

DON DUDLEY
EARLY WORK

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Don Dudley: In Search of the Light

Thomas Lawson

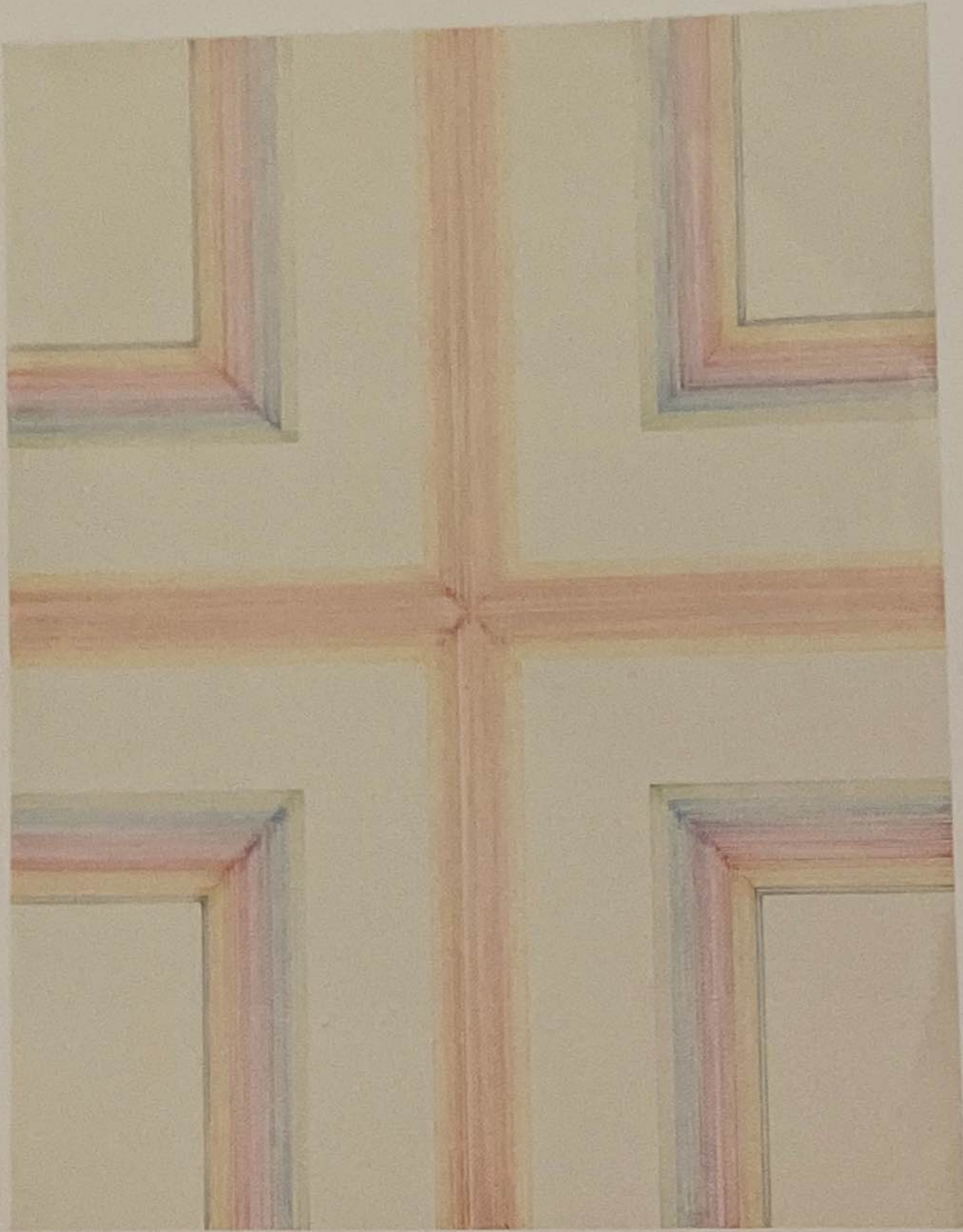
There is an easy tendency to imagine Los Angeles in the 1950s as an easygoing place, all sunshine and beaches, drive-in movies, and drive-in cafés. And when we think of the visual culture of that period we think of movies and architecture—the Late Expressionist stylings of European émigrés like Billy Wilder and Douglas Sirk, the picture-sleek Case Study houses designed by advanced Modernist architects like Richard Neutra and Craig Ellwood. The reality, however, was quite different: a rapidly growing suburban sprawl of undistinguished housing connected by new freeways; and a conformist culture. The Los Angeles of the 1950s was essentially a small midwestern town, not very friendly to visual art or artists. What little art making occurred was framed by a trio of small art schools in the center of town, and a handful of galleries further west, most notably the artist-run Ferus Gallery, which specialized in anti-establishment collage work by artists like Edward Kienholz and Wallace Berman, largely inspired by the Beat poets of San Francisco. The ethos and aesthetic was interior, a search for meaning in materials and personal process; a fundamentally narrative art.

Such was the environment in which the young Don Dudley began to imagine for himself the life of an artist. Following in the footsteps of Beat renegades like Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs, he moved to Mexico, looking for cheap living and a kind of personal freedom that culturally conservative Los Angeles could not offer.¹ He had been studying at the Chouinard Art Institute, the hippest of LA's art schools, the only one not entirely devoted to various forms of commercial art. There he

had studied with the Abstract Expressionist painter Richards Ruben, who spoke of "interval and obstruction" when describing his own practice of obscuring a lively painted surface with larger strokes of gray or white. Ruben taught that painting was always at odds with writing, that it was never involved with narrative, but only with seeing; that it had to be in the moment.

Dudley still remembers working with Ruben at a decisive moment, the time he began to see a personal way to make art. The paintings he was making at this time show Ruben's influence; they are gestural abstractions, actively brushed surface areas of black and white masking underlying color and form. Prior decisions peek through, but seem to have been canceled or wiped out. There is a kind of negativity in play, with the surface of these mostly small canvases blank and resistant, apparently hiding something beneath. But if these works remain indebted to his teacher, the year and a half spent painting, and some success selling his work through a gallery in Houston, Texas, convinced Dudley that he could be an artist.

Empowered by this feeling, and realizing that Mexico was perhaps not the best place to raise children, Dudley and his family drove back to the US in 1959 with a truckload of paintings, settling in San Diego. Soon after, Guy Williams, a young abstract painter developing a geometric, constructivist style, introduced him to the people who ran a small gallery called the La Jolla Art Museum, housed in what had been the Ellen Browning Scripps residence (1915), a sublime Modernist house designed by Irving Gill. Soon Dudley was showing his Mexican paintings there. Out of this grew a job offer to take over curatorial responsibilities for the gallery and to assist in developing a small art school they were trying to set up alongside it as they developed the property. In this position Dudley was able to meet many of the younger artists in town, all struggling to find ways past the methods and philosophies of the Abstract Expressionist generation who had been their teachers, and the Beat poets who had been their inspiration. John Baldessari, still a graduate student at the time, was the first to be offered an exhibition of his Surrealist-inspired paintings. Another local artist Dudley decided to show was Richard Allen Morris, a painter of humorously theatrical paintings indebted to comics and caricatures. But San Diego was a small town, and to build a program Dudley began traveling regularly to Los Angeles to seek out artists to show. There he met the painter John Altoon and the ceramist John Mason, who both showed with Ferus Gallery. He also met the gallery's founder, the eccentric and visionary curator Walter Hopps. All three became friends, with Altoon being the closest, both friend and mentor. Irving Blum, who took over Ferus from Hopps, has described Altoon as in many ways the very



2 Untitled (Prismatic Study), 1966–67

archetype of the Ferus artist: “defiant, romantic, highly ambitious—and slightly mad,”² and his camaraderie and encouragement were certainly important in pushing Dudley to think more critically about his commitment to abstraction, his resistance to narrative, and to find a more contemporary way to push forward in his own studio production.

The work Dudley presented at the La Jolla Art Museum tended to mine the subversive figuration born of what can perhaps be described as a provincial misapprehension of Surrealist thinking—Altoon’s erotic drawings, Baldessari’s literary collages, Morris’s comic book style—all precursors to what would become California Pop and Conceptualism. Dudley the curator responded to this kind of work as a sympathetically recognizable reaction against the existential angst and self-importance of the previous generation. But Dudley the artist found more to consider in Mason’s ambitious explorations of the possibilities of clay, his large wall reliefs, cruciform shapes, and asymmetrical monoliths. Another important, if subliminal influence must have been the daily experience of working in and around the serene geometries of Irving Gill’s early Modernist architecture.

Gill's masterful play of volume against plain surface, his deployment of voids and solids, his use of modern materials like concrete, must all have had a profound impact on the thinking of an artist struggling to move beyond gesture to form. Nearby was El Pueblo Rivera, a 1923 studio complex designed by R. M. Schindler, where an acquaintance of Dudley's lived. As a young artist still pushing past the ideas of interior and exterior space that he had developed in Mexico, Dudley got to know Schindler's grouping of twelve concrete cottages, their interlocking geometries of inside and outside spaces, windowless walls hiding interior courtyards and raised patios, constructed of textured concrete and exposed redwood. In his own studio, Dudley worked on the floor, covering rainbows with black paint to create a foreboding space with a glint of light, a lingering reference to landscape, and a hint of what would happen when Dudley moved to Los Angeles.

After five years it was time to move beyond San Diego, but moving is often difficult. It took local censorship and scandal to propel change. Through his friendships with Hopps and Mason, Dudley had discovered Pasadena-based Paul Sarkisian, another irreverent collagist with a Dada streak. A show was proposed and mounted, and very quickly a local priest complained that one work, combining some religious imagery with a tear sheet from *Playboy* magazine, was sacrilegious, and demanded that it be removed from public sight. A controversy ensued, with the directors of the Art Center asking Dudley to comply for the sake of community relations; he refused, on the grounds of artistic freedom. The art critic Gerald Nordland wrote about the affair in *Frontier* magazine, after Dudley was fired for holding his ground—and, more importantly, offered Dudley a part-time teaching position at Chouinard back in Los Angeles. By late 1964 Dudley and his family were resettled in Echo Park.

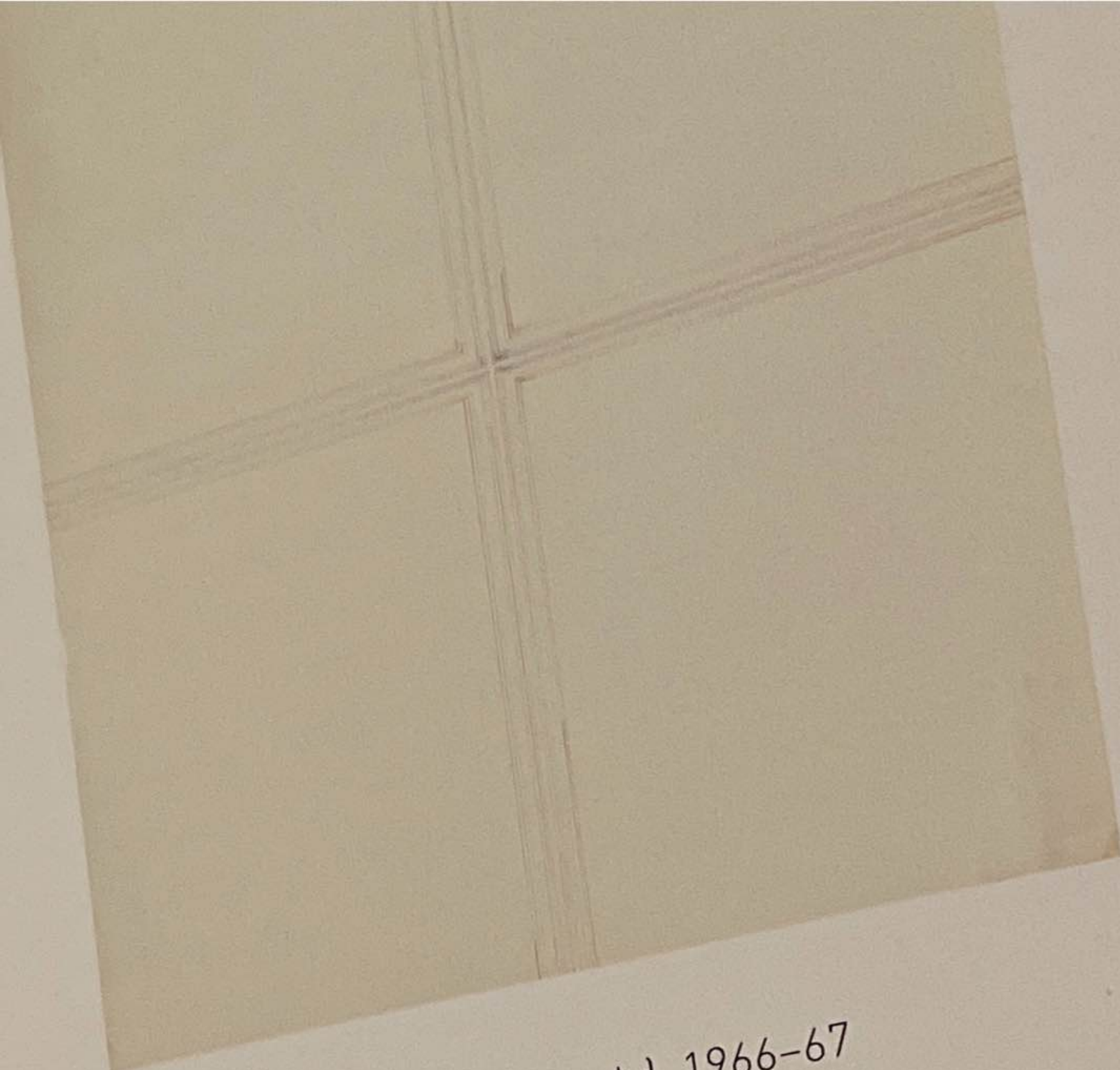
At Chouinard Dudley taught a drawing class, and soon was invited by Walter Hopps to teach another at the Pasadena Museum of Modern Art. But teaching a course or two does not bring in enough money to support a family, so Dudley found work as an art handler and packer at Cart and Crate, the well-known art-shipping company mostly staffed by young artists. Between this and the teaching, Dudley was now well placed to hear the latest talk of the art world, new trends and theories, as well as information about who was showing and who was selling.³ All this left him with little time to make art, and the only studio he could find convenient to his home was a small upstairs space whose landlord forbade the use of paint. As a result Dudley set up to make small drawings, using a Rapidograph drafting pen and ruler to develop a vocabulary of form, and investigate more thoroughly the figure-ground relationships of his earlier gestural paintings.

These drawings, dating from 1966 and 1967, take the prismatic device of the rainbow from the earlier paintings, and put them through a more rigorous process of discovery, and also move decisively away from the referential content of the earlier work. At first a pattern of ruled lines is confined to a small rectangle in the center of the page: a floating window through which we see a fragment of a cross in another space, or a decal-like image applied to the surface. This exploration of perceptual ambiguity gives way to an all-enveloping surface of vertical and cross-hatched lines as the cruciform shape comes to dominate the entire work. What we see is an artist working through a limited set of materials and processes in an attempt to achieve a new kind of surface, the fine lines of the drafting pen creating a chromatic effect that at times almost becomes iridescent.

As he became more confident that the drawings were moving in the right direction, Dudley tried transferring the work to canvas, applying color by pen to unprimed cotton duck. But he did not like the way it looked; the effect was blurred, lacking the crisp, mechanical look of the works on paper. He realized he had reached a point where he had to make significant changes in his life if he was serious about moving his art forward. It was a difficult time; his marriage was breaking up, he was working too many jobs to keep afloat, and as a result was in his studio late into the night. He felt trapped, going nowhere, knowing nobody but his fellow artist friends Altoon and Mason. And it was Altoon, with his notorious intensity and appetite for creative destruction, who pressed him to leave the center of the city and move across town to Venice to be closer to other artists, and to find a more suitable studio. In late 1966 Dudley left his wife and moved west to a storefront in the Ocean Park neighborhood.

The Venice Beach area in the 1960s was home to a significant number of artists there for the cheap rents and hedonistic lifestyle, but also better to study the vibrant street culture of decorated automobiles and surfboards. Inspired by the energy of Kustom Kulture designers like Big Daddy Roth, artists as diverse as Peter Alexander, Billy Al Bengston, Ron Davis, Craig Kauffman, and John McCracken were moving away from conventional art materials and practices, using metal and Masonite as supports, and spray guns, electric sanders, and buffers as tools. They were finding ways to make luminous surfaces using lacquers and automobile paint, fiberglass and synthetic resins, in order to create objects that would hover in a perceptually uncertain space between sculpture and painting.

This was the kind of art that Dudley was working toward, a form of abstraction beyond reference to the everyday, something that would deliver



4 Untitled (Prismatic Study), 1966-67

a transcendent experience to the viewer, a sense of wow. As soon as he was settled in his new studio space he began working on Masonite panels and set up a spray booth to move from the limited scale of pen drawings to something more full-size. But no matter how well prepared, the surface of the Masonite always absorbed light, and he knew he wanted something brighter, more declaratively in the moment. With more space and time to work, ideas developed quickly; he moved on to aluminum, lighter and easier to handle, and more reflective. Dazzled by the decorative designs he saw on customized cars, he sought out the specialized paints and learned the pin-stripping effects made popular by Kustom Kulture aficionados.

Working first with small squares cut to the same dimensions as the Masonite works, Dudley's first decision was to bend the aluminum slightly, giving it a convex curve. He then prepared the surface with a gray automobile primer, and finally applied vertical pinstripes of Murano glass to create an iridescent effect. This was Dudley's breakthrough, resulting in mysteriously compelling artworks that hover between painting

and sculpture, offering an illusion of space, but also obdurately present and object-like.

Encouraged by these first successes, Dudley proceeded by experimentation. He discovered that by eliminating the undercoat, the illusion of space was emphasized. But the square format and the pin-stripping were still rooted in the earlier drawings, and he knew he had to move beyond that. As he says, he had been "trying to replicate the drawings, and now wanted to just let the paint do it by itself."⁴ To get there Dudley decided he wanted something that would soar, and created a taller shape, a vertical bar that tapered toward the top, offering in its physical form an illusion of ascending. With this new form he also began to experiment more freely with the application of paint, creating hypnotically atmospheric finishes by allowing color to do the work. Again working with gray primer, in a typical piece he would spray an area of bluish paint on top and a reddish area at the bottom, then coat the whole with the interference paint, making a pearly yellow in the center area fading to green above and from pink to purple at the bottom, a weird, hallucinatory monolith hovering between the moment and some unidentifiable other space. By the end of 1968 he had a complete body of work, a series of stunning objects that simultaneously enter into the physical and interior, imaginative space of the viewer. There was certainly enough for a show.

But unfortunately, despite living in the then center of the Los Angeles art world, he had no helpful connections: Altoon was increasingly erratic and ill; Hopps, unreliable at the best of times, had left the Pasadena Museum of Modern Art for Washington, DC. Dudley could not find the support he needed; no one offered him an exhibition. He decided it was time to move East. In early 1969 he packed all the work in his station wagon and drove to New York. Quickly finding part-time work with the local office of Cart and Crate and an affordable studio on Broome Street in SoHo, he was ready to begin the next chapter in his life and career.

¹ The biographical information at the heart of this essay was provided by Don Dudley in an interview at his New York loft on September 19, 2013, and subsequent e-mails.

² Irving Blum, quoted in *Photographing the L.A. Art Scene 1955-1975*, by Craig Krull (Santa Monica: Smart Art Press, 1996), 5.

³ In an oral history for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Allan McCollum recalls working for Cart and Crate a few years later: "I met all the dealers, many, many of the curators locally and all the art handlers, of course, and preparators at all the museums' and universities' shows. Picking up works back then from the artists—Ed Ruscha, Sam Francis, Billy Al Bengston—I actually got to know all of them by sight so they'd say hello to me and so forth at openings. So, that was a lucky smart move to meet people."

⁴ See note 1.