Catalogue Number 31

Foreword

Duncan Robinson, Director

The Yale Center for British Art is proud to present the first exhibition in this country devoted exclusively to the work of John Golding, a painter of international outlook and importance. Born in England, he was educated in Mexico and Canada, before returning to England to complete his research and to teach both art history and painting. To describe him as a British artist is to run the risk of insulating him from his wider context; in discussing his own work, he refers not only to Turner, but with no less emphasis or respect to Cézanne, Orozco and Clyfford Still. From it all, and especially during the past ten years of full-time activity as a painter, comes pure Golding.

For the present exhibition we are indebted first and foremost to the painter himself, to Alex Gregory-Hood of the Mayor Rowan Gallery, and to all of the lenders who have generously agreed to make works available. Thanks, too, to Richard Wollheim, who shaped *From Mexico to Venice,* the dialogue with John Golding which appears as the introduction to this catalogue. Their discussions took place in the artist's studio during May and June of this year and, at their request, English spelling is retained.

We are grateful to Marina Vaizey for the enthusiasm and support she has shown for the exhibition ever since it was first mooted. Since then, the efforts of colleagues on both sides of the Atlantic have helped to guarantee its success. I wish to mention especially Harriet Berry at the Mayor Rowan Gallery, Kasha Jenkinson at the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art in London, Leslie Blakely, Constance Clement, Timothy Goodhue, Marilyn Hunt, Julie Lavorgna, Martha Pigott, Vincent Raucci, Leonard Rogers, and the entire Operations Staff here at the Center. The catalogue was designed by Frank Tierney and produced at the Yale University Printing Service.

From Mexico to Venice

A Dialogue between Richard Wollheim and John Golding

R.W. We first met, in Venice, in 1955. At that time, as I recall things, you were working on your thesis on Cubism, and you were also painting: but painting less strenuously than later — or, for that matter, than you had been earlier, in Mexico.

J.G. Yes, we met in the great Giorgione exhibition, in the Doge's Palace. The Cubist thesis took rather longer than I had expected; my grants ran out and I was forced to take a job as a critic for the *New Statesman*. I disliked this and it made me more than ever anxious to get back to my own painting, although of course for a long time I supported myself as an academic by teaching at the Courtauld Institute. The art historical background is very important for me; a lot of my professional life has been as an art historian, and I still write the odd art historical piece.

R.W. I have had the opportunity of following your work virtually since our first meeting, over a period of nearly thirty-five years, and an initial thing to say about it is that it contains two aspects which are not all that often found together in contemporary art: a strong underlying unity, and a great deal of surface change, in response to problems and challenges we shall want to talk about. In this way your career as a painter always strikes me as more like that of a traditional artist than that of a late twentieth-century artist. In so much late twentieth-century art we find either repetition all the way down or novelty all the way down. However I don't want to talk about this general issue, which in fact is that of the pathology of contemporary art — what I think of as the widespread failure to form style. I introduced it only to contrast it with your work. Now the underlying unity in your work, in so far as it is not the unity of style, the unity imposed upon the work by the hand, the hand in the service of the eye,

Figure 1
1959 Desnudo Gris
acrylic on canvas
28 x 35 1/2 inches
Collection of the Artist

comes, as I see it, from its constancy of subject matter: the human body.

J.G. You are quite right about the subject matter of my work. I began as a figurative artist and found my way into abstraction through moving, as it were, up and into the body imagery of my painting. Given the fact that abstract art has been with us for some seventy-five years, it never ceases to amaze me that it was only the generation of painters after my own that accepted abstraction as a language that could be immediately picked up rather than as something that had to be worked into. I think this is why abstract art has been through, and is still in a way in, a state of crisis. A lot of young artists were excited by the look of abstract art and began making abstract painting and sculpture, but then after a while they became uncertain what their work was *about*. I think it is perfectly possible to make art out of and about other art provided you know that that is what you are doing. I myself grew up in Mexico and saw relatively little good abstract art until I began visiting New York in the very late 1940s. Apart from a few landscapes, my own first works were all figure pieces. And in one form or another the body is still always there in my work. The formats of the paintings over the past two decades have been consistently horizontal, and maybe this is why people have seen them as having connotations with landscape. This doesn't necessarily bother me — the space of landscape is for me richer and more interesting than architectural, man-made space, and I probably make use of it, indirectly. But I recognize that the body is always there in my work, that that is what my paintings are about.

R.W. Let us start with an early work (figure 1). Here we see unmistakably the middle section of the human body, the male human

Figure 2
1962 Torso
acrylic on board
destroyed

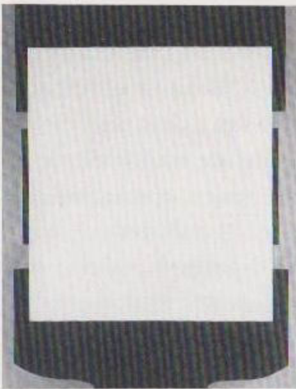

Figure 3
1965 – 66 Achilles
acrylic on canvas
72 x 56 inches
Private Collection

body. The gender is not in doubt. The picture also exhibits another great theme of yours: light. The body, and light — and also a third theme, which is potent in much of your work, mystery. Mystery, as I see it, has a short-lived absence from your work in the period of the hard-edged descendents of those early torsos (figure 3), and that may have been a powerful reason why you grew dissatisfied with that "purer" kind of work. Personally I recall the purer work with affection because you did a simplified version of one of those hard-edged images for the cover of the first English edition of *Art and Its Objects.*

But to go back to the early torsos, which tell us so much about the pictures in the present exhibition, through their dissimilarities as well as through their similarities. Mystery is powerful in both groups, but in the early work it is never far away from terror, and the terror in turn comes from the penetration of the body by light. In the later work light falls on the body and explores its surface, but here it drives its way through the body, often coming at it from behind, and then generally from a single source. Light is essentially inquisitorial, and mystery comes about partly from its success, or what it uncovers about our strange interior, and partly from its failure, or what the body continues to hold secret from us. So there is the mystery of strangeness and, superimposed on it, the mystery of ignorance. Do you think this is a reasonable way of describing the subject matter of these pictures?

J.G. The majority of my early single-figure pieces were male. Half the torso pieces of the sixties were in fact female (figure 2), although male and female were sometimes coupled. But there came a time when I realized that in my work I was somewhat desperately trying to find a compromise between a male and a female body. This is a perfectly valid subject for art and has been explored by many artists, writers

in particular; but when I realized what I was doing, I turned my back on this because I am not interested in art as self-discovery or as therapy. Hence, probably, the move to a "purer," hard-edged art, besides the fact that there was a lot of good hard-edged painting around and I was enjoying it and responding to it. The terror you refer to in this earlier work may have something to do with personal problems I was facing; and not the least of these was the fact that I was coming increasingly to recognize that I was not particularly naturally gifted as an artist. In some ways it seemed almost impertinent to try to become a painter, and yet it was the activity that most interested me. As for many, light and truth have always been associated in my mind, although I can also recognize a truth of darkness, as for example in certain attitudes towards death. So, yes, light for me was at one point inquisitorial although it no longer is. I am aware of the element of mystery you speak of, but it isn't something I consciously cultivate. Art that sets out to mystify mostly repels me. On the other hand, the very idea of art seems to me infinitely mysterious. It keeps alive certain spiritual values, but, when one actually thinks about it, it is a very odd thing to do or make, and it involves great risks at many different levels for both the practitioner and the experiencer.

R.W. I fully understand, and sympathize with, the distinction you make between mystery and mystification, and when I said "mystery," I meant mystery. But I also sympathize with your implied point that you aren't really the person to ask about mystery in your work, even though it comes from you. But I should like to stay for a moment with these early paintings, because I want to concentrate on one particular aspect of them. Not the subject matter, but something that goes along with the subject matter and provides an analogue to it. It depends on a certain optical effect, which helps to carry the subject matter. These pictures have an abrasive quality, and I am thinking of this in a literal way. I don't know if you added anything to the paint in those days, but the pictures have a very gritty surface towards which the spectator then feels himself drawn. He is drawn into the surface because of this grittiness and, as he is, he starts to feel as if this grit is being rubbed across his eyes and eyelids. It is a sensation that I associate with certain pictures by Goya, particularly the single-figure pictures. They also induce it. It is a somewhat cruel effect, but the upshot is that the spectator feels that his body, as he experiences it, is twinned with the represented body. The two are allied through distress, and the distress that the spectator feels alerts him to what is happening to the body in the picture.

Now, without at this stage going further into this rather specific conception of the body, the body

under inquisition, which after all is subject matter you have now left behind, I should like to ask you something about the pictorial sources you drew upon in realizing it. Someone looking at these pictures, either at the time or now, would have rather superficially thought of Francis Bacon. But in actual fact, these images, as I understand the matter, derive much more from Mexican sources. Would you like to say something about that? A great deal of your later work could be anticipated by saying that, over the years, Mexico gives way to Venice.

J.G. My first experience of contemporary art was of the Mexican Mural Movement. Orozco was my greatest source of inspiration, and I still believe he is one of the giants of the twentieth century, although his output was so incredibly uneven. One of the features of Orozco's art is the way in which his figures all seem to be in some way flayed; they wear their skeletons on the outside, like armour, although it is an armour that is useless, and he mostly seems to see humanity as doomed. I sometimes get the feeling that he painted out of hatred, a sensation I also experience in front of another artist I enormously admire, Clyfford Still, although of course, in the end products of both, the hatred is sublimated into very powerful art. In front of Orozco's work I experience the distress through empathy that you describe; and I experience it, too, in front of Bacon, much of Goya, and also when looking at a lot of El Greco. The actual grittiness of my torso pieces came, technically, from applying sand and gravel to the surfaces; this was partly to combat the gloss and stickiness of the acrylic paint I was then using, but it may also have been an unconscious attempt to somehow emulate the corrosiveness and blackness of Orozco and other Mexican mentors. Maybe I subsequently responded so strongly to the great revolutionary American abstraction of the forties and fifties because a certain amount of it owed a debt to Mexican art.

R.W. On the level of mere appearance the biggest or most abrupt change in your work was when you shifted from the early painterly, gritty manner, sombre, with very little colour, to the hard-edged representations of the body, still sometimes without colour, but sometimes with a lot of bright colour and often a rather silvery effect. But on a deeper level the really important change came later and was less immediately perceptible. It coincides with a shift from pictures that contain within their edges, or as parts of themselves, representations of the body, to pictures that in themselves or as wholes stand in for the body. This is what I call metaphorical painting — the painting is a metaphor for the body — and all the paintings in this exhibition are metaphorical paintings. They are no longer figurative paintings, we can no longer see the

body in the painting, but the reference to the body is no less present. The difference is that this reference is not effected through representation. These pictures are manifestly representational: we see forms or shapes arranged in depth, or with one behind, or in front of, another. But, though representational, the pictures don't represent the body. What has happened is that they have become metaphors for it. I don't want to be misunderstood. As you know, but I had better make this clear, I think that a painting can both be a metaphor for the body *and* represent it: Titian supremely. But your paintings are metaphors for the body but not representations of it. Now from this transformation your painting has acquired many benefits, many positive benefits, but there is one "negative" benefit, a benefit by deletion, that I should like to bring up now. Abandoning figuration has resulted in the dissolution of those great centralized images which, in one way or another, presided over most of your early work. It is only with hindsight that this emerges as the major liberation it has turned out to be. Did you feel centralization to be a constricting force at the time? It seems to me that the example of Bacon, where over the years, over the decades, remorseless centralization has eroded the expressive effect of the work, might have made you wary of it. But I may be reading my own responses into your work.

J.G. Kandinsky discussed two ways of moving into abstraction, veiling and stripping or laying bare. I suppose he himself basically veiled while someone like Malevich stripped bare. The veiling process is probably easier to sustain or keep up, because the artist can continue the dialogue with his sources of inspiration, whether in the world of visual appearances or the world of ideas. But once the stripping has taken place, it leaves the artist *vis-à-vis* the reductive idea or image — whatever it is that has been laid bare — and then it is very hard to keep the dialogue up at the degree of intensity necessary to give the resulting artefact sufficient charge to make it valid or meaningful. But I think there is another, third way into abstraction, which is moving up into the image or images of an earlier mode. As I see it, Still and above all Rothko achieved their ultimate visions in this way. Newman, on the other hand, basically stripped bare, but for all his reductiveness continued to deal with developing ideas; and this was why he was so much more of an influence on other artists. Obviously I am not comparing myself in any way to these great artists, but in my own case I in a sense moved up into the centralized images of my earlier work. In the process the centralized images were abstracted, and the centralized image became the canvas itself in its entirety. The pictures themselves, as you say, became metaphors for bodies.

R.W. Before we look at the later work, I should like to ask you a question. It follows directly out of what we have been talking about and is something that troubles many people, though it also troubles them that it does. They think that it is puerile or unsophisticated. But Clement Greenberg, to his credit, has always felt that abstract painters should never lose sight of the fact that they deny themselves things that figurative painters could make use of. Abstraction, in other words, involves loss: though — and this is the crucial point — not necessarily overall loss. You are doing something different from what Signorelli or Veronese or Poussin or Manet did. They are all painters whom you admire, yet there is no conceivable way in which you could straightforwardly combine what you do with what they did. But how do you experience the fact that you have denied yourself part of what was available to them? There are, I am sure, many ways of experiencing the loss—including denying it—but I am sure that everyone who admires your work will be interested in any answer you have to this question.

J.G. The loss is in terms of possibilities. Reading a stimulating book full of new ideas or confronting a new and exciting visual situation, either in terms of other art or in external reality, seldom helps in the way that it can with figurative art, or even in "veiled" abstraction. Visually the body offers fewer possibilities for reinvention than nature does, so painters who have worked their way into abstraction through landscape are in a sense in a more open and receptive situation. Interestingly enough I can't think of any abstract artists whose work interests me who have worked their way into abstraction through still life. Mondrian was interested in still life, but it was the landscapes and in particular the seascapes that got him into abstraction. Malevich's still-life abstractions are really just a misunderstanding of Cubism, and it was through the body that he achieved his really significant abstraction. Kandinsky did it through the figure in landscape. In the case of both the "stripping bare" and "moving up" processes, it becomes a very confrontational situation for the artist and the viewer; and the danger, for the artist, is that the picture/image becomes self-referential and repetitive.

If you do a painting of a figure or of figures in a landscape, for example, the possibilities are endless: you can move the figure about in space, make it larger or smaller and so forth. But if you have produced an abstract painting by moving up into body imagery and the picture itself has become the image, it becomes extremely difficult to reinvent the image, to visualize it in different situations or in different surroundings as you can constantly when you are working in a figurative idiom. I see

Malevich's *Black Square* very much in terms of body imagery. But if it was, as he saw it, a *tabula rasa,* it was also in certain respects a dead end, the end of a process. He had to look for new themes through which he could work himself back into abstraction, and he did it through aerial photographs and so forth; for a while there was much more variety in his abstractions — many more possibilities — though he produced no image that was as powerful as the *Black Square;* then of course he ended up with the *White Square.* Pollock, after he had found his way into abstraction, subsequently tried to revive or repeat the *processes* by which he had got himself there, not always so totally successfully the second time round. I think a very high proportion of abstract artists, more particularly those who have found their way into abstraction through figure work, and even more particularly those who have done so through the single figure, have at certain times felt it difficult to renew themselves and their art. I think Rothko was ultimately and tragically very much aware of this.

To get back to a question you asked earlier: I confronted the centralized images in earlier works by moving right into them. The individual images had become simultaneously so flat and so centralized that they seemed almost like pictures within a picture. I was faced with the alternative of expanding the space or the areas around the image in order to be able to move the image about more, to destroy the centralization, or else of moving up into the image, making the image the picture and subsequently looking for ways to fill the picture-image with light and space. The movement up into the imagery was and still is in some ways liberating and exhilarating, but it has also shut endless doors, endless possibilities. I spend a lot of time looking at other painting and it is possibly my greatest pleasure; but it saddens me that I can now very seldom respond to its stimulus in my own work in the way that I would like to. I love the paintings in the National Gallery, but I can now very seldom draw on them directly in my own work in the way that many of my figurative painter friends do. On the other hand, I often try to echo in my own work the emotional or psychological chords that individual works of the past strike in me, and I can be very directly inspired by colour combinations, effects of light and so forth. When the El Greco *View of Toledo* was on loan to the National Gallery, for example, I thought how good it would be if an abstract painter could produce a painting that was so mysterious and so totally dark and nocturnal and yet so full of light.

R.W. Now there is one issue which, as far as I can see, is, historically at any rate, much associated with the rise of abstraction, though

perhaps only accidentally so: and that is the disappearance, the attenuation, of detail, at least detachable or significant detail. You could, of course, excise a portion of a Pollock, but it wouldn't really be detachable detail. There isn't detail in Rothko, though the jagged edges of the rectangles invariably come to engross our attention. Detail abounds in one abstract painter whom I admire more than you do; Hans Hofmann, particularly in his very late work, the *Renate* paintings. Now, *your* work displays detail. Now, what do you feel about this tendency in so much twentieth-century painting, abstract and non-abstract, which has the effect of squeezing out localized attention? Do you feel it's just the end of one historical tendency, or is it something graver than that?

J.G. I wonder if it isn't more a question of incident than of detail. In Impressionist painting, for example, there is for the most part very little detail, but there are a lot of incidental effects in the handling of paint, and because of this one enjoys looking at them close to as well as from the greater distance from which they were meant to be viewed; small sections of the paintings reproduce very well. I think the question of the abolition of detail is as relevant to a lot of contemporary figurative work as it is to almost all contemporary abstract art. An artist like Bacon achieves some of his effects by playing off small touches of detail against large empty areas, or, in his best work, large empty spaces. But there isn't all that much detail in late Picasso or in, for example, an artist like Baselitz, although there is quite a lot of incident in the paint effects. One of the legacies of heroic mid-century abstraction to subsequent figurative art was the legacy of the large-scale format, and this has posed problems. Artists whose imaginative powers rely on very specific use of imagery and hence often on detail then find it hard to incorporate it into, so to speak, the grander scope of things; and it often looks fussy or lost — this happens, for instance, in a lot of the big Clementes. The detail or incident in Hofmann probably comes because he enjoyed pushing paint about, while many of his colleagues in contemporary American art were more involved in making large physical and symbolic gestures. The incident in my own paint effects comes from the fact that I work the pictures over very long periods, and the traces of earlier marks and configurations build up and coagulate into little pockets of interest that aren't immediately apparent when seen from a distance; but I like being able to go up to a picture and to enjoy bits of it close to after having apprehended it as a whole. Maybe one of the reasons that contemporary art in general makes less use of detail or incident is that viewers, even serious ones, spend less time actually looking at individual works than they used to.

R.W. Let me try and be more precise. How I think of detail is as something that makes a distinct contribution to the whole. The leading idea here is that detail works in a picture in a way analogous to the way a word is used in a sentence. A word makes a distinct contribution to the meaning of a sentence, even though there are many words — "and," "very," "is" — whose meaning it would be extremely hard to give outside the context of a sentence. Of course this is only an analogy here, just because, as I am always so insistent, pictorial meaning and linguistic meaning are such very different things. Now let's take a painting of yours for an example. Take *Body*: a passage that I think of as detail is to be found against the right edge, about half way down, isolated by narrow pale bands. It is cavernous, with a split or fissure, above a lot of far space. We can identify the contribution that this makes to the picture — though remove the passage from the picture and who knows what the passage would look like? In your painting, as I see it, detail often centers around incident — to use your distinction. The successor to the abrasive surface, which we talked about earlier, is constituted by smallish passages in which the paint (as you say) coagulates. They remind me of somewhat similar passages, very differently produced, which we find in de Kooning: passages which I have described as resembling the breast of a tiny bird. Why I think of these as successors to the abrasive surfaces is that they too draw the spectator towards them — and this effect has a great deal to do with their segmentation into detail. They *compel* isolated attention, as I see it.

J.G. Yes, I was probably underplaying the role of what I called incident in my work. Earlier on I very consciously enjoyed playing off more elaborately worked passages of paint against larger, emptier, or more broadly handled areas. It is something that I now do much less consciously, but it is still very central to how I work and to the effects I want to achieve. As centres of focus or interest begin to form or grow, I often make them into cells or pockets by catching them up in a linear net, or by reinforcing the contours of areas around them. It is a process of affirmation and cancellation because sometimes the whole surface becomes too busy and pocketed and then I have to get rid of the detail or incident, or at least some of it, in favour of recapturing the broader effects. As you say, or imply, it is a question of ensuring that details, areas one can home in on when one moves up close to a painting, simultaneously fall into place within the totality of the picture when one moves back from it. In the case of *Body* the banded spatial cells at the right are in fact less highly worked than the denser red areas to the left where there was much more of the process of cancellation and reaffirmation; because of this the smallish super-

imposed colour patches and touches are more separate and read more as detail and this effect is reinforced by catching them up in the pale bands or flares. The more vaporous treatment of the space at the right seems to balance the matted space of the rest of the picture and is in a sense an escape for the eye. I do appreciate your point that in a lot of more recent abstraction every mark and gesture seems to be at the service of the painting as a whole, no matter how small or broken it may be, and because of this the eye is not invited to enjoy or explore individual areas of the surface.

R.W. You've talked just now of the bands or flares in your pictures. You've anticipated me. I think that anyone, on looking at the body of work in this exhibition as a whole, will eventually become aware of the three factors I've isolated: the body, light, mystery. But someone, wanting to come to grips with the actual surfaces, would most likely start by trying to grasp the role of the one recurrent morphological feature in the pictures, and that is the bands — and the gap between the bands. Leaving aside their genesis, where they come from, how do you think of their evolution over the ten years of work that this exhibition covers? This would give the spectator a way of ordering the pictures.

J.G. I find it hard to separate the functions of the bands in the paintings from their genesis. I spoke of the way the figures in Orozco's paintings seem to wear their skeletons on the outside. The white bands or flares in my painting are a distant legacy from him in that they are the paintings' bones or substructures.

Originally, after I had moved into abstraction, I divided the canvases into two or three simple geometric shapes which had for me the quality of presences. The flares or bands articulated the edges of the shapes; they helped to separate the shapes while the geometry of the compositions held the paintings together. Then the relationship of the bands to the shapes became more complicated; bands began getting into the shapes, animating and modifying them. As a result of this I sensed how I could get more light into the pictures. I have for a very long time been obsessed with the way in which Braque compresses or accordion-pleats space up onto the canvas, so that a painting of an interior can seem to contain more space within it than the actual interior to which it is related. By multiplying the bands, I think I was instinctively trying to pleat more light into the paintings. And of course when light shifts it makes one more aware of space too, so that as there was more light in the paintings and more variety of light, I think the paintings got more spatial, too — or at least I hope so. Originally the pleating of light was on an upright axis, and basically it still is; I think that

for most people the upright emphasis is more evocative of the human presence than the horizontal. At one point light in my painting became increasingly pocketed, and the bands began to bend and interlace to contain the pockets of light. And in order to get more light into the paintings, I began folding it in more different directions or axes. But when there is too much horizontal pleating or folding, the pictures begin to acquire horizon lines and to look like surrogate landscapes and I have to wipe them out and begin again.

R.W. One question that interests me about your paintings is point of view. When we look at a painting of yours, are we looking at an image that sticks up in front of us — like the painting itself does — or are we looking down on something, or do our points of view (as I suspect) shift? The question I'm asking is one that descends from Monet's *Nymphéas,* which in this respect at any rate were precursors of abstraction. Otherwise I regard this as an exaggerated issue. There, I feel, we look down on to the watery surface for about the upper two-thirds of the picture; then, as our eyes reach the lower one-third, we find ourselves looking back into the water from a point barely above it. I take it that one thing that this achieves is that it preserves the traditional idea of the bottom versus the top of the picture. Would you like to say where you stand on this? Do you think of yourself as organizing a picture with a top and a bottom, or one which has four sides with nothing directional about them — like a swimming pool looked at from above? Or do you feel a tension between these two perspectives onto the work — if you do, how do you adjudicate between them? "Adjudicate" is of course an artificial word, but that's why I use it. Because what we are doing here is trying to make explicit something that is executed implicitly. And why not? It always seems to me a perfectly legitimate thing to do.

J.G. Maybe it is the scale of the *Nymphéas* that induces the ambiguities. The edge of the water Monet was looking down on, or had looked down on, he painted at eye level and so we experience it as though just above them, as you say. The larger sheets of water that were receding from him horizontally he had to look down on in imagination; and after he had, so to speak, picked them up and put them on the upright canvas, we seem to be suspended over them as if we were looking at them from a high bridge but also quite close to. One doesn't — or at least I don't — get the same ambiguous reading from the smaller water paintings. When the vast format became one of the hallmarks of American abstract painting of the late 1940s and '50s, all kinds of odd things happened. For instance, I get sensations almost of vertigo in front of certain Clyfford Stills; the tops of the paintings are often quite high above one's head, but the eye rushes up their

surfaces at such a speed that one can somehow sense oneself at the top of the pictures and about to fall off them. (Tintoretto sometimes gives me visual vertigo, but this is because of the high viewpoints he uses and because the space in his work often seems to spin.) I don't know where Still placed himself when he was studying his own work, but I imagine it was relatively close to. Then when we got used to the idea of having very big modern paintings around, a lot of people unconsciously began treating them as if they were smaller pictures by trying to "hold them down." I think that this is why the Newman exhibition at the Tate in 1972 had such a surprisingly poor reception. One went into these enormous galleries and saw people standing too far back from the works.

I suppose the fact that I sometimes stand and work my paintings upside down but couldn't ever look at them on their sides confirms the fact that I see them as having a top and bottom, very definitely. After a few elements have been laid in, I tend to begin the pleating process I spoke of at the top and bottom. Because the tops and bottoms are more articulated than the sides, the sides are more open and expansive; the eye can drift off the sides sometimes but seldom off the top or bottom. But I do work the paintings on the floor a lot when I want to paint very wetly, and then I walk round them in all directions, although the canvas always remains stretched up because the exact format is crucial to me. I suspect that when painters work on the floor, they tend to work more quickly, partly because they are to a certain extent working blind in that they can't totally appreciate what they have done until the canvas is dry and can be studied vertically against the wall. So, basically, I see the images as sticking up in front of me, or in front of the viewer, but there is also something of the swimming pool about them because of the technique, the way they are executed.

R.W. With what someone coming fresh to this exhibition is bound to think of as unnatural restraint, we haven't so far talked about your concern with colour. Colour is such a salient aspect of your painting. It has great meaning for you and great appeal. I deliberately put it like that to bring out its twice-over appearance in your work. And you have a striking natural sensitivity to colour compared not only to myself — I have rather defective colour vision — but to almost everyone else.

I propose starting with something I remember from a review written by the Israeli painter Arikah. It has somehow stuck in my mind. He asked why it was that almost all critics in writing about a painter's work described it in the vernacular of colour instead of in the language of pigment. Of course this was in

part malice, or a way of saying that art critics aren't technically qualified to write about art, but there is a way of taking it straight, and, if we do, then I think that it's most interesting taken on the most general level. Then it is pointing out that colour gets into painting only through the manipulation of pigment: something which people who approach painting through slides of painting can effectively overlook. Because slides make paintings approximate to stained glass. But there is also — or could be — a normative aspect to the remark. Painting, it might be saying, is profounder, or most itself, when it emphasizes the materials of colour. Florentine painting, for all its great beauty, is constantly haunted by the aetherealization of colour: of course, in some cases, the beauty and the aetherealization of colour go together, one arises out of the other. I suppose the historical truth of the matter is that this aetherealization could be fully overcome only with the introduction of oil paint and the emergence of the brush stroke: in effect, Venice. I think we should talk about Venice, and your work certainly invites it. But before we take this up, let us take up an issue, a distinct issue, but one which is the mirror image of colour as materiality: and that is materiality as colour. It seems to me that within painters to whom the materiality is something enormously important, there is a difference between those to whom this stuff is essentially coloured, and is so even when they drain it of brightness, and those for whom the stuff is not like that at all. Rembrandt, for instance, for whom matter is essentially tangible. This struck me so forcefully the other day in Vienna looking at the Titians. There we have a painter for whom colour is materialized and, at the same time additionally, the materiality is something essentially coloured. I looked at a number of early Titians, middle Titians, and then at the great late *Nymph and Shepherd*. Now there is no more colour in this painting, I imagine, than in, say, a late Rembrandt self-portrait. Yet even at his most tenebrist, Titian still strikes me as a painter who, in loading the canvas with matter, is encrusting it with colour, even if maximally muted colour. In other words, he remains the opposite of Rembrandt.

Now I would like to ask you two questions. Is there anything you can say about colour in your work — or is it too close to you, like the element of mystery I raised earlier? And how do the colour and pigment fit together in your scheme of things? More particularly, there is this issue: you use acrylic, and yet, as far as I can see, you seem to get out of acrylic something rather like what the Venetians got out of the newly discovered oil paint.

J.G. I think colour is the hardest aspect of painting to analyze or talk about. On the one hand it can often be the most immediately physical and emotive aspect of painting and on the other it is the most elusive and intangible; it also provokes a more subjec-

tive response in spectators, I suspect, than any other pictorial property. It strikes me as interesting and possibly revealing that whereas one can think of endless artists who were natural-born draftsmen — Degas and Picasso, to name only two, come instantly to mind — many artists whom one thinks of as colourists only became really great colourists in mid-career or relatively late in life. There are marvellous colouristic passages in Delacroix's *Massacre at Scio*, but the painting as a whole isn't a colouristic marvel in the way that later works of his are. Similarly it seems to me that Bonnard didn't truly hit his stride as a colourist until the 'twenties when he was well into middle age. Matisse was a natural colourist, but even so it took him quite a time to find his feet.

The question of colour as a substance baffles me somewhat. When you talk of the aetherealization of colour in Florentine art, I suppose you mean that it has so little substance to it — it can be beautiful and can move us, but it is seldom the painter's primary concern or vehicle. Bellini must somehow be a test case here because even in his late work his colour retains some residual feeling of "fill in"; one is always so aware of the contours of forms, and yet colour is what is carrying the pictures more than anything else. Of course he had oil paint, but he was applying it lightly and smoothly so that, although light seems to flood the pictures from various directions on our side of the canvas, the pictures also seem to be lit from behind. I imagine that for him light and colour had become more or less synonymous, and except in pictures that are totally tenebrist it is always a bit hard to separate the two. Titian is so much more physical and emotive. But what is interesting is the way in which the sensuous quality of the pigment and colour, even its sensuality, becomes sublimated. We become increasingly aware of the tactility of the paint, and of the paint as colour, and yet also increasingly aware of the fact that it isn't itself at all, that it is just pure emotion. I wonder if it would be fair to say that he felt in terms of colour. Latterly, and as his eyesight deteriorated, he was able to endow very dark paintings, the tenebrist paintings you speak of like *Nymph and Shepherd* and the London National Gallery *The Death of Actaeon*, with colouristic sensations even though there is relatively little colour in them.

Although Veronese's colour is so incredibly rich and sumptuous, I think he used colour much more intellectually and self-consciously. Maybe he thought rather than felt in colour. And one can learn so much from him. Last time I stood in front of the *Feast in the House of Levi* in the Accademia, I all of a sudden realized how he was structuring those vast expanses in terms of his reds; red, for me, is the most static of

colours. If you mentally remove the other colours from this painting, the reds are still giving you the painting's structure or basic composition. I don't think you could ever mentally remove a colour from a Titian. I am also intrigued by the way Veronese can use a very small amount of a particular colour and yet make it pervade a picture; one can think "that is a very blue painting," and yet on examination one finds there is relatively little blue pigment in it. His use of drapery is extraordinary too. Drapery sometimes seems to convey more of the movement and drama of what he is saying than the bodies underneath — drapery as metaphor, I suppose.

In this century the painter who has got most out of colour is of course Matisse. Sometimes he invents new light sensations with it, as he did in his Fauve work, sometimes he recreates natural light with it, and sometimes he uses it decoratively, or simply as itself, for the pleasure it gives the eye — I see some of the paintings of the 'thirties in this way. He could also use colour very physically in the sense of making one so aware of pigment and colour as matter, while at other times — and in these instances colour seems to take us over even more completely — there seems to be very little of the actual stuff on the canvas. These are the Matisses that emanate most light. A lot of contemporary abstraction is very bright but gives out very little light. Occasionally it actually cannibalizes the light around it. These works look wonderfully stimulating and alive when one first encounters them, but after a while one's eyes feel dry and drained.

I myself am obsessed by the properties of pure pigment, which is why I work so much in pastel. There is no binding medium, or virtually none, so that there is nothing getting between you and the pure colour sensation; and the moment you rub it on to a white support, colour seems to be lit up not only from behind but from within — the colour is very much there, but it is also in a sense insubstantial because there is hardly any matter to it. In my own work I see colour and light as totally interdependent. I would never put one colour down next to another simply to make one or other or both more telling and vivid. Rather, colours initiate dialogues which produce light sensations which in turn echo or induce psychological experience. To this extent the paintings are about states of mind, although I suppose in a sense everybody's paintings are, in one way or another. In the paintings I use acrylic because of its quick-drying properties; also it can be used very wetly without becoming too thin or insubstantial. As I have said, the paintings are worked on for very long periods, and in the process they become very elabo-

rately built up. If I were working in oils it would take that much longer for me to finish a painting, years rather than months. But acrylic can be very unpleasant as a substance, and it can also look like an unpleasant synthetic skin, which of course is what it is. Then again acrylic paints, in England at least, as opposed to oil paints are very underpigmented; because of this they can be simultaneously garish but dull. To combat this I do a lot of glazing; one can, for example, make a cobalt blue more resonant or more spatial by glazing it over another blue that has a lot of purple in it, or even over a Venetian red. As the colours become more layered, they become more physically palpable but also more luminous so that paradoxically they lose some of their physicality. I realize that I have, largely unconsciously, tried to use the glazing and layering possibilities of acrylic to achieve something that corresponds or approximates to the way the Venetians used oils. The colour and light in Venetian painting continues to move me in a way that colour and light in more recent painting, which means as much to me in other ways, does not.

R.W. I think that it is crucial for a spectator of your work to bear in mind what you say about Veronese and drapery. I think that it is a failure to recognize the way you are implicitly drawing on these effects of Veronese's — light falling not directly on the body but on drapery, or an outer coating of the body — that leads people off on a tangent to assimilate your work to landscape. And that reminds me to go back to something you said at the beginning. In agreeing that your painting always retained its reference to the body, you said that some people thought it derived from landscape, and you said that, though this wasn't right, you didn't mind. You said that "it didn't bother you." I'll now confess that this amazed me. I think of you as an extremely tolerant person, and I think that is a characteristic of yours that is to some degree formative of your painting: it makes your painting unhectoring, indeed unrhetorical, and I personally find this quality so exhilarating in an art world full of manifestoes, and denunciations, and declarations of intent, disguised as paintings. Nevertheless — and I may be taking you too literally here — I wonder how it is that you can not mind being misunderstood. Of course I can see how you might think that what you're doing could get through to people at one level, unconsciously or preconsciously, even when at another level they conceptualize it to themselves incorrectly. However, isn't there a real danger in these false conceptualizations? I say this partly for a particular reason: and that is I think it's becoming increasingly clear that the New York School has suffered so much from critics just saying what they wanted about the artists, and the artists, or some artists, for one reason or another, not challenging

them. But, as I say, I may be reading too much into a casual remark of yours.

J.G. The whole question of the ways in which abstract art can be "read" is so vexed. Undoubtedly people's response to abstract art is even more subjective than their response to figurative painting. I remember Frank Stella writing in *Working Space* that he "had trouble" with what he called the "underpinnings" of pioneer abstraction; in a sense this is an odd thing to say because without their ideological and intellectual underpinnings the artists would never have achieved their ends or got themselves visually where they did. On the other hand, I don't think that one has to be aware of their interest in theosophy or the fourth dimension, for example, to sense that their work has content and is profound.

I said earlier that when my paintings began to look like surrogate landscapes I wiped them out; and if I thought that people saw them as surrogate landscapes, this would worry me. But if people see certain landscape connotations in the work, this doesn't trouble me. Turner's light is often straightforwardly naturalistic of course, and he is the British painter who has most influenced me, although it is also true that I respond most to the most visionary and most abstract of his works. Cézanne haunts me; I am particularly obsessed by the late landscapes, and I would like to think that some of their space had got indirectly into my work, even if my own imagery does derive ultimately from the body. I think that artists got very brainwashed by the insistence on flatness in so much abstract art, and for that matter so much figurative art, of the 1940s and '50s. The painting that I am drawn to most of all is painting that is very flat but also very full of space. Late Bellini means as much to me as any painting in the world; it is very flat because it tends to be very frontal, and the overlapping images are so tightly bonded to the surface; but the paintings are also full of space that comes through light even more than through perspective. I agree with you about it being wrong for artists to allow critics to falsify their work and that they should speak up for themselves, although while one can think of artists who have written marvellously well, one can think of others who would have been better advised to remain silent. Today I think it is the art impresarios more than critics who tend to interpret or misinterpret artists' work for them.

R.W. Now there is one point I'd like to end on. You think of your pictures in terms of their succeeding or not, of their "working" or not. What is it for you for a picture to work? Let's — if you like — take the painting here that you like best: can you say why? I don't mean conclusively — but can you say something about why?

J.G. Well, quite obviously the pictures have to work in the straightforward way of complying with visual, formalistic criteria. They sometimes do this at a fairly early stage in their evolution, but the ones that do so are in fact often the ones I have to work on longest. There is no one painting in the exhibition that I like best, so can I take the painting that on recent visits to my studio is the one that I think you liked best? I often give my pictures titles only in order to be able to identify them quickly in my mind after they have left the studio. Sometimes a title suggests itself to me as I am working on a painting; this is the case, for example, with the painting called *Echo*, which incidentally, despite the fact that the greens immediately evoke associations with foliage, I see in terms of body imagery — the white, columnar form is somehow to me very female, and so I gave the picture the name of a nymph. But the picture I am talking about, which we have already mentioned, is predominantly red. When I asked you if you could think of a title for it, you suggested I call it simply *Body;* so I did. It was a picture that began very well; it had a nice swinging movement to it, and a couple of painter friends who saw it urged me to leave it as it was. But after a while it seemed to me to be all surface, both in the sense that it didn't have enough space and depth to it visually, but also in that it looked exactly the same every time I pulled it out, so that after a while it seemed psychologically flat too. I went back into the painting and worked it over a period of some months. I kept losing it; after altering aspects or elements in it, the picture looked awkward or inconclusive, but it was also becoming more layered in every sense. Then I put it aside again. Subsequently I reworked it yet again, quite quickly, and it got back to looking more like it originally had, but I could now look at it for longish spells without getting bored with it. I like the way it seems to move from right to left and yet the eye ends up in the middle of it. To this extent, although there is a lot of movement in the picture, it is also — to me at least — quite firm and steady, even quite still. It is in certain respects a visceral painting, and a couple of people have seen suggestions of body imagery in it.