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Aesthetic priority through spatial tension and media manipulation

Donald Richard Sheckler

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

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AESTHETIC PRIORITY THROUGH SPATIAL TENSION AND
MEDIA MANIPULATION ,

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

The Graduate School

by

Aug. 4 1969

Donald Richard Sheckler

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION

Bachelor of Science Degree in Education

BY Donald Richard Sheckler

ENTITLED Aesthetic Priority Through Spatial Tension and

Media Manipulation

BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

DEGREE OF Master of Fine Arts

(Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the MASTER OF FINE ARTS DEGREE)

(Faculty of Art and Design
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University
Edwardsville (Campus)

(August) 1969 .

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

The Graduate School

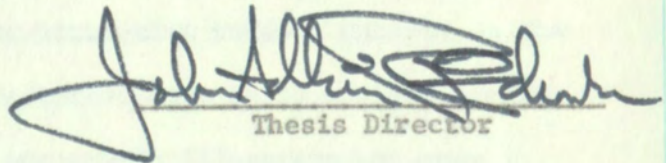
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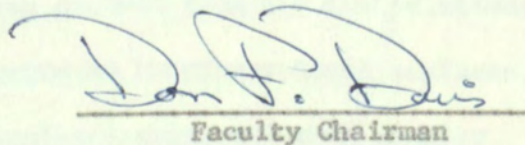
Aug. 4, 1969

Part I. Text: Aesthetic Priority Through Manipulation Page 1
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DEGREE OF Master of Fine Arts


Thesis Director


Faculty Chairman

AESTHETIC PRIORITY THROUGH SPATIAL TENSION

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Only in retrospect has the painter become aware that his painting endeavors are a continuum, of which even this project is but a segment. The project must not be considered an end in itself, but instead, a segment from which new ideas will evolve into new generations of painting efforts which will further the

AESTHETIC PRIORITY THROUGH SPATIAL TENSION

continuum.

AND MEDIA MANIPULATION

Almost all of the first experiments were undertaken for the . The author of this thesis project will use the project as an attempt of explaining the motivational criteria which have prompted his painting. Although the work itself must carry the impact, the following text offers a general aesthetic rationale of the paintings. problems upon these solutions.

It is the candidate's belief that aesthetic sensibility or sensitivity has remained constant through history and that the changes in understanding and perception reflect changes in the habits and beliefs of the societies into which a given artist is born. His project will attempt to illustrate the many in aesthetic possibilities that have evolved from his manipulations of spatial masses which, originated on two-dimensional surfaces, gradually evolved to three-dimensional ones, and then finally were executed on a combination of the two-dimensional and three-dimensional surface. positions. The aforementioned continuum, then, represents an attempt to reach a certain "truth." The work is a symbol in itself, a symbol of aesthetic thrust and

Only in retrospect has the painter become aware that his painting endeavors are a continuum, of which even this project is but a segment. The project must not be considered an end in itself, but instead, a segment from which new ideas will evolve into new generations of painting efforts which will further the continuum.

Almost all of the first experiments were undertaken for the sake of understanding the nature of the medium and its possibilities and, as well, the possibilities of the painter. This exploration has never ceased and many artistic problems have been solved through gradual exploration of problems and the building of new problems upon these solutions.

The continuum has been characterized by selective experimentation.

For example, this thesis project has been an intensive effort to (1) eliminate the use of color for the purpose of minimizing the elements used and (2) reduce subject matter in an effort to have the basic structure of the work appear as minimal as possible. Still, the basic elements are often more complex in their character than one might at first assume; a note of terror or whimsey exists in paintings which is nothing more than painted compositions. The aforementioned continuum, then, represents an attempt to reach a certain "truth." The work is a symbol in itself, a symbol of aesthetic thrust and

the evolution of the painting represents the act of painting as an object of its own integrity.

In this development, the painter has attempted to refine his efforts in order to convey a bold visual impact to the viewer. The consequences of the effort can be noted in such things as the increasing clarity of the edges of the forms, the attempt at reduction of visible brushwork on the painted surface, and the quality of the entire painted surface. Elimination of all unnecessary elements and reduction of the work to the very basic essence of composition is then taken as the equivalent of refinement.

The first obvious reduction in most of the compositions was color. Interesting surface vibrations and negative-positive visual interplays seem to have evolved from the extreme dark-light value areas. From this strong contrast in surface value, minute characteristics of the forms were intensified and became dramatic elements in the composition. In some instances these small areas helped add areas of interest, in others, they seemed to give definition to the larger zones. The effort in all of the compositions is to attain interesting formal relationships that provide a bold optical impact for the viewer. The actual refining the color relationships was accomplished through the application of very dark values of grays, blue-grays, and greens in contrast with a Titanium white surface area. Somehow, the very subtle or subdued colors seem to provide more interest,

intrigue, or mystery than does the use of black. The Titanium white forms, however, still provide a desired contrast and a purity that I have not yet discovered in any substitute.

The effort to reduce visible brushwork on the surface has been another aspect of the effort. In attempting to get a surface with a minimal amount of "bloom" in the paint and brushstrokes, the first consideration is the sizing and then the application of paint to the surface.

Finally, the most important condition of refinement has been the development and manipulation of spatial masses, that is, the formal composition of the paintings. In this respect continuum is characterized by the simplification and reduction of the number of forms as well as the apparent complexity of these forms employed in the paintings. Although the most recent paintings are not ideally "minimal," especially as regards their surfaces, they are more refined than any of their predecessors.

The paintings which might be labeled the precursors of this project, those done between September 1968 and January 1969, were rough-surfaced canvases of muted colors. The pigment has a "scrubbed" look, which in that context was desirable. Gradually, however, a concern was developed for flatter unadorned areas or forms. Since an unbroken field appears more neutral than a field or area in which value and/or intensity changes might occur, the development of opaqueness in the painted areas became

a primary concern. Gradually it became apparent that acrylic paint rather than oils seemed best suited to the need since acrylics dry with less visible brushwork and the nature of the paint responds better to the masked tape borders. Too, while oil paint was inclined to bleed under the tape, the acrylic paint seldom did so. Yet another beneficial feature of the acrylic paint is the reduced drying time; this is helpful since all of the surfaces have required several applications of paint.

After experimentation with several different types of paint--co-polymers, oils, and various brands of acrylics--the product found to be most desirable was Liquitex brand acrylic paint. Particularly noticeable in black and white, as well as most colors, is the strength of this pigment. That is more than competitive products. In addition, this product mixes easily with water as well as with acrylic painting mediums, quickly reaching a satisfactory painting viscosity. By comparison, some other brands of paint were difficult to reduce in thickness for application and quickly became gummy, making it almost impossible to achieve a smooth surface. Even when various gel mediums were added to the Liquitex acrylic, the viscosity is decreased. The medium does, however, tend to make the paint more transparent and as a result more applications of paint become necessary. When any of the acrylic paints were diluted with water alone, the permanence of the paint was greatly reduced, to the extent

that the paint could easily be smeared with cool water several days after drying.

It is important not to apply more layers of paint than are absolutely necessary to cover the canvas because the painter is attempting to get a smooth, polished surface and any build-up of paint is easily noticeable. The following formula has proven best: two parts Liquitex acrylic paint, plus three parts water, plus one part gel medium.

The preparation of the surface for painting might be considered even more important than the application of paint. The most desirable working surface has been prepared in the following manner: two very diluted applications of commercially prepared gesso are applied to the stretched canvas, the second application not applied until the first has thoroughly dried. The third application is much thicker and is thoroughly brushed or scraped into the canvas in an effort to avoid any surface texture. When the canvas is stretched over a three-dimensional framework, rabbit skin glue is applied to help shrink and tighten the canvas which then responds better as a painting surface.

Among the several available brands of commercially prepared gesso, the Permanent Pigments brands appear to be superior in sealing ability and workability. By comparison several other brands were less effective, necessitating more applications in

in order to yield the same working surface.

Another aspect of importance to the bold opaque forms is the desirability of clarity of the edges of the painted areas. sanding proved unsuccessful.

In the first paintings of this series, the painter was not concerned with this "hard-edge" characteristic and it was not until later that it was recognized as an aesthetic attribute in the development of the formalization of the work of this project that hand-painted edges did not provide satisfactory results. A superior substitute for free-drawn edges was masking tape. And the most desirable product is Mystic brand masking tape, which is flexible enough, sticky enough to adhere to the painted surface, and with reinforcement threads fine enough to be easily razored into the proper shape.

Every painting in the project is painted on stretched canvas with the exception of painting Number Eight which is tempered masonite. In all of the beginning painting efforts other products were disregarded due to readily available canvas. This did not prove to be a particularly favorable product to use for the painted cubes, Numbers Seven and Eight. In the first of the constructions, Number Seven, canvas was used, and the product was not particularly successful. The form was built from white pine 1" x 2" strips, this being covered with a machine-sewn canvas cover. The obvious problem which resulted is the still

canvas or masonite over a wooden structure or framework. In the

visible seams across the top and down one side panel. Filling the seams with a modeling paste and trying to obscure them by sanding proved unsuccessful.

The second construction, Number Eight, tempered masonite over a frame, did offer a more efficient method of construction, although the masonite does not provide as desirable a working surface as does canvas. Although the masonite surface is smooth, it is also rigid. This rigidity makes it undesirable for any surface except a flat two-dimensional one. While it might be possible to build a three-dimensional surface in sections with masonite, the connecting joints would be undesirable. Canvas may be stretched quite easily over any area that is not too large or angular, when it would not be necessary to piece the material together. While canvas is not as smooth as masonite, its slightly textured surface provides an excellent ground for paint. The surface quality, strength and uniformity of weave make canvas a product without substitute for my work, providing it is not necessary to sew sections together for the painting area.

In the formed canvases, which are an outgrowth of the earlier two-dimensional and three-dimensional projects, canvas has provided the most visually satisfactory surface as well as the most efficient construction solution thus far.

The basic construction of all the projects is, then, either canvas or masonite over a wooden armature or framework. In the

first paintings, the construction is that of the more traditional wooden stretcher frames over which the canvas is stretched. The construction of the two three-dimensional pieces, Numbers Seven and Eight, has been discussed in the preceding paragraph.

The two alternate construction possibilities have proved effective when constructing the formed canvases. The construction method illustrated in each of the formed canvases in this project, Numbers Nine, Ten and Eleven, is that method which may be used when the forms have straight rather than curved boundaries. It entails the use of specifically tailored vertical and horizontal members of a greater width than the stretcher panels, which are secured inside the stretcher frame which will form the perimeter of the painting. An alternate system of construction might well be used when the forms in the composition are to have curved boundaries. This would involve cutting the desired shape from a sheet of $3/8$ " plywood, connecting this cutout to the stretcher frame, then elevating it to the desired height on $1/2$ " wood doweling from a thin wooden base attached at the back side of the stretcher bars. The canvas covering could then be stretched over the skeletal structure to the desired degree of tautness.

The varying width of the frames among the paintings is a reflection of the attempt to free the productions from the restrictions of a two-dimensional surface. With the additional

width of the canvas panels as well as the painted forms continuing beyond the borders of the paintings around the sides of the panels, the work is literally less restricted than if it were on a traditional panel. This concept is developed further in painting Number Six. This work was painted in two sections. Its purpose was to alter the concept of traditional canvas construction and create an illusion of carrying depth and third dimensionality. This is the first painting of this series that has deviated from the traditional two-dimensional painting surface.

In the painted three-dimensional forms, Numbers Seven and Eight, an attempt was made to produce paintings which could be removed from a wall surface and thus, project the spatial masses more dynamically than in my preceding works.

The result was a disappointment. Although the three-dimensional structures may command a dominant role in the initial perception, the painted masses on the constructions quickly lose their impact. The intention had not been to decorate a three-dimensional structure, but to use this structure to help emphasize the painted composition. Yet in many respects, the rectangular constructions tend to restrict visual digression of the forms more than would the traditional canvas. While on a two-dimensional surface forms might be continued to the boundary of the panel, in no way suggesting a termination of the form, on a three-dimensional construction a point of termination for the

forms enveloping this structure is inevitable. The viewer is then made aware of the exact definition of the forms on the constructions, while on the two-dimensional panels, the forms may remain more ambiguous since the viewer cannot be certain how the nature of the forms might change beyond the boundary of the surface.

In the final three paintings of this project, the forms on the surface are emphasized three-dimensionally, proving superior to earlier endeavors in almost all respects, particularly in the emphasis of painted form.

For paint application, a variety of brushes have been experimented with, the best results being produced by two to three inch pure bristle brushes of medium thickness. True bristle brushes which leave little visible brushwork on the surface are strongly preferable to the available nylon varieties.

The photographs of the paintings to be found in the Appendix represent in chronological order the painting continuum, the topic of this project. These are the same works that compose the painting exhibit accompanying this paper.

In painting Number One an attempt has been made to add variety to the traditional figure-ground relationships. White was used for contrast with the two values of gray. Effort was made for a visual interplay or vibration between the upper and lower portions of the canvas. The original context of this

work was of landscape derivation, however, in finished form it is strongly suggestive of an anatomical structure. This suggestion might be noted in the lower forms of this painting which might be suggestive of either female breasts or buttocks. Here is an example in which an unrepresentational form lends itself to whimsical interpretation because of its ambiguous silhouette.

The desired compositional structure has been achieved, although many of the errors that were to become primary considerations are obvious in this work. The most outstanding of these is the lack of sharpness in the outline of the forms. Another problem is the apparent brushwork on the surface.

In attempting to achieve more optical interplay among the forms on the surface, a different spatial relationship was established in the next few paintings.

In the second painting we shall consider Number Two, it is obvious that an effort has been made to reduce reliance on hue used in the composition. This is the only one of the very early works which uses but two painted areas, the dark gray and the white. In the composition an attempt was made to distinguish sharply the large gray zone from the white area at the bottom, thereby intensify the impacts of each.

Here, too, is the first example of a taped edge. The paint application is too thick and as a result does not offer a smooth surface. This strikes the candidate as the only painting in

this project that might be considered too complex for his purposes. The nature of this complexity seems to exist in the suggestiveness of the border that distinguishes the two areas. For example, note the possible interpretation of the white forms as silhouettes of portions of a landscape and the dark area as sky. Another possible interpretation would be the dark area being human buttocks. It seems that the impact of the painting might be more bold, simple and direct if the boundaries of these two forms were less intricate.

In painting Number Three a more subtle distinction is made between the size of the areas. The whites, which could be interpreted as negative space, have been designed to develop a strong optical value contrast with the forms of darker value. In contrast to the distinction in value, a more subtle contrast exists between the shapes and positions of the two darkest value areas; notice the flowing, bulbous quality of the darkest form on the left which extends off the top of the canvas and compare it to the angular lighter value form on the right. The angularity of this latter form plus the important peninsula of white bordering it establishes visual balance and, as well, adds interest to the composition.

Number Four represents a reversal of the typical dark-light area relationships in my paintings. Again, in this painting, with a different brand acrylic gel painting medium, it proved

the spatial contrasts are similar in the amount of area that the dark forms occupy on the surface. The area of tension between two white areas has been intensified by reducing the amount of black area between the two masses. This is an example of the aforementioned intention of dramatization with very small curves, of adding importance to the larger areas by emphasizing a contrasting small area or detail. By contrast to Number Three in which the two similar forms were in related values, the two most similar forms in this painting are of exactly the same value, Titanium white. The area surrounding them is Mars black and is the only example of the use of pure black in any of the paintings in this project. The black-white contrast is strikingly bold, but it does not offer the refined subtlety of color that the painter considers important. This experiment has been helpful, however, in determining the use of other values in later paintings.

As in Number Three, the shapes are contrasted by what at first might appear minute distinctions, such as a sharp cornered form adjacent to a more rounded bulbous form. But, though minor, the distinctions none-the-less produce an important center of interest.

A particularly discouraging aspect of this painting was the visible brushwork and the amount of "bloom" on the surface. The fact is that the paint was applied too heavily; an experiment with a different brand acrylic gel painting medium, it proved

unsuccessful. on the right, although similar in silhouette,

Painting Number Five seems almost to represent a culmination of several characteristics that have been considered undesirable in earlier paintings. The irony of this is that it was deliberately planned in light of the preceding statement. Pure black and white were used in this painting so that all subtlety in value would be compromised. The structure of the forms used are almost exactly repetitious in character, to the extent that the two forms almost appear to have originally been joined together. Not only are they of exactly the same value, but the defining boundaries are almost identical.

A tension, although not a strong one, has been established on the surface. If more contrast in the white area between the forms were apparent at some point along the borders between the two black forms, the impact of these forms could have been much more intense. Instead, it seemed desirable to offer a subtle division between such similar forms. The strength of the painting seems to reside in the undulating quality of the forms themselves rather than in their immediate relationship to one another. Although their relationship does carry some compositional interest and importance, it seems possibly of less concern than the curves of the individual forms, particularly the black forms on the left in the composition. the right side of the canvas,

The positioning of the black forms is of particular impor-

tance. The forms on the right, although similar in silhouette, is severely broken from the form on the left, as can be noted by its position several inches higher than the form on the left. This sharp break and the fact that each form has a crisp corner and outline raises a distinct contrast to the smooth curves of the top and bottom of the forms. The remaining area of the painting is Titanium white.

Painting Number Six is a sectioned canvas in two parts, the painted areas being continuous from one form to the other. This is the first most obvious attempt to establish a distinction between painted areas and the structure itself. Even though the canvas becomes something of a three-dimensional design, due to the varying widths of the stretcher frames, the painted forms remain flat. In this painting the concern was to construct a three-dimensional canvas on which two-dimensional forms might move around the sides, over the top, or follow any random path.

The traditional concept of painting at this step in the continuum has somewhat been altered, though very little. The only difference in this structure and the earlier two-dimensional canvases is the width of the stretcher frames and the use of a diptych pattern. The movement of the forms is different than in any of the other paintings in this project. While the black form on the left moves to the right side of the canvas, the streamlined appearance of this form tends to add a certain

gracefulness to the suggested movement. The pattern of lighter gray on the right seems to move upward, this illusion being made still more pronounced by the concave bottom of the form which corresponds to the reflexive actions familiar to the world of physical locomotion.

Although an area of conflict has been established at the bottom where the forms nearly meet, this is a minor consideration in the entirety of the composition due to the similarity between them. It provides more a mark of definition for the two forms than an area of conflict.

Painting Number Seven marks the first actual detachment from the restrictions of a two-dimensional painting surface. Although each of the five panels or sides composing this cube serves the same purpose as two-dimensional canvases-providing a surface on which the painted compositions might be developed-an additional factor, that of continuing the composition around the edges or borders of these panels and permitting the forms to ignore the boundaries of the individual sides or panels, is added.

In this project all of the paintings except for the last three, represent the painters attempt to retain a sense of two-dimensionality. In paintings Numbered One through Six he experimented on two-dimensional surfaces and in Numbers Seven and Eight on three-dimensional ones. The primary consideration has

been to develop the visual effects of the painted forms as far as possible.

As mentioned earlier, the unsuccessful construction of Number Eight puts obstacles in the way of full appreciation of this production. In such a work, where absolute uniformity of the surfaces is lacking, so is aesthetic quality.

Painting Number Eight represents the second of the three-dimensional problems as well as a different mode of construction. Masonite hard board has been substituted for stretched canvas. Although the masonite produces a smoother, more uniform surface, it is less desirable than the canvas surface for the actual painting. The use of canvas better fulfills my conception of a solution to the problem of liberating the concept of the painting surface from its two-dimensional limitations.

Strong hue was used in this exercise to help qualify the subtleties of the other paintings in the project. Viewing this in contrast to the other paintings strongly illustrates the reduction of optical interplay on the painted surface.

The orange color is bold, but according to my conception of color, it appears trite and frivolous by contrast to its predecessors in this project. Many viewers have caught a note of whimsy in this painting, but any humor is implied through the rather garish Cadmium orange rather than by the concept of the spatial masses of the composition.

Those paintings in which my goals have best been met and problems most successfully solved are the following three works.

In attempting to develop interest and strong character in the painted forms the striction to the two-dimensional surface has been abandoned. In addition, the use of color to emphasize the forms has also been abandoned in the last two paintings.

In painting Number Nine, a three-dimensional form has been integrated into the two-dimensional painting surface. The simplicity of that form gives the painting a bold impact. Rather than suggesting movement on the surface, the activity of the form most strongly suggests a mass emerging from beneath the canvas surface.

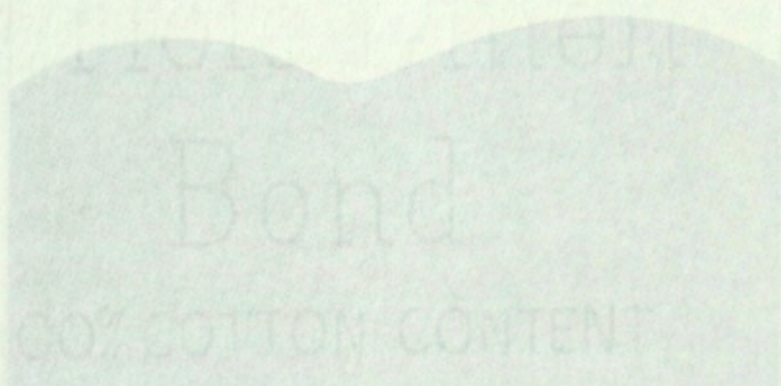
With paintings Number Ten and Number Eleven, the painting continuum is brought to a climax and serves as the culmination point of the thesis project.

Color became no longer necessary.

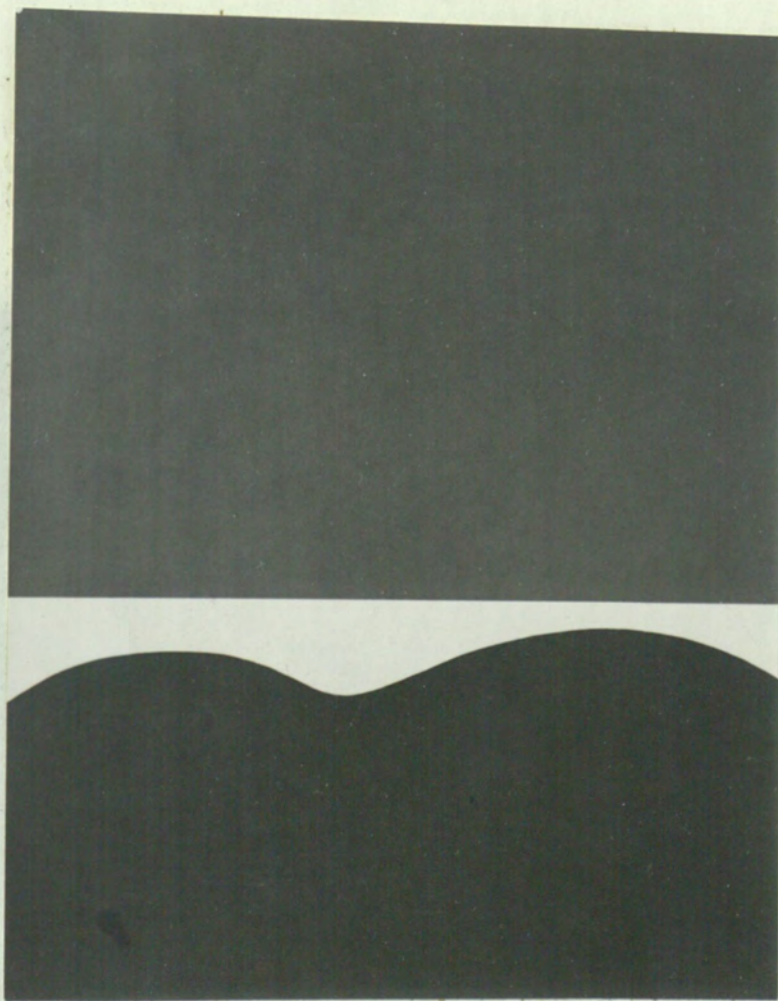
The spatial masses which form the compositions have changed little in their actual structure although the development of the presentation of these spatial relationships might well summarize the motivating element of this project. For example, the forms employed in paintings Nine and Ten are very similar to the forms in paintings Three and Four, yet the character of the paintings are much different. The developmental changes that have occurred in the paintings of this project from a two-dimensional

to the three-dimensional surface and finally to a combination of characteristics of both the two and three-dimensional surfaces provides an accurate overview of the development of the character of the spatial relationships of these works.

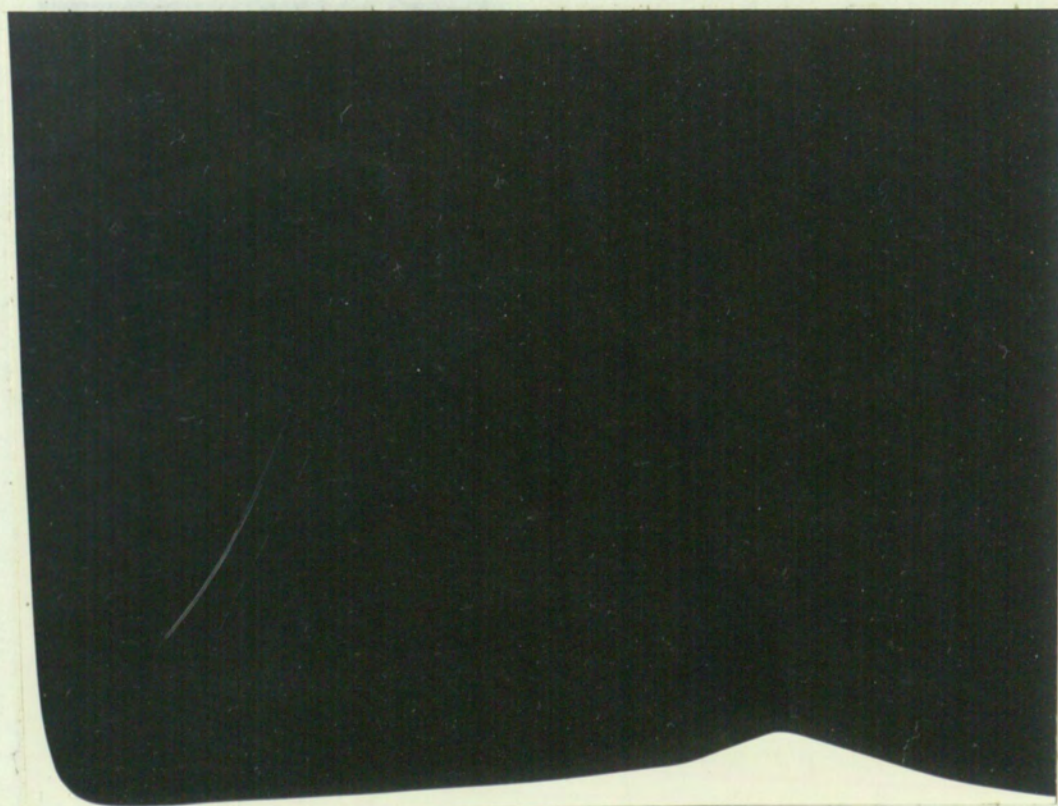
APPENDIX



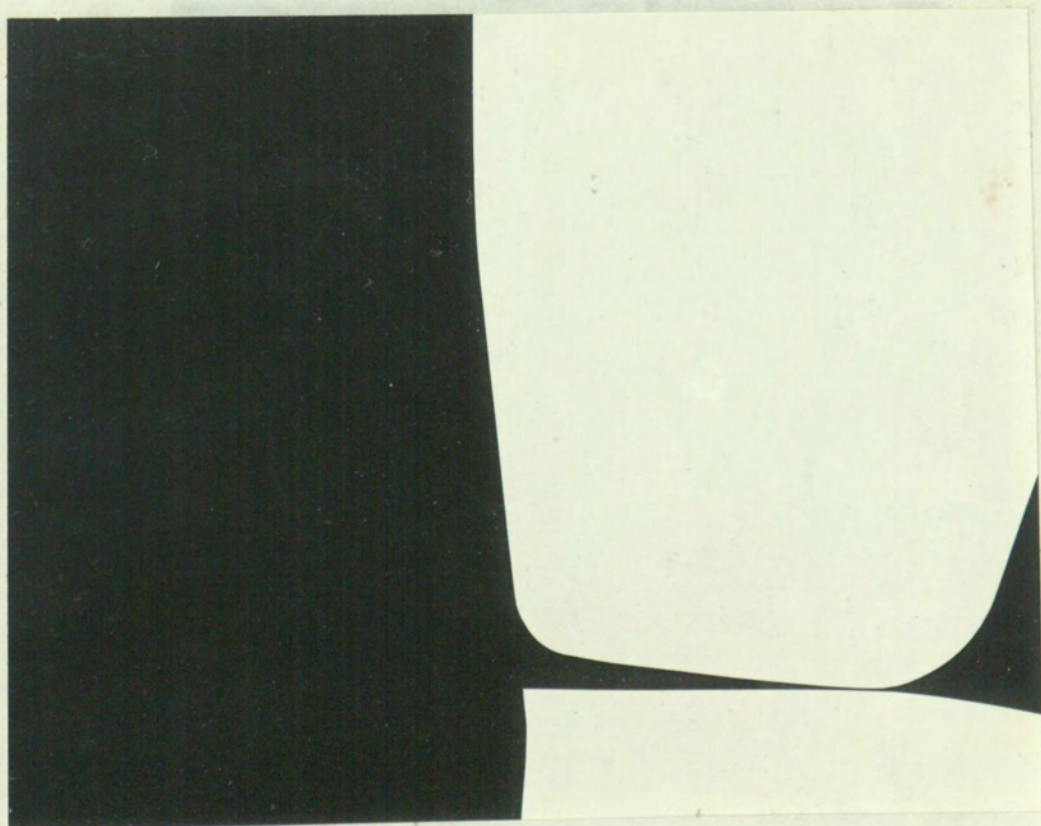
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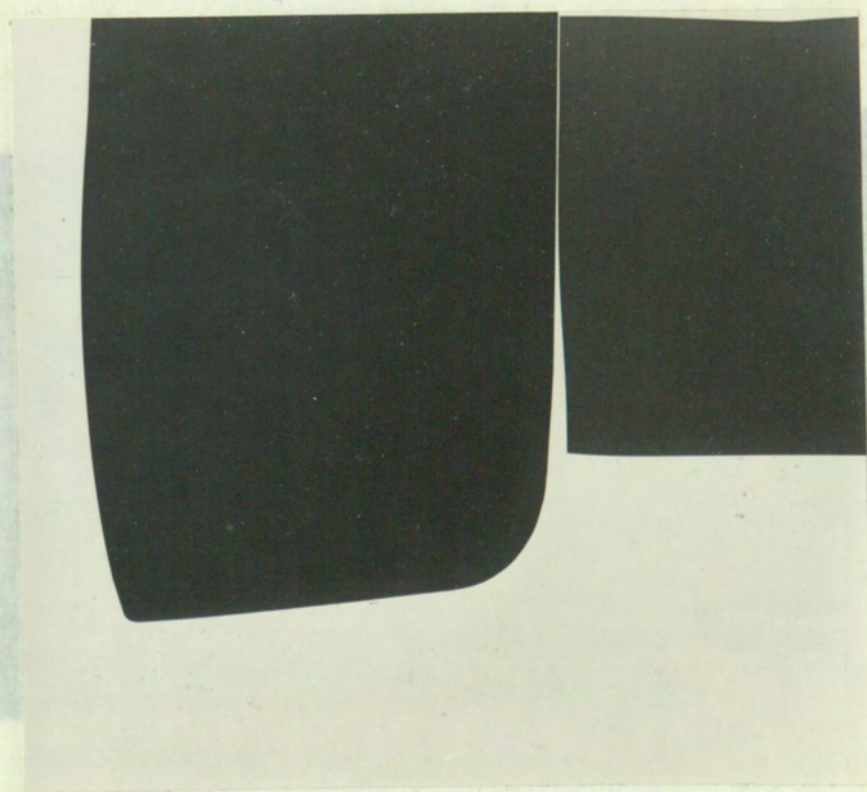
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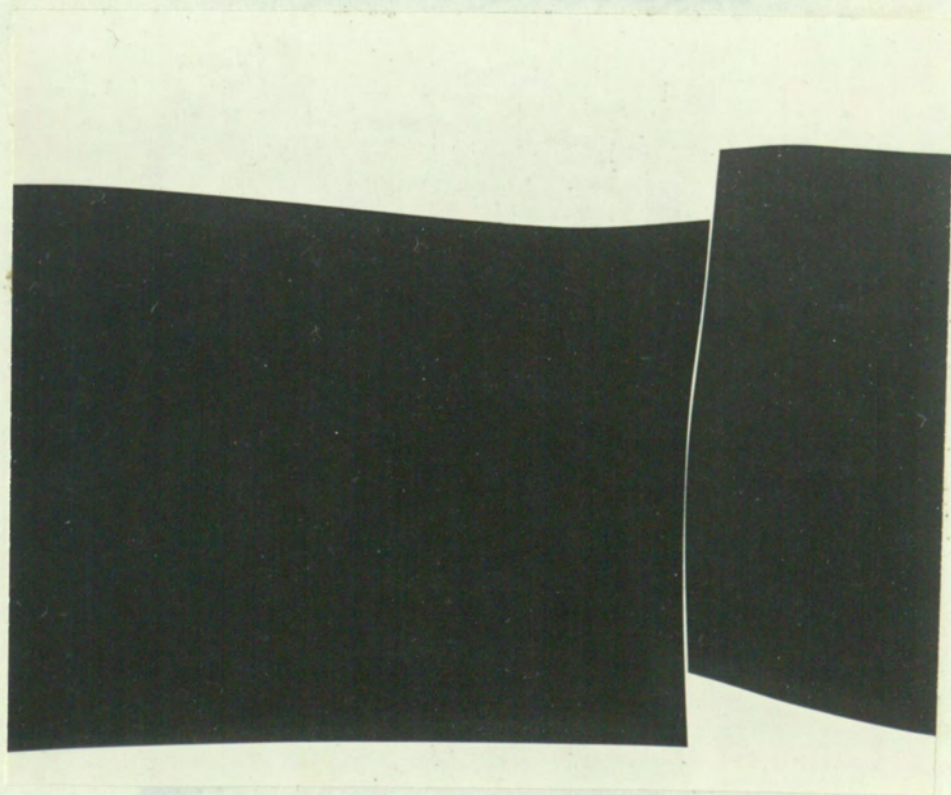
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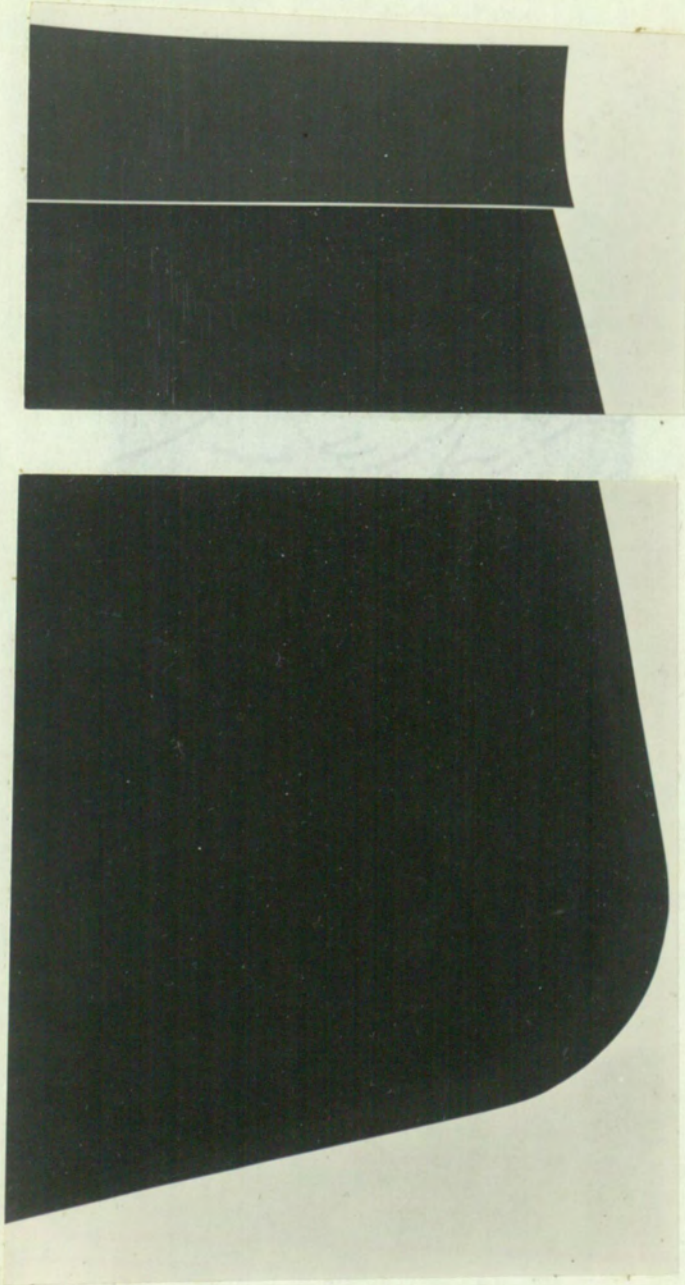
Number Three



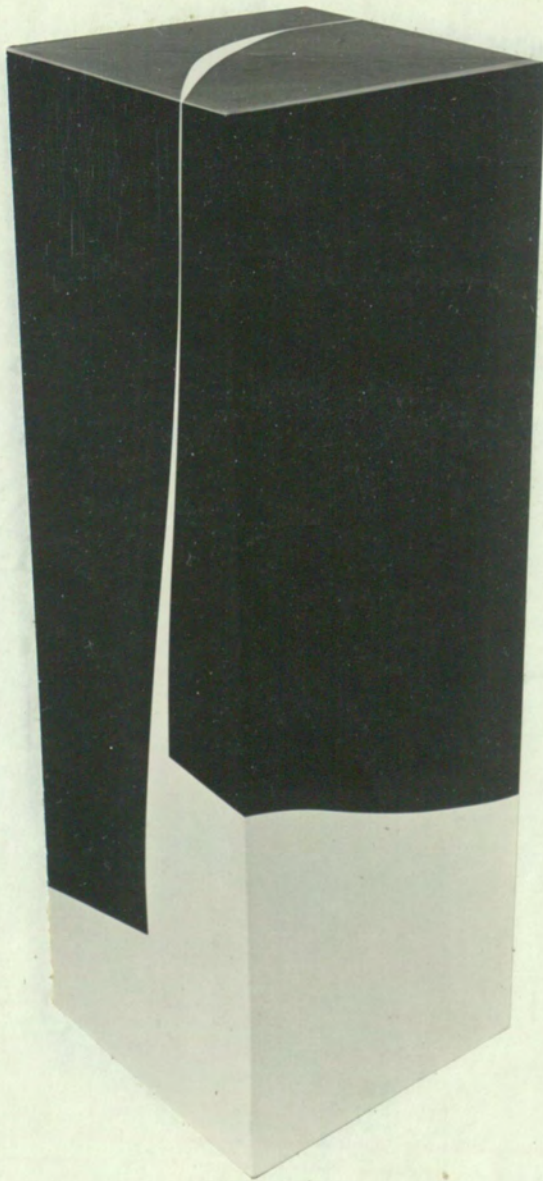
Number Four



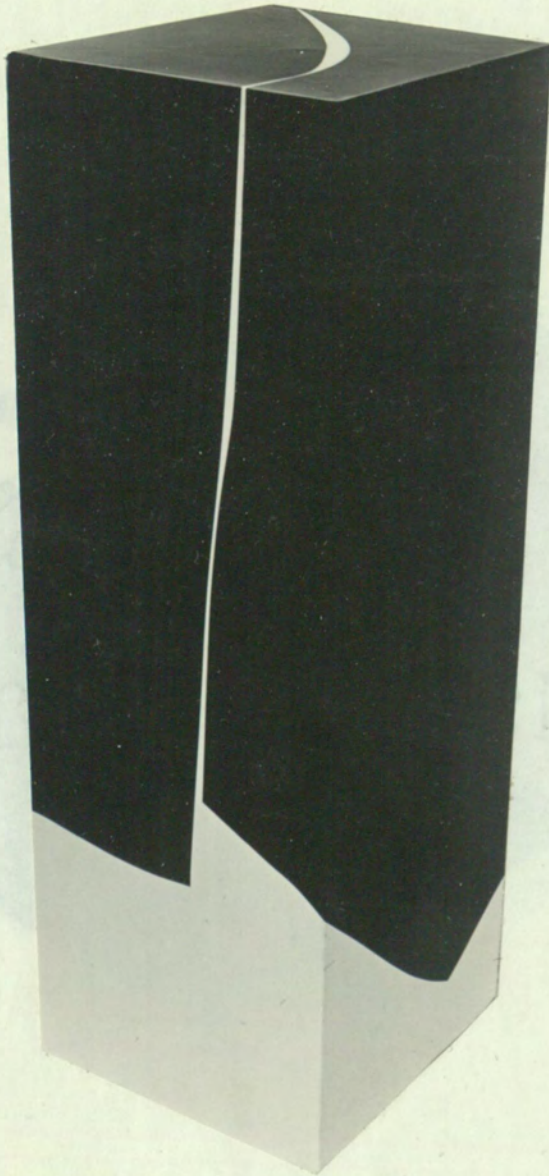
Number Five



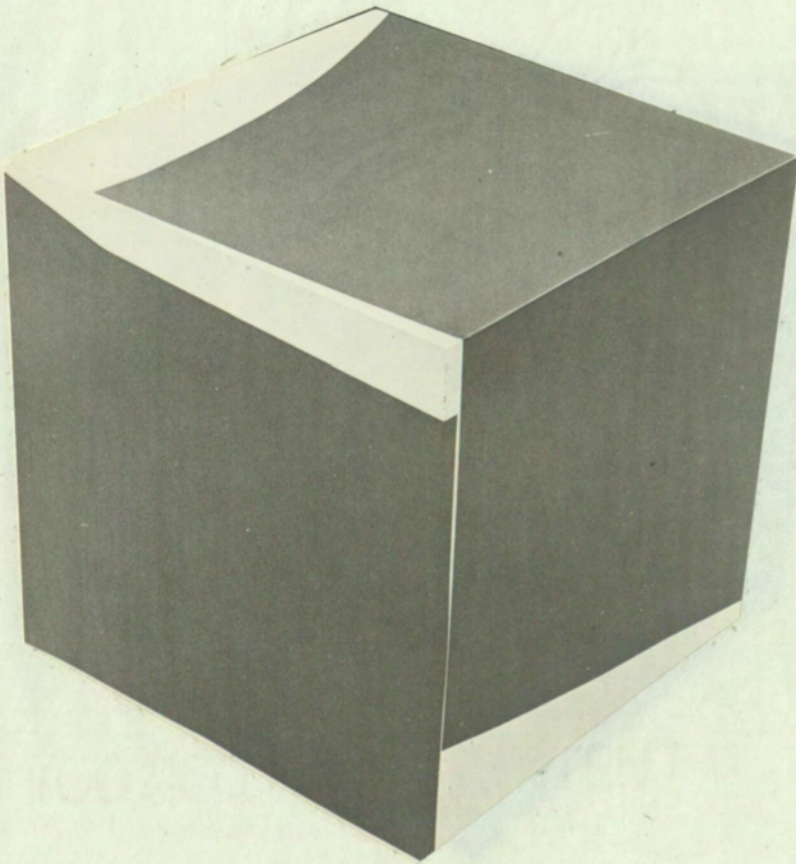
Number Six



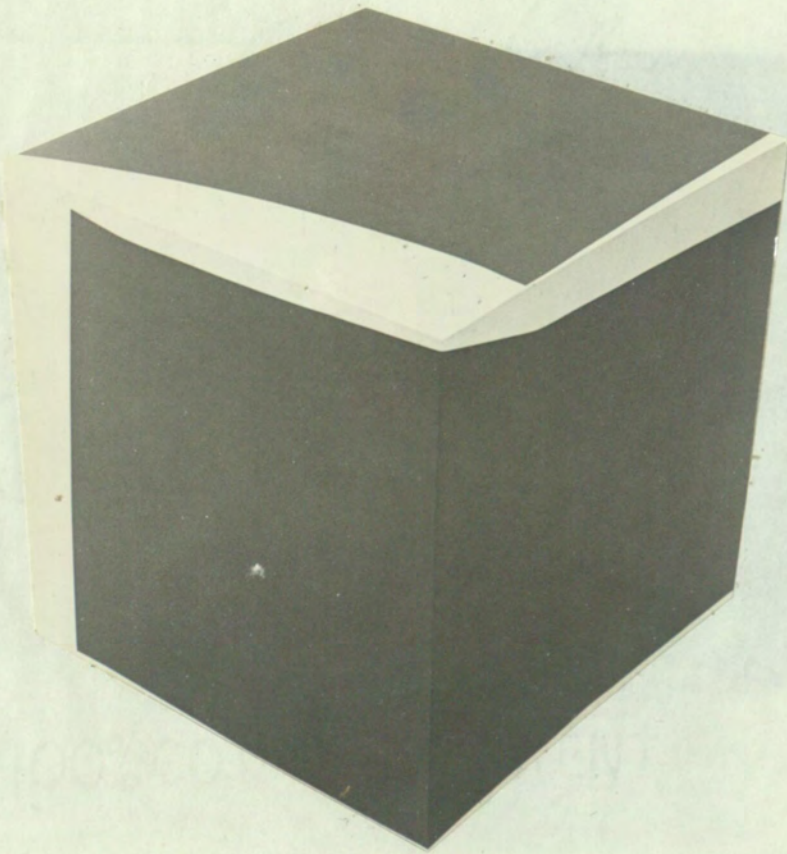
Number Seven - Front View



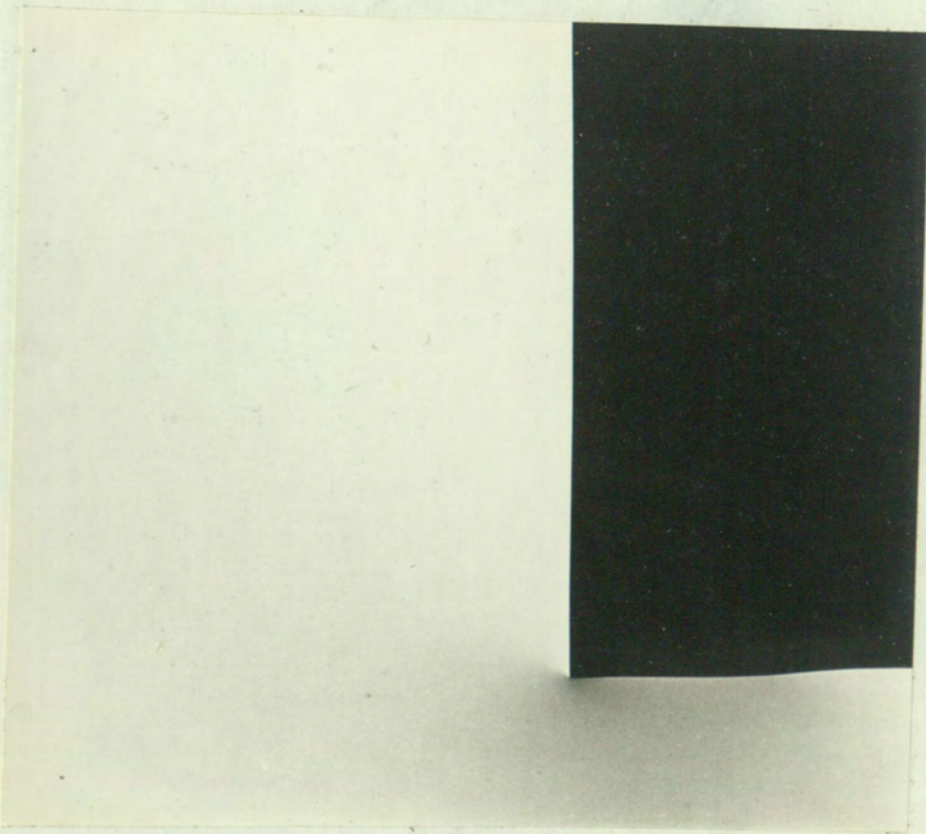
Number Seven - Rear View



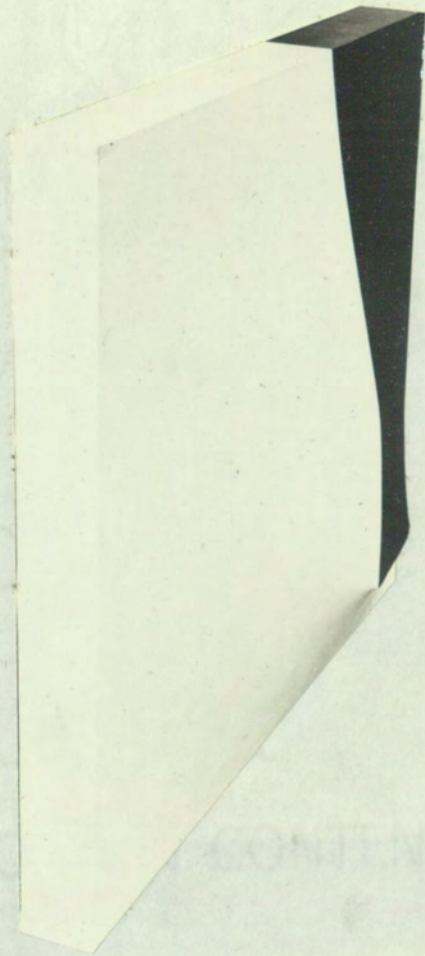
Number Eight - Front View



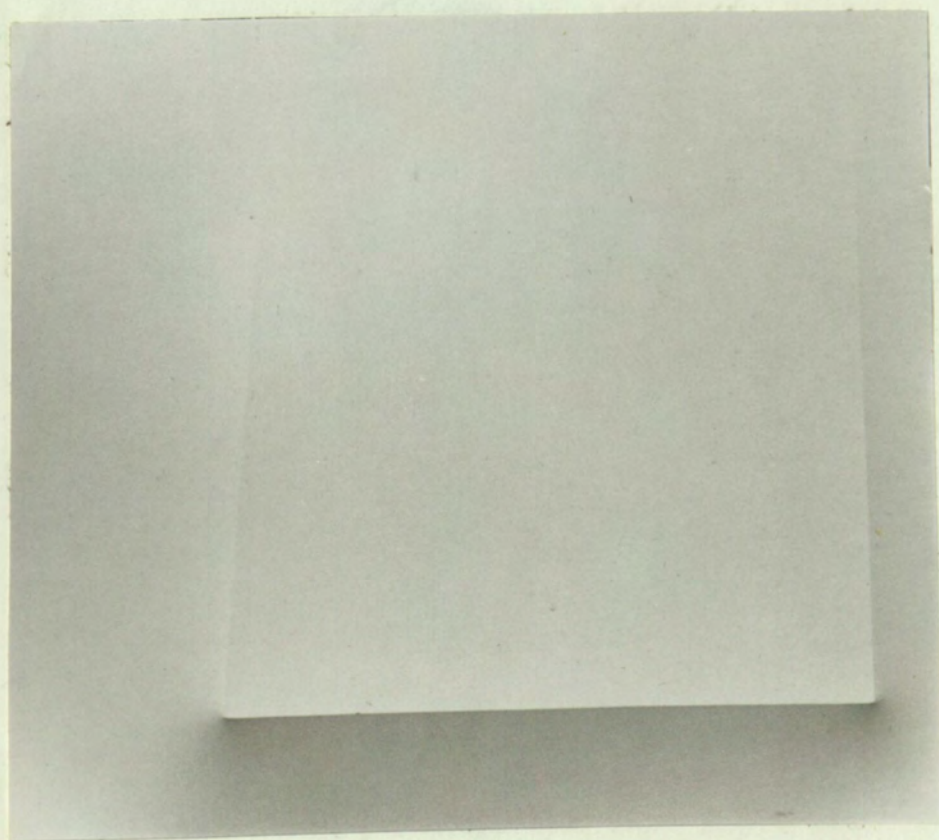
Number Eight - Rear View



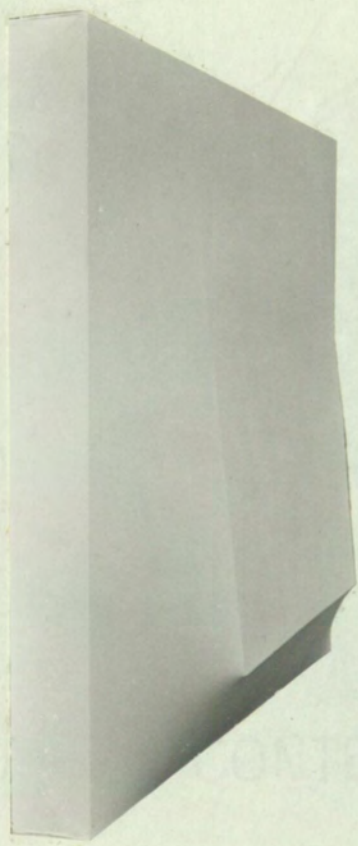
Number Nine - Front View



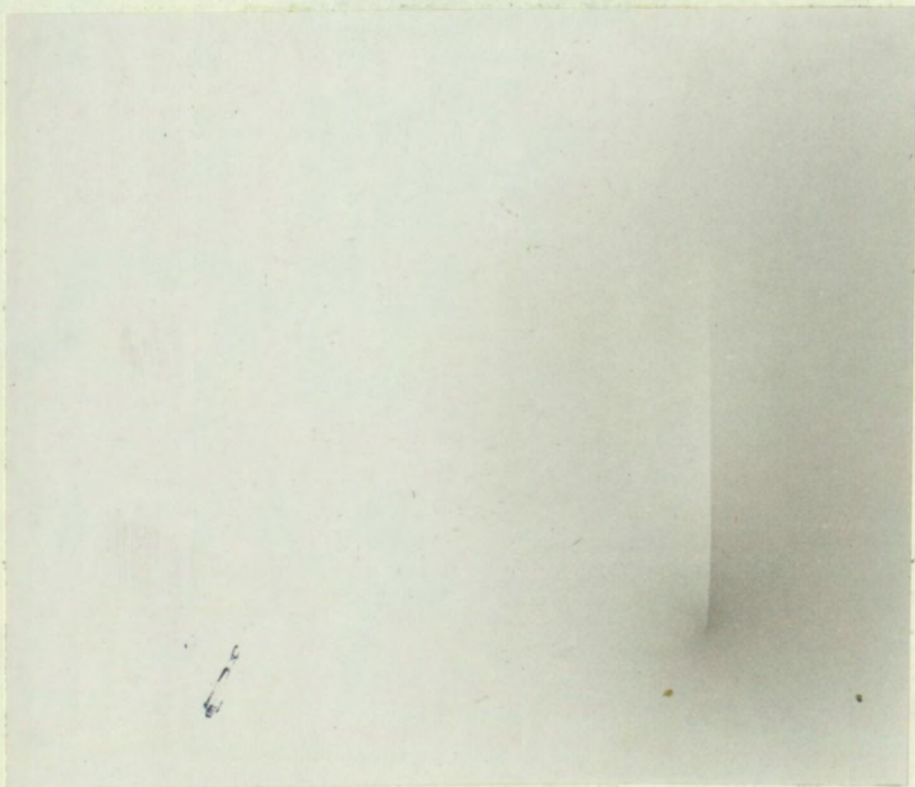
Number Nine - Side View



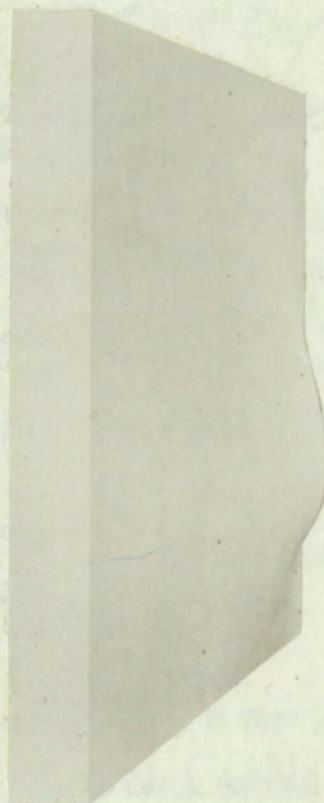
Number Ten - Front View



Number Ten - Side View



Number Eleven - Front View



Number Eleven - Side View

Vita Sheet

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Kappa Pi Art Honor Society

Thesis Title:

Aesthetic Priority Through Spatial Tension and
Media Manipulation

Advisor: Dr. John Adkins Richardson