At the Y, my students were mostly old women, and my task was to guarantee the success of each painting they undertook. Since they were all thoroughly inept, this was not easy. They were so lacking in confidence that I had to approve every decision they made regarding their paintings, and I had to paint for them if they couldn't manage a difficult passage. Fear of failure choked the atmosphere. I came to dread Tuesday evenings.

At the school in Ridgewood, New Jersey, I taught photography, 3-D and 2-D Design. A reactionary businessman ran the school. Outspoken and used to getting his way, he would come into my classes and tell me how and what to teach. He once told me that he didn't like my "hairdo." The students were apathetic. I was out of place in the photo and 3-D classes. It was a two-hour bus and subway ride each way. It was depressing.

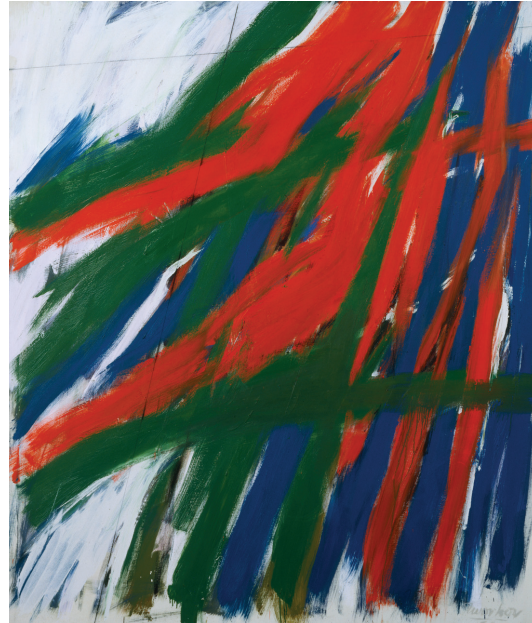


Watching TV night after night that year — 1968 — I saw my ambivalence about “preserving dead values” being addressed on a huge scale.

Among the young people, there was more than just mistrust of the establishment; there was fierce anger over the treatment of blacks, as well as what was increasingly seen as the misguided war in Vietnam. Hippies merged with left-wing radicals, who merged with civil rights proponents and the anti-war movement to make a formidable case against the status quo. People became polarized; many went to extremes.

I watched TV in dismay and confusion as, in Chicago, a new group of young people called “Yippies” drove Mayor Richard J. Daley and the entire Democratic Party nuts with their antics during the Democratic convention. Mayor Daley proclaimed the need for “law and order.”

Figure 58 . Bob Paige . *Black New York Self-Portrait* . Pencil on Paper . 7 x 6". 1967 - 8



Newsmen reported, “Gestapo tactics in the streets of Chicago.” Nixon called the Yippies “overprivileged kids.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. had lost control of the civil rights movement. Race riots broke out in Detroit, L.A., and elsewhere around the country. The Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam were increasingly strident.

LBJ was ramping up the war in Vietnam, and in response, the anti-war movement grew. Student protestors were active on campuses all over the country, and the government was cracking down on them. Walter Cronkite, everybody’s idea of a reasonable man, announced on television that, “the Vietnam war is unwinnable.” Young men were doing crazy things to avoid the draft. *Ramparts*, the New Left magazine, was advocating overthrow of the government. The Weathermen were blowing up government buildings. The popular motto of that time was: “If you’re not part of the solution you are part of the problem.”

Where did I stand?

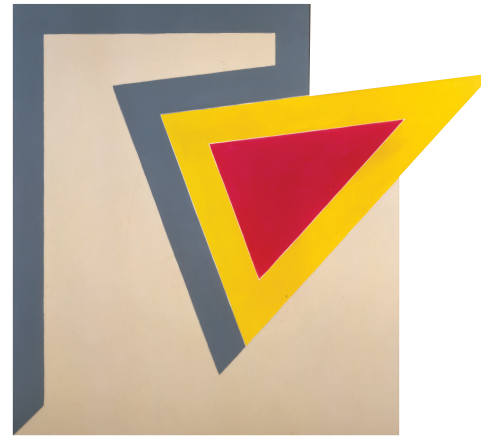
I didn’t know which side to take. The Yippies were too extreme, the Weathermen were *far* too extreme, and the Panthers were *way* far too extreme. Their extremity created a backlash in the populace, allowing demagogues like George Wallace, Nixon, and Mayor Daley, all whom I despised, to flourish.

My self-doubt left me immobilized. I was studying the occult, hoping to find, in the pages of a book, a way to assuage my increasing anxiety.

That February, looking for some solace in art, I went to see the Whitney Annual in its massive block-like building on Madison Avenue. The show —

Left: Figure 59 . Willem de Kooning . *The Visit* . Oil on Canvas . 60 x 48" . 1966 - 7

Right: Figure 60 . Jack Tworkov . *Friday* . Oil on Canvas . 81 x 69" . 1960



this year of paintings — was arranged on three floors, with the older, well-known artists on the fourth floor, and the newly established artists plus a sprinkling of young Turks on the third and second floors. I went to the fourth floor first to see the latest works of the grand old men of the Abstract Expressionist movement.

Slowly and quietly, I visited with the masters whom I had so ardently studied and from whom I had learned so much. Franz Kline was dead — from a heart attack. Gorky had hung himself after a series of personal tragedies. Pollack had died many years before in a suicidal car crash. Guston had left the fold.

The latest de Kooning, titled *The Visit* (Fig. 59), was a disappointment. A woman, legs spread, faced out. She was ensconced in a welter of turgid brushstrokes. The predominant baby blues and pinks felt wrong for the subject. Everything seemed mushy, and muddled. Worse, de Kooning committed an artistic blunder by putting a face into a painting that was otherwise largely abstract. It was the only part of the painting that was clearly identifiable. The recognition factor, as well as its circular form, trapped viewers and kept them from moving freely in the painting.

There was a Tworkov painting from 1960 named *Friday* (Fig. 60) that was constructed very simply. It was layered, with long brushstrokes of red, green, and blue on white. The simplicity was probably a result of the pressure exerted by the ideas of the new wave of minimal artists whose work was just beginning to take hold at that time. Tworkov, I had learned, was sensitive to shifts in the art world winds.

Left: Figure 61 . Frank Stella . *Tuftonboro III* . Fluorescent Alkyd and Epoxy Paint on Canvas . 100 x 110" . 1966

Right: Figure 62 . Andy Warhol . *Multiple Self-Portraits* . Silkscreen Ink on Synthetic Polymer Paint on Nine Canvases:

Each Canvas, 22.5 x 22.5"; Overall 67.6 x 67.6" . 1966

The Tworkov and an Albers *Homage to the Square* hanging nearby brought me back to my days at Yale and deepened my memories of that uncertain time. I felt sad to realize that I had been unhappy for so many years.

I was comfortable with these paintings. Maybe, I thought, we had all gotten too comfortable with this idiom. This could be the reason that Abstract Expressionism, predicated on edginess and challenge, was now being passed over, relegated to history. The critic Harold Rosenberg had called his seminal book about these times *The Tradition of the New* and Abstract Expressionism was no longer new.

Now new waves of art forms were crashing down on us every few months. Some artists were taking Abstract Expressionism into new dimensions, while others, starting from a different set of premises, found fertile ground elsewhere.

Frank Stella's painting, called *Tuftonboro III* (Fig. 61) from a series whose structure he had hinted at in his talk at Yale, stuck a yellow and red triangle most of the way into a rectangle, and linked them with a thick, blue-gray line. Stella was leading the pack of Minimal artists by making a statement that had the utmost integrity. There was no space, no form, no illusions of any kind, no subject matter; it could not be altered, added to, dreamed into, or otherwise fooled with. To paraphrase Popeye: it was what it was.

The Op and Minimal artists had taken their structure and concepts from Abstract Expressionism, but, I thought, had neglected its real power. It seemed to me that art for them was all surface with no inner dimension of feeling or questioning, angst or insecurity — in short, no humanness. With these new artists, art, however intelligent, had become much flash and dazzle, with little substance. I was dissatisfied with it.

Among the Pop artists, Andy Warhol was showing a canvas, *Multiple Self-Portraits*, on which he had made many arbitrarily colored versions of his face (Fig. 62) by painting with transparent dyes over a silk-screened photographic image. Tom Wesselman, a Cooper Union classmate, showed an enlarged female foot from his *American Nude* series. And Roy Lichtenstein offered a five-foot enlargement (entitled, *Tears*) of a frame out of a *True Romance* comic book.

This group of Pop artists was making images that critiqued or appropriated or pointed at popular culture, but their works did not reward my eye. As I drew and painted more in what I viewed as my authentic style, I became more demanding in looking at the art of others. My belief was that

paint on canvas should transform itself into illusions of form and space, of light and shadow, and of texture. I required that a painting move the viewer's eye across its surface and keep it entranced with unusual events. To look at a painting had to be an experience of wandering through a created, unique world. When I stood in front of a Warhol or a Lichtenstein, my eyes slid across the surface. Nothing engaged me and kept me looking. According to Finkelstein's *Realms of Art* theory, the genre, as done by these people, was too heavily weighted toward the realm of story, and not enough was done in the realms of representation or design.

As the numbers of works that I felt little affinity for grew, I became increasingly unsure of myself. If I didn't respond to the best of Op, Pop, Hard Edge, and Minimal art, I thought, there must be something wrong with me. My spirit diminished. I sat down.

On a bench in the middle of all of this, musing on my situation, it seemed to me that I didn't fit in anywhere. I wasn't comfortable with, or accepted by hippies like Giorgio and Shenkin. I couldn't buy into the view of life espoused by the radical left. And I certainly did not identify with Nixon and his crowd. Louie and Ritchie weren't interested in my paintings. And now, in a place where I should have felt at home, the Whitney Museum, I found myself on the outs with almost all of the work I was seeing. Was I hopelessly out of step everywhere? It seemed so.

Gloomily, I circled the second floor galleries and headed for the elevator. Rounding a corner, I was stopped in my tracks by Chuck Close's giant painting of Phil Glass's head (Fig. 63). (Chuck, a friend of Ritchie's, was with him in the class ahead of me at Yale.) The canvas, painted in shades of gray, was about ten feet tall. Phil's head filled the entire canvas — it was magnificent.

A closer look showed that the huge painting was covered with a quarter inch grid of pencil lines. To achieve this incredible effect of Photo-Realism, Close had simply sprayed, with an airbrush, a gray dot of a specific value in each of the many thousands of grid-squares. The painting was at once delicate and bold, free yet disciplined.

*Awesome!* I thought, now feeling completely undone. *How can I justify my little scratchy scribbles after seeing this? Why am I so out of tune with the times? Ritchie was right. I should get a spray gun and spray up some big walls or something. Or maybe I should give up altogether.*

I heard that Ritchie Serra had a piece in another show at the Whitney in the spring of that year, so I went to see it.



Stepping off the huge, high-ceilinged elevator onto the second floor on which the show displayed cutting-edge works by promising young artists. I found myself facing a gigantic boulder, about 12 x 10 feet, apparently ripped from the ground, probably from upstate New York. The boulder, reeking of its — now lost — surroundings, somehow brought the aura of the woods into this otherwise clean, sterile environment, thereby, in a sense, interrogating its reality.

Skirting around the boulder, I walked warily into the main gallery, and as I came to Ritchie's piece, dug my hands in my pockets and stood looking at it with my body slightly turned away. *House of Cards* (Fig. 64),

Figure 63 . Chuck Close . *Phil* . Synthetic Polymer on Canvas . 108 x 84" . 1969



had a rope around it because it was dangerous. Four lead antimony squares, 4 x 4 feet, 1-inch thick, each weighing 500 pounds, stood propped against each other like a house of cards. If they were to fall they could do real damage. The only thing that kept them from falling was gravity. Embracing the avant-garde, Ritchie had taken the gesture of Abstract Expressionism and put it into a gutsy new form. The piece was good.

In a darkened room behind Ritchie's sculpture, I watched a film showing Ritchie and some friends, including Phil and Chuck, gingerly erecting his *House of Cards* in the nearby gallery. I felt the way I had felt as a kid when I wasn't chosen for the team, somehow not good enough, left out.

Afterward, another film began. It showed a young man — in my state of self-pity I imagined that he was another friend of Ritchie's — walking in circles around a room playing a violin. After about ten minutes of this monotonous scene, the sound suddenly disappeared, and the film continued with the guy lurching and fiddling in silence. Like the boulder, I thought, this piece was meant to shock the viewer into experiencing reality from a new angle.

I skulked away, hoping not to be seen by anyone I knew.

On the subway heading downtown to the Village, I decided to leave New York. I was now convinced that I simply didn't fit in. I had come to

Figure 64 . Richard Serra . *House of Cards* . Lead Antimony . 48 x 48 x 1" . 1969

New York to be a hippie and an artist, and I was unable to make it in either community. I was profoundly unhappy, and after seeing the work of the young artists at the Whitney, my belief in my own art had been shaken. I was doing highly emotional work at a period of time when the art world had moved toward cool, cerebral forms. I was completely out of step.

The last painting that I did in New York was another self-portrait head, *Self-Portrait With Red and Yellow Scarf* (Fig. 65), started in the winter of '69 — before I had visited the Whitney — and finished that spring. I painted my head about twice life size. It was cold in the unheated studio, so I wore my coat and scarf. In the painting I face the viewer directly, mouth open as though stunned. My eyes are questioning. My exaggeratedly crooked nose forms a long curving line down the center of the face. The light playing across the face has a fiery quality, producing a spectrum of color from baby pink through dirty orange to green. The clashing yellow and red of the scarf attenuate the shrill feeling. My left shoulder is slightly hunched, as if to ward off a blow.

The recently founded Community College of Philadelphia (CCP) needed a painter who could also teach art history. The job sounded tailor-made for me — and Boris and Arlene were in Philadelphia! Boris, after getting his MFA from Indiana University, had been hired to teach at PCA. They had been in Philadelphia for a year, and we had seen them several times, both there and in New York. I would be very happy to renew my friendship with Boris, whose ideas about painting were congruent with mine.

Wally Peters, the new chair of the fledgling department, was in New York, and came to see me in my studio. He was a man of about 45 who had studied with Hans Hoffman — the Abstract Expressionist artist who had inspired Mr. Lund's "finding" project — and had gravitated over time to painting landscapes. Having a similar artistic background and direction, we got along and I got the job.



Figure 65 . Bob Paige . *Self-Portrait with Red and Yellow Scarf* . Oil on Canvas . 32 x 32" . 1969