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Meyers Collection,
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Untitled
Vincent Melzac Collection

Howard Mehring

1960
Washington Color School

This work, the last of the six Mehring's in the Agency's collection, shows the strong relationship and interaction with the work of fellow Color School artist Downing. Mehring and Downing were close friends as well as colleagues and their work had an interesting mutual influence, one upon the other. Like Downing's **Dapple**, Mehring here uses dots of color, but not dots of uniform size and shape. Rather, he stipples the apparent dots of color onto the canvas, slightly recalling the areas of color in the large orange **Untitled** canvas of 1958 (in OHB Main Corridor.) Mehring wanted to get away from the over-all style of the earlier work, in which he thought the energy of the color "heated up around the edge," that is, where the color meets the wall. To do so, he brought the edge *into* the painting: "The edge is important and exciting to me, but what I've done in these paintings is to reverse the edge, carrying it into the picture almost as if the canvas has been folded back on to itself." By repeating these "energy breaks" inside the painting, he multiplies their potential. Within these edged spaces, Mehring stipples the paint onto the canvas in order to achieve the sense of airiness, movement, and lights. To increase further the power of the edge, he actually cut the shaped areas of uniform color out from other canvases and glued them into this arrangement on yet another canvas. This concentration on the edge influenced Downing's later "shaped" paintings.

#14 NHB 3rd Floor

Untitled
Vincent Melzac Collection

Howard Mehring

1959
Washington Color School

In this painting, as in the silver-gray painting on the opposite wall, Mehring's use of small areas of color maintains an even attention over the entire canvas surface. Ever so slight variations in size and color, however, create a sense of expansion and contraction, with the effect that the surface seems to "breathe color." This is largely achieved by the nature of the medium as well as the technique. The medium is a new product of the 1950s called magna: unlike water-based acrylic – also a product of the 1950's – magna is based on turpentine and mineral spirits. Applied directly onto the cotton canvas, it literally bites into the threads of the cotton surface and becomes part of the canvas – instead of just being **on top of the canvas**. The artists of the Washington Color School also expanded on a technique called "staining" which allows the color to be applied evenly and meticulously across the surface of the canvas while removing, so to speak, the touch of the artist's hand, which is more obviously evident when a paint brush is used. In some cases, artists even used eye drops to apply the paint! This emphasis on depersonalizing the painted surface creates a surface in which every area has virtually the same intensity of color, saturation, and inflection. The artists of the Washington Color School believed that in denying the personality of the artist, a certain purity is added to the work. Color and structure are "married" in this approach, with color – with its accompanying lyrical qualities – becoming the primary emotive vehicle of the painting.

#1 OHB Main Corridor

Untitled
Vincent Melzac Collection

Howard Mehring

no date (ca. 1958-59)
Washington Color School

This painting preceded the orange-toned painting to the left and is an important example of the transition from gesture and romantic atmosphere to staining. While also on cotton canvas, the water-based acrylic medium is not stained into the cotton but rather sits on top of the fiber of the canvas. Mehring acknowledged that a major influence in this work was the French Impressionist Claude Monet's massive paintings devoted to water lilies. Using layers of color with the dominant silver-gray on top of the other colors, Mehring creates a similar "romantic" image evoking – but not literally depicting – forces of nature, such as water or a storm. This indeed was a typical characteristic of the Washington Color School artists: the elimination of literal representation or figuration in their striving toward purity in the image and unity of color and structure.

#2 OHB Main Corridor

Untitled

Howard Mehring

ca.1958

Vincent Melzac Collection (on loan)

Washington Color School

The subtle yet at times striking colors and the strong diagonal of this painting's composition carry the viewer's eyes across the canvas surface. There are as many as 10 layers of the turpentine-based magna paint "poured" onto the surface, starting with the splash of orange and followed by layers of purple and violet and some subtle greens on top. Even as the paint is layered, the colors are not muddied, because the magna paint does not bleed between the layers into the successive layers of color. The composition is guided but not preconceived: the artist guides the paint as it is being poured across the canvas placed on the floor, but such a technique of pouring and staining the color onto the canvas makes it quite impossible to control exactly how the colors will combine or absorbed into the canvas. While the artist exerts some degree of control – in terms of the amount of turpentine used to thin the paint, the amount of paint used, the direction of the flow of paint, etc. – by allowing chance occurrences to be incorporated into the painting, Mehring created a composition of particular liveliness and spontaneity.

#4 NHB 2nd Floor

Untitled

Howard Mehring

no date (ca.1958)

Vincent Melzac Collection (on loan)

Washington Color School

This early Mehring work shows the artist studying the way the staining process works and also shows him enjoying its accidental effects. Most basically, Mehring presents a contrast here of pigment on the surface of the canvas with that of deep staining: the viscosity of the white areas, which is here virtually poured straight onto the canvass out of a bucket, is in vivid contrast to the thin ethereal space of the purple area, which appears to be poured and the blotted, resulting in deep staining. In some ways, this work is reminiscent of a galaxy formation or of something biological, viewed under a microscope. This relationship to science – away from a romantic depiction, closer to the very nature of the material and the simplicity of shape – is viewed as a very American characteristic of the artists of this period.

#6 NHB 2nd Floor

Untitled Howard Mehring no date (mid-late 1950s)
Vincent Melzac Collection (on loan) Washington Color School

This is probably the earliest of the six Mehrings in the Agency's Melzac Collection, painted while he was still in his twenties. With its bold juxtapositions of color and the controlled energy in the shapes, this is a deeply felt, personal expression of the lyric potential of color. As such, it is an example of his earlier "romantic" style, which he left behind in the later 1950s in favor of the more depersonalized style achieved through staining. While this work is also stained in parts, it is done nonetheless using a brush. Mehring and his Washington Color School compatriots often visited The Phillips Collection, the private collection of works by major European and American artists. Of particular interest to these painters -- Mehring among them -- was the work of the late 19th century American artist, Albert Pinkham Ryder, whose work was characterized by broad, simple shapes and a dark, romantic atmosphere in his depictions of storms and landscapes.

#8 NHB 2nd floor

Fold-II Thomas Downing 1968
Vincent Melzac Collection (on loan) Washington Color School

This is the last of the Agency's series of paintings spanning Downing's career. We can follow it from the early poured wash painting (third floor) through color circles (second floor) to the earlier shaped canvases (north corridor). Color was always his focus, but his ideas on what to do with it changed dramatically over the course of his career. In this work, Downing identifies the form and color with the canvas itself -- namely, with its very shape. Feeling that the traditional horizon line was relevant only to earth-bound space and largely insufficient for the 20th century, he abandoned vanishing-point perspective for isometric projection. Colors are flat and even, precluding a sense of background or foreground. In *Fold-II*, Downing presents space as an entity of its own, extending simultaneously into the wall and into the room.

#3 NHB 1st floor

Center Grid
Vincent Melzac Collection

Thomas Downing

1960
Washington Color School

In an earlier work (**Dapple**, #9 on 2nd floor NHB), Downing made use of modules of pure color to create a field of pulsating color across the canvas surface. In **Center Grid**, Downing uses this same module but is aiming for an entirely different effect than in his earlier work. Now he marshals the color modules formally, and the play in space results from contrasts of focus and overlapping layers of depth. Downing saw himself somewhat as a romantic as regards painting: "I liked the feeling of my brush going around when I painted. Then I found out a remarkable thing about color – that it can move while being still." He used the objective structure of the painting as neutral framework that would allow the color to operate in freedom: "I use variations of color as a language." Downing's later adventures in color are evident in his shaped canvases on the first floor.

#7 NHB 2nd Floor

Dapple Thomas Downing 1959
Vincent Melzac Collection Washington Color School

In this painting, Downing uses the dot as a module of color. Each dot is a unit of pure color, but together they create an overall pulsating field, where they seem to float in front of the canvas in a unified space, with no sense of fore- or background. The color is similarly closely keyed in the blue-green range, without sharp differences of light and dark, creating a feeling of openness, space, and movement. This is perhaps the Agency's best example of what the Washington Color School artists meant when they spoke of their interest in "color as light" -- a reference to the late 19th century French movement known as Pointillism, pioneered by Georges Seurat. Downing and his Color School colleagues were aware of Seurat's color theories, and indeed, saw a work such as *Dapple* as "exploded pointillism."

#9 NHB 2nd floor

Untitled
Vincent Melzac Collection

Thomas Downing
Washington Color School

1959

This is the earliest of the Agency's seven paintings by Downing. At first glance it appears solid, geometric,...even flat, but the many variations in the surface give it a velvety quality, which is most evident in the creamy border but is effectively carried throughout the work. The square-inside-the-square motif recalls the idea of the quilt -- a very American object. The inside of the three squares is itself the subject of this painting, with the red-orange square field resting or sitting inside of the blue, which is in turn nested on top of the milky white gesso, which is itself inside a slender band of red-violent, and only finally does the orange band -- of uneven width -- echo the color of the center square. The artist allows the viewer to "see" the canvas underneath, in the two opposite corners that appear to be left unpainted. The staining technique allows for an unevenness and spatial quality in the color, which would not have been possible had the artist used the more traditional oil technique, which over time actually rots the canvas. It is interesting to follow Downing's style from this poured wash, to the overall patterns of dots of color, to his later shaped canvases.

#17 NHB 3rd floor

Planks
Vincent Melzac Collection

Thomas Downing
Washington Color School

1967

By this time in his career, Downing has abandoned his circles or modules of color entirely, in order to create color compositions that extend the paintings into real space. The painting no longer exists simply contained within its rectangular or square frame. He initially began his shaped paintings with basic parallelogram shapes, followed by the series called *Planks* represented by this example, which gives the illusion of unfolding from the wall. The color is presented in as uncomplicated a manner as possible, and the sequence of greens is subtle and pleasing to the eye. In contrast to the general aim of the Washington Color School artists to avoid the sensation of depth, Downing here uses what amounts to a traditional vanishing point, creating the impression of a recession into space.

#19 NHB 1st floor

The Melzac Collection is located throughout both CIA's Original Headquarters Building and New Headquarters Building.

The 29 modern paintings at CIA represent an elemental approach to art, a swashbuckling donor, and a correlation to the art movement contemporary with the OHB architecture. These paintings within our compound affirm the original intention of DCI Allen Dulles that the CIA be campus-like in character. Such art is a perfect and necessary complement of the multi-faceted academic pursuit of understanding ourselves and others. It reinforces the Agency's unity of purpose and unifying theme. The paintings within our walls and the architecture that surrounds them complement each other.

The way the eye perceives color and pattern was the subject of Norman Bluhm, Gene Davis, Howard Mehring, Kenneth Noland, Thomas Downing, Alma Thomas, and the other artists of the Washington Color School. These artists worked in Washington, DC, at the same time as the better known and more gestural abstract expressionists Jackson Pollock and Willem De Kooning worked in New York City. The Color School work was part of a new minimalism in American art.

For the first time, color and the raw materials of painting—paint and the raw, unprimed canvas—became the subject matter. As artist Kenneth Noland advocated, "The thing is to get that color down onto the thinnest conceivable surface, a surface sliced into air as if by a razor. It's all color and surface." These artists poured the paint onto the canvas in layers of thin washes and repeated color in patterns of stripes or dots or rhythmic paint strokes. Standing in front of these paintings, you will sense the rhythm of the layered colors and the movement of the paint. Many of the paintings are so large that they tend to absorb the viewer. The collection's patron—the late Vincent Melzac—was a larger-than-life figure. A Washington business executive who began collecting art at age 16, he collected work by promising new artists and grew to love it. Every major collection in Washington, including the National Museum of American Art and the Phillips Collection, eventually benefited from his largesse.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Melzac made more contacts in the art world and filled his collection with many works by the artists represented here at the Agency today. He became the CEO of the Corcoran Gallery of Art in the early 1970s. He raised prize cattle and Arabian horses on his West Virginia farm until his death in 1989.

Melzac's first loan of art to the CIA came in 1968 when eight large paintings by Norman Bluhm, Gene Davis, Thomas Downing, and Jack Bush were selected by officials of the Corcoran Gallery to fit the large open spaces of OHB. At that time, he also loaned a sculpture by Giorgio Spaventa; it now resides in the Vatican. Melzac also donated sculptor Marc Mellon's bust of George H. W. Bush that stands at the top of the stairs of the OHB lobby. In 1982, DCI Casey awarded Melzac the Agency Seal Medallion for his generous support to the CIA.