# GEORGE WARDLAW

## CROSSING BORDERS

**$65.00**

# George Wardlaw

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by J. Richard Gruber, Ori Z. Soltes, and Suzette McAvoy

A significant figure in American art, George Wardlaw has prolifically produced paintings, drawings, and sculpture for more than sixty years. The insightful critical essays and numerous illustrations in this volume place the artist's work in context with relevant movements of his time, reveal the remarkable breadth of his technical mastery, and elucidate the evolution of his singular aesthetic vision. This book serves as an exemplary guide to Wardlaw's artistic legacy, and is also an important contribution to the study of twentieth-century American art.

When I assumed the position of Deputy Director for Programs at the Mississippi Museum of Art in November 2005, ambitious plans to move to a renovated facility were already in development. Most enjoyable among my new duties was the acquisition of additional worthy objects for the permanent collection in anticipation of the museum's June 2007 grand opening. The works selected were to be installed in the expansive, thematically arranged permanent collection galleries known as The Mississippi Story.

A series of curatorial meetings was held to identify significant gaps in the museum's holdings, and it was agreed that the lack of a major George Wardlaw work must be addressed. Thus, in October 2006, director Betsy Bradley, curator Patti Carr Black, and I ventured to Amherst to meet George.

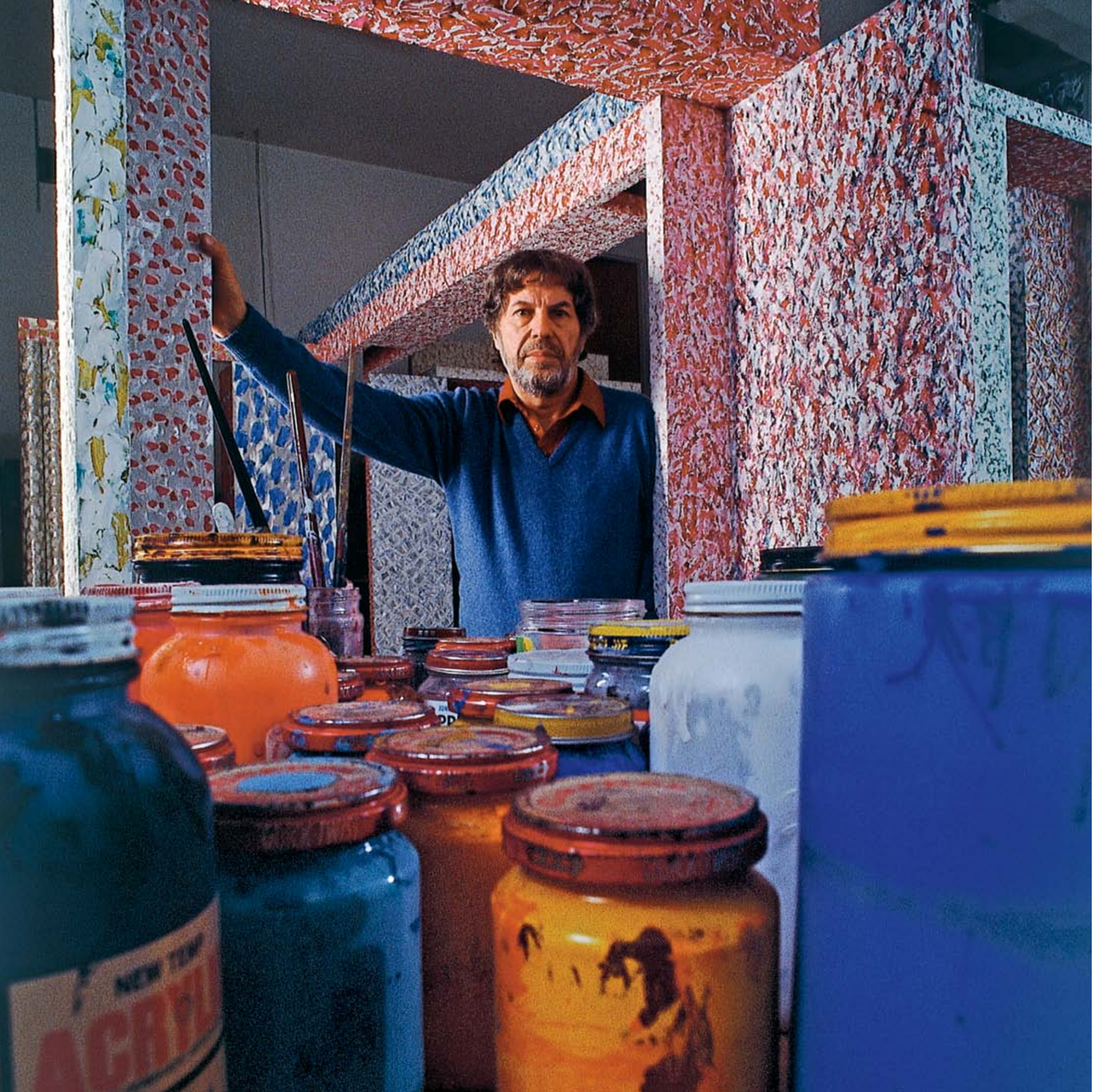
Though prior to the visit I had some general notion of George's work, gained primarily through exhibition catalogs, I was scarcely prepared for the abundant, overwhelming reality that awaited our party in his basement studio. There were decades of paintings, drawings, and sculpture, all arranged and stored with the same care and sense of order that is so evident throughout George's vast creative oeuvre. The experience gave one the sensation not so much of temporarily inhabiting the artist's studio but rather, vicariously, inhabiting his life.

Hung on a long wall, and visually dominating the studio, was a group of recent canvases from the artist's Shore Visit series. With their considerable scale, subtle hues, richly textured surfaces, and mystical references to nature, these paintings were truly breath-taking, and absolutely compelling. The three of us could scarcely contain our enthusiasm for George's brilliant new works as we walked back and forth among them, exchanging comments, making comparisons, and taking notes. At last, we agreed upon the beautiful *Guardian of the Light* for the museum collection.

Several of the themed galleries in The Mississippi Story are devoted to the Magnolia State's expatriate artists. Therein, *Guardian of the Light* is prominently displayed among works by many of George's Mississippi-born contemporaries, such as Sam Gilliam, James Seawright, Mary Lovelace O'Neal, Fred Mitchell, and Ed McGowin. We are honored that George's singular creative vision is shared at the museum with visitors from across the state and country, and around the globe.

—Daniel Piersol
*Deputy Director for Programs*
*Mississippi Museum of Art*

GEORGE WARDLAW



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BY J. RICHARD GRUBER ORI Z. SOLTES SUZETTE McAVOY

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*Passage X: Interior Garden*, Johnson Wax Corporation, 1985–86, site-specific sculpture commission

FRONTISPIECE George Wardlaw in his studio with one section of his two-story, architectonic sculpture commission *Passage X: Interior Garden* for the Johnson Wax headquarters at the Howard M. Packard Building, Racine, Wisconsin. Courtesy of *Contact*, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Spring 1986.

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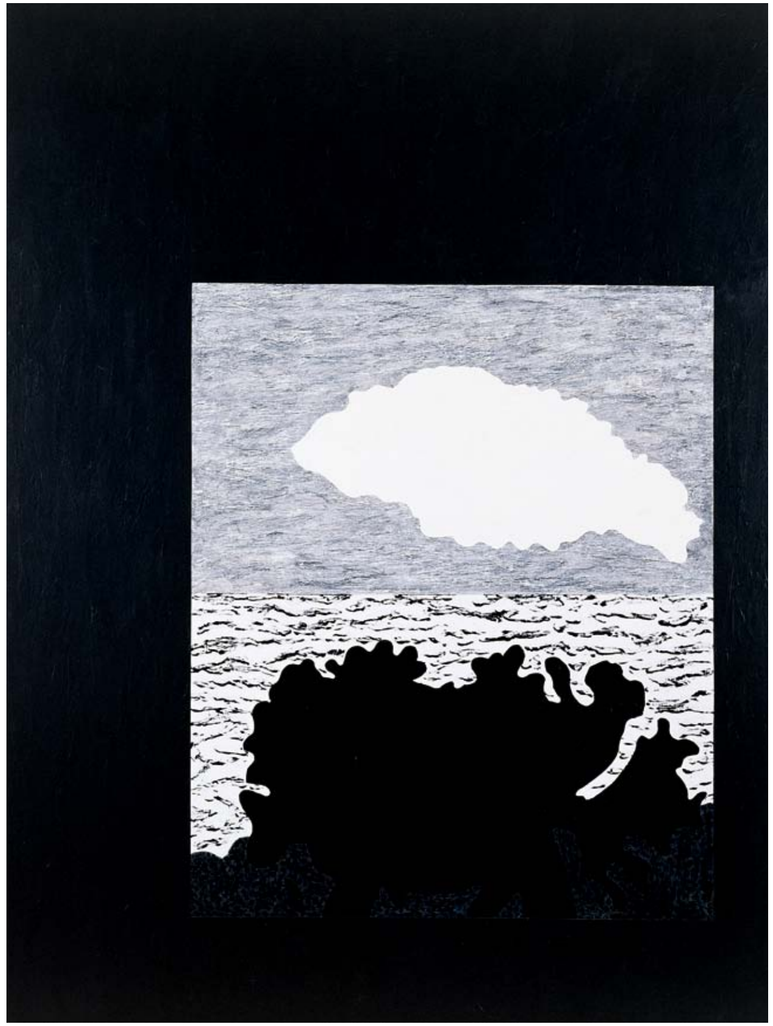


*Illumination Cloud*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 54 inches

## PREFACE

No one can say that George Wardlaw is a one-theme artist. Unlike less venturesome colleagues, content to exploit a signature idea or two, Wardlaw's aesthetic appetite seems unbounded. His passionate exploration of modes and expressions has taken him in practice from jewelry-making to painting to monumental sculpture; in subject matter from lofty religion to humble apples to the rugged coast of Maine. He has aptly described his art as *a kind of collage...of different places, times, experience, materials*.

In short, he has produced a rich and varied body of work whose scope defies the limits of a human lifetime, an output that resonates with the insights he has gained in the spiritual quest that eventually led him from Christianity to Judaism.

If I were forced to choose among the Wardlaw works I could most rewardingly live with, I would settle on his haunting Maine series, begun in the 1990s and still going on. Distillations of land and sea forms in stark grays, blacks, and whites, they are by turns restless, calming, meditative, mysterious, gentle, thunderously foreboding. Responding to these formidable works, one feels acutely keyed in to the artist's anima, a deeply inspiriting encounter. Thank you, George, for giving your insights and feelings such powerful visual voice.

—Grace Glueck

*Grace Glueck served for many years as an art writer and critic for* The New York Times.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the many people who helped give direction to my life's work over the past sixty-four years. Specific acknowledgments are limited to those who have had some direct connection to the development, organization, and production of this monograph or consistent involvement in my career.

First, I would like to express my deepest gratitude and appreciation to my three children, Greg Wardlaw, Sarah Wardlaw Hodgkins, and Steven Wardlaw, for their ongoing support and assistance. Over the years, each has dependably worked as a studio assistant. Greg has consistently helped move the work to exhibitions around the country. Regarding this monograph, Steven assisted in every facet; he was especially helpful in organizing the paintings and sculptures for review and photographing. Aside from the essays, most of the additional writing for this monograph and other general communication was diligently and expertly edited by Sarah.

Much appreciation goes to Lori Friedman who took on the momentous tasks of reviewing sixty-plus years of my art production and sensitively curating the works to be included. She also wrote the foreword which features a synopsis of the monograph's three essays, presenting the reader with a brief, enticing overview.

The magnificent organization and exciting presentation of this monograph was designed by Karin Wilkes who also served efficiently and expertly as project manager.

I am deeply indebted to the writers, Richard Gruber, Ori Soltes, and Suzette McAvoy, whose knowledge of my work, thoughtful scholarship, critical judgment, and concern for accuracy greatly enriched the publication. The essays are thorough in addressing the work of the specific periods and in relating the individual series to the work as a whole. I highly commend them for their understanding and sensitivity in decoding the visual communication and translating it into its written equivalencies.

Special recognition and deep appreciation go to Karen Johnson Boyd. Karen made significant contributions to my art career through exhibitions at her art gallery in Chicago, gifts of my work to museums, and along with her brother, Samuel Johnson, commissioned a major sculpture installation at the Johnson Wax headquarters, Racine, Wisconsin.

Special thanks go to Oriole Farb Feshbach for her counsel and general assistance. Great appreciation is extended to David Stansbury who photographed much of the artwork included in this monograph.

Although his role in this particular project was limited primarily to moral support, Hanlyn Davies has played a significant role in my life and work. He has consistently critiqued my work and has been a devoted friend, colleague, and advisor for many years. I have greatly benefited from his astute and generous guidance.

—George Wardlaw



To Judy Spivack Wardlaw

*This book in dedicated to my wife, Judy, who passed away on May 14, 2008. She would have taken the greatest interest and delight in contributing to this publication. No one had a bigger or more important role in my life and art career. She was my constant companion, advisor, critic, supporter, best friend, and cheerleader from 1957 until her untimely death. To Judy, my greatest thanks, appreciation, debt, and love.*

*Judy,* 2009, acrylic on canvas, 78 x 54 inches

# FOREWORD

I was introduced to George Wardlaw in 2009 at my son's Little League baseball game on a hot, sunny day in Amherst, Massachusetts. George was at the field watching his grandson play ball. I knew of George's work, and had seen a catalog from an exhibition he had had some years earlier at the University Gallery at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. I was aware of his reputation in Amherst as a prominent artist, teacher, and professor at UMass, where he had served as chair of the art department for over fifteen years. What I didn't know that day, was how fortuitous this meeting would be, and how impressed and fascinated I would become after my first visit to George's studio, by the range of work I saw there—paintings, sculpture, and drawings executed over a lifetime, covering decades of the most exciting periods in contemporary art making in America—a treasure trove of art hidden away in the racks, shelves, and storage spaces of his studio, tucked into the hillside of his Amherst home.

As an independent curator, and former gallery director in New York City in the 1980s and '90s, I recognized immediately the strength and significance of this collection of work by an accomplished artist whose focus and dedication appeared uncompromised by the more recent vagaries of the art market. It was thrilling to see series after series of works, beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, and continuing through this first decade of the new millennium, each speaking to the time in which it was made, in conversation with other artists, and the ongoing dialogue of contemporary art criticism and thinking. Beginning with an exhibition of his work at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1960, George continued to exhibit in both galleries and museums throughout his career, including a mid-career retrospective of his work at the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art and the Memphis College of Art in 1988. And yet, throughout his career, George remained devoted to his teaching, his family life, and without fail to the pursuit of making art, driven by his passion and desires rather than responding to the pressures of popular art trends. The body of work that has emerged from this freedom of expression is remarkable, and reveals a story that is both personal and universal, weaving one man's individual perspective into the larger context of the canon of modern and contemporary art of our times.

This story is chronicled in the in-depth essays that follow here. The three writers who chronicle George's work in this book offer a unique and extensive look into the unfolding of a lifelong journey played out on canvases, forged in metal, constructed in objects, sculpture, and installations—an exploration across geographical, physical, intellectual, philosophical, and spiritual boundaries. We come to know George Wardlaw, the man, and George Wardlaw, the artist, by traversing decades of art making that bring us through George's own migrations from the South to the Northeast, and through the changing tides of art movements from the 1950s up through the millennium.

Richard Gruber's detailed and historical study of this artist's early work begins with George's humble childhood growing up on a farm in rural Mississippi, from his earliest influences rooted in family and local traditions—his mother's quilting, his father's drawings of hunting dogs, his childhood discovery of his American Indian heritage—through art school at the Memphis Academy of Arts where he was exposed to contemporary art trends and philosophies. Gruber brilliantly examines George's early metalwork and jewelry making along with his early investigations into abstract expressionist painting, both in the context of regional influences and national leading art movements, placing George's work solidly within the context of the postwar Studio Craft movement while at the same time laying the foundation for George's future work in sculpture and painting. Wardlaw goes on to join the faculty at the University of Mississippi where he meets Jack Tworkov and David Smith, both of whom profoundly influence his work. From here, Gruber tracks George's career moves from Mississippi to New York (from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge to the State University of New York at New Paltz), to Yale University in 1964, and finally to Amherst in 1968 to the University of Massachusetts, where George goes on to chair the art department from 1971 to 1988. Gruber's essay covers George's work from his early abstract expressionist paintings, from Louisiana-inspired landscapes to the mountains of the Hudson River Valley, through George's immersion in the subject matter of apples—a fifteen-year investigation into subject, form, image, surface, patterning, and even pop art. Gruber paints a vivid picture of the pertinent historical and cultural references, noting the important personal events that shaped this period in George's work, and highlights the significance of the early work while laying the foundation for exploring George's mid-career and recent work in the essays that follow.

Ori Soltes addresses the large body of work that comprises George's mid-career from both an art historical and humanistic perspective. Subtitled "Spiritual Journeys and Borders Between Realms," Soltes's essay beautifully elucidates the transformation in George's work from painting to sculpture and back again, and from George's Southern Baptist upbringing to his eventual conversion to Judaism, merging the spiritual and the secular in works that transcend boundaries into what Soltes calls "the realm of the miraculous." Placing George's large-scale sculptural installation *Passage X: Interior Garden*, commissioned for the Howard M. Packard Building at Johnson Wax headquarters in Racine, Wisconsin, in the context of Renaissance and Baroque architecture and painting, Soltes elucidates the spatial relationships created in this work from George's use of minute detail on the painted surfaces to the monumental scale of his forms as they relate to the architectural whole. In this space, one that Soltes refers to as "the space between humanity and divinity in which art and the artist, like the priest and the prophet, intermediate," we can experience both our own relationship to size and scale as it relates to human form, the structures we create and inhabit,

and the natural order of our universe. George's foray into sculpture follows a seemingly nonlinear trajectory, which Soltes skillfully navigates, linking George's early jewelry to his 6- to 8-foot painted aluminum columns. These sculptures serve as templates for several series of works, beginning with monochromatic planes of color, moving to more complicated patterning and shapes referencing the imagery of specific painters (Kandinsky, Picasso, de Kooning, Miro, Matisse), to the brightly enlivened surfaces of dappled paint that represent various northern Mississippi Native Americans, tribes and localities, and finally to the Caged Free series where the sculptures explode with color and exuberance. From here, we are ushered into a series titled Doors, as the work expands in size and scale, moving toward the spiritual and monumental series of works titled Passages and Exodus I and II. In this Jewish-themed work, George explores his relationship to his own Jewish identity, family, and spirituality through the depiction of biblical stories in large-scale installations, and later in a series of paintings titled Ten Commandments and another titled Warning Signs. It is in this context that Soltes brings to life the religious underpinnings of each of these works, and the interpretations they inspire, linking thousands of years of history to our contemporary understanding of spiritual presence as it relates to the work of George Wardlaw.

In "Divining the Numinous: Maine Paintings," Suzette McAvoy introduces us to the next phase in George's oeuvre. Spiritual themes continue, though no longer tied to religious subjects. We are transported to the coast of Maine, a place where George was drawn after teaching at a Jewish summer camp for girls in Poland, Maine. Having spent many summers on the Maine coast, with his wife, Judy, and their children, George embarked on this new work, using photographs he had taken of the shoreline as reference material. Beginning with Shore Themes, a series of large abstract paintings on shaped canvases begun in 1997, McAvoy links George's work to the long tradition of Maine coast painting, going back to the paintings of Thomas Cole. In these early shore paintings, Wardlaw works with the idea of displacement, specifically in relation to the geometrics of the work. By methodically shifting one or more triangular panels, each of the paintings alludes to the ever-changing natural order of the universe. This series was followed by a group of paintings titled Cycles: Time–Light–Life where George explored a twenty-four-hour cycle of changing landscape based on the summer solstice. Subsequent series continued to focus on this coastline, from Shore Visits to a series begun in 2005 titled Windows.

In that vein, George continues to use weather as a subject to depict the vastness of the sea, as a way to explore the knowable and the unknowable in painting. His canvases are built up with layers of paint, and then scratched into with a razor blade revealing the hidden colors and textures that lie beneath the surface. The rocks on the shore and the waves in the sea become sculptural objects, creating borders and edges; and in his most recent series, Installations at the Shore, the shapes define one another in their separateness, and yet provide a bridge between opposites as one boundary intersects another. As one series leads into the next, Wardlaw crosses borders into new territory without ever losing sight of, or abandoning, his past. In McAvoy's words, "the abstract imagery of Wardlaw's Maine paintings reflects a profound awareness of the spiritual and metaphysical properties

Opening reception for the Wardlaw retrospective exhibition at Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, 1988

of the sentient world." These paintings anchor us in a place and time, grounded in nature, and yet transcend us into the universal as time and space merge with spirit. In this closing essay, Suzette McAvoy's sensitive insights and writing illuminate the vastness of George Wardlaw's aesthetic approach.

In 1992, George spoke about his work at the University of Massachusetts Art Gallery at Amherst in a presentation titled "Looking Back: A Conflict of Extremes." In this talk, Wardlaw read an excerpt from William Faulkner's 1950 acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize that included these words: "I feel that this award was not made to me as a man, but to my work—a life's work in the agony and sweat of the human spirit, not for glory and least of all for profit, but to create out of the materials of the human spirit something which did not exist before." As a young Mississippi artist hearing this speech, George said he was inspired by the strong and significant values expressed by Faulkner, ones that he hoped would be possible to apply to his own life's work. Indeed, we can see that George Wardlaw has accomplished this goal. The images and essays in this book offer us a window into an artist's process, one of discovery and exploration, a joining of heart and mind in works that ask us to see and experience the world we live in through an ever-changing lens.

—Lori Friedman
*Independent Curator*
*Amherst, Massachusetts*

Wardlaw in his Amherst studio, 1982

## PRELUDE

In 1983, George Wardlaw was one of only four Mississippi artists—including Ed McGowin, Ray Parish, and Valerie Jaudon—selected, at that time, to receive the Visual Arts Award from the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters. Nationally recognized as a distinguished artist, professor of art, and long-standing chairman of the art department at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Wardlaw was brought back to Jackson and his native state by the Visual Arts Award ceremony. The award also acknowledged the great distance Wardlaw had traveled in his extended artistic journey, one that began on a farm in Prentiss County, Mississippi, in 1927. It is a journey that still continues in 2011, the year Wardlaw marked his eighty-fourth birthday, while working on a series of new paintings and this book.

More than sixty years ago, in 1947, Wardlaw made an earlier return to Mississippi, after serving in the U.S. Navy, and then arranged to use his GI Bill benefits to enroll at the nearby Memphis Academy of Arts, leading to his entry into the American art world. Wardlaw had not seen an original work of art when he arrived in Memphis, yet, even before he graduated from the Academy, his abstract paintings and modernist silver jewelry were shown in national galleries and juried exhibitions. As the first essay will indicate, George Wardlaw's professional career evolved in rapid succession during the twenty-five-year period from 1950 to 1975: when he graduated from the art academy; built a painting and jewelry studio in Baldwyn; taught and studied art at the University of Mississippi (with David Smith, Jack Tworkov, and Reginald Neal); exhibited his work at major New York art galleries; moved to New York and taught at SUNY at New Paltz; was recruited by Jack Tworkov to teach at Yale University; then left Yale, to teach, and later to serve as the chair of the art department, at the University of Massachusetts, where he remained for the rest of his influential academic career.

— J. Richard Gruber

Memphis and Oxford to New Haven and Amherst

## **GEORGE WARDLAW** ART IN PROCESS 1947–1975

Memphis and Oxford to New Haven and Amherst

by J. Richard Gruber

George with his parents Lillie and Wiley Wardlaw about 1938, and (opposite) in his University of Massachusetts studio, 1969

George Melvin Wardlaw was born to George Wiley Wardlaw and Lillie Lee Tapp Wardlaw, in the hill country of northeastern Mississippi, on April 9, 1927, the month the nation's attention was focused on the Mississippi Delta and the Mississippi River Valley. If the young Wardlaw had been looking for a sign about the world he entered, it might have been found, less than one week later, when *The New York Times* described an unprecedented event: "Great Flood Peril Along Mississippi; Huge Mass of Water Is Rushing Southward Threatening to Inundate a Vast Territory." During the spring of Wardlaw's birth a flood of biblical proportions, the nation's worst natural disaster to date, inundated almost one million homes and forced hundreds of thousands of Southerners, many of them African-Americans (and many of them from Mississippi), to migrate to the North.[1] Two years later, in the fall of 1929, the stock market crashed, and the nation entered the years of the Great Depression.

George Wardlaw was raised on a farm four miles west of Baldwyn, Mississippi, during the hard years of the Great Depression. An only child (a sister died in childbirth), he enjoyed drawing from an early age, yet his life and that of his family, like so many others in Mississippi in the 1930s, was centered on farming. Work was the focus of life, and there was little time or opportunity for art. He grew up on an active family farm in Prentiss County where they raised cotton, corn, and soybeans, as well as hay to feed the farm's cows and horses. The family also maintained a small dairy operation. As soon as he was old enough, the young Wardlaw worked in a full range of farm activities

PREVIOUS PAGE *Blue Limbs* (detail), 1969, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 156.25 inches

including planting, plowing, hoeing, milking, baling hay, and picking cotton. He knew, firsthand, the life of a farmer, from planting to harvesting.

As with many other artists raised in Mississippi in the 1930s, Wardlaw's aesthetic foundations were largely vernacular, rooted in family and local traditions. Baldwyn was a small town located in Mississippi's northeastern corner, a significant distance, both geographically and culturally, from New York City, the center of the international art world in the 1950s, and the city where

George at his grandfather's house, 1930, and about 1940

Wardlaw would achieve recognition as an emerging artist. Baldwyn can be found on highway maps between Oxford, Mississippi, and Florence, Alabama, close to the Alabama and Tennessee borders. Founded in 1861, not far from the Natchez Trace, Baldwyn was shaped by the Battle of Shiloh and the Seige of Corinth, epic and tragic battles that took place nearby, rooting the city in the history of the Confederacy and the Civil War. Nearby Mississippi cities include New Albany (where William Faulkner was born), Oxford (where Faulkner lived for decades and home of the University of Mississippi), and Tupelo (birthplace of Elvis Presley).

Willie Morris, the noted Mississippi writer, once described his native state succinctly. "This is a land of ghosts: the vanished Indians." Morris referred to the Chickasaw, Choctaw, Natchez, and other tribes including the Yazoo, Choula, Algonquin, Tunica, Biloxi, Sacchuma, Alimamu, and Pascagoula, noting that they "worshipped the sun and the sacred fire and, like a few contemporary Mississippians, believed in spirits."[2] This aspect of the state's history was brought into Wardlaw's classroom, as he recently remembered. "When I was in either the fifth or sixth grade my teacher did a study section on American Indians and planned a pageant as part of the study. There were four teachers in the school and four classrooms. Each teacher taught two grades in the classroom. When the teacher, Ms. Rogers, announced the pageant, she said everyone would participate." Then, in a striking way, Wardlaw learned that his personal history was tied to Morris's "land of ghosts":

> *And she informed the group that one student in the classroom had an Indian heritage and would serve as the Chief of the pageant. To my great surprise, I was that student. This was something totally unknown to me, I had never been told. After asking questions about this revelation, my mother said she was one-fourth Indian, that her grandfather had married a full blood Indian and the subject was dropped. From what I could gather at that time the woman was probably Chickasaw or Choctaw. I felt honored with my elevation in status to Chief and took great pride in the idea that, in at least one way, I was different from everyone else in the classroom and that pride has continued until this day.*[3]

*Itawambia*, 80 x 21.5 x 16.5 inches; *Iuka*, 80 x 17 x 16 inches; *Chickasaw*, 80 x 21 x 13 inches; *Yalobusha*, 80 x 24 x 12.5 inches; all 1980, acrylic on aluminum

After World War II, when he attended art school in Memphis, Wardlaw created paintings about his Indian heritage and, later, beginning around 1980, totemic sculptures that he titled after Indian tribes and places in Mississippi, reflecting his ongoing pride in his heritage.

Although he exhibited an interest in drawing and creativity in his early years, Wardlaw had never visited an art museum or gallery, nor seen an original work of art. Other than a single trip to Memphis, when he accompanied his parents on a visit to his Aunt Laura Prather, he did not spend time in major cities during his formative years. For the young Wardlaw, "art" was associated with the Baptist Church, the social and spiritual center of his family's activities—specifically with the religious scenes printed on the fans dispensed at Southern Baptist churches and revival meetings. Even now, he retains vivid memories of art within this context. Two other forms of creativity made lasting impressions on him. The first were the drawings made by his father to register the hunting dogs he trained. These flattened diagrams, representing

Quilt by Lillie Wardlaw, George's mother

the distinctive markings of each dog (serving as abstract portraits, in a way), intrigued Wardlaw, who thought they contained a certain power, "like magic," by the time his father completed them. None of these survive (they were submitted with the registration forms), but Wardlaw's early drawing may have been nurtured by the imagery, and practical nature, of his father's work. One of his aunts, who was an invalid, collected Wardlaw's childhood drawings and encouraged his work. His friends in high school also recognized his drawing skills, which developed in spite of the school's lack of formal art training.[4]

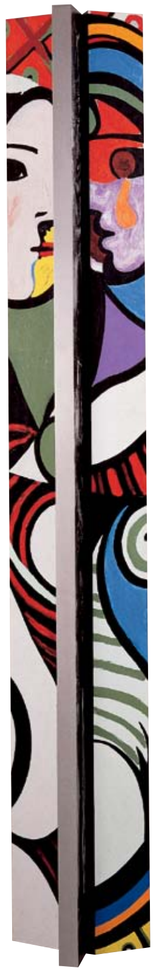
The traditional quilting associated with his mother, Lillie Lee Tapp Wardlaw, her friends, and other relatives was another source of inspiration for Wardlaw. Through her quiltmaking, he learned to appreciate color and pattern, and also came to understand the social environment tied to Southern quilting. Art museums may not have been available to him, but Wardlaw was exposed to important vernacular art forms, including quilts and the types of "folk art" now exhibited and collected in regional and national museums. Significant scholarly, curatorial, and collecting activities have been devoted to Southern quilts and quiltmaking in recent years, including projects like the Mississippi Quilt Association's Heritage Quilt Search Project, culminating in an exhibition and publication (*Mississippi Quilts* by Mary Elizabeth Johnson) on quilts made in Mississippi from 1800 to 1946.[5] National interest has focused as well on the complex patterns, designs, and materials associated with African-American quilters from the isolated Gee's Bend area in Alabama.[6] Wardlaw added his own tribute to his mother's creativity when he incorporated images of her quilts in his Reflections series of sculptures (notable, as well, for being created in the era of feminist art and appropriated images).

Wardlaw was far from alone in living a childhood without access to museums and art institutions during the Depression era. Across the South, there were a limited number of art museums open before World War II (and, during the era of segregation, even public art museums were restricted largely to white Southerners). Two of the oldest were city museums located in adjoining states, the Delgado Art Museum in New Orleans (opened in 1911) and the Brooks Memorial Art Gallery in Memphis (opened in 1916). In the state capital of Jackson, the Mississippi Art Association organized and presented exhibitions before a municipal art museum opened there. In 1931, as the economic impact of the Depression worsened across the nation, Eudora Welty returned to Jackson from New York. Other young Mississippi artists—including William Hollingsworth, Karl Wolfe, and Helen Jay Lotheros—soon followed, after graduating from the Chicago Art Institute. They joined artists in Jackson including Bessie Carrey Lemly and Marie Atkinson Hull, as well as other noted Mississippi artists active in the 1930s—including Walter and Peter Anderson, Dusti Bonje, John McCrady, Leon Koury, Caroline Compton Russell, and Richmond Barthe. Many Mississippi artists were employed by the federal government's WPA and FSA art programs during these years, creating murals and art projects across the state in schools, post offices, parks, and other public spaces.[7]

*Reflections: Post and Other Things,* 1985, acrylic on aluminum, 90 x 18 x 11 inches, Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, Tennessee, gift of Autozone, Inc.

*Reflections: Sentry to Garden*, 1979, acrylic on aluminum, 90 x 19 x11.5 inches
*Reflections: Time Log*, 1978, acrylic on aluminum, 80 x 18 x 12 inches





*Heroes*, 1978, acrylic on aluminum, 90 x 16 x 11 inches; *Reflections I*, 1978, acrylic on aluminum, 90 x 15 x 12 inches, collection of Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, Tennessee, gift of the Brooks Museum League

Before graduating from Baldwyn High School in 1945, Wardlaw volunteered for the Navy. After completing boot camp at the Great Lakes Naval Base, he was assigned to the Naval Hospital Corp School in San Diego. After graduating from the Hospital Corp School, he was transferred to the Naval Hospital in Dublin, Georgia, where he completed his service duties and was discharged in 1946, after serving in a variety of capacities. He served in the Navy's medical corps in 1945 and 1946, then returned to Baldwyn. One of his friends there inquired if he was still interested in art and drawing, and encouraged him to use

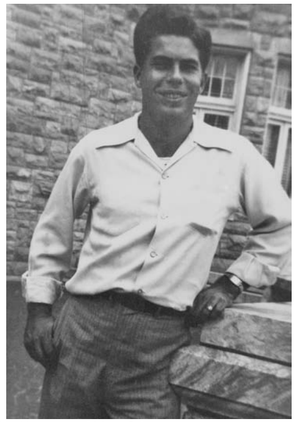
Hospital Corpsman George Wardlaw at the Naval Medical Center, San Diego, California, about 1945

his GI Bill benefits to enroll in a professional art school. Wardlaw drove to the nearest Veteran's Administration office, located in Tupelo, and learned that his benefits would apply to art school. The Memphis Academy of Arts was recommended. Two weeks later he enrolled there and moved to Memphis, where he lived with his aunt, Mrs. Laura Prather (at 1264 South Wellington Street).[8]

When Wardlaw arrived there in 1947, Memphis was a thriving postwar metropolis, one that contrasted sharply with the environment of Baldwyn. The city was a center of urban migration for people of diverse races and backgrounds—from Mississippi, Arkansas, west Tennessee, and points beyond—as was evident to him on Beale Street, in the downtown and riverfront areas, and in the city's many residential neighborhoods. In Memphis, the cultural and economic capital of the mid-South, he also found a progressive art institution, the Memphis Academy of Arts, where he studied with some of the region's most advanced artists and teachers (some connected directly to the New York art world). Wardlaw entered the art academy when Mildred Hudson was its director (a position she held from 1943 to 1949). Associated with the school since 1937, Hudson encouraged artistic and intellectual experimentation and was a prominent figure in the city's cultural community. After surviving the Depression years, the art academy was rejuvenated by the veterans who attended after the war with government support. Wardlaw soon found that many students were veterans, like him, who were mature and eager to obtain a professional art education. Visiting artists, often with significant national reputations and connections, were an integral part of the school's offerings.[9]

The art academy was located on Adams Avenue, in two converted Victorian mansions and a series of carriage houses, when Wardlaw arrived there. Though he had not seen an original painting, and knew art only from reproductions, he was not different from many entering the art schools of the nation, especially those from the South. Robert Rauschenberg, for example, born and raised in Port Arthur, Texas, saw his first paintings while in naval

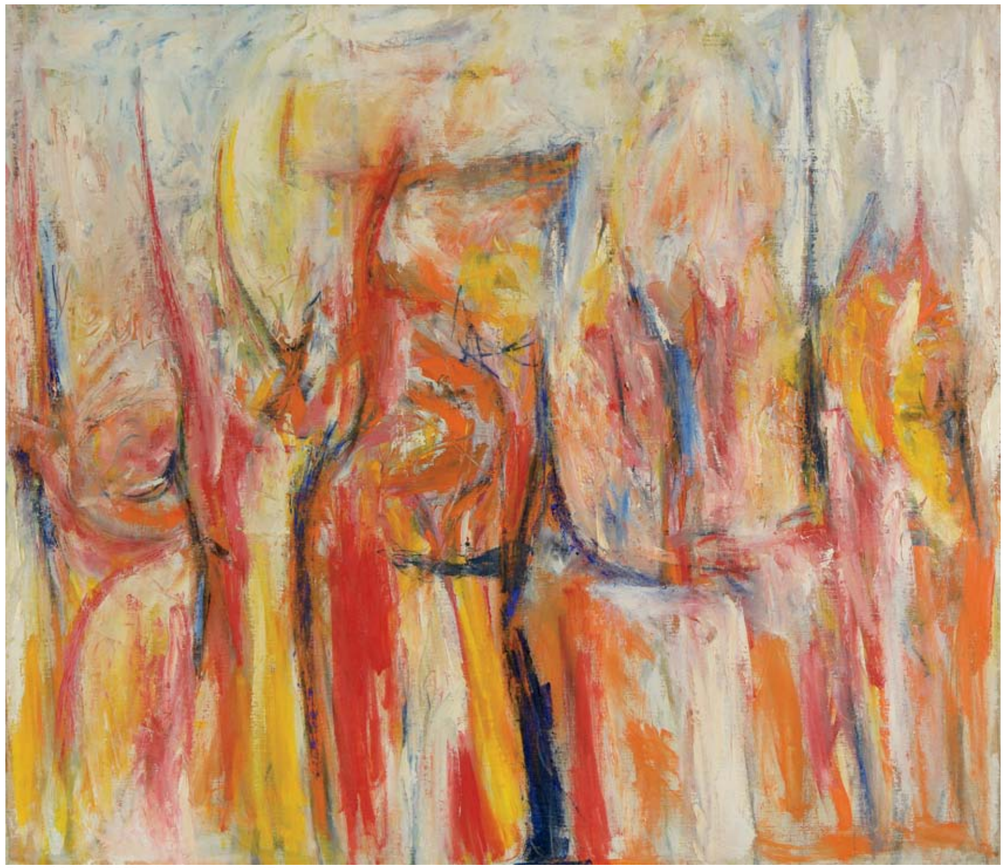

*Tree Emotion,* 1954, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches



*Southern Landscape*, 1955, oil on paper, 16.5 x 22.5 inches, collection of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, University of New Orleans
Wardlaw, at the Pink Palace Museum, Memphis, Tennessee, about 1949

training during World War II in California, when he visited the Henry E. Huntington Library and discovered Gainsborough's *The Blue Boy* and Sir Thomas Lawrence's *Pinkie* (he recognized them from playing cards).[10] Benny Andrews, due to the color of his skin and the laws of segregation in the South, could not enter an art museum in Georgia, even if one had been available to him. Andrews did not view an original work of art until he used the GI Bill to enroll at the Art Institute School and entered the Art Institute of Chicago in September 1954, discovering Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* and major paintings by Van Gogh, Renoir, Picasso, and Rembrandt that made a lasting impression. He was twenty-three years old.[11]

The year Wardlaw entered the art academy was, as described recently by Irving Sandler, a scholar and contemporary of the abstract expressionist painters, a critical year for artists working in New York. "The Abstract Expressionists began to 'break through,' as they put it, to their mature styles in 1947, some sixty years ago, and slowly gained world wide acceptance." Sandler noted that Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, and Willem de Kooning had breakthroughs in 1947, and that from "1948 to 1952, the Abstract Expressionists began to achieve growing art-world approval."[12] In the years before World War II, regionalism and American scene painting were dominant influences in art schools and federal art programs. Realist and narrative painting, often with American themes, had a major influence on students of art. In contrast, after World War II, progressive art schools (like the Memphis Academy of Arts) came under the influence of abstract painting. In the 1950s, abstract expressionism became the dominant influence in most academic teaching programs in America.



*Tower of Silence,* 1955, oil on canvas, 41 x 47 inches

*Pin*, 1951, silver, enamel, ebony; *Necklace*, 1951, silver, coral, ivory, ebony; *Pin*, 1951, silver, bone

From 1947, when he entered the academy, to 1957, Wardlaw's evolution as a painter was formed by the theories and influence of abstract expressionism. He achieved recognition as a painter who was aware of the New York School, and this continued until he began to shift to painting expressionistic subject matter (apples), beginning around 1957. Fortunately for Wardlaw's orientation to the art world, the academy reflected contemporary art trends and philosophies, including those evident in New York and in leading art periodicals (a growing and increasingly significant national influence). In painting, his work at the academy was influenced by Ben Bishop, who taught for a limited time there. Before the end of his second year, Wardlaw created nonobjective paintings and was influenced by Wassily Kandinsky's book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Other faculty members included Pillow Lewis, Dorothy Sturm, and Burton Callicott. Today, Wardlaw recalls that Callicott's skilled paintings and related interest in spirituality had particular appeal for him. Reginald Neal was director of painting at the academy from 1948 to 1949, and served as chair of the art department at the University of Mississippi while Wardlaw completed his MFA studies there.

After one year at the art academy, Wardlaw's painting *Factory Buildings* was included in a national traveling exhibition, *Twenty-Five and Under*, sponsored by the Jacques Seligman Gallery in New York. As a student, he saw works by leading national artists in exhibitions installed in spaces throughout the academy's buildings, encouraging his interest in exhibiting his own work. Most memorable for Wardlaw was the exhibition of Hans Hofmann paintings, hung in one of the academy's studio spaces, where students continued their training



*Ring*, 1949, silver, enamel; *Ring*, 1955, silver, gold, aquamarine; *Ring*, 1959, silver, gold, tourmaline; *Ring*, 2003, gold, silver, diamond; *Ring*, 2003, gold, silver

surrounded by Hofmann's works. Another loaned exhibition, featuring the works of Max Beckmann, made an impression on many academy students, including Wardlaw. The exhibition was sponsored by the art academy and held at the Brooks Memorial Art Gallery in Overton Park.

Under the guidance of William (Bill) DeHart, who taught jewelry and metalsmithing at the art academy, Wardlaw achieved notable skills in crafting art in silver. DeHart was a nationally recognized silversmith and jewelry maker, also known for his enamel work; his pieces were featured in major exhibitions including the Walker Art Center's influential 1948 exhibition, *Modern Jewelry Under Fifty Dollars*. Wardlaw recently observed that "Bill DeHart was the total influence on my jewelry during my time in school. The other influences came out of painting and sculpture." Underscoring this point, Wardlaw has explained that he regarded his creative work in silver as more than an exercise in refined craft technology. He viewed it as sculpture, produced on a small personal scale, which was directly related to his larger interest in painting and sculpture. He also looked to Joan Miro as another important influence upon the evolution of his early work. The biomorphic patterns and forms evident in his jewelry and silver work, marked by the integration of ivory, wood, and other materials into the silver, demonstrate his awareness of Miro. His skills in silver, tempered by a growing fascination with nonobjective painting, combined the practical and the conceptual. Ted Rust, a sculptor who assumed the director's position at the academy in 1949, also encouraged these explorations.

*Necklace* (three views), 1957, silver, enamel, ivory, gold, ebony, and other assorted metals and rare woods

Looking back in 2010, especially in light of recent scholarship and collecting in the field of American craft, the twofold path of creativity selected by Wardlaw is particularly interesting, and reflects the opportunities available in the postwar era of art and craft. While exploring the evolution of abstract expressionist painting, he also explored the parallel evolution of the postwar Studio Craft movement. Described by some scholars as the second American craft revival (after the Arts and Crafts revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), a number of colleges and universities—including Black Mountain College, Cranbrook Academy of Art, the University of Kansas, and Indiana University—offered new and expanded craft programs, as did art schools like the Memphis Academy of Arts. They attracted military personnel returning from World War II who used the GI Bill for professional training. Museums, including the Walker Art Center and the Museum of Modern Art, expanded the exhibition of modernist jewelry and decorative arts, while juried national exhibitions, including the American Craftsmen exhibition (organized by the University of Illinois) and the Decorative Arts and Ceramics Exhibition (hosted by the Wichita Art Association), became increasingly influential.[13]

Working within this evolving American craft environment, Wardlaw began to exhibit and sell his silver and jewelry, regionally and nationally. In 1949, his silver work received a cash prize from Handy and Harman. Recognized as a major distributor of precious metals, the firm was also noted for a professional interest in reviving the use of precious metals in art. In 1950, Wardlaw was chosen as

*Necklace*, 1957, silver, enamel, ivory

*Necklace* (two views, enlarged opposite), 1951, silver, enamel, ebony, ivory, paint; *Necklace* (two views), silver, ebony, coral

George, seated left center, at the National Silversmithing Worshop, Rochester Institute of Technology, New York, 1950

one of twelve individuals in a national competition to attend silversmithing workshops in Rochester, New York, sponsored by Handy and Harman, along with another Memphis Academy of Arts student, Earl Pardon. Wardlaw and Pardon were two of the academy's leading students. Pardon went on to a distinguished career in jewelry and design, as well as teaching at Skidmore College.[14] The next year, in 1951, competing in the Arts and Crafts section of the Los Angeles County Fair, Wardlaw received first and third place awards in the "Jewelry—with stones" category.[15]

The rapidity of Wardlaw's assimilation of the lessons taught at the art academy and his artistic successes were notable, and regularly reported in the Memphis and Baldwyn papers. In July 1947 he was included in a *Memphis Commercial Appeal* photograph with other students, "studying oil painting in the 'still life' class at the Academy." In 1948, he was the subject of an article, "Wardlaw, Young Mississippi Painter, Is Achieving National Recognition," in the *Memphis Press-Scimitar*.[16] In 1950, respected regional art writer Guy Northrop, Jr. reviewed the annual show at the Memphis Academy of Arts, commending Wardlaw and Pardon, and fellow students Andrew Kincannon, Louis Robinson, and Halina Amneski. He observed that "George Wardlaw and Earl Pardon, both standouts in the exhibit of silversmithing skill (their modern designs touched with primitivism

*Bottle,* 1951, silver, ebony, bone; *Salt Shaker,* 1951, silver; *Salt Shaker,* 1955, silver; *Bottle,* 1951, silver, gold

*Pin and Pendant*, 1957, silver, ebony, aquamarine, collection of Racine Art Museum, Racine, Wisconsin, gift of Karen Johnson Boyd

*Pin*, 1957, silver, gold, enamel, ivory, ebony

make exotic jewelry), have decided ideas about painting." Continuing, he noted: "Wardlaw trajects lines through his paintings in jigsaw-like patterns, all designed to knit unity into his creation, and color tells another story of balanced composition."[17] By 1951, Wardlaw had received numerous awards for his silver and had exhibited his abstract paintings nationally. After graduating from the art academy that year, he returned to Baldwyn and built a studio, planning to paint and to produce jewelry that would generate an income.

After building his studio in Baldwyn, he received an offer to join the faculty and teach silver and jewelry making classes at the University of Mississippi. He accepted and also enrolled in the school's MFA program. The art department faculty included Reginald Neal (chairman and professor of art), Bruce Breland (painting and design), Leo Steppat (sculpture, drawing, and foundations), Ann Chatman (ceramics), and Wardlaw himself (jewelry). Wardlaw took printmaking with Neal, sculpture classes with Steppat, and a course in design with Breland. As a member of the faculty, he was allowed to plan the rest of the program himself. The evolution of Wardlaw's career was profoundly influenced by the presence of two nationally recognized visiting artists, Jack Tworkov and David Smith. Tworkov came to Oxford in the fall semester of 1954 and remained for two months (Wardlaw recalls that Tworkov also lived across the street from him). Smith was in Oxford during the spring semester of 1955, for approximately the same time. During these residences, each artist was given a one-man exhibition at the University of Mississippi.



*Pin and Pendant*, 1957, silver, gold, enamel, ebony; *Bracelet*, 1951, silver, enamel, ebony, ivory

The tenures of Smith and Tworkov in Oxford reflect the open and vibrant nature of the American art world in those years as well as Wardlaw's remarkably good fortune during his early career. Offered the opportunity to work with two of the nation's leading artists, Wardlaw embraced it. He immersed himself in their art and visions, learning advanced techniques and theories, while also expanding his understanding of the larger American art world. David Smith (1906–1965) was recognized for his heroic and pioneering efforts in working with steel. In a 1952 symposium devoted to sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, Smith stated that "metal possesses little art history, what associations it does possess are those of this century; power, structure, movement, progress, suspension, brutality."[18] Smith personally transported his sculptures and equipment to Mississippi in his own truck, a process that made an impression on Wardlaw. From Smith's work and studio ethic, his attitude to sculpture and materials, and his vision of the larger importance of contemporary American sculpture, Wardlaw gained valuable insights for his own career as a metal sculptor. He followed the evolution of Smith's art, particularly admiring his Cubi series, and later began to create his own larger, more architecturally scaled pieces.[19]

During these early years of his academic career, while he taught students how to make silver jewelry at the University of Mississippi, Wardlaw continued to advance his own professional career by making, exhibiting, and selling his own jewelry. In 1951, the United States Department of State purchased five pieces of his silver and included them in Handcrafts in the United States, an

*Ten Commandments One (You shall have no other God); Ten Commandments Two (You shall not worship graven images); Ten Commandments Three (You shall not use the Lord's name in vain);* all 1993–94, ink and acrylic on Mylar, 15.25 x 10 inches

exhibition that traveled in Europe and the Near East. As the 1950s advanced, while he studied with David Smith and Jack Tworkov, his works were featured in some of the most influential art fairs and exhibitions in the country, including the American Craftsmen exhibitions (in 1952, 1953, and 1955) and the Decorative Arts and Ceramics Exhibitions at the Wichita Art Association (in 1951, 1953, 1954, and 1958). He also exhibited his abstract paintings and became associated with galleries including the American House Art Gallery in New York, the Palmer House Art Gallery in Chicago, and the Circle Art Gallery in Detroit.

Wardlaw has stated that there was no visual artist who influenced the development of his career as profoundly as Jack Tworkov did. When Tworkov (1900–1982) arrived in Oxford, he had been active in the American art world for more than thirty years. Born in Poland, he was brought to America in 1913 and was raised in New York's Lower East Side. He studied writing at Columbia University and art at the National Academy of Design and the Art Student's League, and then painted in Provincetown. Tworkov actively participated in the easel painting division of the Federal Art Program in the latter half of the 1930s, painting in a social realist style. He was closely linked to the career of Willem de Kooning (their studios adjoined in the early 1950s), and both were significant figures in the evolution of abstract expressionism. When he came to Oxford, Tworkov's painting had evolved from a figurative to a more abstract style, evident in a notable work of this era, *Pink Mississippi* (1954), and he had taught art at Black Mountain College, American University, and Pratt Institute. Wardlaw learned about abstract expressionism, as well as the latest developments in New York, in a first-person way from Tworkov. Their association, forged in Oxford, continued far beyond Wardlaw's graduate school years and nurtured Wardlaw's commitment to a teaching career (and led to his teaching at Yale with Tworkov). Wardlaw also found Tworkov to be a major contributor to the evolving nature of his own philosophical and spiritual development, including his conversion to Judaism.[20]

A third national figure who influenced Wardlaw in Oxford was not a visual artist but a writer and the town's most famous resident, William Faulkner. He had published a remarkable range of books by that date including *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Sanctuary* (1931), *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), *The Unvanquished* (1938), *Go Down, Moses* (1942), and *Intruder in the Dust* (1948). Faulkner's books described a state, a people, and a way of life familiar to Wardlaw. In a speech Wardlaw delivered at the University of Massachusetts, in 1992, he discussed Faulkner's influence. "He became a bigger than life hero for me. His 1950 acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize for literature had almost biblical status for me. While living in Oxford I saw Faulkner frequently but I never had the courage to speak to him." Wardlaw mentioned a favorite excerpt from Faulkner's Nobel Prize speech: "I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance." Wardlaw added that, "For me, a young Mississippi artist, the ideals expressed by Faulkner were inspirational and represented strong and significant values, ones that I hoped would be possible to apply to my own life's work."[21]

In addition to these national artists and the members of the University of Mississippi art faculty, Wardlaw came into personal and extended contact with one of the region's most significant self-taught artists, Theora Hamblett (1895–1977). In fact, he lived in Hamblett's Oxford boardinghouse for two years, renting the entire second floor, over the apartments below, including her own. He maintained his studio there, and completed many of the paintings of this period in Hamblett's boardinghouse. Wardlaw appreciated and encouraged

Theora Hamblett, who became famous later in life for her paintings, made most of her income by renting rooms in her Oxford house to college students. Wardlaw rented the entire second floor for two years where he maintained a studio.

Hamblett's early paintings of her visions, and supported the evolution of her early career, as he recently confirmed. "I discovered Theora's paintings one day while paying my rent. I was very impressed and spread the word. Bertha Schaefer, who was a native Mississippian, and owned a gallery on 57th Street in New York City, came to visit me and I showed her Theora's paintings. Betty Parsons was visiting Dorothy Sturm [Wardlaw's professor at the Memphis Academy of Arts] and they came to Oxford for a visit and saw Hamblett's paintings. Parsons later showed the paintings. I was the one who got things moving for Theora Hamblett's paintings."[22]

Wardlaw's wife, Judy Spivack, was born into a Jewish family, and her faith had a significant influence on his interests. Photo by a student at the Yale-Norfolk summer school.

Wardlaw's support of Hamblett's visions and his understanding of Tworkov's art were connected to his exploration of the spiritual and mythic during a time when Tworkov and artists of the New York School explored similar interests. Wardlaw's spiritual interests can be traced to other sources as well, beginning with his childhood exposure to the Southern Baptist Church, which was central to the life of his family. By 1951, if not earlier, another spiritual influence entered his life as he began to consciously explore his growing interest in Judaism. Beginning in the summer of 1951 and continuing through 1964, Wardlaw headed the department of arts and crafts at Tripp Lake Camp in Poland, Maine. After regularly attending services at this Jewish summer camp for girls, he became intrigued with the religion he associated with his closest artistic mentors, Ben Bishop at the Memphis Academy of Arts and Jack Tworkov at the University of Mississippi.

Ben Bishop made a critical observation regarding one of the paintings Wardlaw created at the Memphis Academy of Arts, an experience Wardlaw recently described. "Ben Bishop came into my studio one time, looked at my painting, and said, 'Wow, that painting is like a spiritual journey. It belongs in the Museum of Non-Objective Art in New York. Why don't you title it *Spiritual Journey*?' I did, and I have been on a spiritual journey ever since." Wardlaw felt in those years that much of the most advanced art of the period—that which, to him, was most profoundly loaded with spiritual and abstract meaning—was connected with Jewish artists (including Mark Rothko) and the Jewish Museum in New York, known for its progressive exhibitions. His future wife, Judy Spivack, was born into a Jewish family, and her faith

*Passage IX: Changing Seasons*, 1984–85, acrylic on aluminum, 89 x 94 x 165 inches

*Louisiana Flesh*, 1956, oil on canvas, 48 x 35.5 inches

had a significant influence on his interests. By the mid-1950s, these diverse influences converged, and he began to actively study to convert to Judaism.

During his time on the University of Mississippi campus, Wardlaw experienced little of the state's brewing racial strife, but he was certainly aware of it, and still recalls that Tworkov said that he would not return to the South as long as segregation continued. Reflecting on this era, Willie Morris wrote that it was easy "to forget the cruel and ponderous racial climate in the Deep South—and especially in Mississippi, the deepest of the deep—in the 1950s and early 1960s.... In the early 1950s there was a burgeoning fear, quite frenzied in its unfolding, that the federal courts would intervene in the segregation of the public schools." Then, following the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision in 1954, there was, Morris explained, "a new day fraught with violence and tension. For many whites it spelled doom; the savagery would worsen with time. At stake was the soul of the state." It worsened in 1954 and 1955, the years Tworkov and Smith came to campus. "There was a resurgence of lynchings, all of them unsolved. A fourteen-year-old black boy [Emmett Till] visiting the Delta from Chicago was murdered for whistling at a white woman; the white men indicted for the crime were unanimously acquitted." It was a time when sensitive residents of Mississippi, and the nation, began to look for ways to stop these outrages, and it was, Willie Morris concluded, "the back drop against which Faulkner would begin speaking his opposition to racial injustice in his state in the 1950s."[23]



Wardlaw had all of these influences at work, in his paintings and in his psyche, during the middle years of the 1950s. His paintings reflected his interest in abstract expressionism as well as his evolving spiritual concerns. *Mountain Endurance* (1955) has an expressive, gestural surface, marked by rich coloration and a unified sense of pattern and composition. This work and other paintings of the period appear to have been abstracted from natural subjects, often landscapes. After he graduated from the University of Mississippi with a MFA degree in 1955, Wardlaw accepted a teaching position in the art department at Louisiana State University (LSU), in Baton Rouge. Responding to the changes in landscape, environment, and culture that Wardlaw encountered there, he painted works like *Bayou Country* (1956). This work brings a more sober, moody sensitivity to his abstraction, tempered, undoubtedly, by the qualities of the Louisiana landscape. Lighter in tone is another 1956 Louisiana painting, titled *Louisiana Flesh*, which suggests affinities to the influential series of abstract female figures painted in this period by Willem de Kooning, and refer as well to experiences Wardlaw recalled during his days in the Deep South.

*Bayou Country*, 1956, oil on canvas, 48 x 56 inches

Judy and George at their wedding

Wardlaw entered a decisive new stage, in his personal and professional development, beginning in 1956 and continuing into 1957. He decided to leave his native South and accepted a teaching position at the State University of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz. Ralph Wickiser, who was chair of the art department at LSU, resigned to become the new chair of the art department at New Paltz, and offered Wardlaw a faculty position, encouraging him to move to New York. In addition to his other academic responsibilities, Wardlaw established a silver and jewelry program at SUNY, but he began to make fewer pieces of his own jewelry (he did make silver work at Tripp Lake Camp until 1964, usually commissioned pieces for the camp counselors). In New Paltz he met Judy Spivack, after she visited a friend in one of Wardlaw's sculpture classes. Later that year they were married, on September 8, 1957 (and they remained so for more than fifty years, until her death, after an extended battle with multiple myeloma, on May 14, 2008).

By 1957, after a decade of working in an abstract expressionist mode, Wardlaw reached a transitional point in his art. He traveled to New York often during his New Paltz years, visiting galleries including the Betty Parsons Gallery, the Janis Gallery, the Castelli Gallery, the

*Apple*, 1957, oil on canvas, 9 x 9 inches, private collection; *American Apple*, 1961, oil on plaster, 10 x 4 x 4 inches; *Apple on a Stand*, 1961, oil on plaster, 10 x 4 x 4 inches

Poindexter Gallery, the Stable Gallery, and the Allan Stone Gallery. In the nation's art center, he discovered more than abstract expressionism, including many of the prevailing styles, ideologies, and movements cataloged more recently by curator Paul Schimmel. "The complex and overlapping art movements of the fifties, from which we can now distinguish Pop, assemblage, collage, Beat, figuration, gestural and hard edge abstraction, Happenings, Abstract Impressionism, and color field painting, were far from distinct to contemporary viewers." Schimmel also tied these movements to the galleries of New York. "Galleries such as Hansa, Castelli, Janis, Green, Martha Jackson, and Stable all showed Pop artists in the late fifties and early sixties alongside second generation Abstract Expressionists and Figurative Expressionists."[24] Wardlaw studied the range of works he discovered in New York, and increasingly, he found the paintings were "getting larger and larger, emptier and emptier."


Retrospective exhibition, Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, 1988

As Wardlaw searched for a point of departure, and for new inspiration, there were months when he completely ceased painting. When he finally began again, he selected a simple subject to paint: the apple. The apple, as his new subject, abounded with symbolic and artistic overtones throughout the history of art, yet Wardlaw initially selected it for its formal qualities. The apple became Wardlaw's primary subject for the next fifteen years. As he readily admitted, "I was really into apples." He went to libraries, researching every aspect of apples, including growing conditions and diseases that affected them. He became intrigued by all that changed apples, "being handled, being bruised, being diseased—the kind of markings, colorations, shapes that appeared."

Like Cézanne, one of his favorite painters then, he studied his subject's shape, color, form, and essence. He began to produce apples in diverse sizes, beginning in 1957, with very small works (in conscious contrast to the large scale of abstract expressionist canvases), featuring a single apple on a canvas measuring 8 x 8 inches. He worked on a related scale in both paintings and small sculptural pieces, as in *Apple* (1957), *American Apple* (1961), and *Apple on a Stand* (1961). By 1963, these canvases became more abstract and grew increasingly larger. He created three-dimensional apples, working in plaster and plastic, as in *Half Apple* (1963), and then he began to incorporate actual tree branches into his pieces, including a sculpture like *Apple and Limb* (1963).

The apple became his primary subject after he started teaching at SUNY. Initially, he used apples to make his students focus on the objects they were assigned to draw, rather than on their subjective notions of the assignment. He and Judy had moved to a house in New Paltz surrounded by orchards. It was quite natural and perfectly logical, therefore, that he turned to apples rather than other subjects for his students and his own interests. He spent hours in the orchards, selecting specific apples and branches for use. He explored the environment of the orchard, studying and photographing apples in all weather conditions and in all stages of growth, from early blossoms through maturity, even into rotting and decomposition, as they fell from the trees. A 1962 work, *Apples on the Ground*, was derived from these studies and combines the painted canvas with applied three-dimensional apples made of papier-mâché.

*Apple and Limb*, 1963, apple wood, modeling paste and oil, 72 x 56 x 24 inches

*Apples on the Ground*, 1962, papier-mâché and oil on canvas, 50 x 48 inches

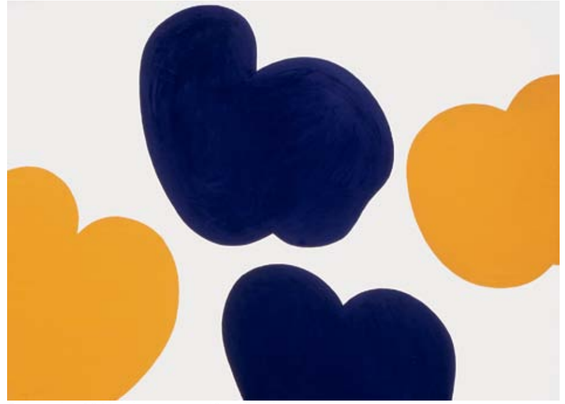
*Half Apple*, 1963, oil on plastic, 23 x 22 x 11 inches

After such an intense immersion in his subject matter, Wardlaw eventually moved beyond the use of actual apples as models, refining and shifting his focus. He began to understand that the apple was becoming "a container for something else, for painting ideas. The apple became a form to be used. The apple provided a constant subject that I didn't have to worry about—the problem then became painting."[25] Accordingly, in 1963 he painted one of his most forceful canvases, *Big Apple*. A large, potent apple is presented as an iconic image, complete with a rich painterly surface, one that reflected his earlier mastering of the abstract expressionist gesture. The powerful handling of the brush, the strength of his palette, and the power of his vision combined to give this apple a monumental, transcendental presence, one that marked a peak in this phase of his development. He also explored painting apples in pairs and diverse combinations, as evident in works like *Stacked Apples* and *Two Apples*, adding to the complexity of his compositions, and playing with classical compositional forms.

Although the apple predominated in Wardlaw's art from 1957 to 1963, he continued to paint abstract landscapes that transcended his studies of the orchards, inspired by the natural environment and vistas he discovered in the historic Hudson River Valley region. Works such as *Mountain-People, Hudson-Place of the Meeting Water*, and *Hill and Hudson Sky* reflect the evolution of his landscapes from his earlier Louisiana period. A brighter palette, a clearer sense of light, and a less somber tone were all inspired by his new environment, as well as by his movement away from the more subjective, abstract expressionist–inspired period. The Hudson River Valley had inspired leading American landscape painters in

*Big Apple*, 1963, oil on canvas, 62 x 68 inches, collection of Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, Tennessee, gift of Autozone, Inc.

the nineteenth century—including Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, Frederic Edwin Church, and John Frederick Kensett—who extolled the spiritually charged qualities of this environment and its reflection of the American landscape as a divinely blessed symbol, a sign of manifest destiny. Painters in the twentieth century remained aware of these earlier precedents, and were inspired in new ways by the region's dramatic light, mountains, and water. Wardlaw's landscape paintings of the Hudson River Valley built upon these traditions, yet in an abstract manner (see color plates on pages 60–69).



*Four Apples*, 1966, oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches

In the years from 1957 to 1963, Wardlaw continued to exhibit his art on a regular basis. In 1959, when the Memphis Academy of Arts opened its new building (designed by Memphis architect, Roy Harrover) near Brooks Memorial Art Gallery in Overton Park, Wardlaw's jewelry was featured in the opening alumni exhibition. Later, in the fall of the year, he exhibited his jewelry again, in the Academy Fellowship exhibition. From November 29 to December 17, 1960, a significant exhibition of his abstract Hudson River landscapes was presented at the Betty Parsons Gallery Section Eleven in New York. In a review (for *The New York Times*) of the fourteen works included in the exhibition, Stuart Preston observed: "Here this artist takes the Hudson River landscape with its hills and water and Catskill distances, translating them into a tortuously expressive painterly manner that has more to do with abstract expressionist practice than with an actual scene."[26] The Parsons Gallery exhibition served as a conclusion of Wardlaw's 1950s devotion to abstract expressionism, including his late use of this style for his Hudson River landscapes. The exhibition received attention from critics for its energy and expressive color, yet it was faulted for its indecisive, impersonal qualities.

By 1963, Wardlaw's explorations of the apple and its possibilities as a subject offered more original opportunities. In 1963, he exhibited his apple works at the Allan Stone Gallery, during an early peak of the pop art era. Once again, he returned to the forefront of current art activities. By the end of 1963, Wardlaw approached another period of change in his art and teaching career. His six-year search for a direction out of abstract expressionism, centering on his apple works, had placed him in the company of an important new generation of painters who set the stage for the appearance of pop art. Wardlaw's distinctive early apple canvases were produced before the influential 1958 exhibition of Jasper Johns's Target and Flag series at the Leo Castelli Gallery. Although pop art did not receive major critical or commercial recognition until 1962, centering on The New Realists exhibition at

George at his University of Massachusetts studio, Amherst, Massachusetts, 1970

the Sidney Janis Gallery in the fall of 1962, a number of artists, including Wardlaw, had prepared the way in the late 1950s. Wardlaw's painterly, expressionistic apples are significant developments in the transition from the symbolic and metaphorical concerns of the abstract expressionists to the more specific and objective focus of the pop art period.

That year, after Jack Tworkov assumed the chairmanship of the Yale University Department of Art in 1963, he offered Wardlaw a teaching position. Wardlaw accepted and moved to New Haven in 1964. United again with Tworkov, Wardlaw entered a productive new period, marked by a decision to focus exclusively on painting. After arriving at Yale, he essentially ended the making of jewelry in silver (although he returned to the use of another metal, aluminum, in his later, new sculptural forms). He stopped making apple sculptures in 1964. Not until 1975 would he return to the production of three-dimensional art. His decision to turn to painting exclusively in 1964 was related to a serious medical condition, caused by his physical reaction to the toxic solvents and hardening agents he used in making his sculptures. The national art press documented Wardlaw's reaction to these new materials, as well as related case histories of other contemporary artists.

*Limb with Four Apples*, 1966, oil on canvas, 29 x 90 inches

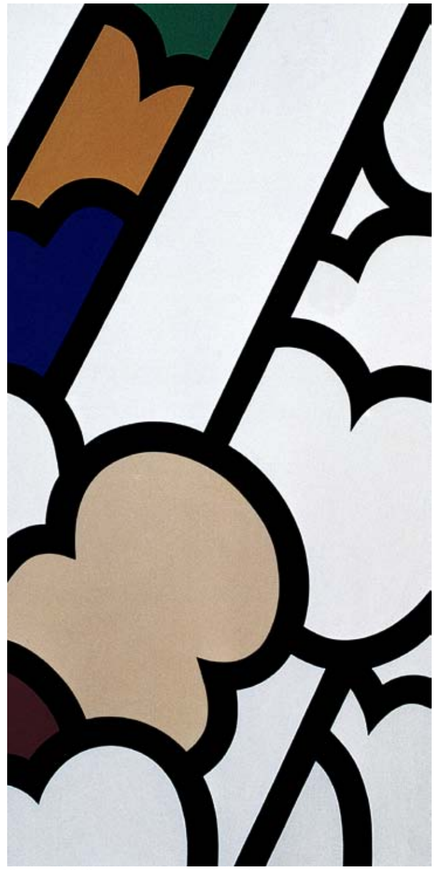
Wardlaw's spiritual concerns in his art, evident prior to 1958, subsided as an operative factor in the works he produced from 1958 to 1975. He, like other younger artists, began to move beyond the concerns of the abstract expressionists, as indicated by Robert Rauschenberg: "To start every day moving out from Pollock and de Kooning, which is sort of a long way to have to go to start from."[27] Instead, there was a new focus on art as independent object, whether it was evident in Johns with his flags and targets, or Wardlaw with his apple. Another new reality for this generation of artists was the increasingly supportive network of dealers, galleries, critics, museums, curators, and collectors in New York. As Paul Schimmel has noted, "The financial possibilities for an artist emerging in the latter half of the fifties and early sixties were unprecedented, and separated *all* these artists from their bitter predecessors, the Abstract Expressionists. This new generation was apolitical, college educated in art and design, knew what they wanted to become, and had no need for manifestos."[28]

George's wife, Judy, and their children, Greg, Sarah, and Steven, 1969

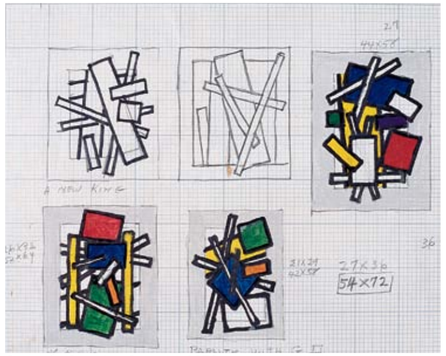
Wardlaw certainly seemed to know what he wanted. The use of the apple as subject and form offered him a way to achieve his goals. And, in a very clear way, the apple became his "brand," easily recognized and increasingly familiar, a "Wardlaw." Explaining the evolution of his work in these years in the 1992 lecture he delivered in Amherst, Wardlaw said, "In 1964, I moved from the apple orchards of New Paltz to New Haven but I continued to work with the orchard and apple as a theme." Continuing, he stated that during "this period I intensified the color to an extreme, simplified and refined the shapes, removed the gestural brush work, hardened the edge, and intensified the contrast between the figure and the ground." This is evident in works including *Vertical Blossoms* (1965), *Apple Blossoms I* (1965), and *Apple Blossoms II* (1965).

In the continuing evolution and simplification of his forms, details were dropped, and bold, flattened patterns began to appear, as seen in works like *Limb with Four Apples* (1966) and *Four Apples* (1966). In a review of Wardlaw's paintings in his faculty exhibition at the Yale University Art Gallery, in the spring of 1966, Joan V. Cobb, writing in the *New Haven Register*, observed that he "seems exasperated by pale pink apple blossoms and baby blue skies. He liberates all that—apples on a limb, apples in a landscape, apple limbs in bloom—from any sticky, romantic conceptions." Looking at his colors and forms, she declared that they "expose a new way of seeing things," and offered this conclusion: "The raw red life of the tortured apple is something to think about on a sunny spring day. Wardlaw not only confronts us with apples that won't stay still, he gives us nature screaming."[29]

In 1968, Wardlaw left Yale and accepted a position with the faculty of the art department at the University of Massachusetts, at Amherst. He served as a professor of art, and as chairman of the art department, from 1971 to 1988. In addition to his administrative duties, in the years from 1968 to 1975 he followed the evolution of his apple imagery, and this led, eventually, to a return to sculptural forms. After arriving in Amherst, he created a series of works he called the Black Line Paintings, including *Seeding* (1969). Then, as he explained, his "continuing concern for creating works with an energized presence



*Seeding*, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 96 x 48 inches

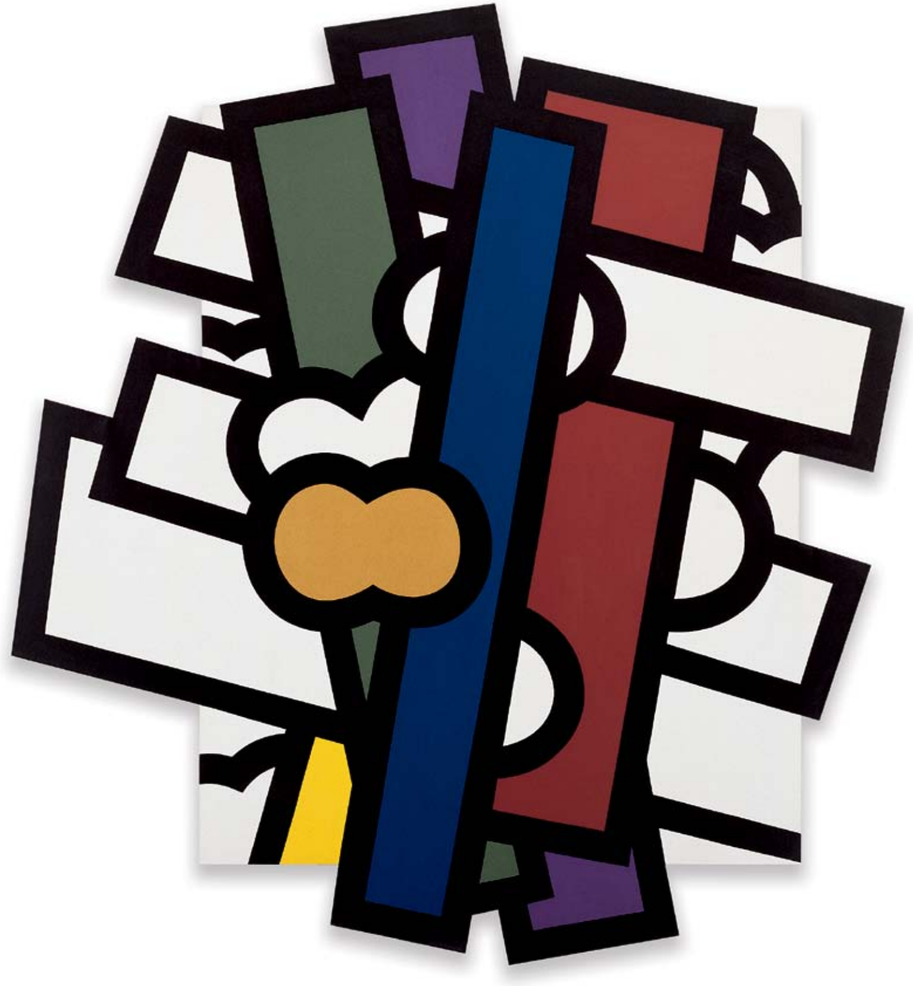


*Studies for Black Line Paintings*, 1973, pencil, permanent marker, and acrylic on graph paper, 8.5 x 11 inches

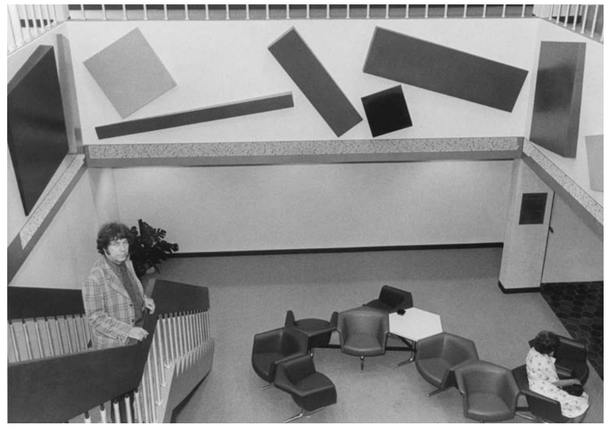
led me to develop paintings that dealt with space illusion in front of the canvas surface," bringing him to the last stage of painting apples, as evident in works like *Space Maker* (1970) and *White Advance* (1971). And, following the path of his own logic, he moved toward reduced subject matter and imagery in the years 1973–75, as he has stated: "During the next two years the paintings became somewhat simpler, the black line disappeared, and the work became very constructivist. Actually, the rectangles and the squares, in some respects, simply replaced the apples and limbs. These paintings became the foundation, the floor plan, for the sculpture that followed. I kept seeing these images extended into space." Examples of these works are *White Mountain* (1973), *Charger* (1973), and *Space Game* (1974). The paintings of 1975, including *Blue Sentry*, *Solar Sentry I,* and *Spirit Explorer V,* all seem to be moving (or dancing) toward a next logical step in his work, growing into three-dimensional, extruded forms, like the wooden sculpture, *Door Sentry* (1975).

By 1975, Wardlaw had come a long way in his extended creative and spiritual journey. In the most literal sense, he had moved from Baldwyn, to Memphis, to Oxford, to Baton Rouge, to New Paltz, to New Haven, and finally, to Amherst, where he has lived and worked for over four decades. His evolving spiritual journey, nurtured by Ben Bishop, Jack Tworkov, his wife Judy, and others, advanced in these years. He moved beyond abstract expressionism, his painterly focus on the apple, and a desire to work only as painter, and returned to sculpture in 1975. These new sculptural forms evolved out of his earlier paintings and sculptures, as well as his silver jewelry, reflecting a shift in scale, perhaps, but not in craftsmanship, vison, or artistic sensibility. Wardlaw has stated that he always considered his silver jewelry to be sculpture, not "decorative art." When he returned to making sculpture in 1975, spiritual concerns reappeared in his art, as evident in later pieces like the Passages XI: Exodus sub-series (1987–88), which reflected the spiritual issues he had explored during the period of his conversion to Judaism.

The young Wardlaw discovered great inspiration in his mentors, including Jack Tworkov and David Smith. In March 1955, as his graduate education was coming to an end, he listened carefully to a speech by David Smith at the University of Mississippi (he still finds these words inspiring). Smith described the emergence of a new era and new importance for the artist in America, which he called a "new order" and described in these terms: "It doesn't matter particularly whether the French or the United States were first. We have come of age, and intuitively create with an autonomous condition. I couldn't begin to name the new order painters and sculptors. There are thousands. Their number increases steadily in



*Space Maker*, 1970, acrylic on canvas, 104 x 97.25 inches



Commission at Mount Sinai Medical Center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1977

Retrospective exhibition, Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, Tennessee, 1988

all parts of the country. I hope we are eclipsed as the relative beginning of a greater movement."[30] If George Wardlaw was not already part of Smith's "new order" at that time in Oxford, he soon would be. Ten years later, he would be teaching at Yale University, on the faculty with Jack Tworkov, Al Held, and other prominent national artists. Twenty years later, in the spring of 1975, he was an established professor and chairman of the art department at the University of Massachusetts, a recognized national artist, and one beginning to move into a vital new stage in his artistic career.



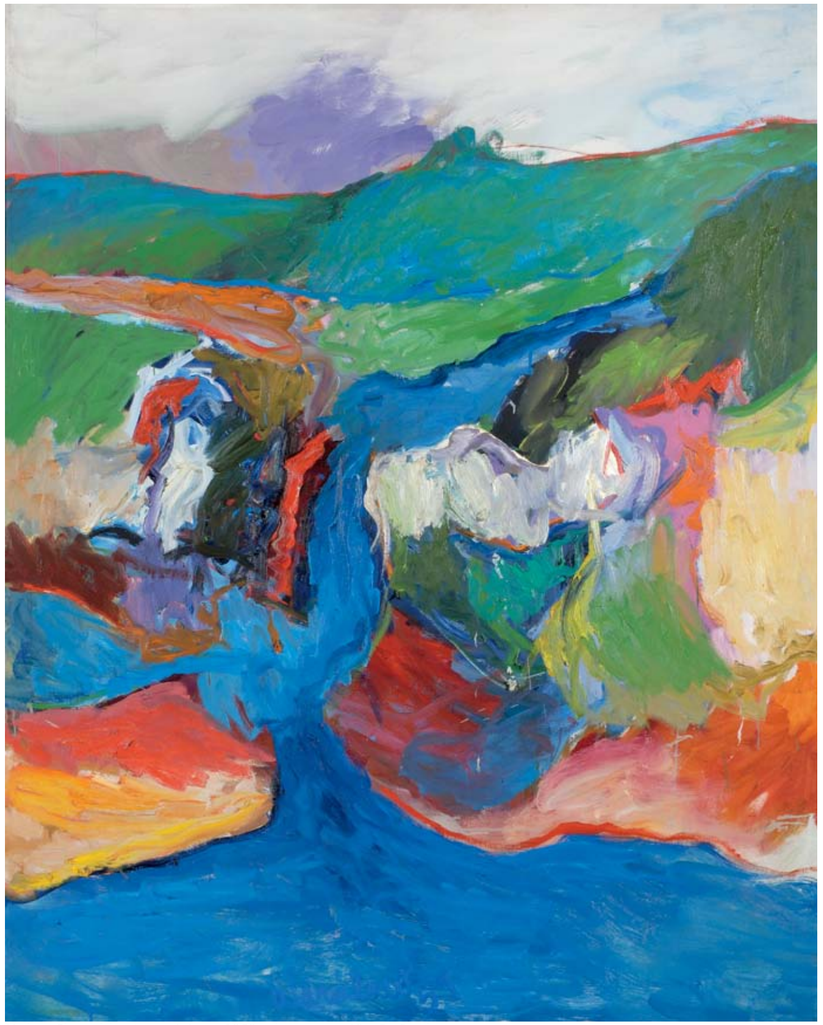
## color plates 1955–1975

*Equinox*, 1955, oil on canvas, 47 x 46 inches

*Mountain Endurance*, 1955, oil on canvas, 48 x 58 inches

*Bend in the Hudson*, 1959, oil on canvas, 60 x 62 inches





*Hudson: Place of the Meeting Waters*, 1959, oil on canvas, 68 x 54.5 inches

*Hudson Hills*, 1959, oil on canvas, 67 x 61 inches



*Hill and Sea*, 1959, oil on canvas, 57.5 x 63.5 inches

*Hill and Hudson Sky,* 1960, oil on canvas, 59.75 x 68 inches

*Color in the Hills,* 1960, oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches

*Mountain People,* 1960, oil on canvas, 64.25 x 68 inches



*Mountain Man,* 1960, oil on canvas, 41.5 x 48 inches

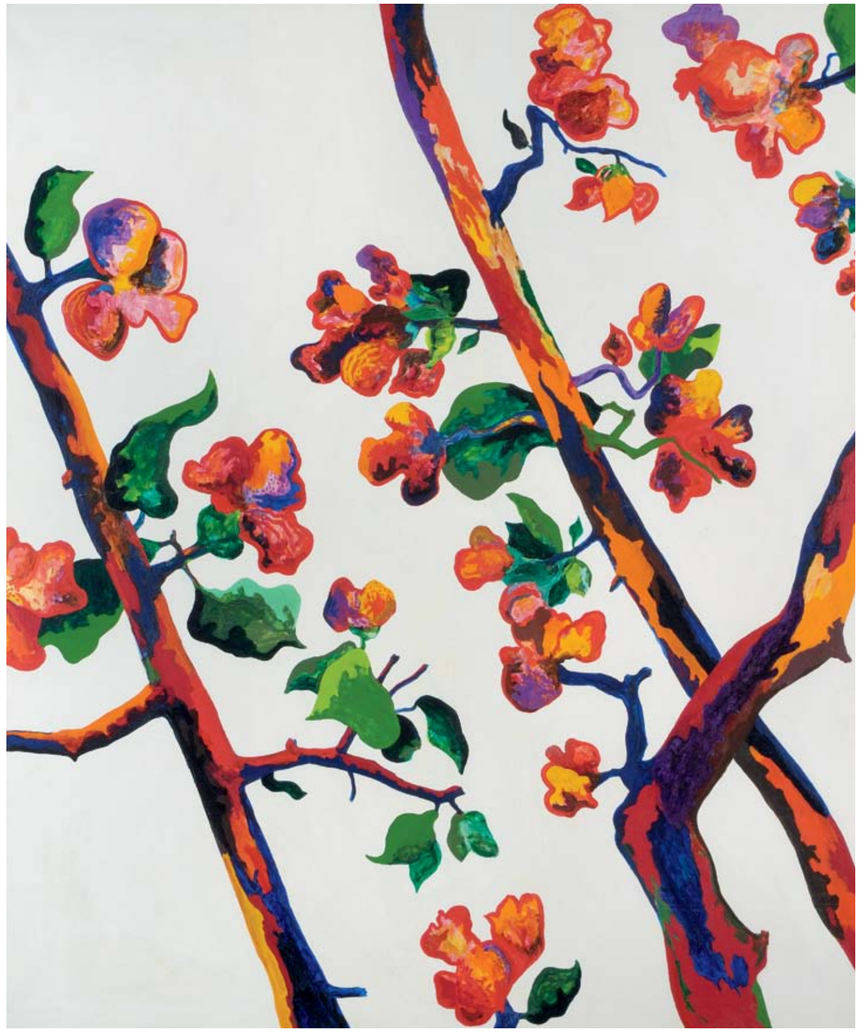
*Mountain Climb*, 1960, oil on canvas, 42 x 47 inches



*Mountain Peak*, 1960, oil on canvas, 60 x 49.5 inches, collection of Mr. and Mrs. William Harrison, Greenwich, Connecticut

*Stacked Apples,* 1963, oil on Masonite, 35 x 23 inches

*Two Apples,* 1963, oil on Masonite, 12 x 22 inches



*Apple Blossoms 1,* 1965, oil on canvas, 81.75 x 68 inches

*Apple Blossoms 11*, 1965, oil on canvas, 80 x 55.75 inches



*Vertical Blossoms*, 1965, oil on canvas, 80 x 60 inches

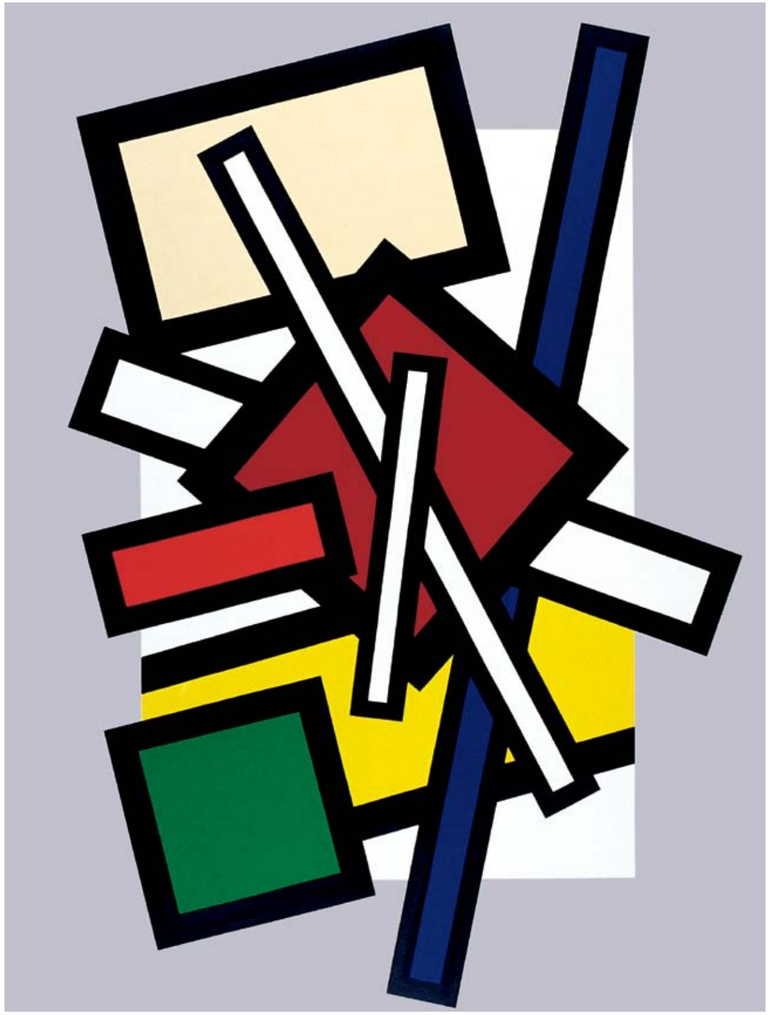
*Two Way Space*, 1970, acrylic on canvas, 102 x 100 inches



*Charger*, 1973, acrylic on canvas, 74 x 86 inches, private collection

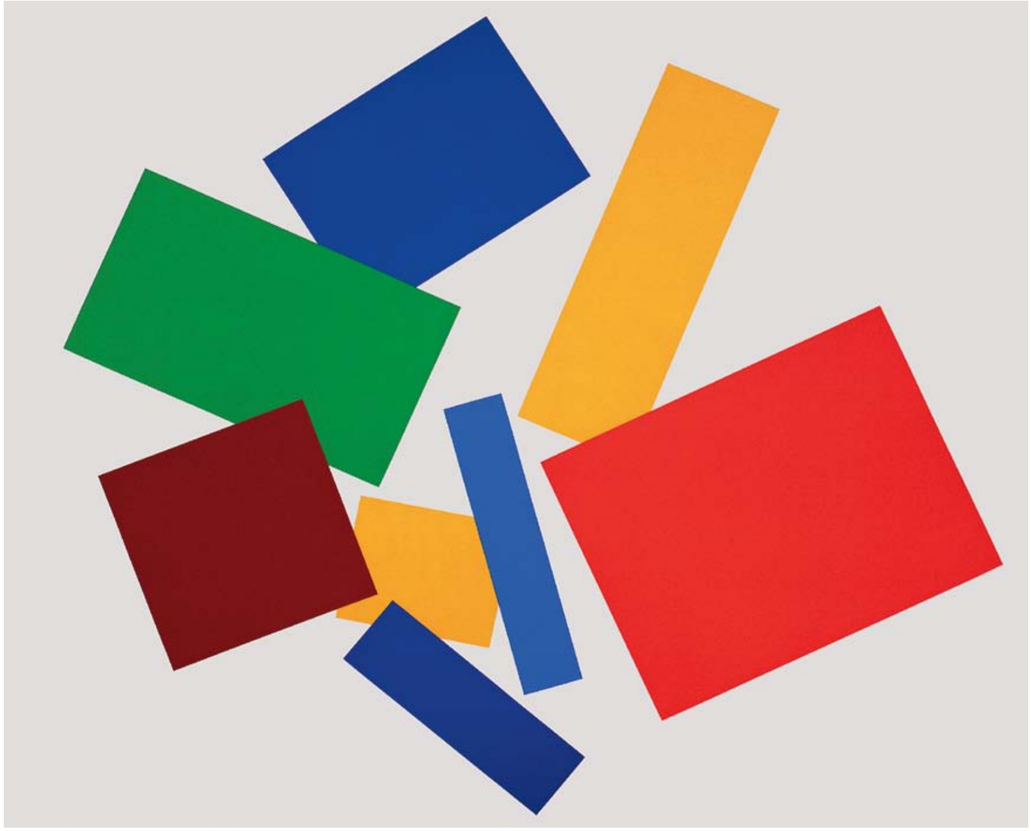
*White Mountain,* 1973, acrylic on canvas, 87.5 x 125 inches





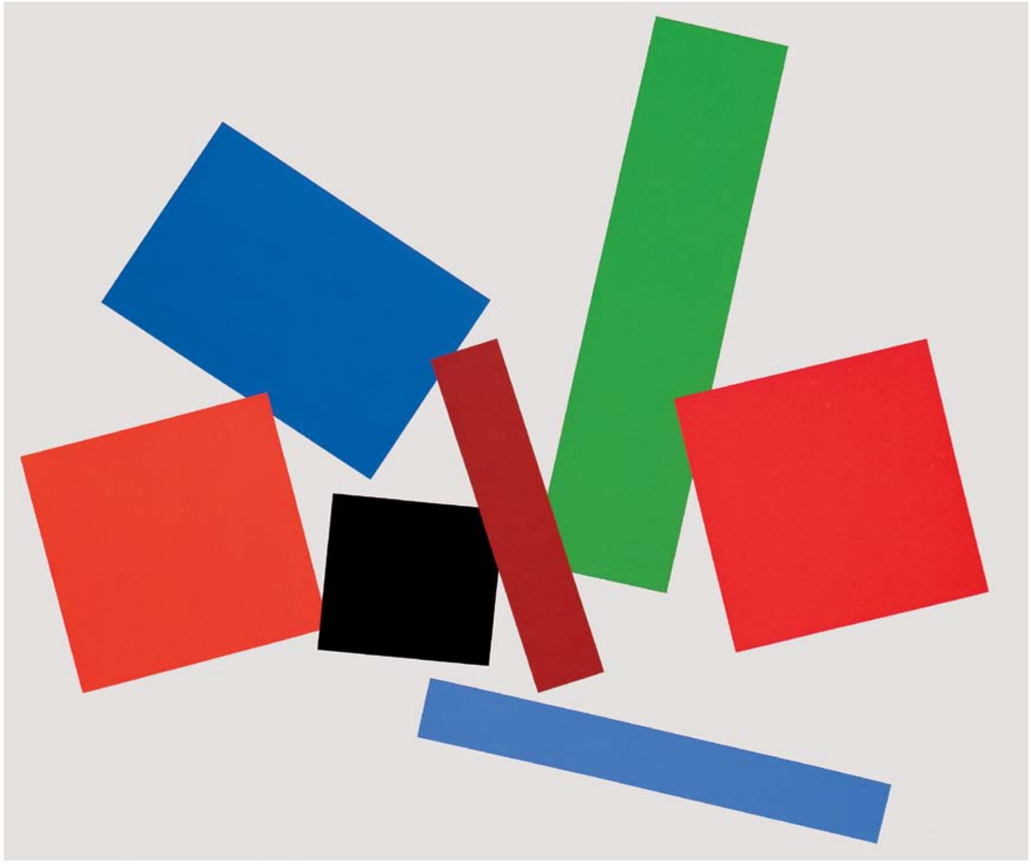
*Space Game,* 1974, acrylic on canvas, 58 x 44 inches, collection of deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts

*Red Monument,* 1975, acrylic on canvas, 62 x 50 inches

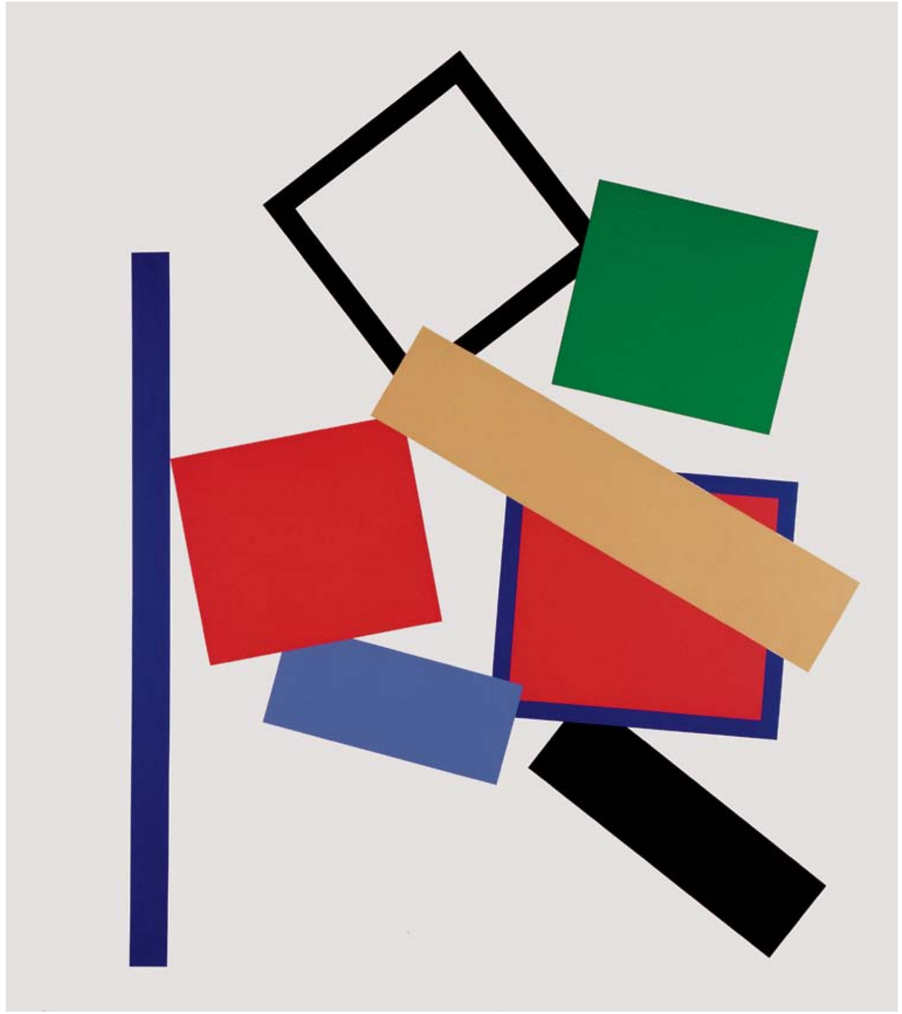


*Fortune,* 1975, acrylic on canvas, 70 x 85 inches

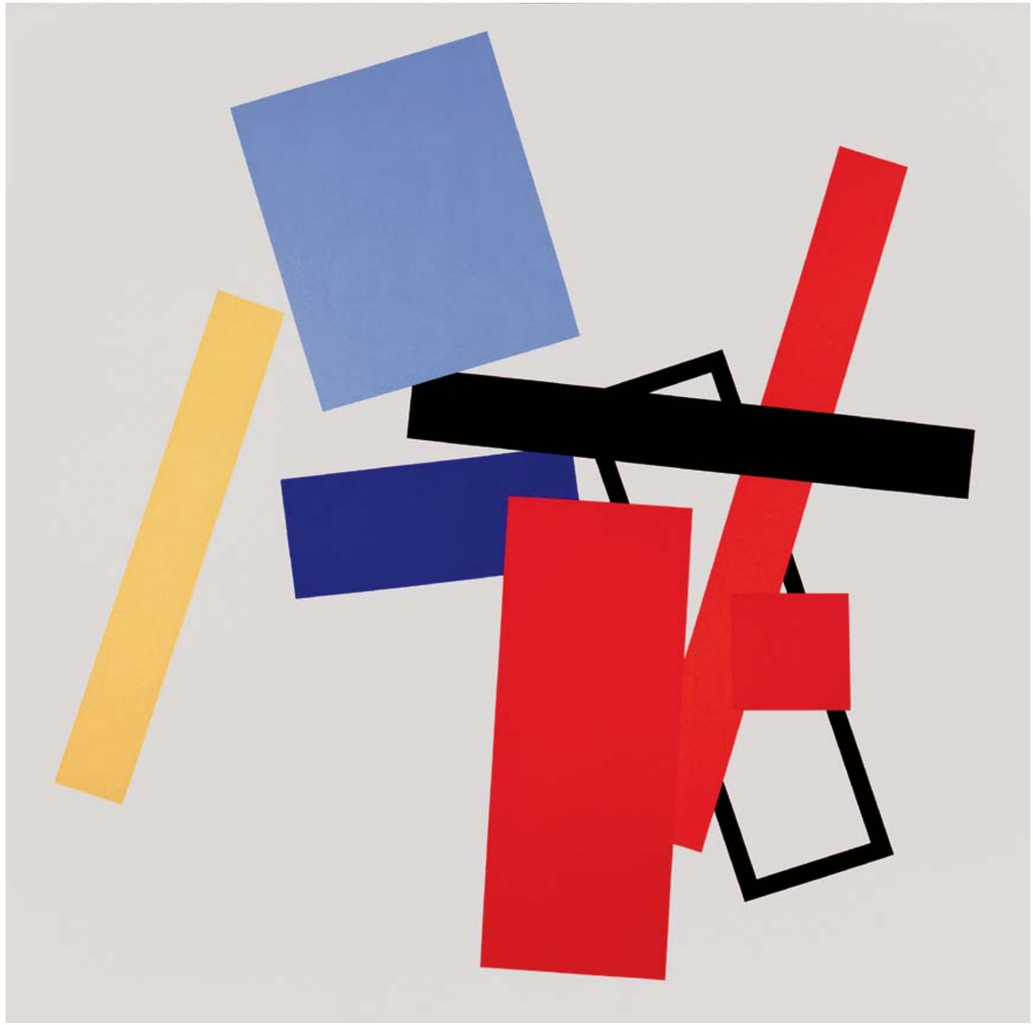
*Solar Sentry I,* 1975, acrylic on canvas, 85 x 67 inches



*Return to Hudson,* 1975, acrylic on canvas, 75 x 87 inches

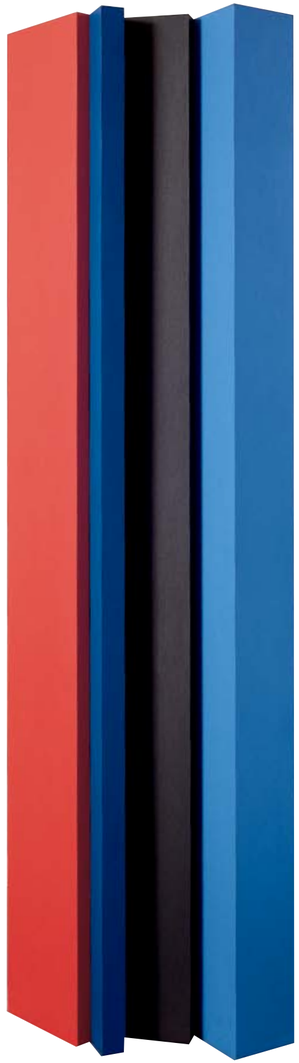


*Solar Sentry I*, 1975, acrylic on canvas, 85 x 67 inches



*Spirit Explorer V*, 1975, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 inches, private collection

*Blue Sentry,* 1975, acrylic on canvas, 85 x 60 inches, collection of deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts, gift of Dr. Beatrice H. Barrett



*Door Sentry,* 1975, acrylic on wood, 96 x 29 x 10 inches

Spiritual Journeys and Borders Between Realms

# **GEORGE WARDLAW** ART IN PROCESS 1975–1996

## Spiritual Journeys and Borders Between Realms

by Ori Z. Soltes

The thing about George Wardlaw's work is that, multifaceted as it is in both form and content, it invites multiple approaches to exploring and explaining what it is really *about*. His work may be seen as a series of stylistic and subject convergences. It constantly dances on the borders and edges of modes and categories of expression. It twists within the winds of an extraordinary range of influences while transcending their combination to yield something that is his own, and it turns in an array of directions without ever losing the clear-visioned path along which he has undertaken a lifelong journey.

Back when, after a post–high school stint in the Navy, he was studying art at the Memphis Academy of Arts on the GI Bill, Wardlaw painted a painting and his professor—Ben Bishop, who would exert an important early influence on the artist—came and looked over his shoulder at the work. He liked it. "And then he said, 'I've also got a name for it: *Spiritual Journey*.'" Wardlaw never forgot that moment, and in looking back at it sixty years later, and at the sweep of art that he has made between then and now, it is easy to see how his work has been a series of spiritual journeys on any number of levels all along the way.[31]

His path has been forged of the intertwining and dynamic contention of two fundamental realities: change and constant growth and transformation on the one hand, and a core of consistency on the other that may be perceived throughout his work, as it has been present throughout his life. His Southern Baptist father was a very religious man, and Wardlaw, throughout shifts through particularized modes of religion—to an identity that might be labeled, if one requires labels, culturally Jewish—has remained consistently spiritual. His sense of the wonderful and the miraculous in the world around us, in its colors and its shapes, in its natural forms and man-made lines, has never wavered. His art has moved across media and styles—as, in some respects, he has embraced diverse aspects of his own being—yet it has continued to translate a recognizable vocabulary of visual ideas into those endlessly shifting articulations.

### PRELUDES: CONVERGENCES AND BORDER-CROSSINGS

Wardlaw and his art have spent more than six decades crossing borders and occupying spaces between diverse conceptual places. Even a brief perusal of his career shows not merely diversity of style as of subject and material, but an aggressive assault on the boundaries so often defined within the history of art. He has been equally comfortable and equally accomplished in "craft" and "art." As his scale of focus grew—literally—from minute to monumental, his brushwork adjusted itself from rough-hewn, expressionist interwoven explosions of paradoxically delicate hues to controlled, sharp-edged agglomerations of pigment shaped by bold outlines. When he "shifted" from painting and other flat media to sculpture, he refused to leave his paintbrush and his coloristic sensibilities behind. Sculptural contours reshaped themselves from more curvilinear to more rectilinear but never letting go entirely of curves.

PREVIOUS PAGE *Parting of the Red Sea,* 1989–92, acrylic on aluminum, 92 x 204 x 66 inches

George in his Amherst studio, 1985

And when confronted with a sense of intimidation regarding how to implant sculpture within an apparently unconducive architectural space, he simply transformed his sculpture into architecture, creating a dynamic dialogue within that space, between the two media, between ups and downs, ins and outs, verticals and horizontals that transverse each other, between coloristic points of view and positive and negative concepts of space that ultimately encourage even the most casual passer-by and passer-through to engage—in the same sort of question the artist had initially asked himself in addressing the commission: How does it all work? How does it all—the lines, the colors, the shapes; the sculpture which is a painting and which is architecture and the architecture which embraces it—fit together, *miraculously*?

There is something about much of Wardlaw's work that seems to pull in a paradoxically secular manner from the realm of the miraculous. One might say that his work—particularly this last-mentioned gargantuan installation, *Passage X: Interior Garden*, 1985–86 (for the Howard M. Packard Building at Johnson Wax headquarters in Racine, Wisconsin)—creates the basis for what, in Raphael's day, was called a *disputa*. That is: a discussion regarding the miraculous in which all the participants agree that it happened. For Raphael's audience it was the Eucharistic transformation of wine and bread into blood and flesh; for Wardlaw's audience it is the artistic transformation of painting into sculpture and sculpture into architecture.

If the artist's painted sculpture nods obliquely to Raphael's *Disputa* fresco (ca. 1508) in the Vatican *stanze* spaces, as architectural sculpture it nods directly to Bernini's extraordinary *baldacchino* (1624–1633) for St. Peter's church in Rome. That Baroque work is a soaring bronze contrivance that needed to draw the human eye toward it in the cavernous, football field–like nave of the church: not to be lost within it, yet not compete with it, so that it has frequently been written of as opening up a border territory between sculpture and architecture. Wardlaw's work stands firmly in that open, border territory.

At the same time one might see his work as precisely antithetical to that of Bernini: the St. Peter's baldachin is part of a multiple-material program of engendering a sense of awe on the part of the viewer. In the context of the Counter-Reformation, its goal is to cause us to feel our tininess within the vast, distancing space and its diversely overwhelming visual elements, and by extension to recognize our minuteness within the context of the yet vaster, yet more transcendent, divinely shaped universe at large. Wardlaw's intention was to bring the architectural space down into the graspable purview of and for the human viewer by shaping a bridge of form and color to that architecture that the viewer cannot avoid noticing and thinking about.

As an "interior garden," this work hovers between spaces on several other levels. It carries an idea forward all the way from ancient Babylon and its renowned hanging gardens. But rather than cascading from a series of stepped walls and terraces, it surges up from the ground, criss-crossing the open atrium space with verticals and horizontals that reach from level to level. It offers multiple dialogues: between floral pigments and forms, and between the softness of vegetation and the hardness of aluminum columns and beams. Wardlaw has shaped an interstitial interior environment from an exterior concept.

*Passage X: Interior Garden*, 1985–86, Johnson Wax Corporation, site-specific sculpture commission

*Rex I* (three views), 1976, acrylic on wood, 84 x 18 x 15 inches; *Nashua I* (two views), 1976, acrylic on aluminum, 72.5 x 14.5 x11.5 inches

In a different time and place, the intermediator between the mundane and the miraculous would be the priest or the prophet. In this time and place Wardlaw has assumed that role as the shaper of the Garden: the *space between* that his work occupies—between minute and monumental; between painting and sculpture and between sculpture and architecture; between large, still swatches of pigment and agitated swirls of color and texture; between South and North, between Baptist and animist, secular Jew and religious Jew—is ultimately, art historically, analogous to the space between humanity and divinity in which art and the artist, like the priest and the prophet, intermediate. Wardlaw has spent a lifetime engaging that intermediation (as other essays in this volume explore in greater detail).

## EVOLUTION: CONTINUUM AND TRANSFORMATION

The journey to the enormous spaces of the *Interior Garden* began with fine crafting of infinitely smaller pieces: jewelry and everyday objects—mundane salt shakers and humble perfume containers turned into tiny sculptural masterworks of form and texture, of silver embedded with or in dialogue with stone, wood, and bone. These early works carry two obvious seeds within them—the one biographical, the other aesthetic. The horse bone comes from the remains of a mare remembered from the artist's childhood in rural Mississippi that, when she died, was carried into the woods to be subsumed into nature. Years later, Wardlaw remembered that, and went looking for the bones, to use them in his work.



*Nashua I* (two views), 1976, acrylic on aluminum, 72.5 x 14.5 x11.5 inches; *Nashua III* (three views), 1976, acrylic on aluminum, 72 x 20 x12 inches

And the forms that accentuate many of these pieces are the rectangular blocks that would later find their way onto an array of drawings and paintings, where, piled against and over each other and outlined in rigorous linear borders, they offer a sense of three-dimensional depth against the flat surface of the paper and canvas. The urge to three-dimensionalize, which yielded the first sculptures—with their arrays of juxtaposed curves and straight edges, convex and concave forms, attenuated boxes and tubes—translated the same disciplined rectangles of color onto the surfaces of those forms. That first sculptural series was diversely named: *Rex*, *Nashua*, and the like. But when, after a while, "I found those surface embellishments too pure," he began to alter them, adding texture and increasingly complex layers of line and shape.

Ah, but the journey wasn't *that* simple! The path is a convergence of paths, not a single, linear one. His first paintings, where he first simply let go, allowed his emotions, his *spirit*, to push his brush, rather than using his mind to shape rigorous forms—the first moments when Jack Tworkov, another of his very influential early teachers, punched him in the arm and said, "That's it! You've got it!"—were those energized expressionist works referred to above. Consider: works like *Mountain Endurance* (1955) and *Bayou Country* (1956) offer diversely grouped explorations of agitated line by way of varied vocabularies of color in directly reflecting the natural and human world in which he grew up and first began to paint.

*Tombigbee*, 1980, acrylic on aluminum, 80 x 22.5 x 12.5 inches

That world would shift from the bayou and river world of Mississippi and Louisiana to the meadow and orchard world of New York State when he began to teach at SUNY in New Paltz, in 1956—just a year before he married Judy Spivack. The visual results are stunning, from the continuity of overall formal feel—but with a different coloristic direction—exuded by works like *Mountain Climb* (1960) to redirected formal paths offered by papier-mâché-on-canvas depictions of *Apples on the Ground* (1962) or by the monumental (62 x 67 inches) oil on canvas, simply called *Big Apple,* of the following year. The energy of both his brushwork and his palette are still there but harnessed to more overtly "figurative" forms. That big apple is at once inviting and terrifyingly overwhelming, not just for its size but for the endless cycle of textures and pigments that submerge the viewer into a birth-growth-decay-death reality of which that apple is a symbol and a statement.

Two years later, two Wardlawian paths seem to converge in his still larger (81¾ x 68 inches) *Apple Blossoms* (1965). For here we see the same dynamic hues licking at each other, up and down branches and the leaves and flowers that festoon them. But the pigments are all harnessed to a deliberate flatness and a sharp-edged outline that begins to marry the emotive wildness of Wardlaw's expressionism to the intellectual discipline of strictly defined blocks of color and shape of the sort that defined his earlier jewelry. The convergence leads, organically, toward the pop art–like syntheses that carry from paintings like *Apple Blossoms II* (1965) to those like *Limb with Four Apples* (1966) and further, those like *Blue Limbs* (1969). There is thereafter a logical continuum that further reduces his canvas shapes and subjects to the layered and outlined curvilinear and rectilinear geometries found in works like *White Mountain* (1973) and culminates in his paintings that eliminate outlines altogether to achieve a dancing interweave of primary-color blocks across the grand and grandiose (85½ x 67 inches) picture plane of works like *Spirit Sentry I*—a coloristically pure explosion that turns Malevich and Mondrian on their heads.

So if the "purity" of the first works of sculpture is a logical continuation of a visual journey that carries from jewelry to these last paintings, on the other hand, in retrospect, the artist's arrival at a point of feeling that their colors were "too pure" and to push in a more textured—a more expressionistic—direction constitutes a circling back to where he began as a painter, fresh from the world of jewelry-craft. At the same time they represent a turning back toward the sculpted apples, small and large, upon which the artist had visited his intense color-and-brush proclivities in the first six or seven years of wrestling apples onto his canvases by myriad means.

The next several groups of his painted aluminum statuary (that vary, series by series, from as "little" as 6 feet tall to as much as 8 feet) echo each other and various aspects of what Wardlaw was and is, both as a human being and as an artist. One series, done at the end of the 1970s, just beyond his "pure color" groups, takes on with a direct frontality what was variously implied in the paintings done in the previous two decades: artistic loves and influences that converge and diverge within his consciousness and unconsciousness as an artist.

Layers of himself are easily—or sometimes not so easily—excavated by the viewer in the references to painters like Kandinsky (whose 1910 book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, had affected the young Wardlaw as much as anything); to Picasso and de Kooning, fragments of whose respective distortions of the female form interact across and around the undulating pilasters and columns; to Miro and the late, cutout Matisse, with their biomorphically encaged primary colors; to sculptors like David Smith—another direct influence on Wardlaw, when, like Tworkov, Smith spent time teaching down in Mississippi during Wardlaw's student years there. The stripping away of the aluminum surface to leave a raw, swirling, textured sheen (an expressionistic energy on the surface of the metal rather than across the surface of a canvas) that appears here and there on some of this group of sculptures echoes both the visual and the conceptual importance of Smith as a pathfinder along Wardlaw's journey.

The view from Wardlaw's studio in New Paltz, New York, 1959

A series that followed, inspired by archaeological explorations along the Tombigbee River, in an area not far from where he grew up, reflects on the various Indian tribes and localities—the Chickasaw, Itawambia, Iuka, Tallachatchie, Tishomingo, Tombigbee, Yalobusha—that defined not only the humans inhabiting that part of the world before Europeans arrived, but a part of the artist's

*Caged Free III* (three views), 1979, acrylic on aluminum, 80 x 21 x 10 inches

own complex ethnic heritage. If, religion-wise, he was born Southern Baptist and later became Jewish, his bloodline includes Cherokee—or perhaps Choctaw, depending upon whose vision and whose version of that genealogy one embraces.

Yet another series, called Caged Free, reflects on the ways in which these two concepts define the human condition. This is a focus that resonates all the way back to Greek literature (which revels in the issue of the human condition as caught between the contending truths of free will and fate) and the Bible (which ups the ante of that contention by positing an active, all-powerful creator God as the element counter-pulling against human free will) and forward to contemporary phrases like "free as a bird" which, while observing the gravity-defying abilities of most avian species, fail to recognize the pull upon them of wind currents and weather shifts, to say naught of predators. Networks of lines suggest undulating bars of color that separate the riotous colors beyond them from the viewer. They argue for webs of delicate but strong spidery material that enwrap and entrap these pillars; they reflect the hidden and overt webs and bars that enwrap each of us who appear to be standing free—at least free of these color-wrapped columns.

In retrospect, these various groups of bundled columns, ever-expanding in not only their lateral but at times, their vertical dimensions, are preludes to the doors and their symbolism to which Wardlaw arrived—in part as a



*Caged Free II* (two views), 1979, acrylic on aluminum, 80 x 23 x 13 inches

*Tallahatchie* (two views), 1980, acrylic on aluminum, 80 x 19 x 12 inches, collection of Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Mississippi, gift of the artist in memory of Judy Spivack Wardlaw



*Choctaw* (two views), 1980, acrylic on aluminum, 80 x 19 x 16 inches

delayed response to a book of that name (*Doors*) given to him by his then-sixteen-year-old son, Greg, in 1980—by the early 1980s, as he sought a "kind of container or metaphor for all the visions and ideas I have worked with in the past twenty years[32]...[for] there are two sides to a door: one side does not necessarily inform us about the other. Through these openings, we move from one passage of life into another."[33] The Doors series summarizes and

Retrospective exhibition at deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts, 1978–79

literalizes in a particular way all of the openings through which the artist had moved in the course of his career at that point. Each of the six works in the series offers a subtitle that suggests the metaphysical underpinnings for these scintillatingly physical explorations of form and color: *Spirit Lock*, *A New Light*, *Entrance*, *Enter Please*, *Cycle*, *To the Night Sun*.

Each presents an agglomeration of imagery around which the viewer proceeds. But in turn the Doors themselves are a prelude—a doorway—to the next series, Passages, which for the first time accompanies vertical elements surmounted by horizontal ones—so that the viewer can proceed both *around* and *through* the works, turning sculptural elements into architectural elements, just as the long line of sculptures that led through the artist's career turned painting into sculpture—and as, in fact, these myriad Passages are both and neither architecture, sculpture, and painting. By 1985–86 the visual vocabulary of the Passages series, born and bred in an ever-changing continuum from both jewelry and salt shaker and abstract expressionist painting through monumental paintings and agglomerations of aluminum pillars and pilasters, had blossomed into the multi-storied *Passages X: Interior Garden*.

The space between the salt shaker and the soaring interior garden of architectural doorways is the space between the mundane and the miraculous. What ties it all together is Wardlaw's diversely contoured humanism. The salt shaker and necklace converge with the paintings and sculptures on the interior garden with the dual intention of creating something aesthetic and beautiful and shaping something to which humans can *relate*, whether as an instrument of dispensing gastronomic improvement or the visual enhancement of the neck and upper chest, or whether providing a richly articulated link to an otherwise anonymous building through which people pass day in and day out.

And as it turns out, the overall Passages series, wrapped in time around the creation of the *Interior Garden*, ended up at a particular Passage by 1987–88. The seven-part subseries of Passages XI is entitled Exodus. This complex installation engages the dramatic narrative of the Israelite departure from Egyptian servitude and its formation as a people of Covenant at Sinai—which identity-shaping narrative has been retold in Jewish households across the planet for two millennia. The work represents the first overt exploration of that Jewish part of Wardlaw's identity that he had assumed by formal conversion thirty years earlier—in the same year when he married Judy, and soon after he began to teach in New Paltz; in the same period when he was beginning a passage from the Southern bayou to the Northern mountains and from one mode of expressionism to another.

## ARRIVALS: JEWISH AND OTHER IDENTITIES

In retrospect, the abstract direction Wardlaw's work began to take in the 1950s, and the range from jagged-edge interweavings of pigment without distinguishable forms on his canvases toward sharp-edged, heavily outlined, and distinct forms on the other; and his turn to large geometric statuary with painted and textured surfaces, offers another path along the spiritual and aesthetic journey that brought him to this work. For it also ties him to that double group of bold painters whose humanistic intentions have most often been ignored by critics: the abstract expressionists. Far from limiting their work to the engagement of color and form, Jackson Pollock in his way, and Barnett Newman, Adolph Gottlieb, and Mark Rothko in their way engaged the world beyond the canvas—responding to its explosive chaos by reflecting it (for Pollock) or by trying to restore it to order (for Rothko, Newman, and Gottlieb).

The latter group, the chromaticist group, turns out to have been comprised mostly of Jewish painters, responding to the imperative articulated most distinctly by the sixteenth-century Jewish mystic, Isaac Luria, to improve the world

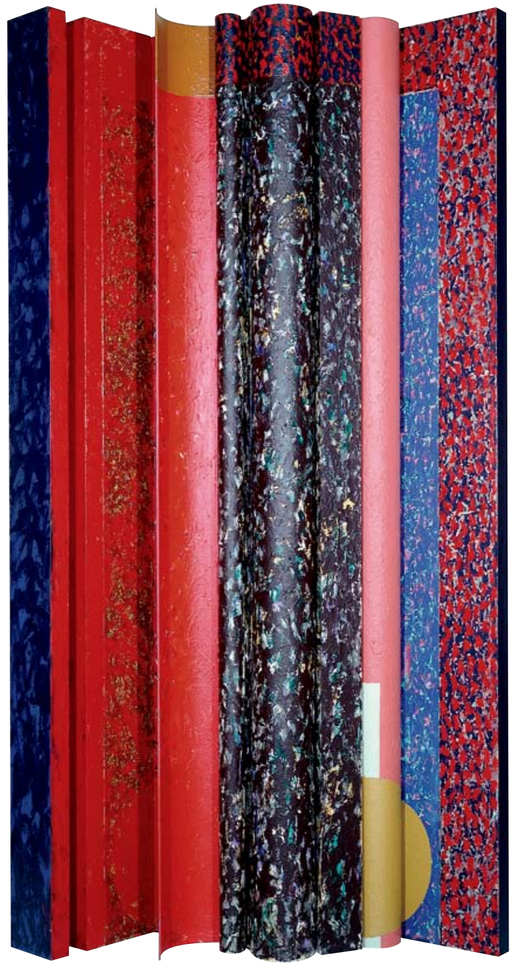
Karen Johnson Boyd and George viewing the Johnson Wax sculpture installation commissioned by Ms. Boyd and her brother, Samuel Johnson

Model for *Passage X: Interior Garden*, Johnnson Wax project

—to help fix what is broken, which after Auschwitz and Hiroshima was a social imperative that their art could not sidestep, no matter how pure its aesthetic interest.[34] It was an imperative the parameters of which were not unknown to Ben Bishop or certainly to Jack Tworkov, two Jewish artists who stand out as particularly important figures among George Wardlaw's mentors. Wardlaw's embrace of Judaism—his conversion in the spring of 1957—has any number of sources, but one of them was the influence of these figures, particularly Tworkov—who

*Doors III: Enter Please*, 1981, acrylic on aluminum, 84 x 50 x 22 inches





*Doors I: Cycle*, 1981, acrylic on aluminum, 84 x 46 x 15 inches

*Doors II: Spirit Lock*, 1981, acrylic on aluminum, 84 x 51 x 20 inches



*Doors II: Spirit Lock*, 1981, acrylic on aluminum, 84 x 51 x 20 inches

*Doors IV: A New Light*, 1981, acrylic on aluminum, 84 x 32 x 32 inches

would years later (1964) invite his former student to teach side-by-side with him at Yale—on his thinking not only about art, but about life.

Wardlaw's Passages XI: Exodus series has been described by the artist as "organically similar to the family unit: composed of many parts that one day will separate and go their own ways," but can and may "reunite from time to time." One might see the work as both an exploration of the roots of the Jewish identity, which the artist embraced back in 1957, and—as with all of his work—an exploration of himself, the myriad parts of which are organically connected and yet separate.

It is a work the parts of which may stand together as a gallery-filling installation or function as distinct and separate pieces. The first component is subtitled *Passage of Light (Fire)/Pillar of Cloud*—alluding to the semi-concrete manifestation of God's protective and guiding presence as the Israelites wandered for forty years through the wilderness. A visible if not tangible presence was connoted by the pillar of cloud hovering by day, and the pillar of fire by night, over the Tabernacle in which the Tablets of the Law were kept.

Wardlaw presents those pillars—adapting a form long familiar to him as a medium, as we have seen—as a pair of clustered columnettes on an earth-color-like base, rising 9 feet from bottom to top. One column cluster is swathed in a rich, fiery red (fire) and the other in interlicking shades of dark gray, blue, and black (cloud). Together, the two columns also suggest a monumental pair of stanchions around which a gigantic Torah scroll might be wrapped. This sense is reinforced by the way in which a narrow, silvery white top rises, as it were, "out" of each of the wider-diametered pillar clusters—but that feature also lends to them the aspect of a pair of chimneys, of the sort that have become iconic references to the Holocaust and its premier killing center, Auschwitz.

Thus this component of the overall work is filled with questions—where was the God of the Covenant when the pillars of fire and smoke rose from the ashes of nearly 5,000,000 Jewish adults and more than a million Jewish children?—even as the artist answers that unanswerable question by embedding it in the overall, multiply-nuanced installation, and in fact, places the pillars directly across from Part Five, *Creation*. This bright, modulated cardinal red piece offers a stepped base surmounted by seven columns. If they allude to the seven-day creation cycle delineated in Genesis I, they also recall—once again, in monumental terms—the seven-branched candelabrum (the *menorah*) that is the oldest, most consistent symbol in Jewish art.

The menorah image alludes, first of all, to the Temple in Jerusalem (in which it was the most significant object outside the Holy of Holies) and connotes the hope for its messianic restoration and the messianic redemption of Jews within their land and humanity across the planet. More subtly but more importantly, perhaps, it alludes, in concretizing the abstraction of sevenness, to the commandment to "remember the seventh day to keep it holy," which commandment, along with the other nine, defined the fundamental covenantal relationship between the Israelites and God. That covenant, articulated at Sinai, in the passage from servitude to freedom, from Egypt to the Promised Land, carries with it both the promise of redemption and the burden of responsibility for helping to effect the redemption through our own acts of improving the world.

Conceptual and visual antitheses abound throughout the overall piece. Part Four, *Palace Gateway* alludes to the sumptuous world of the Pharaohs who enthralled the Israelites. A central pillar, glowing with a light golden yellow, is placed within an enormous frame painted to suggest green-black marble of the sort from which myriad Egyptian royal images were cut. On the other hand, Part Two, *Waiting*—a long, primarily horizontal, bench-like construction placed at right angles to the *Palace Gateway*, *Creation*, and *Pillar of Light/Cloud* components, but with an upright part that suggests a stele, or the slab of a tombstone—is intended to convey the extended time between the beginning of servitude, or of exilic dispersion, and redemption. The dark slate gray, with yellow ochre emanating through the darker pigment as an undercoat, refers both to the wait that the Israelite slaves endured until their exit from Egypt and to the still-longer wait until the world is redeemed.

Part Six, *Border*, drenched in reds and yellows, may be seen in its disposition as an opening to serve as both entryway to and exit from the installation, while Part Seven, *Barrier*—set near that entry/exit "gate"—obstructs the way in and out, suggesting the difficulties and complications faced by the Israelites as they moved through the wilderness. These were spiritual and psychological as much as physical: the Egyptians in pursuit and the Amalekites on attack, together with the search for food and water, on the one hand; and on the other, the faith that the Egyptians and Amalekites would be defeated, that God

*Passover*, 1989–1992, acrylic on aluminum, 100 x 80 x 14 inches

would not abandon them and food and water would be found, that Moses would lead them effectively, and the challenge of living up to their covenantal promises.

Perhaps the central conceptual element—it is at least, arguably, as close to a physical center as the artist will allow us to perceive in the overall installation—is Part Three, *Passover*. This component is conceived as kind of passageway—a doorway in the midst of the work—that invites the viewer to move within and through, to pass back and forth into the depths within the depths of the entirety. Mottled yellow—the identifying color forced upon Jews at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, and long associated in Western, Christian art with Judas as a symbol of all that the Christian world has found objectionable in Jews and Judaism over the centuries—is sprinkled with red. This alludes to the lamb's blood placed by the Israelites on their doorposts at the divinely inspired instruction of Moses so that their houses would be passed over by the angel of Death during the night of the last plague against the Egyptians—the plague that would precipitate the pharaonic decision finally to allow them to go forth from Egypt toward the Sea of Reeds (the Red Sea, as it is often erroneously called) and the wilderness of Sinai beyond.

This third part among the seven that comprise Passage XI most emphatically interweaves imagery and ideas derived both from the Western, Christian tradition and the narrative that, shared by Jews and Christians—siblings from the same parentage that have gone their separate ways but reunite from time to time—offers one set of significances for Jews and another for Christians. Wardlaw, who stood in the first part of his life in one of those worlds and in the next part in the other, is thus a border creature (as every real priest and prophet and artist must be), and his art articulates the passage back and forth between realms to either side of multiple borders.

When I first met the artist in 1998, I was in the process of organizing an exhibition called "Jewish Artists: On the Edge." I was in search of the work of Jewish artists who were in one way or another edgy: in the originality of their art; in the fearless engagement of their identity—in whatever articulations, butting up against whatever range of subsets pertaining to gender, ethnicity, race, religion, nationality—and of an art world often inclined

PREVIOUS PAGE *Passage XI: Exodus*, 1987–88, acrylic on aluminum, 110 x 180 x 324 inches



*Passage III: Presence of the King*, 1983–84, acrylic on aluminum, 86 x 80 x 153 inches, Milwaukee Art Museum, gift of Karen Johnson Boyd

to associate the term "Jewish" with art devoid of power and empty of nuance. George Wardlaw's work could not have been more conducive to my needs. And both the combination of his identities and the particular path that he followed in embracing Judaism could not have been more intriguing.

Wardlaw, as a creature and a creator who stands (to repeat) at a place of multiple convergences, who hovers at the border *between*, who dances on diverse edges *of*, in the shaping of himself as in the development of his art—who became a Northerner but didn't leave his Southern roots uprooted; whose blood mixes Native American and European DNA; whose Baptist religious background shifted to a Jewish foreground—would have been a perfect candidate for inclusion in the exhibition even had his work not been so compelling.

His path to Judaism (of obvious, particular interest for the purposes of my exhibition) had been impressionistically forged through the inspiration of fourteen years of teaching art at Tripp Lake Camp, a summer camp for Jewish girls in Poland, Maine, and the spiritually moving and atmospheric Friday evening Sabbath services into which he found himself repeatedly drawn, against the background of woods and water. It had expanded to intense

*Warning Signs: First, Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Eighth and Ninth Plagues,* all 1995, pencil, ink, and acrylic on Mylar, 33 x 22 inches



seriousness through the hours spent in the company of Jack Tworkov (and others), whose focused influence on the artist ranged from the aesthetic to the spiritual. It culminated with his relationship—that became a fifty-one-year-long marriage—to Judy, herself from a cultural, secular Jewish background.

And as it turns out, the spectacular expansion of his series of his Passage installations—with their own varied vocabulary of expanding aspects of his earlier work—toward Passage XI: Exodus and all that installation connotes with respect to his Jewish identity in relation to other aspects of his being, had been yet another prelude to further development. That further development was Exodus II, a still more complex and extensive exploration of that narrative than had been articulated by the final Passages—in effect, the Exodus I—group.

The work that Wardlaw contributed to my 1999–2000 Edge exhibition was a large, pyramidal sculpture, *Exodus II: Warning Signs*, created between 1989 and 1992. Intended both to stand free and yet to be seen from a "front," rather than a "back"—one side, the "front" side, swarms with locusts to the attentive eye—is simultaneously a large, black aluminum step-pyramid and a stylized representation of the mountain which Moses ascended to commune with God and from which he brought down the Tablets of the Law with their covenantal commands.

It evokes both the Egypt whence the Israelites fled—and alludes to the array of plagues imposed upon the Egyptians to convince their Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to go free—and the place in the wilderness where they experienced the beginning of their reshaping as a people before wandering in the wilderness and eventually completing the return to the Promised Land. It thus also recalls the synthesis of the ethnicity of Moses—the Israelite raised in the ultimate Egyptian household—and the spirituality of Jethro, his Midianite father-in-law (a *priest* of Midian, no less), who joined the covenantal community when he heard about "all the goodness that God had done to Israel" (Exodus 18:1–12): a figure whose transformational spiritual biography might be said to anticipate the artist's own spiritual transformation.

But that single piece is in fact only one part of a larger series—of seven monumental sculptures and dozens of accompanying paintings. If we may recognize the organic relationship between this series overall and its immediate predecessor, Passage XI: Exodus, we can readily discern the new directions it has taken compared with its older sibling—and the ways in which it has doubled back to earlier work in both two and three dimensions. Most obviously, the emphasis on horizontal and vertical elements has been supplemented by both an interest in diagonals and in the formation of them by means of chains of horizontal/vertical steps.

So, too, there is a profound translucent smoothness to the surface texture to go with a wider range of more muted pigments through which minute, repeating figurative imagery sometimes peeks through. That remarkable surface translucency—one might find a seed of this planted back in the Reflections series in those gleaming surfaces that alluded to David Smith's work—is derived from an almost obsessive and certainly labor-intensive process devised by the artist, of burnishing the surface and then applying acrylic to it, and then scraping away,

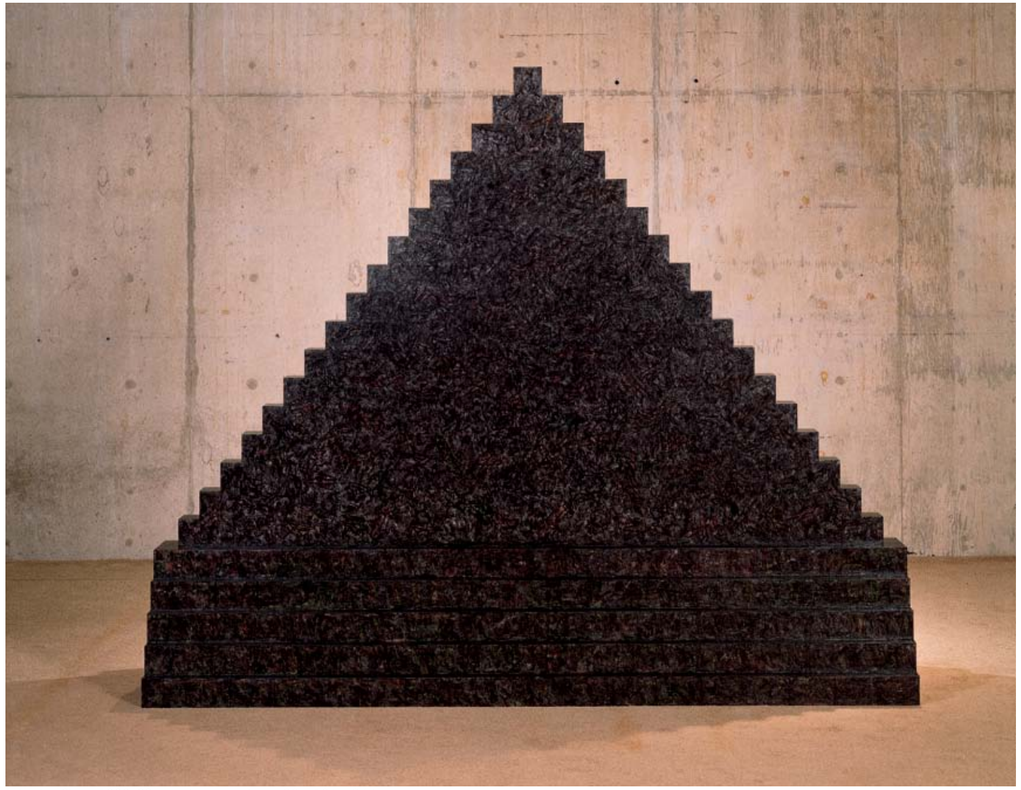
again and again and again. Or put otherwise: he builds up the texture and color of the surface, and then as he scrapes it away he enacts an archaeology of the self, working though layers and strata which connect to the layers and strata of that self.

So the negotiation of the parallel borders—between servitude and freedom, wilderness and homeland, covenantal obligation and covenantal promise, ethnic and spiritual identity, that are essential to the narrative of Exodus—reflects the negotiation of borders and criss-crossing paths within the journey of Wardlaw's own life. But the very method of creating these works more emphatically than any that have come before excavates beneath the surface of his being. The Exodus II series also emphatically continues Wardlaw's ongoing dialogue between two-dimensional imagery and frontality on the one hand and three-dimensionality and circumnavigation of the work on the other, as it furthers the dynamic tension between sculpture around which one moves and architecture through which one passes.

The seven-part group, interestingly, offers one piece that alludes to the beginning of the book of Genesis (*Sabbath/Creation*) while the other six draw from passages within the book of Exodus. Aside from *Warning Signs*, the other five Exodus pieces are *Calling at Mount Horeb: Burning Bush*, *Passover*, *Parting of the Red Sea*, *Ten Commandments*, and *The Ark of the Covenant*. We recognize a familiar formal feel to *Sabbath/Creation*: from a treble, not double base, this time, seven rectangular pillars, each of a different color, rise. One might even read a kind of obliquely coloristic echo of the narrative of creation in these pillars: light (white) and darkness (black); sky (blue) and earth (light brown); vegetation (green) and animals (gray); and the blood-brown of earth-made humans.[35] The echo is oblique not only because of the uncertainty regarding how or whether to suppose any correspondences at all, much less such specific ones, but because the sequence of seven typically refers to days of creation, culminating with a seventh day of rest, and not the seven created elements to which I have referred.

But this would in any case be symptomatic of Wardlaw's desire to straddle another border: not only between figuration and abstraction, but between literalism and metaphor, and between symbols and their meanings and pure aesthetics that offer pure emotion rather than intellectual exercise. Quite opposite in underlying conception from *Sabbath/Creation*, in any case, is *Passover*—its general intentions familiar from Passage XI, but entirely reconceived. Thus the reddish pigment seething around the "doorway frame" may still be read as an overt allusion to the blood smeared on the Israelite doorposts, but this "doorway frame" encompasses a smooth-surfaced and visually compelling slab that is no door and is in turn encompassed by a lushly mud-colored larger slab that is no dwelling wall.

And by paradox, while this is the "front" of the work, the "back" is so significantly different—seeped in velvety black and gray; a slab flanked by pairs of embedded rounded columns against broad rectilinear pilasters—that one cannot simply relegate it to the status of "back," but must understand it as an alternative "front": "There are two sides to a door: one side does not necessarily inform us about the other. Through these openings, we move from one passage of life into another." The piece is somehow



*Warning Signs*, 1989–92, acrylic on aluminum, 88 x 106 x 24 inches

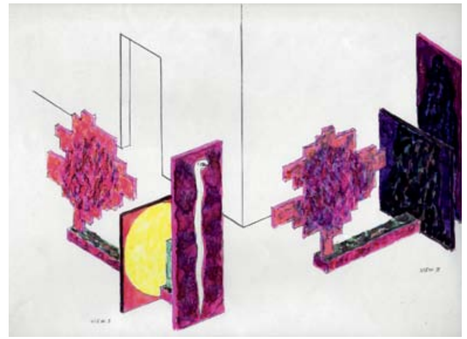
*Burning Bush*, 1989–92, acrylic on aluminum,100 x 116 x 60 inches

(miraculously) both flat and yet three-dimensional. But one may also see this double-sided "door" as offering a contrast between the humble post-and-lintel construction associated with the oppressed Israelite inhabitations and the palatial double-columned doorways of their Egyptian oppressors—and both may be seen to allude to the false (yet in a different sense, *true*) doors that lead, in Egyptian tombs, to the realm of the dead (who live eternally in that other reality).

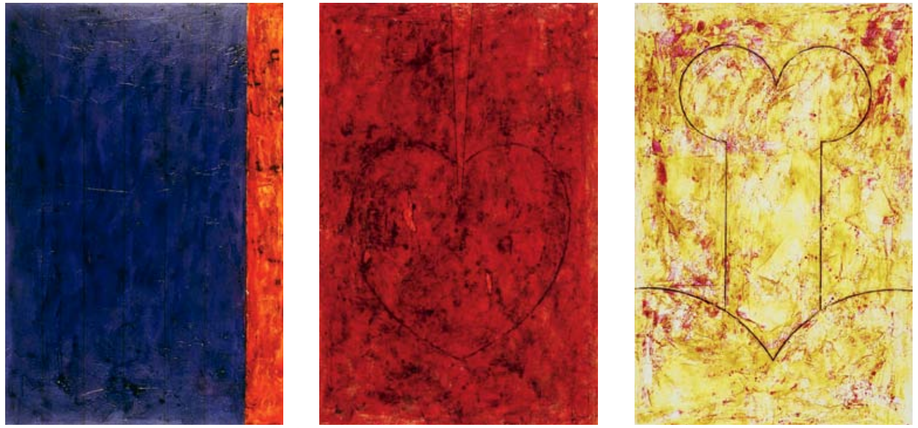
If we backtrack to the beginning of the Exodus narrative—to chapter three of the book of that name within the Torah, within the Hebrew Bible—then we find Moses confronting the extraordinary sight, out in the middle of the middle of nowhere, of a bush that is on fire but continues to burn rather than crumbling to ash. This is the time and place—outside time and place—where a voice instructs the shepherd of his father-in-law's flocks to remove his shoes, "for the ground whereon you stand is holy," and then instructs him further, to go back to Egypt, to speak to the Israelites and to the pharaoh, demanding the liberation of the slaves. Wardlaw's *Calling at Mount Horeb: Burning Bush* translates this moment into a jagged-and-irregular-edged silhouette in deep, dark red that is at one and the same time the bush and the mountain of the Lord where it hovers between reality and dream.

The swirling, percolating surface of the "bush/mountain" is echoed in silvery tones by the backdrop to which it is attached by a smooth, dark tie, its tone echoed in turn by the dark slab that rises beyond its silvery foreground. Are these the blinding desert, and the dark sky beyond it, both stretching into the infinity of the message emanating from the bush: "I am/will be that I am/will be," my

*Study for Burning Bush*, 1989, pencil, ink, and acrylic on paper, 9.5 x 6 inches



*Study for Burning Bush*, 1989, pencil, ink, and acrylic on Mylar, 8 x 12 inches



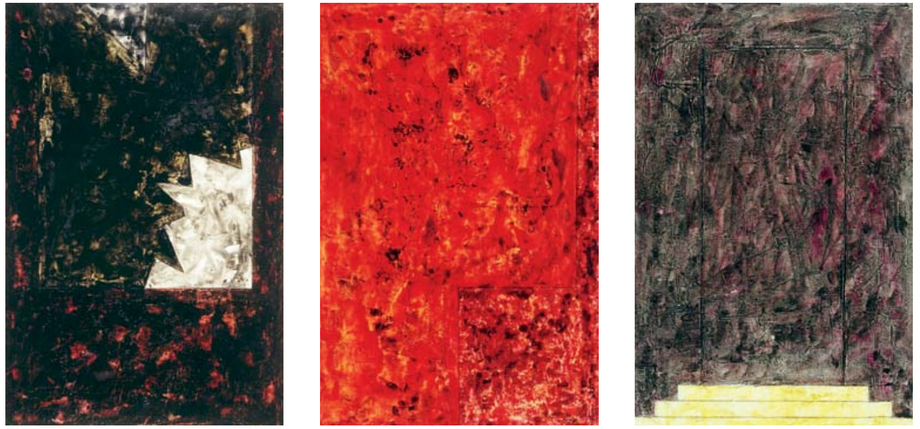
*Ten Commandments Four (Keep the Sabbath holy); Ten Commandments Six (You shall not kill); Ten Commandments Seven (You shall not commit adultery);* all 1993–94, ink and acrylic on Mylar, 15.25 x 10 inches

Name is Being itself? It is in returning into Egypt from the wilderness of Midian that the prophet bears the *Warning Signs* to the hard-hearted and hard-willed Pharaoh; the locusts are midway between the river turning to blood and the death of the first-born sons among the Egyptians, on the night of the *Passover*—when the other side of the doorway is shown. The pharaoh who once ordered the deaths of firstborn Israelite baby boys watches his own son perish; the magisterial palace doorways turn black with mourning as the humble Israelite doorways still tremble with the blood red of life.

The visual text carries the Israelites from their mundane doorways, half-baked bread carried in their pockets, in hurried departure, toward the sea, pursued by an Egyptian army led by a pharaoh who one last time would oppose the will of the Israelite God. It is that pursuit that occasions the miracle of the *Parting of the Red Sea*. An enormous passageway—17 feet long but less than 8 feet wide (the root of the word "Egypt" in Hebrew means "narrow")[36]—connotes the passage in the midst of the surging sea through which the Israelites will pass safely to dry land, while their pursuers will be swallowed up by the roaring waves. The columns and their cross beams—endlessly smoothed and abraded and smoothed and abraded, built up and scraped away, built up and scraped away—in their blacks and grays offer two frames, from each of which a reverse trapezoid is suspended, its edges trickling down in a series of steps. Coal-black on the exterior, they offer contrastive interior hues: the one a dark red (recalling the Burning Bush and God's first words to Moses); the other a rich, deep sea blue; the one hiding barely discernible images of serpents, swirling in the waters; the other, hints of variously pigmented fish scintillating beneath the surface color of these depths.

The aftermath of this cataclysmic (for the Egyptians) event, in which Miriam, the sister of Moses, leads the





*Ten Commandments Eight (You shall not steal); Ten Commandments Nine (You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor); Ten Commandments Ten (You shall not covet your neighbor's property);* all 1993–94, ink and acrylic on Mylar, 15.25 x 10 inches

Israelite women in songs of thanksgiving and praise to the salvational God who leads them by means of the instrumentation of Moses, is the hurried passage back to the mountain—where this time, Moses disappears into its upper reaches for forty days and nights, to the great terror of the Israelites. But he returns, his countenance resplendent with the experience, glowing with rays of light, with the Tablets of the Law in his arms. Wardlaw's Ten Commandments most obviously echoes his *Sabbath/Creation* in form, with its series of vertical elements—as it should, since the commandment to keep the Sabbath is articulated within those commandments.

He has turned to the darkest of browns, grays, purples, and blacks and returned to the horizontal and vertical box and slab construction to anchor this anchoring of the narrative—this transformation of the motley crowd of slaves toward a covenantal people; this transition from the heroic narrative focused on individuals like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses to a narrative in which the ultimate hero, for better and for worse, is the people of Israel conceived as a singularity. From an elegant pedestal rise ten short stelae, one for each of the commandments (their texts hinted at, etched just beneath the surface), but ranged in pairs, signifying, perhaps, the dual nature of the covenant: that it prescribes proper behavior for dealing with both God and one's fellow humans.

One feels the same quiet spirituality pulsing silently from within this dark yet glowing work that one feels in the monumental and darkly glowing paintings, their unprimed surfaces soaked in pigment, of Mark Rothko's late paintings—such as those that surround the viewer in the plain white chapel in Houston that popularly bears Rothko's name. Here, it is the slabs of Rothko- and Barnett Newman–like color, worked and reworked with the untrammeled gestural scraping inspired by Wardlaw's mentors, Smith and Tworkov, that contour the surface of

*The Ark of the Covenant*. This is the inner structure of the Tabernacle in which the Tablets of the Law were placed as they were carried among the Israelites through the generations of wandering in the desert wilderness—its tawny vastnesses reflected in the pigments of the upper part of Wardlaw's rendition—and on into and throughout the Promised Land for centuries longer, until Solomon built a Temple in which they might be placed.

Wardlaw's *Ark* is a two-tiered ascent—a double intermediator between heaven and earth, like the double covenantal tablets housed within. It offers a pattern of expanding outward as it ascends; double carrying poles imply the priesthood whose mundane and miraculous job it would have been, in the biblical narrative, to carry this most sacred of objects from place to place as the tent of the tabernacle was being removed from here and readied there. A rich black matte pigment—both the totality and the absence of pigment—forms the coloristic frame for a series of ten scintillating slabs of surface: blue, brown, gold, silver-gray, deep purple, and others.

Each slab is scraped and worked, built up and pared down, with the glowing black underpainting showing through. Here and there that emergence suggests written patterns, neither quite Hebrew nor quite Egyptian hierogplyphs—as if the Commandments themselves, slipping through the outer carapace, beg, in their obscurity, for interpretation. What does it *mean* not to commit *murder* or to *remember* the Sabbath day? So, too, hints of geometric forms—like circles of completion and perfection, visual symbols of the invisible Divine presence, without beginning and without end, without start or stop: "I am/will be that I am/will be"—articulate the surface's details.

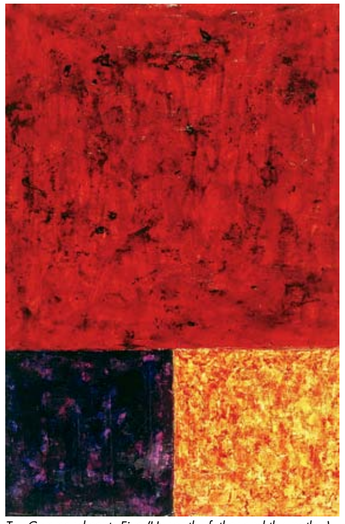
These seven unique works of aluminum swept with acrylic are intended for a gargantuan space. Even more than in the previous series, each piece can stand alone, or they can stand together—in any number of configurations—like the tribes of Israel and the families within each tribe and the individuals within each family. Of course, in pure number symbolism one cannot help noting that the number "seven" has a long history in the Middle East (and elsewhere)—thousands of years of history—of referring to completion and perfection, which sensibility is carried forward into the development of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim symbolic language.

Thus the series both continues Wardlaw's address of his Jewish identity and recognizes the larger Abrahamic and indeed human communities within which the visual discussion is historically and conceptually—spiritually—embedded. It "[helped me] to better understand some facets of Jewish history and identity, and to reaffirm my own.... And foremost, I wanted to make work that had a religious theme but that manifested itself primarily in spiritual presence and awareness, work that might cut across diverse religious boundaries and reveal a common spiritual concern and work that crossed contemporary art with cultural history."

An initial series of paintings—acrylic, ink, and occasionally pencil on Mylar—accompanied these sculptures during the years when the sculptures were being planned and executed. Thus already in 1990, Wardlaw had produced several series of ten works each, devoted to the Ten Commandments. And the following year, he produced a series of works in the same media called Warning Signs, as he continued to explore the expansive theme of

*The Ark of the Covenant,* 1989–92, acrylic on aluminum, 70 x 120 x 33 inches

*Warning Sign: Tenth Plague*, 1994, pencil, ink, and acrylic on Mylar, 33 x 22 inches



*Ten Commandments Five (Honor thy father and thy mother)*, 1993–94, ink and acrylic on Mylar, 15.25 x 10 inches

historical, cultural, and spiritual identity-shaping in the wildernesses of thirty-five centuries ago.

*Ten Commandments Two (You shall not worship graven images)*, for example, embeds the subtle, stylized image of bull's horns—suggesting the bull image variously worshipped by the Israelites' neighbors as Marduk, Ba'al, Apis, Amon, occasionally even Zeus, Poseidon, or Dionysius—rising from a rectangle within a sea of heavily textured yellow-brown color. *Ten Commandments Five (Honor thy father and thy mother)* is mottled in nuances of red—the color of blood and thus of sacrifice and of passionate love, particularly the love of self-sacrifice on behalf of, say, one's children—through which blacks seep; a barely discernible rectangle (male in its sharp angles) surmounted by a barely discernible circle (female in its unwavering curve) together suggest the ever-presence, however covert, of parents.

However, the fascination with the possibilities of a flat rectangle of paper, canvas, or Mylar—the returning full circle to a focused preoccupation with the two-dimensional medium which had been the artist's starting point forty years earlier, in his first serious extensions beyond jewel-craft—caused him to persist in his pursuit of this subject and its variants beyond the time when his sculptural series was completed. Thus he continued to rethink the visual contours of the Ten Commandments as one painting series followed another deeper into the 1990s. And as if to underscore the non-literal intention of his visual discussions—this a parallel path to run alongside that which visualizes the invisible Word of God in lieu of visualizing the invisible God Itself who not only cannot be visualized, but who commands us (in commandment two) not to make images that might be bowed down to as if they are gods—his 1993–94 series merely entitles each work *One*, *Two*, *Three*, and so on.

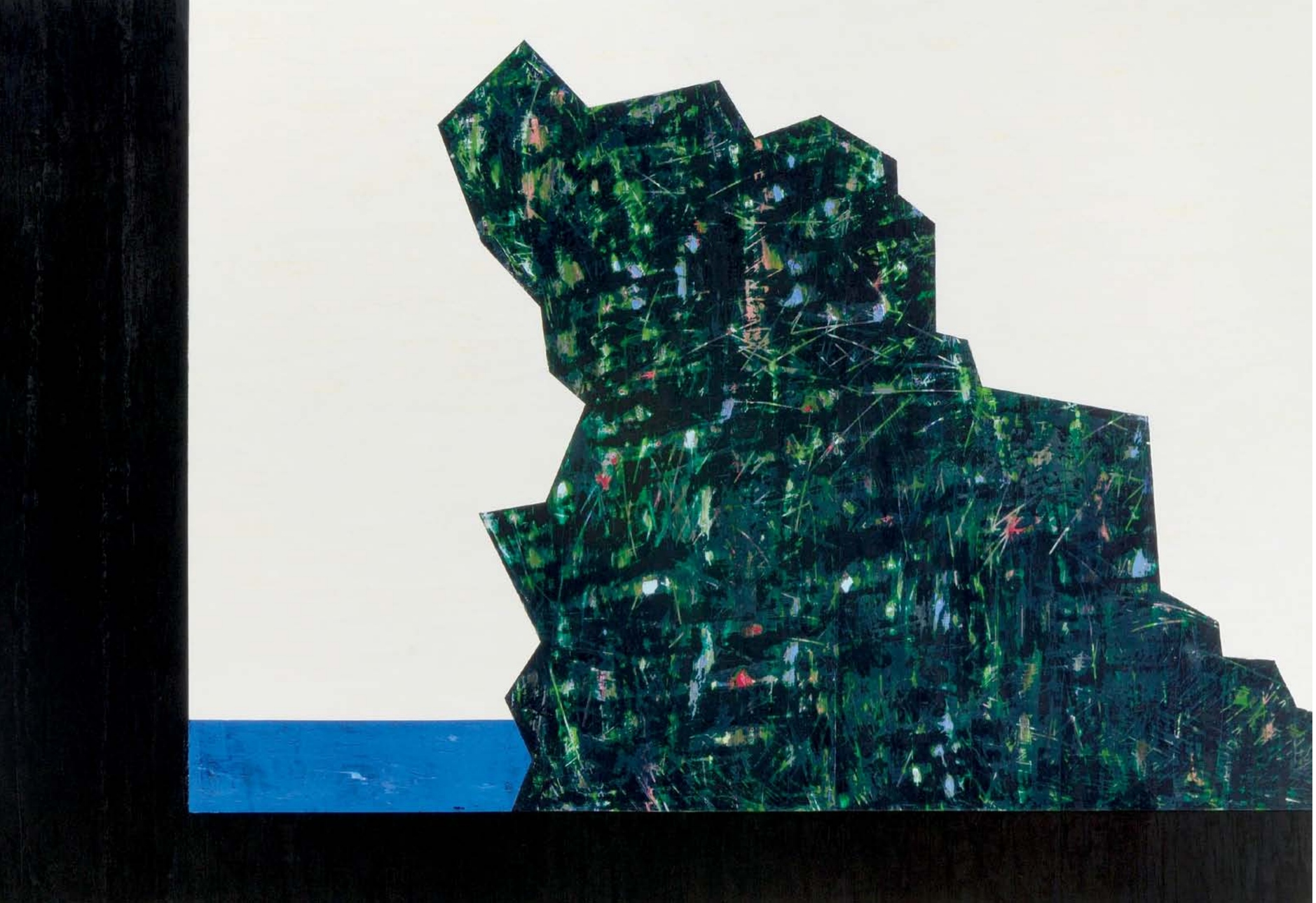
In lieu of identifying words, he merely offers the number—*Ten Commandments Four*, for instance, which particular commandment, we might recall, pertains to the keeping of the Sabbath, and which we might recognize by the pigmentations. Thus, a deep blue inundates six-sevenths of the picture plain, sweeping from the left edge forward until it yields in the image's last one-seventh part to a different, reddish color, suggesting the Sabbath that is separate from the other six days of the week.

So, too, the stunning subtleties of sculptures such as *Warning Signs*, with their plague elements barely hidden beneath the scraped, smooth surface, re-emerge in a series of ten mid-1990s paintings. Each offers the same sort of process, of light or dark underpainting that seeps through the pigments that has been built up and scraped away, again and again. Each offers symbolic allusions to the subject, of varying obviousness. Thus *Warning Sign: First Plague* is suffused with a lush tomato red that easily enough connotes the transformation of the Nile's waters into blood. But only, perhaps, in comparing the tenth plague—the death of the Egyptian firstborn sons—to the first, does the "meaning" of the tenth painting approach clarity: for, suffused with a slightly darker red than the first, *Warning Sign: Tenth Plague* allows that red to be slowly eaten away by the black underpainting that percolates up and out from underneath the red, bringing decay and darkness. It is the color of death itself, beneath the inexorable force of which, the blood of the living runs cold and dry and turns to ash.

By the time of the last of his Passover- and Exodus-inspired paintings, Wardlaw was pushing the visual envelope out and back into new modes of both chromaticist and agitated brushwork, in utterly abstract yet often somehow pictorial directions. In the fifteen years since then he has continued to respond to the world around him—in particular, the landscape and seascape and skyscape of

Judy and George at her parents' home in Milford, Connecticut, 1986

the Maine coast, where that particular path along his spiritual journey—the path to Judaism—had one of its beginnings, and to which he returns, still, today, for visual and psychological solace from the world of university teaching, retirement, bypass surgery, and the untimely and unfathomable death of Judy a few years back. But that furthering of his continuum is another story for another day—to be taken up elsewhere in this volume.



## **GEORGE WARDLAW** ART IN PROCESS 1996–2011

Divining the Numinous: Maine Paintings
by Suzette McAvoy

*The greatest stories are those that resonate our beginnings and intuit our endings, our mysterious origins and our numinous destinies, and dissolve them both into one.*

*—Ben Okri*

In 1997, artist George Wardlaw began a powerful series of large-scale abstract paintings inspired by the Maine coast. Collectively titled Shore Themes, these richly textured, shaped canvases evoke the essence of the Maine coastal environment. Through perceptive juxtapositions of color and form, the artist intimates the physical and sensory properties of light and atmosphere—a wind-whipped green sea confronting gray rocks; golden sunlight caressing sapphire-blue water; a mysterious dark island anchoring a field of blue.

At the time of their creation Wardlaw had been a summer resident of Maine for forty-six years, yet this was his first completed body of work to directly address his seasonal home. "Back in the 1960s," he says, "I did about eight large paintings of the Maine coast that I later destroyed because I thought I had failed in what I really wanted to do."[37] In taking on the subject of the Maine coast, Wardlaw was joining a long line of artists that extends back to the mid-nineteenth century, when America's first great landscapist Thomas Cole ushered in a wave of landscape painting that continues to this day.

Cognizant of this well-populated artistic legacy and ever an individualist, Wardlaw was reticent to approach the Maine motif until he felt ready—spiritually and artistically—to contribute a genuinely fresh aesthetic vision. After completing the major group of paintings and sculptures known as the Exodus series in the mid-1990s, the artist felt prepared for the challenge. "I had always wanted to do something with Maine," he says. "And

PREVIOUS PAGE *Goddess Sea Sentry,* 2007, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 78 inches
OPPOSITE *MN Effect* (detail), 2011, acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 54 x 72 inches

finally, after I had finished the Exodus sculptures and Biblical paintings, I thought, now it's time to deal with Maine—and I've been dealing with it ever since."

Wardlaw was twenty-four years old when he first came to Maine in 1951 to teach metalworking at Tripp Lake Camp located in the small town of Poland in the state's western lakes region. It was the young Mississippi native's first visit to New England, and he was immediately struck by the verdant beauty of the landscape. He spent the next fourteen summers as a counselor at the camp, teaching

George and Judy in Amherst, around 1980

silverwork and jewelry making, skills that had earned him a national reputation while still a student at the Memphis Academy of Arts in 1949.

Tripp Lake Camp, which celebrated its centennial in August 2010 (an event Wardlaw attended),[38] was established as a traditional, all-girls Jewish camp. It was at Tripp Lake that Wardlaw, who was raised a Southern Baptist, first became interested in studying Judaism. His nascent interest in the faith was further nurtured by his close friendship with the artist Jack Tworkov, a relationship that began in 1954 when Tworkov served as a visiting instructor at the University of Mississippi during Wardlaw's second year as a graduate student.

In 1956, Wardlaw accepted a teaching position at the State University of New York (SUNY) in New Paltz. It was there that he met his future wife Judy Spivack, whose family was Jewish. This confluence of events cemented Wardlaw's decision to convert to Judaism at the time of the couple's marriage in the fall of 1957. Over the next seven summers, until the first of their three children was born,[39] the couple returned to Tripp Lake Camp, and Judy, like her husband, fell in love with Maine. The state came to represent for the Wardlaws their lifelong "spiritual home."

In the years after Tripp Lake, the artist and his family spent summers in rental cottages or hotels at the shore in Ogunquit. Without a studio to work in, Wardlaw turned to photography to record his impressions, amassing "an incredible collection of photographs and slides as reference materials." Because his work is primarily based on memory and invention, the lack of a Maine studio did not hinder the development of his work. Rather, the time in Maine was spent in direct observation, storing visual memories of the physical and spiritual qualities of nature and place.

The sea (with its potent metaphorical references) became a strong source of inspiration, even if it did not appear as a visual motif until the Shore Themes paintings of the late 1990s. In an essay on his Maine work, published in *The Massachusetts Review* in 2005, the artist writes:

> *The sea communicates its message of spiritual awareness in a language whose comprehension seems to transcend the differences of culture and belief that ordinarily divide the diverse peoples of the earth. It is the phenomenon of this common response that I find very compelling.*[40]

Creating an artistic language that bridges differences has been a leitmotif of Wardlaw's aesthetic approach. Throughout his long career, he has always sought to go beyond perceived boundaries, whether between abstraction and representation, painting and sculpture, fine art and craft, or the physical and spiritual realms. Grappling with the dualities of reason and intuition, the known and the unknowable, the constructed and the organic, are central themes of his art.

The Shore Themes paintings, and the subsequent series of Maine works—Cycles: Time-Light-Life, Shore Visits, Windows I and II, and the most recent group, Installations at the Shore—continue the artist's sensitive and intelligent investigations into the nature of art and its ability to communicate across time and culture. Deriving from concrete perceptions first observed in nature, then stored and filtered through the artist's memory, the abstracted imagery of Wardlaw's Maine paintings reflects a profound awareness of the spiritual and metaphysical properties of the sentient world.

When he began the Shore Themes paintings in the late 1990s, Wardlaw acknowledged that he was entering a crowded artistic arena. "Shore and marine paintings have a long tradition, especially in Maine," he writes. "I would like to think, and actually do believe, that my

*Morning Dazzle*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 76 x 50.75 inches

new paintings not only follow that tradition but that they contribute a new and different vision to the motif. My paintings are more generalized, more generic, with little or no attention to one specific site. Rather, they are a combination of fragments of experiences from different times, locations, and conditions."[41]

In works such as *Mystery Island*, *Guardian of the Night Shore*, and *Cliff and Green Sea*, all from 1999, the artist suggests the geography and physical properties of Maine's rockbound coast through simple geometric shapes—a black square becomes an island, a rectangle the shore, a trapezoid an overhanging cliff. The artist's keen awareness of the visual world is revealed in his astute rendering of surface texture and color. Synthesizing the particularities of these observed realities with abstraction, he not only references a sense of place, but also suggests the broader, universal aspects of sea and shore.

Originally, Wardlaw intended to title the series Displacement: Shore Themes, with the individual works simply identified by consecutive numbers assigned in the order of creation. Ultimately, he chose to drop the word "displacement" from the series title and add a more descriptive phrase for each individual painting. However, the concept of displacement is still a central theme of the body of work and an integral component of each composition.

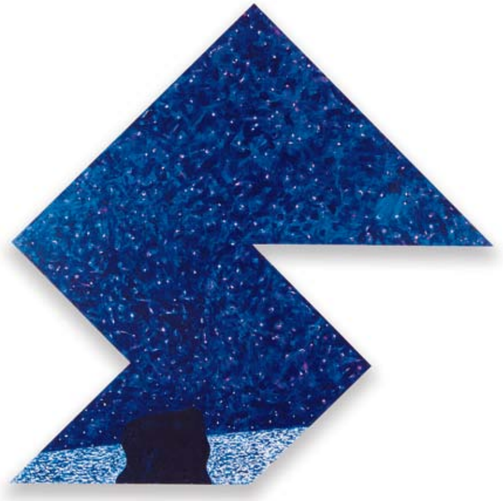
All of the Shore Themes works begin as a 48-inch square composed of eight separate isosceles triangles. In each painting, one or more of the triangular panels are "displaced" and relocated to form a unique arrangement. The physical divisions between the panels are deliberately left visible, adding a subtle frisson to the viewer's appreciation of the underlying geometry. "In addition to the displacement of the physical order," says the artist, "there may be and often is a displacement of natural order; for example, water and sky may be reversed in position. In the same painting there may be indications of multiple times of the day, of the year, or of weather conditions."[42]

Immediately following the Shore Themes series, Wardlaw commenced on a related, yet distinct group of eight paintings titled Cycles: Time-Light-Life, inspired by the twenty-four hours of the summer solstice. In this series, the original square is rotated to form a diamond shape, with one triangle repositioned in each work in a clockwise fashion—its placement indicating three-hour intervals starting at 3:00 A.M. The visual effects of the specific time of day are reinforced by the artist's representation of the quality of light on the color and surface of the water. In *Three AM: Emerging Light*, for example, there is little contrast between the moonlit shore and the ink-blue sea; by *Twelve Noon: Making Sail*, the fragment of shore is bright white and the surface of the water—punctuated by a triangular, white sail—is brilliantly alive with sparkling reflections from the sun directly overhead. Wardlaw's delight in nature's effects, his appreciation for the transient moods of weather and light, is palpable in these paintings.

As conceived by the artist, the Cycles: Time-Light-Life series is physically a closed set of works, restricted to the twenty-four hours of a single day. As a metaphor, the eight paintings are open to interpretation and suggest the continuum of human life from birth to death. This humanistic reference is one the artist has embraced,

*Guardian of the Night Shore*, 1999, acrylic on wood panel, 72 x 48 inches
*Mystery Island*, 1999, acrylic on wood panel, 48 x 72 inches

*Cliff and Green Sea*, 1999, acrylic on wood panel, 72 x 48 inches



and intermittently addressed, since his apple paintings of the 1960s, works in which the blossoming, ripe, and ultimately decaying fruit can be read as stand-ins for the human condition.

"My work has not developed in a straight line, but rather, it's more like a spiral," he has stated. "I keep passing over myself, picking up things from the levels below, discarding parts and adding new things. When I have moved from one series to another it does not mean that I am finished with that work, as I move up the spiral I may reach down and pull something upward or forward."

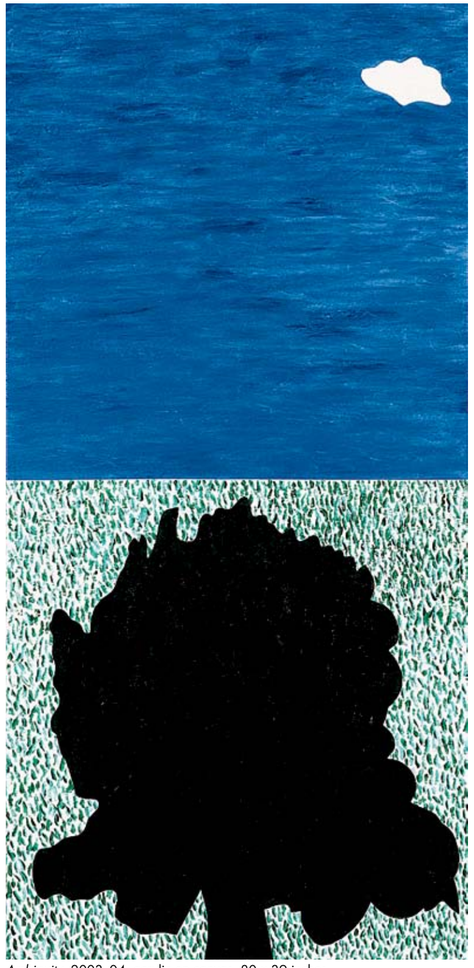
In this way, the shaped paintings of the late 1990s and early 2000s relate back to the artist's shaped canvases of the early 1970s and those from 1978 to 1979. Bridging two- and three-dimensional concerns, straddling the line between painting and sculpture, art and craft, abstraction and representation, Wardlaw repeatedly exhibits a fearless approach to art making and a willingness to move beyond his personal comfort zone, even if it involves physical risk. Consider, for instance, his current studio practice of using a double-edged razor blade to scrape down the surface of his paintings. "Yes," he says mildly, "it can be hazardous to one's fingers, care is highly recommended."[43]

After the irregular-shaped compositions of the Shore Themes and Cycles paintings, Wardlaw returned to a rectangular format for his next series of Maine-inspired works. Created between 2003 and 2004, and collectively titled Shore Visits, these paintings further the artist's explorations of weather effects, piqued by his work on the Cycles series and now brought to the fore. In paintings such as *White Lightning* and *White Lightning:*

*Twelve Noon: Making Sail*, 2000–01, acrylic on wood panel, 69 x 69 inches
*Emerging Light*, 2000–01, acrylic on wood panel, 69 x 69 inches



*Tranquility*, 2000–01, acrylic on wood panel, 69 x 69 inches



*Ambiguity*, 2003–04, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 39 inches

*Night Rainbow*, the artist presents the various weather elements—dark clouds, lightning bolts, sheets of rain, rainbows—as players acting out a performance on nature's stage.

Writing on these works in *The Massachusetts Review*, Wardlaw confirms this theatrical interpretation. "My current preoccupation with weather as a subject involves a number of things," he states. "It adds a different context and content to my ongoing work, and provides new characters to the cast of performers. In the paintings and drawings, rain appears as a vertical wall and serves structurally as a divider, a screen, a veil, a blind, a shade, a curtain, a barrier, a shield—all having a different role and latitude of exposure, concealment, camouflage, privacy, and secrecy in relation to the other players."[44]

On another level, the Shore Visits paintings appear more strongly spiritual than the artist's previous Maine paintings, which deal more explicitly with the natural phenomena and visual experience of the physical world. In the Shore Visits paintings, mysterious forms and implied presences abound, and the titles of the individual works, such as—*Receiving Light*, *Ambiguity*, *Span*—imply multiple interpretations.

In the painting *Transformation*, for example, a white, shroud-like form appears inexplicably on the darkened beach, its presence and meaning the artist leaves to the viewer to decide. In *Guardian of the Light*, one of the signature paintings of the series, a gloss-white orb hovers in the bright, matte-white sky, while three unexplained dark forms populate the shore—a large, cello shape to the left, a small egg shape in the center, and a rounded flower shape to the right. Deep blue curtains of torrential rain, interrupted by a bolt of white lightning, mystifyingly frame the sunlit scene.

Contradictions, ambiguities, and contrasts are common threads throughout this diverse body of work. "The Shore Visit paintings," he says, "unite aspects of abstraction, realism, and surrealism. The work deals with the visible, the almost visible, and the invisible. The objective is to create visual equivalencies, not pictorial scenes."[45]

The theatrical references introduced in the Shore Visits paintings are further developed and explored by the artist in the Windows I and II series that follow. This large group of paintings, which occupied his attention from 2005 to 2009, is divided into two distinct phases, separated by an event of profound sadness in the artist's personal life. Uniting the body of work is a common compositional approach of framing the foreground in a dark border, creating a "window" through which an abstract scene of nature is depicted.

Begun in 2005, the Windows paintings relate thematically to the artist's Doors and Passages works of previous decades, suggesting symbolic thresholds open to diverse readings. The human scale of Wardlaw's Windows paintings—most are between 5 and 7 feet in height—allows the viewer a sense of entering the image. Standing on the artist's imaged shore, in works such as *White Evergreen*, looking out to the vastness of the sea, there is a suggestion of the infinite and finite merging; a harmonious moment made concrete and visible through the artist's attentive gaze and skilled hands. "The wall around the window does not create two worlds," wrote Matisse.

*White Evergreen*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 68 x 50 inches

Judy and George at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, France, 1988

And indeed, in Wardlaw's Windows paintings there is no discernible barrier between the realms of the tangible and the intangible.

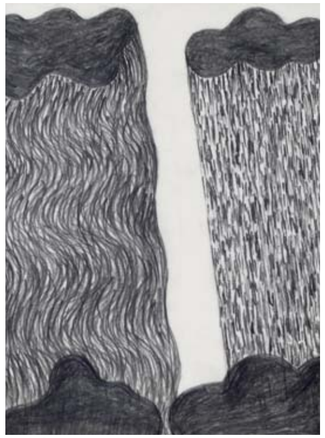
During the period in which he was creating the Windows paintings, Wardlaw's wife Judy was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a particularly deadly form of cancer that ultimately took her life in May 2008. The artist's anger and the emotional strain he experienced during her illness, as well as his grief following her death, become increasingly evident in the later paintings in the series. "Judy's fifty year plus contribution to my art career...and life as a whole cannot be overemphasized," he wrote in July 2010. "She was such a sensitive individual."[46]

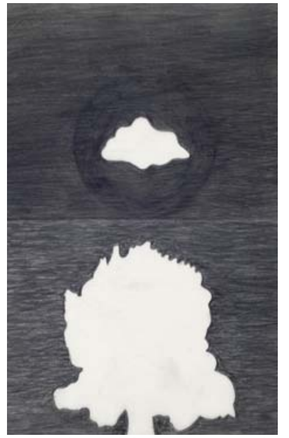
The artist identifies two works in particular as bridges between the more optimistic, outwardly inspired Windows I paintings and the darker, more emotionally charged Windows II works. In *Distant Edge* (2005–06), a cluster of variously sized, abstract forms crowd together in the vertical "window" frame, as if together they will come to an understanding of the small, mysterious bump that appears on the horizon. While seemingly benign, this small shape casts an aura of disquietude in the turquoise blue sea. Painted a year later, *Unidentified Object* is, Wardlaw admits, "perhaps the angriest" of the works created in response to Judy's illness. In this work, a large, ominous dark cloud with hard, jagged edges hangs over an enigmatic white form in the placid sea. The sense of impending grief, portrayed as a concrete, physical presence, is almost intolerable to witness.

The strength of Wardlaw's art—his command of materials, image, concept, and formal aspects, developed through more than five decades of studio practice—enable the Windows paintings, as with the artist's other work, to be seen and appreciated with no knowledge or understanding of his private life. While the Windows II paintings were created as deeply felt, personal responses to events unfolding beyond his control, the paintings resonate with the viewer on many different levels. Within the layers of their richly colored and honed surfaces is a depth of beauty and acceptance that transcends individual concerns.

*Distant Edge*, 2005–06, acrylic on canvas, 78 x 75 inches

*Unidentified Object*, 2006–07, acrylic on canvas, 78 x 60 inches





*Study for painting*, 8.5 x 6.25 inches; *Study for painting*, 10 x 6.5 inches; *Study for painting*, 11 x 7 inches, all 2004, pencil on Mylar

In the past two years, Wardlaw has again broken through to new aesthetic ground. There is an exuberance and freedom to his latest body of work, which he has collectively titled Installations at the Shore and Transplants. In these new series of paintings, the artist appears to be mining his own past, paying homage to individuals and influences important to his artistic development. They are in a sense a summing up of all that he knows and believes after a lifetime of making art.

Recently he said to me, "If somebody asked me, 'What would you like for people to say about you?', the four things I immediately thought of are: it's intelligent work; it's very strong work; it's deeply felt work; it's very spiritual work." These paintings fulfill the artist's criteria.

The title of each series acknowledges the significant role sculpture has played in the creation of his paintings and, in particular, his debt to David Smith, one of his mentors (along with Tworkov) during graduate school at the University of Mississippi. Not long ago, Wardlaw recounted an early visit he and Judy made to Smith at his studio in Bolton Landing, New York, near Lake George.

> *He liked to take his sculpture down to the waterfront and photograph it using the water and sky as the background for the images. He thought that this provided a neutral environment or setting for his sculpture pieces. That experience made a profound impression on me and perhaps has influenced the paintings I am currently doing using the ocean and shore as a setting for the objects I am painting.*[47]

*Guardian: Cubi Mates* is Wardlaw's pictorial tribute to Smith, Picasso, and cubism. The painting depicts two cubist forms—one dark, one white—joined as one and posed on the edge of the shore. A low horizon line and vast sky establish a comparative scale for the painted objects, lending them a monumentality that is larger than

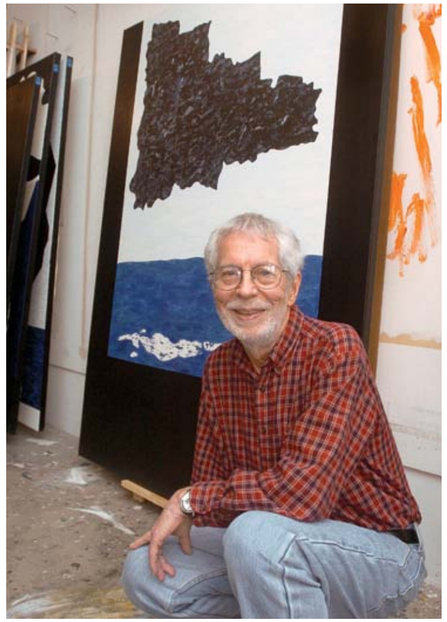
life. In the center of the foreground, an abstract black jaguar head observes the scene. Wardlaw says the jaguar was an instinctive addition. It was only later that he discovered, "A jaguar serves the same guardian functions as demons/angels in Judeo-Christian myth."[48]

A second work from the series, *HM Presence*, refers to Henry Moore and Henri Matisse—two of Wardlaw's acknowledged influences. In this work, a large, bulbous form dominates the compressed pictorial space of the composition, its vaguely figurative shape reminiscent of a Henry Moore sculpture, and its green color the patina of bronze. The outline of the curvilinear form is a reference to similar shapes found in Matisse cutouts, works that are of particular interest to Wardlaw.

"In a way I would say that all of my work is a kind of collage," he has said, "collages of different places, times, experiences, materials—and that goes back through all of my work, even to my original silver work." In this regard, the painting *Totem Trove* can be read as a "collage" of influences, among them African and cubist sculpture, the artist's own Native American heritage, his early jewelry work, and his painted, totem sculptures of the later 1970s.

Two additional paintings from the Installations at the Shore series, *Dance I* and *Dance II*, and *MN Effect* from the Transplants series are notable for their joyous color and sensuous, celebratory mood. Echoes of Milton Avery, Marsden Hartley, and John Marin can be discovered in these paintings, artists who share with Wardlaw an appreciation for Maine, yet find a personal, synthesized view more poetic and meaningful than direct quotation. Orchestrating composition, color, scale, and surface with a confidence gained through a sustained dedication to his craft and individual vision, this group of late-career paintings are a summation of Wardlaw's aesthetic journey. In them, he has come full circle to his "spiritual home."

Although separated by culture and generation, the words of contemporary Nigerian writer and poet Ben Okri eloquently address the universal themes present in Wardlaw's paintings of the Maine coast. For, like Okri's stories, Wardlaw's paintings venture far beyond the realm of description, concretely and poetically intimating "our mysterious origins and our numinous destinies, and dissolve them both into one."



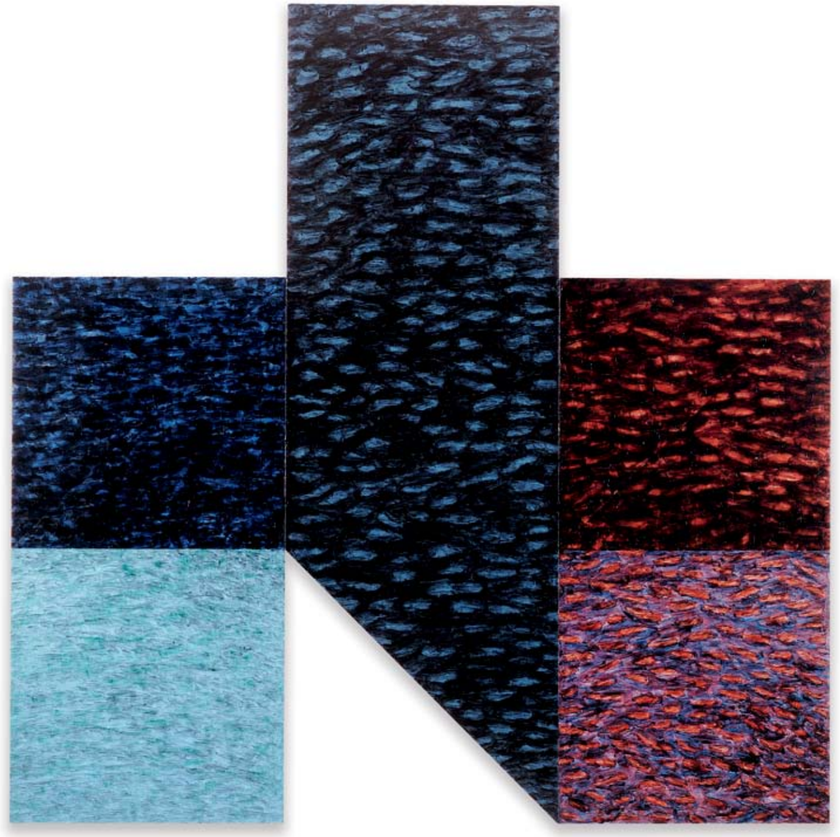
George in his Amherst studio, 2008



## color plates 1988–2011

*Darkness Reigned,* 1988–89, acrylic on aluminum, 81 x 81 inches

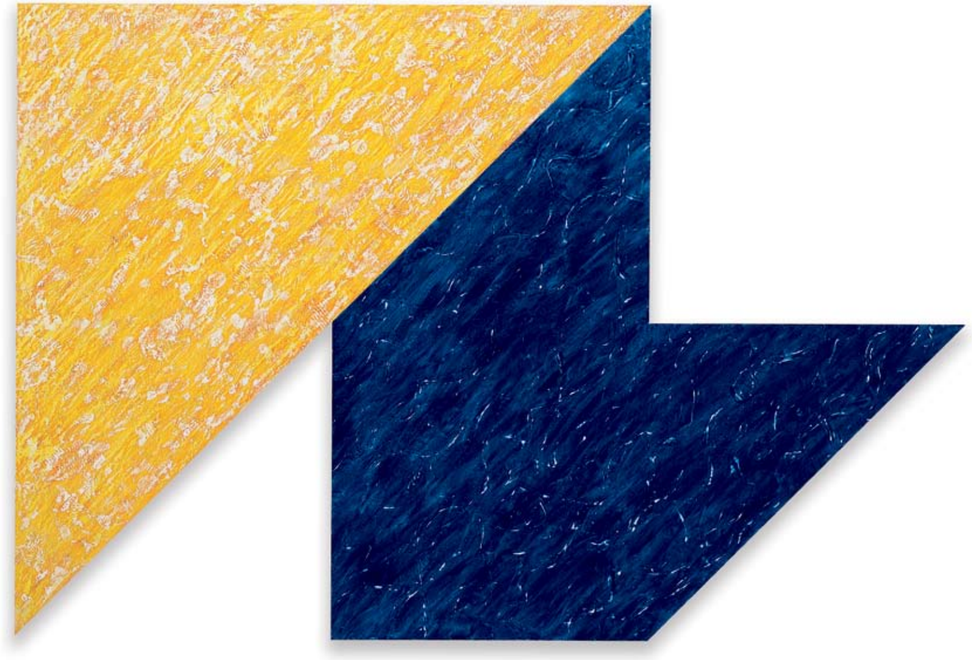




*Neutral Zone,* 1988–89, acrylic on aluminum, 81 x 81 inches, collection of Wichita Art Museum, Wichita, Kansas

*Ominous Fortune,* 1988–89, acrylic on aluminum, 81 x 81 inches



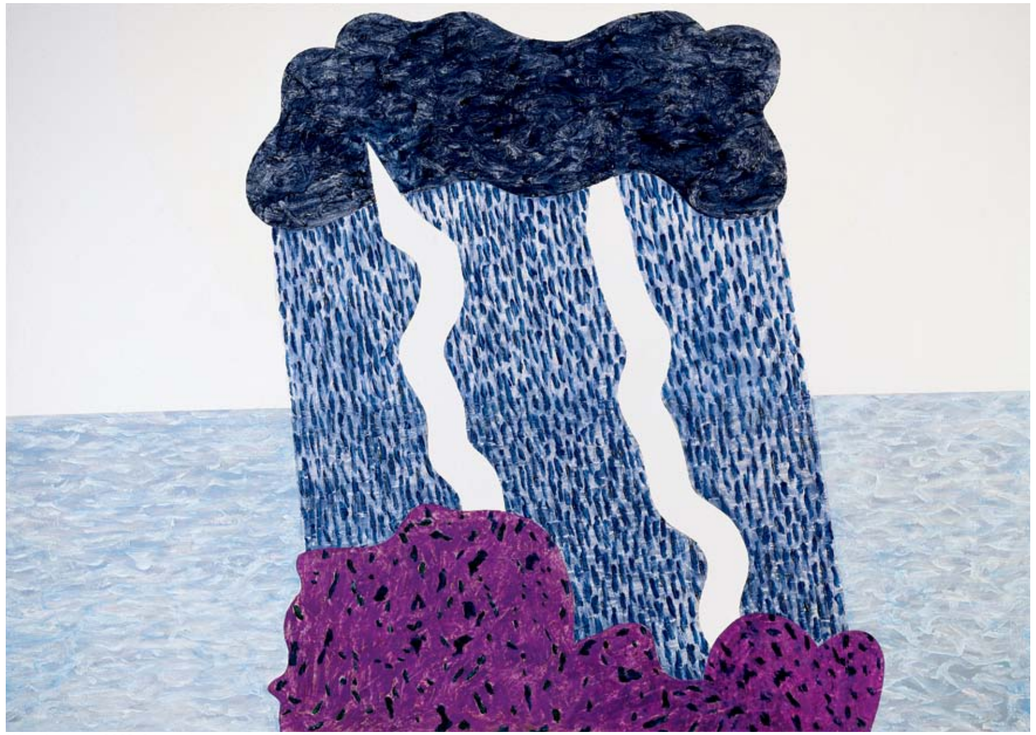


*Yellow Sunset,* 1997, acrylic on wood panel, 48 x 72 inches

*Transformation,* 2003–04, acrylic on canvas, 68 x 54 inches

*Guardian of the Light,* 2004, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 50 inches, collection of Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson

*Span*, 2003–04, acrylic on canvas, 64 x 50 inches



*White Lightning*, 2003–04, acrylic on canvas, 54 x 76 inches

*White Lightning: Night Rainbow*, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 54 inches



*Receiving Light*, 2003–04, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 52 inches

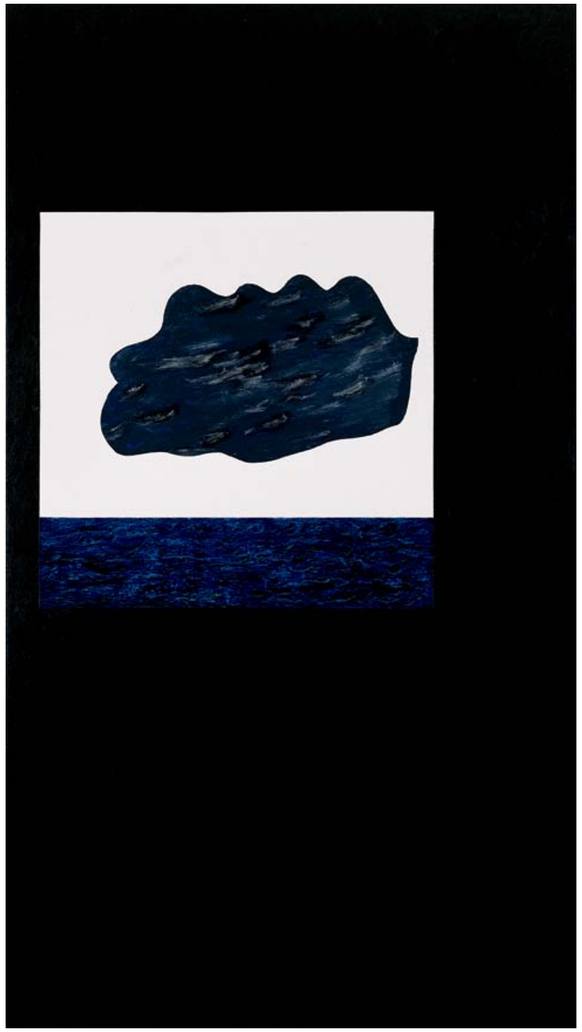
*Trickle Flume*, 2007–09, acrylic on canvas, 78 x 78 inches

*Cherry Hill: Maine Coast*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 78 x 78 inches

*Alone*, 2005–06, acrylic on canvas, 75 x 78 inches

*Together*, 2005–06, acrylic on canvas, 78 x 75 inches

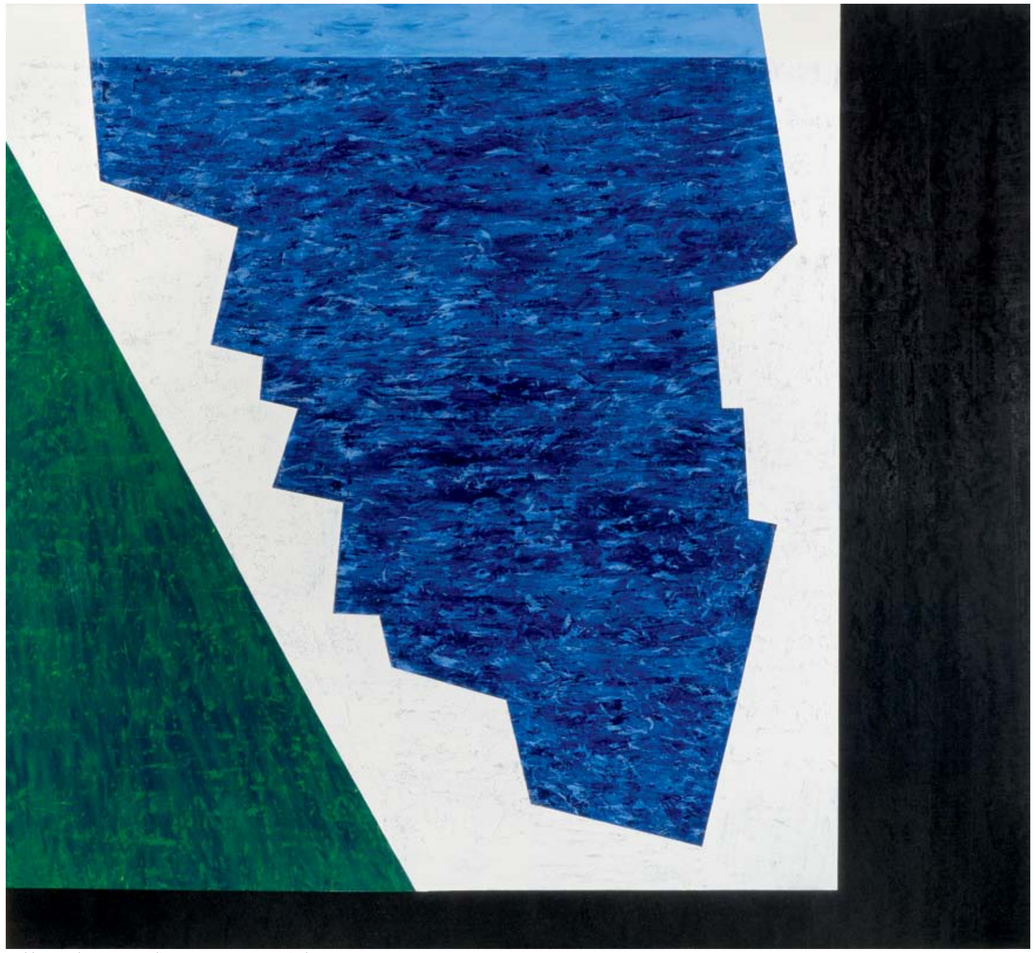
*Light of the Sea Goddesses*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 78 inches



*Cloud at Sea*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 86 x 48 inches

*Union: Night Sea and Sky,* 2006–07, acrylic on canvas, 78 x 64 inches

*Big Bend*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 58 x 78 inches



*Ladder Beach*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 78 inches

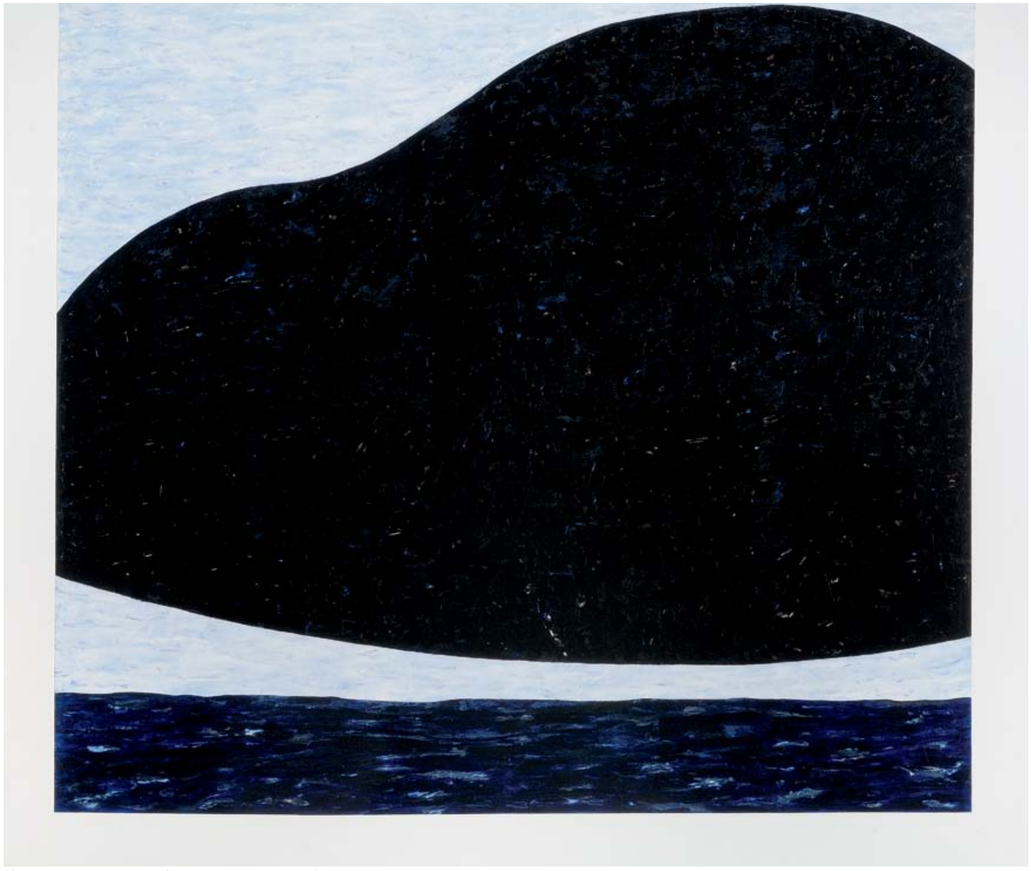


*Mystery at Marble Beach*, 2006–07, acrylic on canvas, 75 x 78 inches

*Phantom Flume*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 88 inches



*Multiple Identity*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 78 x 50 inches



*Threatening*, 2007–09, acrylic on canvas, 66 x 78 inches

*Obscured Flume: Stone Head Cliff*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 78 x 72 inches

*HM Presence,* 2010, acrylic on canvas, 78 x 48 inches

*Guardian: Cubi Mates,* 2010, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 52 inches

*Dance I*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 54 x 54 inches



*Dance II*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 52 inches

*Totem Trove*, 2011, acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 78 x 54 inches

*Yellow Lady*, 2011, acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 78 x 88 inches

*New Life 1*, 2011, acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 88 x 78 inches

*MN Effect*, 2011, acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 54 x 72 inches

# Notes

1. See John Barry, *Rising Tide*: *The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1998), pp. 183–89.

2. Willie Morris and David Rae Morris, *My Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), pp. 5–6.

3. This is a significantly revised, updated, and expanded essay, based upon an earlier piece, "Beginnings: 1947–1963," in *George Wardlaw: Transitions* (Memphis: Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, 1988). That essay and catalog were published to accompany a major retrospective exhibition of the artist's work, organized and presented, at both institutions, by the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art and the Memphis College of Art in 1988. All quotes and references by the artist are taken from an extended series of interviews conducted by the author in 1986, 1987, and 1988, and more recently, in an ongoing series of conversations, correspondence, and e-mails with the artist in 2009 and 2010.

4. This lack of art training would not have been unusual in most schools in the South during the Depression era.

5. See Mary Elizabeth Johnson and J. D. Schwalm, *Mississippi Quilts* ((Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), and also Carol Vickers and J. D. Schwalm, *Threading the Generations, A Mississippi Family's Quilt Legacy* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005).

6. See Paul Arnett, Joanne Cubbs, and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr., editors, *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2006) and Paul Arnett and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr., editors, *Mary Lee Bendolp: Gee Bend Quilts, and Beyond* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books and Austin Museum of Art, 2006).

7. See Patti Carr Black, "Back Home in Jackson," and Francis V. O'Connor, "Framing Time in Expressive Spaces: Eudora Welty's Stories, Photographs, and the Art of Mississippi in the 1930s," in Rene Paul Barilleaux, editor, *Passionate Observer: Eudora Welty Among Artists of the Thirties* (Jackson: Mississippi Museum of Art, 2002). See also, Patti Carr Black, *Art in Mississippi, 1720–1980* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998).

8. "Wardlaw, Young Mississippi Painter, Is Achieving National Recognition," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, May 25, 1948.

9. See J. Richard Gruber, "Visual Arts at the Crossroads," in Liz Conway, editor, *Memphis 1948–1958* (Memphis: Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, 1986), pp. 28–47.

10. Mary Lynn Kotz, *Rauschenberg/Art and Life* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), pp. 56–60.

11. J. Richard Gruber, *American Icons: From Madison to Manhattan, the Art of Benny Andrews, 1948–1997* (Augusta: Morris Museum of Art, 1997), pp. 70–71.

12. Irving Sandler, *Abstract Expressionism and the American Experience: A Reevaluation* (Manchester and New York: Hard Press Editions and School of the Visual Arts, 2009), pp. 7, 231–32. See also Sandler's earlier book, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1970).

13. Margaret Schon, "The Wearable Art Movement" (www.modernsilver.com/Walker); "American Modernist Jewelry, 1940–1970" (www.modernsilver.com/American); and Margaret Schon, *Form and Function, American Modernist Jewelry 1940–1970* (New York: Schiffer, Ltd., 2008).

14. The evolution of the parallel art and teaching careers of Wardlaw and Pardon are notable, reflecting their individual talents and visions, as well as their solid grounding in the programs of the Memphis Academy of Arts. See, for example, Kimberly Cridler, "Earl Pardon: Palette Maestro," *American Craft Magazine* (August/September 2008).

15. "Los Angeles County Fair," *Cross-Country Craftsman* (Vol. 2, No. 5, November 1951).

16. "Wardlaw, Young Mississippi Painter, is Achieving National Recognition, *Memphis Press-Scimitar* (May 25, 1948).

17. Guy Northrup, Jr., "High Caliber Work Exhibited in Annual Show by Students, Memphis Academy of Arts Has Talent With Versatility and Verve," *Memphis Commercial-Appeal* (Sunday, June 11, 1950).

18. Quoted in Lisa Phillips, *The American Century, Art & Culture, 1950–2000* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), p. 20.

19. On Smith, see David Smith, Carmen Gimenez, Rosalind Krauss, and David Anfam, *David Smith: A Centennial* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2006).

20. On Tworkov, see Jack Tworkov and Mira Schor, *The Extreme of the Middle: Writings of Jack Tworkov* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Richard Armstrong, *Jack Tworkov: Paintings, 1928–1982* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987); Karen Rosenberg, "A Modern Artist Who Wielded Both Pen and Brush, *The New York Times* (August 31, 2009); and the artist's excellent website, www.jacktworkov.com.

21. George Wardlaw, "Looking Back—A Conflict of Extremes," delivered in 1992 at the University of Massachusetts Art Gallery, at the opening of his Exodus II exhibition. On Faulkner, see Joel *Williamson, William Faulkner and Southern History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Thomas S. Hines, *William Faulkner and the Tangible Past: The Architecture of Yoknapatawpha* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); and Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie, editors, *Faulkner and the Artist: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 1993* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996).

22. On Theora Hamblett, see Patti Carr Black, *Art in Mississippi, 1720–1980*, pp. 254–55.

23. Willie Morris and William Eggleston, *Faulkner's Mississippi* (Birmingham: Oxmoor House, Inc., 1990), p. 130.

24. Paul Schimmel, "The Faked Gesture: Pop Art and the New York School," in Russell Ferguson, editor, *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955–62* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art and Rizzoli International Publications, 1992), pp. 20–21.

25. S. R., "The apple of his eye," *Amherst Bulletin* (September 28, 1983).

26. Stuart Preston, "Art: Semi-Abstract Oils," *The New York Times* (December 2, 1960).

27. Quoted in Schimmel, "The Faked Gesture," p. 19.

28. Ibid., p. 21.

29. Joan V. Cobb, "While the Pleasure Lasts at the Yale Faculty Show," *New Haven Register* (April 1966).

30. David Smith, "Lecture by David Smith," The University of Mississippi (March 14, 1955), George Wardlaw archives.

31. All references to comments and recollections by George Wardlaw derive either from written conversations in 1999 or verbal discussions in June 2010, unless otherwise noted.

32. The artist's words here are in an article in the *Amherst Bulletin*, September 30, 1981, p. 8.

33. Here the artist is quoted from a speech delivered when he received the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters Award and recorded in the Memphis Academy of Arts *Newsletter*, Summer 1983, p. 2.

34. See a more detailed discussion of this in Soltes, *Fixing the World: Jewish American Painters in the Twentieth Century* (Hanover, NH: University Press of America, 2003) and in Soltes, *The Ashen Rainbow: The Arts and the Holocaust* (Columbia, MD: Eshel Books, 2007).

35. The name "Adam" is derived from the Hebrew *adamah*, meaning "earth."

36. The Hebrew word for Egypt is *Mitzra'im*. The root meaning "narrow" is *tzar*.

37. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes by the artist are from a telephone interview with the author on March 1, 2010.

38. "I had a great visit to Tripp Lake Camp last week and was greeted by a number of former campers that I had not seen in about fifty years. What a wonderful and thrilling experience that was," email from the artist to the author, dated August 20, 2010.

39. Son Gregory was born 1964, daughter Sarah in 1966, and son Steven in 1968.

40 "Shore Visit," by George Wardlaw, *The Massachusetts Review*, Spring 2005, Vol. XLVI, No. 1, *The Massachusetts Review, Inc*., p. 26.

41. George Wardlaw, "Statement About *Shore Themes* Paintings (Series One)," unpublished, provided by the artist to the author.

42. Ibid.

43. Email from the artist to the author dated July 29, 2010.

44. *The Massachusetts Review*, p. 29

45. Ibid., p. 27.

46. Email from the artist to the author, dated July 29, 2010.

47. Email from the artist to the author, dated November 29, 2010.

48. Ibid.

*Study for Warning Signs*, 1989, pencil and ink on Mylar, 10 x 15 inches

## Selected Solo Exhibitions

Pink Palace Museum, Memphis, TN, 1949.

Campus Center, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS, 1951.

State University of New York, New Paltz, NY, 1959.

Betty Parsons Gallery Section Eleven, New York City, NY, George Wardlaw, November 29–December 17, 1960, pamphlet.

Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY, 1965.

Yale Summer School of Music and Art, Norfolk, CT, 1965, ’66, ’67, ’68.

Yale Art Gallery, New Haven, CT, George M. Wardlaw, April 13–May 22, 1966, brochure.

Long Island University, Southampton, NY, George Wardlaw Recent Paintings, 1969.

Lincoln Campus Center, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA, George Wardlaw Recent Paintings, July 26–August 27, 1971, poster.

DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, MA, George Wardlaw, December 3, 1978–February 4, 1979, catalog.

Stux Gallery, Boston, MA, George Wardlaw Recent Work, March 2–27, 1982, catalog.

University of Massachusetts Medical Center Gallery, Worcester, MA, George Wardlaw Sculpture, October 2–31, 1984.

Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, MA, George Wardlaw, January 19–February 16, 1986, brochure.

Memphis College of Art (Retrospective), Memphis, TN, September 18–October 30, 1988.

Memphis Brooks Museum of Art (Retrospective), Memphis, TN, George Wardlaw: Transitions, September 18–October 30, 1988, catalog.

Wichita Art Museum, Wichita, KS, George Wardlaw: Transitions II, May 7–June 25,1989, brochure.

Herter Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA, 1970, ’82, ’90, brochure-poster.

University Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA, George Wardlaw: Exodus II, April 5–June 6, 1992, catalog.

Perimeter Gallery, Chicago, IL, 1984, ’89, ’96, 2000.

Hampden Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA, George Wardlaw Recent Paintings: Windows I, March 2–March 30, 2008, pamphlet.

Hampshire College Art Gallery, Hampshire College, Amherst, MA, George Wardlaw—Windows II, September 1–28, 2008, pamphlet.

Courthouse Gallery Fine Art, Ellsworth, ME, George Wardlaw: Maine Windows, August 16–September 14, 2009, brochure.

## Selected Group Exhibitions

National Gallery, Washington, DC, Handcrafts in the United States, 1952.

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, Handcrafts in the United States, October 1952, circulated in Europe and Near East by U.S. State Department.

The Wichita Art Association, Wichita, KS, Decorative Arts and Ceramics Exhibition, 1951, ’52, ’53, ’54, ’58, brochures.

Iowa State Teachers College, Cedar Falls, IA, Design in Metal, brochure.

University of Illinois, Urbana, IL, American Craftsmen, 1952, ’53, ’55, each year circulated by the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, brochures.

Bertha Schaeffer Gallery, New York, NY, 1953.

America House Gallery, New York, NY, From Rock to Beauty, summer 1952.

University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI, Contemporary Silverwork, February 1953, brochure.

Delgado Museum, New Orleans, LA, 1954.

Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, TN, 1954.

University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS, three-person exhibition, 1955.

The Saint Paul Gallery and School of Art, Saint Paul, MN, Fiber–Clay–Metal, November–December; Saint Paul Gallery, January; Carleton College, February; The University of Wisconsin, March; Beloit College, May; Northland College, 1957–58; brochure.

Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York, NY, Young Americans, work circulated to art institutions and museums throughout the country from November 1958 through November 1959.

Portland Museum of Art, Portland, ME, summers 1959, ’60, ’61.

Long Island University, Brooklyn, NY, Kaaterskill Group, November 1960.

Judson Smith Gallery, Woodstock, NY, Kaaterskill Group, August 16–September 7, 1959, 1960.

State University of New York, New Paltz, NY, Art Faculty Exhibition, 1961, catalog.

Allan Stone Gallery, New York, NY, 1963–1966.

State House, Augusta, ME, Maine State Art Festival, July 31–August 31, 1961.

Betty Parsons Gallery, Drawings, New York, NY, 1960–1961.

Schenectady Museum, Schenectady, NY, Area College and University Teacher’s Art, November 1961, brochure.

Schenectady Museum, Schenectady, NY, The 17th Annual Greater Schenectady Exhibition, October 8–31, 1961.

Hathorn Gallery, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY, Contemporary Crafts of the United States, April 11–May 1, 1992, brochure.

Hathorn Gallery, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY, Contemporary American Drawings, November 28–December 19, 1962, poster, brochure.

Chicago Art Institute, Chicago, IL, 1963.

Richard Feigen Gallery, Chicago, IL, New Talent ’64, 1963.

Allan Stone Gallery, New York, NY, three-person exhibition; Something Wild, December 3–31,1963.

Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, four-person exhibition, spring 1964.

Northeastern University, Boston, MA, New England Contemporary Artists, April 25–May 8, 1965, brochure.

Silvermine Guild of Artists, New Canaan, CT, New England Arts Faculty Invitation Exhibition, May 1–26, 1965.

Jorgensen Gallery, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, Three-By-Three, January 21–February 11, 1965, brochure.

Widener Gallery Austin Arts Center, Trinity College, Hartford, CT, Artist Educator Invitational, November 9–December 4, 1966.

Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI, Recent Still Life, February 23–April 4, 1966, catalog.

Smith College Museum, Northampton, MA, An Exhibition of Sculpture by Sixteen Artists Teachers in Colleges and Universities in Western New England, May 11–June 7, 1966, catalog.

Herter Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Visible Teachers, Visible Artists, September 25–October 16, 1970, catalog.

Jorgensen Gallery, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, 1971.

The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA, Artist Faculty Exhibition, October 29–November 27, 1971, catalog.

DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, MA, 1971.

Galerie Denise Rene, New York, NY, 1974, 1977.

Lamont Gallery, Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, NH, four-person exhibition, October 1976.

Jorgensen Gallery, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, Drawings, summer 1971.

DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, MA, 1988.

Sunne Savage Gallery, Boston, MA, Another Look at the Figure, June 1980.

Stux Gallery, Boston, MA, 1981,1986.

George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum, Springfield, MA, Fifteen Massachusetts Artists: An Invitational, August 5–October 4, 1981, catalog.

Wistariahurst Museum, Holyoke, MA, Valley Faculty Art Exhibition, November 13–December 31, 1983, brochure.

Springfield Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, MA, 1983.

Chicago Sculpture International, Chicago, IL, May 10–15, 1984, catalog.

Montserrat Gallery, Montserrat School of Visual Art, Beverly, MA, Art Off the Wall, October 23–November 15, 1985, brochure.

Hampshire College Art Gallery, Amherst, MA, Works on Paper, February 18–March 14, 1985, poster.

Perimeter Gallery, Chicago, IL, George Wardlaw Sculpture, October 19–November 24, 1984.

Stux Gallery, New York, NYC, Inaugural: Major Works, March 8–April 2, 1986.

Artextreme, Philadelphia, PA, November 1986, catalog.

Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, TN, 1986.

DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, MA, New Work by Old Friends, June 1987.

University of Massachusetts Art Gallery, Amherst, MA, 1996.

Art Chicago–Navy Pier, Chicago, IL, 1996.

The College of Santa Fe, Santa Fe, NM, Jewish Artists: On the Edge, June 4–30, 2000, catalog.

Tryon Center for Visual Art, Charlotte, NC, Like a Prayer: A Jewish and Christian Presence in Contemporary Art, January 31–June 1, 2001, catalog.

Yeshiva University Museum, New York, NY, Jewish Artists: On the Edge, Fall 2001–April 7, 2002, catalog.

Herter Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA, 1958–2008: Nowhere Else but Here, Studio Arts at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA, September 17–October 31, 2008, catalog.

Greenhut Galleries, Portland, Maine, 5th Biennial Portland Show 2010, December 2–31, 2010.

Courthouse Gallery Fine Art, Ellsworth, ME, Abstract Expressionism, Three Maine Artists: Harold Garde, Stephen Pace, George Wardlaw, August 29–September 25, 2010. catalog.

## Collections (abridged)

4 and 91. Johnson Wax Headquarters, Racine, WI

23. Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, TN

25. Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, TN

28. Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans, LA

38. Racine Art Museum, Racine, WI

46. Private collection

49. Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, TN

56. Mount Sinai Medical Center, Milwaukee, WI

69. Mr. and Mrs. William Harrison, Greenwich, CT

75. Private collection

77. DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, MA

83. Private collection

84. DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, MA

98. Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, MS

111. Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI

143. Wichita Art Museum, Wichita, KS

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Herter Gallery at UMass, 1982, installation

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"George Wardlaw Receives Important Commission," *Spotlight*, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, The Fine Arts Center, pp. 3, 6, 1986.

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Hitch, Denise. Review, “Artist Inspired by Spirituality,” *Sophian*, Smith College, Northampton, MA, vol. 41, no.19, 4/16/1992.

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Holland, Laura. Review, “Perceptions of Doors,” *Valley Advocate*, p. 24A, 9/22/1982 (reproduction).

Holland, Laura. Review, “Viewer’s Choice,” *Preview Massachusetts*, September 2008, p. 14–17 (reproductions).

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# Chronology

**1927**
April 9, George Melvin Wardlaw born in Baldwyn, Mississippi, to Wiley and Lillie Wardlaw.

**1933–1941**
Attended Southwest Prentiss Elementary School.

**1942–45**
Attended Baldwyn High School.

**1945–46**
Left school, volunteered and served in the United States Navy Medical Corp.

October 1945, graduated Hospital Corp School, San Diego, California; honorable discharge, March 1946.

**1946**
Apprenticeship with sign painter.

Worked as night manager at uncle's hotel in Amory, Mississippi.

**1947**
January, enrolled in Memphis Academy of Arts, Memphis, Tennessee (GI BIll).

**1948**
May, painter chosen to represent Tennessee in the exhibition, *Twenty-five and Under*, Jacques Seligman Gallery, New York. Painting was one of twenty selected by the American Federation of Arts to travel to art schools and museums around the country.

Honorable mention for both objective and nonobjective painting, school awards.

**1950**
One of the first to receive a BFA degree from the Memphis Academy of Arts.

One of twelve selected to attend the Handy & Harmon National Silversmithing four-week workshop conference held at the American School for Craftsmen, Rochester Institute of Technology, New York.

**1951**
Built a studio at the family farm in Baldwyn, Mississippi, and continued painting and silversmithing. Five pieces of silver work purchased by the United States Department of State to be included in an exhibition promoting creative American crafts. Exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the National Gallery, Washington; and traveled to Europe and the Near East.

**1951–1964 (summers)**
Head of arts and crafts program, Tripp Lake Camp, Poland, Maine.

**1952**
January, invited to establish and teach a metals program, Art Department, University of Mississippi. Continued teaching in the program until 1955.

**1953–55**
Enrolled in the newly established MFA program at the University of Mississippi. Graduated in 1955. Studied with visiting artists Jack Tworkov and David Smith.

**1955**
Appointed to teach two- and three-dimensional design and establish a metals program, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

**1956–1963**
Appointed to teach two- and three-dimensional design, painting, and establish a metals program, State University of New York, New Paltz, New York.

**1957**
Married Judy Ellen Spivack, Kingston, New York.

**1959**
Sublet Herman Cherry's studio on Bowery Street, New York City, New York.

**1959–60**
Solo exhibition at Betty Parsons Section Eleven Gallery, New York City, New York.

**1961**
Built a studio in New Paltz, New York.

**1963**
Three-person exhibition, Something Wild, Allan Stone Gallery, New York City, New York.

Poisoned from plastic materials used in construction of sculpture. Took a semester's sick leave from teaching.

**1964**
Son Gregory was born.

**1964–68**
Yale University, taught painting and served as administrative assistant to Jack Tworkov, art department chair.

Taught at the Yale Norfolk Summer School, Norfolk, Connecticut. Director of the school 1966–68. Solo exhibition each year at the school's art gallery.

**1966**
Daughter Sarah was born.



**1966**
Exhibition Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut.

**1968**
Son Steven was born.

**1968–1990**
Invited to join the art department faculty, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts.

Appointed director of the graduate program, January 1969. Appointed department chair, June 1971–1988. Retired 1990.

**1971**
Built house and studio in Amherst.

**1973–79**
Shared loft studio on West Broadway, New York City, with James Hendricks.

**1973**
February, father died.

**1976**
Commission, Mount Sinai Medical Center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, relief sculpture.

**1977**
Commission, Mount Sinai Medical Center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, sculpture.

**1978–79**
Solo exhibition, deCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, Massachusetts

**1980–84**
Maintained studio on East Broadway, New York.

**1983**
Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters Award for the sculpture series, Doors.

Solo exhibition, Stux Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts.

University of Massachusetts Faculty Research Fellowship.

**1985**
Received a $5,000 Joseph P. Healey Grant to support the large-scale sculpture series, Passages.

**1985–86**
Commission, Johnson Wax Corporation, Racine, Wisconsin, *Passage X: Interior Garden*, site-specific sculpture located in the Howard M. Packard Building.

**1986**
Solo exhibition, Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, Massachusetts.

**1987**
Received a $5,000 Joseph P. Healey Grant to support the large-scale sculpture project, *Passage XI: Exodus I*.

**1988**
Traveled to Europe for two weeks with Judy, Hanlyn Davies, and his two children.

Retrospective, George Wardlaw: Transitions, Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, Tennessee and Memphis College of Art, Memphis, Tennessee.

**1989**
Solo exhibition, George Wardlaw: Transitions II, Wichita Art Museum, Wichita, Kansas.

Solo exhibition, Perimeter Gallery, Chicago, Illinois.

**1990**
Built addition to studio.

**1992**
Solo exhibition, George Wardlaw: Exodus II, University Gallery, Fine Arts Center, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA.

**1996**
March, mother died.

**2001**
Built second addition to studio.

**2008**
Solo exhibition, George Wardlaw: Recent Paintings: Windows I, Hampden Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA.

Solo exhibition, George Wardlaw: Recent Paintings: Windows II, Hampshire College Art Gallery, Amherst, MA.

**2008**
May, wife Judy died.

**2009**
Solo exhibition, George Wardlaw: Maine Windows, Courthouse Gallery Fine Art, Ellsworth, Maine.

**2010**
Three-person exhibition, Abstract Expressionism, Three Maine Artists: Harold Garde, Stephen Pace, George Wardlaw, Courthouse Gallery Fine Art, Ellsworth, ME.

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LORI FRIEDMAN is an independent curator and arts administrator. She is the sole proprietor of Lori Friedman Arts Management, a consulting business providing coaching, consulting, and curating. She has curated exhibitions at The Brattleboro Museum of Art, Greenfield Community College, and the College of New Rochelle. As the former director of the S. Bitter-Larkin Gallery in New York City, she curated over twenty exhibitions on cutting-edge and contemporary art. Before that, she was the assistant to the director at Knoedler Gallery. Ms. Friedman holds a BA in Art History from the University of California–Berkeley, is a graduate of the Sotheby's Works of Art Course in London, and more recently received her MBA from UMass–Amherst. She also serves on several boards of directors for local and regional nonprofit organizations, including the Fine Arts Center at UMass–Amherst where she chaired the Visual Arts Committee for the University Museum of Contemporary Art. Ms. Friedman lives in Amherst with her two sons, who are both avid baseball enthusiasts.

J. RICHARD GRUBER, PhD, is director emeritus of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, University of New Orleans (UNO). He was director of the Ogden Museum and a member of the UNO faculty from 1999 to 2010. He has also served as deputy director of the Morris Museum of Art and director of its Center for the Study of Southern Painting in Augusta, Georgia; director of the Wichita Art Museum in Wichita, Kansas; curator, then director of the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, in Memphis, Tennessee; and director of the Peter Joseph Gallery in New York.

He holds an MA in art history from the University of Colorado at Boulder and a PhD in art history from the University of Kansas at Lawrence. He has published books and catalogs on artists including Robert Rauschenberg, Benny Andrews, William Christenberry, Nellie Mae Rowe, Robert Stackhouse, William Dunlap, Thomas Hart Benton, Ed McGowin, Wolf Kahn, Elliot Daingerfield, and Richard Jolley.

ORI Z. SOLTES is Professorial Lecturer in Theology and Fine Arts at Georgetown University and former director of the B'nai B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum in Washington, D.C., where he curated over eighty exhibitions on a variety of subjects. He is the author of articles, exhibition catalogs, essays, and books on a range of topics, including *Fixing the World: American Jewish Painters in the Twentieth Century*; *Our Sacred Signs: How Jewish, Christian and Muslim Art Draw from the Same Source*; *Searching for Oneness: Mysticism in the Judaism, Christianity and Islam*; and *Untangling the Web: A Thinking Person's Guide to Why the Middle East Is a Mess and Always Has Been*. He is currently completing a book on the definition of Jewish art and architecture called *Tradition and Transformation*.

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She also served as Associate Professor in Museum Studies for the University of Maine at Orono, and prior to moving to Maine in 1988, was the director of the University of Rhode Island Art Galleries. She has also worked at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, and the Museum of American History, Sm ithsonian Institution.

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ON THE JACKET *Obscured Flume: Stone Head Cliff*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 78 x 72 inches

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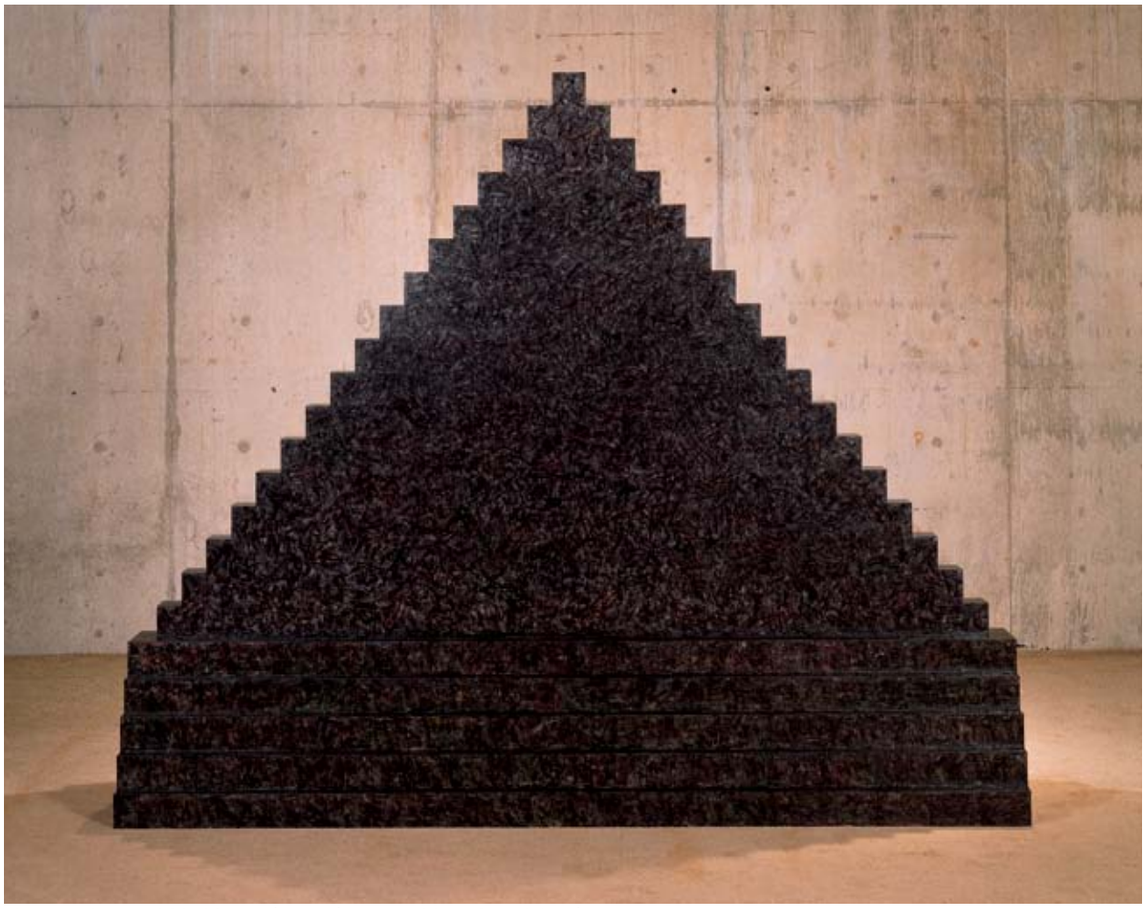

*Warning Signs*, 1989–92, acrylic on aluminum, 88 x 106 x 24 inches

"No one can say that George Wardlaw is a one-theme artist. Unlike less venturesome colleagues, content to exploit a signature idea or two, Wardlaw's aesthetic appetite seems unbounded. His passionate exploration of modes and expressions has taken him in practice from jewelry-making to painting to monumental sculpture; in subject matter from lofty religion to humble apples to the rugged coast of Maine. He has aptly described his art as 'a kind of collage...of different places, times, experience, materials.'"

— Grace Glueck

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