

WHAT TO  
PAINT  
AND WHY:  
MODERN  
PAINTERS AT  
CRANBROOK,  
1936-1974

CURATED BY  
CHAD ALLIGOOD

ESSAYS BY  
CHAD ALLIGOOD  
JOAN BEEHLER BENCE

CRANBROOK ART MUSEUM



1 Kyle Morris  
*Bus Stop*  
1947  
© Estate Kyle Morris. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.

## WHAT TO PAINT AND WHY: MODERN PAINTERS AT CRANBROOK, 1936-1974

by Chad Alligood

I begin with an early image by a painter who later found significant success: Kyle Morris's painting *Bus Stop* (1947, plate 1). Made in the year Morris received his MFA from the Department of Painting at Cranbrook Academy of Art, the painting depicts a scene simmering with narrative ambiguity and unresolved tension. A clutch of highly attenuated figures huddles along the lip of a narrow sidewalk backed by a wooden fence. Several of these figures cluster in pairs: two men in sailor caps convene in the center background; a bedraggled woman and child perch stiffly behind the waste bucket on the right; at left, a bearded, enfeebled man with a cane grips the arm of a woman in an orange pillbox hat. Still others remain resolutely isolated despite the density of the composition. The man with his arms crossed at the heart of the painting, his eyes cast off into the unfocused distance, seems just as remote and inaccessible as the shadowy figure behind him buried in a newspaper. Abruptly thrust onto a shallow, stage-like foreground, garishly illuminated from the side as if from an oncoming car, these various, noncommittal ciphers pose more questions than they answer. Where did we come from? they seem to ask. When will our bus arrive? And when it does—where are we going?

The doubt at the core of this painting reflects Morris's own uncertainty regarding the field of painting at this juncture in his career. He arrived at Cranbrook already trained as an art historian and with experience as an instructor, holding an MA from Northwestern University and having taught art history at the University of Texas at Austin. Morris abandoned teaching to serve in the Army Air Corps in World War II from 1942 to 1945 before coming to Cranbrook to study painting under Zoltan Sepeshy, then the director of the Department of Painting. Forged in the fires of Sepeshy's instruction, the budding painter subsequently adopted some of the stylistic characteristics that marked his teacher's work. Morris's illustrative method

of depicting the figure, for instance—evident in *Bus Stop* in its reliance on heavy outline—directly recalls Sepeshy's paintings from the same time period. But the shallow depth of field, the overall flattening of three-dimensional form, and the tendency towards abstraction indicate other influences as well. Wallace Mitchell, also an instructor in drawing and painting at the Academy in 1947 in addition to serving as its registrar, was developing a highly refined abstract language at this very moment. In Mitchell's *Abstraction No. 1* (1945, plate 2), for example, a series of elongated, repetitious geometric forms crowds the foreground of the picture plane against an indeterminate background of mottled gray in a manner not unlike the simplified figures of Morris's



2 Wallace Mitchell  
*Abstraction No. 1*  
 1945  
 © Estate of Wallace M. Mitchell.  
 Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.

poor souls at the bus stop. With a foot in both artistic camps—Sepeshy's expressive representation and Mitchell's flattened abstraction—Morris was endeavoring to find his own vocabulary of painted forms. The difficulty of this task emerges in his MFA thesis, in which Morris explains the plight he and his colleagues confronted:

The student of painting in this day generally comes to the conclusion that he has been begot in an era which describes a strange future for him. . . . He is confronted with many conflicting and changing definitions, not only in the philosophies of aesthetics, but also in the fields of science, religion and economics. . . . He finds that the basic concepts which will shape his conclusions of "What to paint and why?" are also difficult to clarify.<sup>1</sup>

Morris here pinpoints the unique and significant challenge of the midcentury painter: to find a compelling subject matter, style, and motivation for painting in the face of the dramatic cultural shifts that characterize American life during this period.

Painters at Cranbrook Academy of Art formulated a spectrum of responses to the fundamental question identified by Morris. These responses—in the form of paintings, drawings, sculpture, and ceramics—compose the central concern of this catalog. Like the exhibition to which it corresponds, this essay groups the works under consideration into five prevalent themes: Nature, Self and Other, the City, War, and Abstraction. Rather than

constructing a chronological history, this text and exhibition instead seek to identify certain connective threads among works that illuminate the varying subjects and strategies adopted by Cranbrook painters during this period. Through this thematic exploration, the significance of the productive tension between the styles of Sepeshy and Mitchell emerges. From Mitchell's arrival as an instructor at Cranbrook in 1936 until Sepeshy's death in 1974, the dynamic contrast between these two men and their approaches to painting stimulated a generation of painters to address the medium in uniquely inspired ways. The challenge of their instruction—and the professional models they represented—launched several of these painters to lifelong careers of national renown.

## NATURE

Nestled into the gently rolling landscape of Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, Cranbrook Academy of Art has inspired artists to engage with the primacy of the natural world from its very beginnings. George Gough Booth, the newspaper magnate and philanthropist who founded Cranbrook on the site of his summer estate, conceived of this idyllic setting as an antidote to the increasingly industrialized way of life prevalent in urban centers of the United States. Like his fellow supporters of the Arts and Crafts Movement, Booth sought to elevate the standards of art "to the end that American life may progress in simplicity and purity."<sup>2</sup> Such values were to be found, at least in part, in the natural landscape of Cranbrook's campus, masterfully framed by

Eliel Saarinen's architecture and populated by sculptor Carl Milles's bronzes of frolicking naiads and nymphs.

In the years following the Academy's official foundation in 1932, early Cranbrook painters—including David Fredenthal, Wallace Mitchell, and Harry Bertoia—looked to these pastoral surrounds as one subject for their watercolor works. Indeed, the 1934–1935 *Cranbrook Academy of Art Announcement*, which was given to prospective students, specifically notes “the natural beauty and easy accessibility of scenes that are of great pictorial interest in the immediate vicinity” as an advantage to studying painting at the Academy.<sup>3</sup> Cranbrook painters often took advantage of these incomparable views. Fredenthal's *Autumn Landscape* (1937, plate 3), for instance, proffers a scene overlooking the lagoon at Cranbrook School for Boys, with the small canoe house visible in the left middle ground and the regularized architectonic forms of faculty housing dotting the landscape beyond. Fredenthal, who had never painted prior to his arrival at the Academy in 1935, found particular utility in the medium of watercolor because of “reasons of economy.”<sup>4</sup> Born to immigrant parents in a tenement house in Detroit, the artist attended Cranbrook only by dint of a full fellowship for the duration of his studies. But beyond watercolor's relative cheapness, Fredenthal found freedom in the material qualities of the medium. For him “speed and decisiveness were necessities” since “one had to enter immediately into the problem of picture construction with a minimum of technical paraphernalia and fuss.”<sup>5</sup> Such freedom finds fulsome expression in this work, as the staccato interruptions of green representing trees and

bushes sporadically interject among the flowing, descriptive cerulean washes of the clouds and water.

Fredenthal considered Zoltan Sepeshy, his instructor at the Academy, to be an integral figure in his artistic development. He noted that Sepeshy taught “by revealing the underlying principles of a specific problem and never by arbitrary generalization.”<sup>6</sup> Sepeshy, too, examined the natural landscape as subject matter for his painted compositions, but his eye sometimes alighted on something darker hidden in the verdant hills. A Hungarian transplant to the Midwest, the painter practiced a kind of dynamic regionalism akin at times to the contemporaneous work of Thomas Hart Benton, with whom he corresponded regarding painting techniques in different media.<sup>7</sup> A painter who once vaingloriously described himself as “one of the few remaining American pioneers,”<sup>8</sup> Sepeshy mined the



Fig. 1 Zoltan Sepeshy with students in critique, May 1, 1942. Richard G. Askew, Photographer. © Cranbrook Archives (5892-2).

- 3 David Fredenthal  
*Autumn Landscape*  
1937  
© Estate of David Fredenthal. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.



- 4 Wallace Mitchell  
*Excavation for the Jonah Pool*  
1937  
© Estate of Wallace M. Mitchell. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.



- 5 Harry Bertoia  
*Mountain Landscape*  
1939  
© 2013 Estate of Harry Bertoia/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.  
Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.





6 Zoltan Sepeshy  
*Sunday Afternoon—The Family*  
 1944  
 © Estate of Zoltan Sepeshy. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh and Tim Thayer.

subject of the American landscape to explore complicated notions of home, identity, and family. Such themes arise in his masterful *Sunday Afternoon—The Family* (1944, plate 6), a large tempera painting portraying three figures in a roiling, dynamic landscape. What initially seems to be a charming depiction of a little girl flanked by her two parents in a rural setting assumes a charged undercurrent under further scrutiny. In the left background, two horses rear up beneath the churning clouds of an oncoming storm. The woman on the right peers behind her, both at the girl and the darkening sky. Her bonnet rests in the grass; her dress has come undone at the bosom. The male figure languorously sprawls against a freshly-cut tree stump in the foreground and plays a harmonica, his boots astray at his stockinged feet. Between these two figures, the wide-eyed child unflinchingly returns the gaze of the viewer, clutching one toy rigidly to her chest while the other hangs flaccidly at her side. Emulating Benton's swirling compositional style, Sepeshy's rhythmic, disquieting picture exploits our traditional trust in the landscape to deliver a scene of transportive calm, providing in its place an enigmatic field teeming with uncertainty. In so doing, he finds a renewed vitality and narrative possibility in the age-old subject of nature.

#### SELF AND OTHER

Like the genre of landscape, the portrait as a subject for painting boasts a history as long as the medium itself. Perhaps due to the hothouse atmosphere at the

Academy, painters at Cranbrook in this period found particular inspiration in depicting themselves and their contemporaries. Such a preoccupation with imaging the self undoubtedly stems from the Academy's expressed emphasis on "the personal vision and mode of execution" of its painting students, each of whom was encouraged "to find and develop his own personal style" in the course of his studies.<sup>9</sup> This impulse to self-reflection emerges in works produced by Cranbrook artists during this period. In Sepeshy's *Blue Hat (Self-Portrait)* (1946, plate 8), for instance, the artist trains his keen eye and expressive brushstroke on the form of his own visage. A strongly directional light source illuminates Sepeshy's face from outside the frame at upper left, highlighting its plastic form and lending a palpable immediacy to the depiction. Though renowned for his work in tempera, the artist's reliance here on unmodeled areas of oil paint to describe planes of the face—in the quick stroke of russet at the bridge of the nose, or in the flat gray trapezoid defining the lip's bow—indicates his sensitivity in this medium as well.

Other Cranbrook artists engaged the genre of self-portraiture to similar effect. Maija Grotell, Sepeshy's colleague on the teaching staff of the Academy beginning in 1938, often applied paint to the surfaces of her ceramic vessels in an illustrative mode before arriving at Cranbrook. Such a method appears in her *Self Portrait Jug* (circa 1937, plate 7), which actually features two self-portraits: one of the artist painting a pot and another with the figure holding the finished vessel. Grotell in both cases depicts herself from the chest up in a highly stylized idiom: the



7 Maija Grotell  
*Self-Portrait Jug*  
 Circa 1937  
 © Estate of Maija Grotell. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.



8 Zoltan Sepeshy  
*Blue Hat (Self-Portrait)*  
 1946  
 © Estate of Zoltan Sepeshy. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.



9 Zoltan Sepeshy  
*Portrait of Eliel Saarinen*  
 Circa 1940–1945  
 © Estate of Zoltan Sepeshy. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.



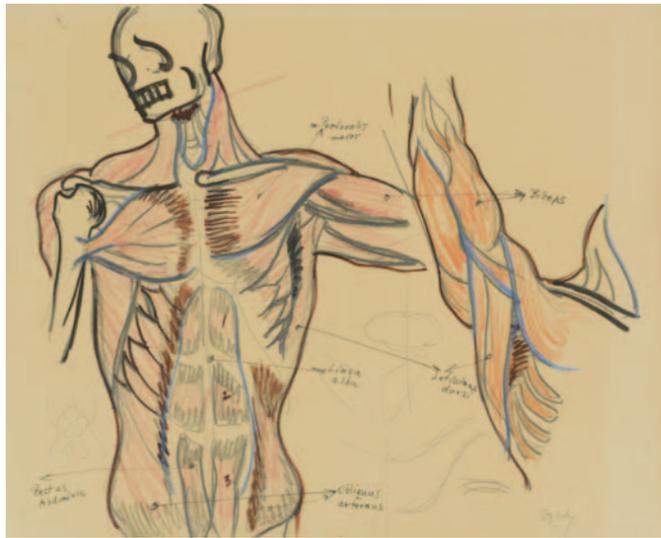
Fig. 2 Maija Grotell painting a vessel, circa 1940. © Cranbrook Archives (CEC940).

sculptural, abstracted form of the head tilts downward atop an elongated neck, while the high forehead retreats into a long mane of dark hair. In this modestly sized earthenware jug, the artist demonstrates her engagement with a long tradition of ceramics production in the form of the jug while asserting her authorial intent in its surface painting. As she developed her own style in residence at the Academy, Grotell moved away from representational strategies of surface ornament, experimenting in the abstract repetition of forms derived from the world around her. Such forms included her immediate milieu—Eliel Saarinen’s designs for Cranbrook’s campus often find direct echoes in the surface elaboration of her vessels. Painting students of this era, including Robert Collins, sometimes took classes with Grotell to explore alternate ways of making beyond the

painting studio. The ceramist commanded deep respect and devotion among her students for her “patient, playful, untiring and eminently fair” manner in the studio.<sup>10</sup>

At times, the examination of the self through portraiture emerged through the context of a larger painting with multiple figures. Sepeshy’s *Study for the Scientist, Artist, and Farmer Mural* (1941, plate 12) slyly embeds a self-portrait within a design for a mural commission. Like many of his contemporaries and students, including David Fredenthal, Clifford “Bud” West, and Jack Keijo Steele, Sepeshy worked in the mural format, which grew in popularity during this period due in large part to its governmental support through the Federal Art Project. Sepeshy prepared this study for one of his most significant private commissions, a mural for the Engineers’ Lounge at the Rackham Engineering Foundation in Detroit. In an allegorical presentation, Sepeshy brings together men of three different occupations—scientist, artist, farmer—surrounding a massive drop of water to underline their divergent conceptions of this elemental substance. The composition didactically celebrates their various societal roles, implying that each remains important in its own way. Beyond a mere self-portrait, Sepeshy’s use of himself as the model for the ur-painter in this composition indicates the high esteem he held for his own painting prowess.

The increased interest in the mural as a format in the thirties and forties necessitated rigorous study of the human figure by students of painting. The Academy fulfilled this need in part by periodically employing dedicated instructors to teach anatomy and physiology. The



10 Zoltan Sepeshy  
Anatomical Drawing  
Undated  
© Estate of Zoltan Sepeshy. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.



11 Elizabeth Eddy  
Line Drawing  
1945  
© Estate of Elizabeth Eddy.



12 Zoltan Sepeshy  
Study for The Scientist, Artist and Farmer Mural, Rackham Building, Detroit, Michigan  
1941  
© Estate of Zoltan Sepeshy. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh and Tim Thayer.

administration required knowledge in these fields “in so far as they relate to the portrayal of organic structure and movement.”<sup>11</sup> Such a requirement was no doubt endorsed by Sepeshy, whose intensive undated drawings of anatomical structures (plate 10) bespeak his deep commitment to understanding the whats and whys of the human body. Beyond instruction in anatomy, students in the Department of Painting also participated in life drawing classes which were regularly held in the painting studios. These classes, like the relatively unstructured atmosphere of the Academy curriculum overall, emphasized the freedom of expression and the realization of a personal vision. Such attributes emerge in the finest drawings from these sessions: consider, for example, Elizabeth Eddy’s expressive *Line Drawing* (1945, plate 11), one of a series of ten drawings produced

during a single life drawing class. Eddy, a student of Sepeshy, here sensitively exploits the capacity of the single line to express dimensionality, space, and contour. Relying on an intuitive approach to the figure, the artist unmoors representation from the standard rules governing proportion: the outstretched hands and head are clearly outsized compared to the relatively diminutive torso. But Eddy’s virtuosic, hastily inscribed lines indicate an intimate understanding of the vagaries of the human form and a fundamental trust in her own hand to translate them into ink on paper. Part of a generation of Cranbrook painters who found inspiration in the bodily forms of self and other, Eddy and her contemporaries worked in a variety of media to explore a range of expression through the representation of the body.



Fig. 3 Life Drawing Class, Cranbrook Academy of Art, December 17, 1954. Harvey Croze, Photographer. © Cranbrook Archives (AA2625-19).

## THE CITY

Given its location in the suburbs, twenty miles from Detroit’s city center, Cranbrook’s relationship to the city and urban life has always been tenuous. Close enough to visit but far enough to feel removed, the bubbling fountains and calculated vistas of the Arcadian campus clearly announced Cranbrook as a world apart. The total design of the environment sought by Booth at Cranbrook necessitated this complete removal. The chaotic, commercialized, plainly un-designed form of the American city—especially one as industrially focused as Detroit—ran at complete odds with the aspirations of Booth’s cherished Arts and Crafts ideals.



13 Zoltan Sepeshy  
*Factory Rhythm (Back of Hudson Motor Plant)*  
 Circa 1947  
 © Estate of Zoltan Sepeshy. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.

But painters at Cranbrook during this period embraced the city as a subject anyway, mining its rich visual and narrative complexity to their own unique ends.

Sepeshy led the charge at Cranbrook to depict the bustle and clamor of urban life. Even before his arrival to teach at Cranbrook in 1931, he was painting dynamic, Cubist-inspired scenes of industrial Detroit. During his long tenure as the head of the Department of Painting, he continued to develop his explorations of the subject, returning again and again to the streets, buildings, cars, and trolleys that populated the city during these years. Such an extended engagement undergirds pictures like *Black Bottom (North of Congress)* (1947, plate 15), an illustrative depiction of the Black Bottom neighborhood on Detroit's east side. The area was densely populated in the late 1940s, boasting an active culture of night clubs and social institutions that catered to its predominantly black population. To make way for the Lafayette Park urban renewal project, Black Bottom was completely demolished by 1954, its 140,000 residents forced to relocate elsewhere in the city. In this painting, Sepeshy captures the busy street life that characterized the area in the late 1940s. At the right of the picture, a junk peddler in a blue overcoat hauls his wares across the street, slowly making his way towards several figures who are variously engaged: three boys gather around a game of jacks, a pair of young men laugh gaily on a nearby porch, and a corpulent woman chases a child in the background. Anchoring the left side of the painting, a child emits a plaintive cry and is attended by an inquisitive pup. These figures populate a composition situated diagonally to the picture plane, a



14 Leonard Ruder  
*Flight*  
 1950  
 © Estate of Leonard Ruder. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.



15 Zoltan Sepeshy  
*Black Bottom (North of Congress)*  
1947  
© Estate of Zoltan Sepeshy. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh and  
Tim Thayer.



16 Wallace Mitchell  
*Detroit Park with Buildings and Factories*  
Circa 1935-1939  
© Estate of Wallace M. Mitchell. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.

technique typical of Sepeshy's paintings of this time period. The street in the foreground recedes as it progresses from left to right, lending a sense of depth and movement to the work that underscores the activity of the scene.

Sepeshy was not alone at Cranbrook in his examination of urban scenes. Wallace Mitchell's work during his early years at Cranbrook reflected the foundational influence of Sepeshy, under whom he studied in 1935. Mitchell's watercolors of the midwestern countryside and his unflinching depictions of the industrial Detroit cityscape directly echo Sepeshy's explorations in these subjects.<sup>12</sup> Such an influence readily emerges in Mitchell's *Detroit Park with Buildings and Factories* (mid- to late-1930s, plate 16), in which the artist's interest in the architectonic forms of the buildings parallels Sepeshy's similar mode. But where Sepeshy's paintings of the city depict the forms of the cityscape accompanied by the people who inhabit them, Mitchell's image remains completely bereft of the human figure. In its place, Mitchell finds utter fascination in expressing the surface character of the snowy ground. The scumbled surface of the foreground of the painting reveals Mitchell's early interest in the subtleties of tonal variation, presaging his later extrapolations in abstract color variation.

Like Mitchell, Detroit-born Leonard Ruder studied under Sepeshy at Cranbrook. Like Mitchell, too, Ruder gleaned from Sepeshy a prevailing interest in exploring the tension between depth and surface in his paintings. This tension manifests to great effect in Ruder's *Flight* (1950, plate ?), painted in the year he graduated from the Academy and subsequently moved to Portland, Oregon, to start his

career. On either side of the picture, repeating angular forms overlaid with thin layers of paint evoke the reflective metal and glass of skyscrapers. At the center of the painting, two side-by-side outlined triangles—one yellow-white, one bluish pink—seemingly launch from right to left, leaving a trail of curving black lines leading to a mass of orange and yellow counterparts at bottom right. Lording over the scene, a progression of radiant white fields of pigment terminate in a peak at the top right of the picture plane, forming the unmistakable silhouette of Mount Hood, which overlooks the city of Portland. In this picture, produced during a time of momentous transition in the young painter's life, Ruder imbued the modern technological and industrial forms of the city with a buoyant sense of life and possibility. Beyond its intimate connection with his personal narrative, this painting represented a flashpoint in Ruder's career: the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston chose *Flight* for a traveling exhibition of young American painters in 1951. In a similar vein as his colleagues in the Department of Painting at Cranbrook, the artist found singular inspiration in depicting the structure and form of the urban fabric.

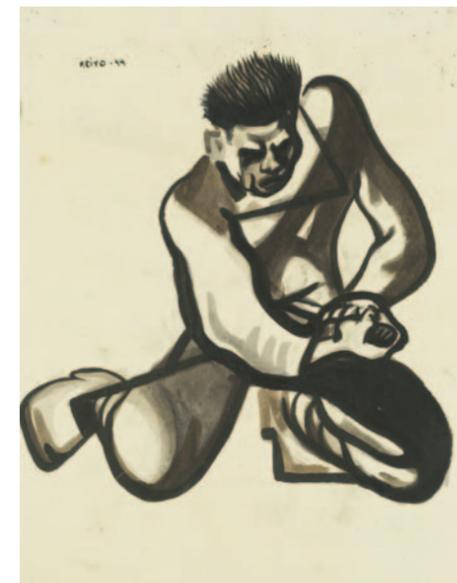
## WAR

Like many campuses across the United States in the late thirties and early forties, Cranbrook Academy of Art and its utopic atmosphere were fundamentally altered by the onset of World War II. Student enrollment waned as young men were called into service. Resources tightened as officials

responded to wartime economic pressures. Temporary exhibitions in the Museum of Cranbrook Academy of Art were suspended from summer of 1942 until May of 1944. The Academy acknowledged the exigencies of operating in a period of national crisis in its annual *Announcement* in 1943: "Because of the war emergency, the Academy may make substitutions in its faculty without notice. . . . It has been necessary for the Academy to restrict its educational program for the duration of the war to a select group of fundamental courses in graduate and undergraduate work."<sup>13</sup> The activity of the Academy during this period remained significantly less robust during these years as attention and resources were redirected to war efforts.

Still, Cranbrook painters managed to make an impact beyond the confines of the campus during wartime. Several students and alumni from the Academy numbered among the painters selected as official combat artists to document the experience of World War II at the frontlines. George Biddle, the chair of the War Department Art Advisory Committee, iterated their charge in a 1943 memorandum: "Express if you can, realistically or symbolically, the essence and spirit of war. You may be guided by Blake's mysticism, by Goya's cynicism and savagery, by Delacroix's romanticism, by Daumier's humanity and tenderness; or better still follow your own inevitable star."<sup>14</sup>

That last appeal to personal vision must have resonated especially with Cranbrook painters, who were trained to recognize and develop their own approach in style and subject matter. Among those Cranbrook students and alumni who responded to this challenge was Jack Keijo





19 Jack Keijo Steele  
*Soldiers in New Guinea*  
 1943  
 © Estate of Jack Keijo Steele. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh and Tim Thayer.

Previous:

17 Jack Keijo Steele  
*Australian Soldier*  
 Circa 1942

18 Jack Keijo Steele  
*Hari Kari*  
 1944  
 © Estate of Jack Keijo Steele. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.



20 David Fredenthal  
*Combat Troops Reach Beach*  
 1943  
 © Estate of David Fredenthal. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.

Steele, who had arrived at the Academy in 1940 to study painting under Sepeshy. Steele interrupted his studies in 1942 to serve as a combat artist with the 20<sup>th</sup> Statistical Control Unit of the United States Army Air Force, among other groups. During his service, he traveled with his units to Australia and the South Pacific, filling sketchbooks with drawings and paintings of his fellow servicemen, their living conditions, and the people and places he encountered along the way. The images that result from his time as a combat artist, such as *Australian Soldier* (circa 1942, plate 17), evoke a vividly personal experience of war beyond the headlines, treaties, and battles that come to dominate historical narratives. At times, the material form of the works tells one just as much as the images themselves: Steele's ink drawing *Hari Kari* (1943, plate 18), which depicts a man committing

Japanese ritual suicide in bold, calligraphic strokes, appears on the reverse of a Royal Australian Air Force map of the King Leopold Ranges in Western Australia dated July 1943. In larger paintings produced during this period, Steele applied the techniques of composition he had learned under Sepeshy's tutelage, as in *Soldiers in New Guinea* (1943, plate 19), in which a bevy of troops navigate through overgrown bush to bring an injured comrade to safety. The swirling organization of space, dramatically shifting from the deep background to an immediate foreground along a single sightline, directly recalls the regionalist style then prevalent in the American Midwest. This vertiginous sense of movement, combined with Steele's dramatic handling of light and shadow, lends an immediacy to this scene that reflects Steele's extended direct observation of soldiers in combat.

Like Steele, David Fredenthal traveled to the South Pacific to serve as a combat artist. When the War Department Art Advisory Committee lost its federal appropriation in 1943, many war correspondents who found themselves stranded overseas gained a reprieve from *LIFE* magazine, which stepped in to employ a number of them, including Fredenthal. The artist's quick hand and capable touch, which he had developed back at Cranbrook painting watercolors of campus vistas, now came in handy to produce drawings like *Combat Troops Reach Beach* (circa 1941-1945, plate 20). Certainly, such scenes could have been captured by photographs, but these images served a larger purpose beyond mere objective recording. Bearing traces of the artist's hand and thus a direct connection to lived

experience, drawings and paintings by Cranbrook's combat artists served as a conduit to relate the personal experience of war to the public back home.

## ABSTRACTION

As a central development in American art during this period, the rise of abstract painting in the United States has been interpreted variously as a tool of American propaganda, a by-product of postwar European cultural migration, and the ultimate triumph of art's insularity. At Cranbrook Academy of Art, awareness of abstraction as a possible mode of inquiry arrived relatively early in the institution's history. Abstract painting, indeed, flourished on the Academy campus throughout the midcentury period due in no small part to the influence of Wallace Mitchell, who was among the first painters on campus to embrace nonrepresentational painting. By the mid-1940s, Mitchell had moved beyond the figurative representation that characterized his earlier practice to a vocabulary of abstract geometric forms suspended within a rigidly controlled, modestly scaled picture plane, as evident in his *Abstraction No. 1* (1945, plate 2). For the artist, the shift from representation to abstraction need not indicate a fundamental polarity between the two modes—he claimed that “every good painting has as its base those qualities which we call abstract regardless of how realistic it might be.”<sup>15</sup> His willingness to embrace abstraction inspired a number of his students to follow suit, including Ivan Majdrakoff and

Frank Okada, both of whom went on to successful careers working in an abstract vein.

Mitchell's turn to tightly controlled abstraction aligned him with a prominent strain of international painting during this period. Hilla Rebay, then the director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim-sponsored Museum of Non-Objective Painting in New York City, invited Mitchell to show at the museum in 1946. As a result of Rebay's interest in his work, four of Mitchell's abstract compositions appeared in the 1947 and 1948 *Réalités Nouvelles* exhibitions in Paris alongside the work of famed abstractionists Robert Motherwell, László Moholy-Nagy, and Barbara Hepworth. This stamp of approval from an international vanguard seems to have galvanized Mitchell about the direction of his practice, inspiring him to experiment on a more ambitious scale. Such ambition emerges in Mitchell's painting *Spangle* (1953, plate 24), in which a central, undulating field of richly-hued triangular forms unfurls against an enclosing border of mottled gray. The eye darts to areas of pure, saturated vermilion, then lingers on nearby passages of cool green and scumbled ochre. Mitchell achieved such tightly controlled shifts in the juxtaposition of color through his use of casein on board, a medium he first employed in the mid-1940s. Here, he has mastered casein's capacity for layered color, imparting a subtle, shifting depth to the irregular forms. Still, the overall effect remains resolutely flat, as the triangular shapes refuse to coalesce into recognizable figures against a static ground.

As Mitchell's career developed, his strict adherence to two-dimensionality loosened as he expanded his vocabulary



21 Wallace Mitchell  
*Untitled*  
1947  
© Estate of Wallace M. Mitchell. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.

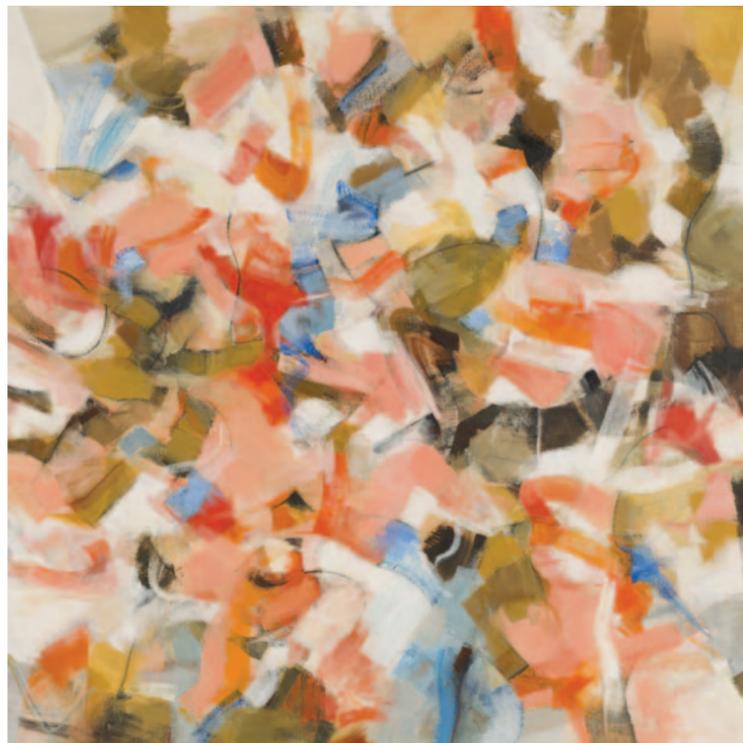
Below:

22 Ivan Majdrakoff  
*A Mobile of Flowing Abstract Forms*  
1948  
© Ivan Majdrakoff. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.



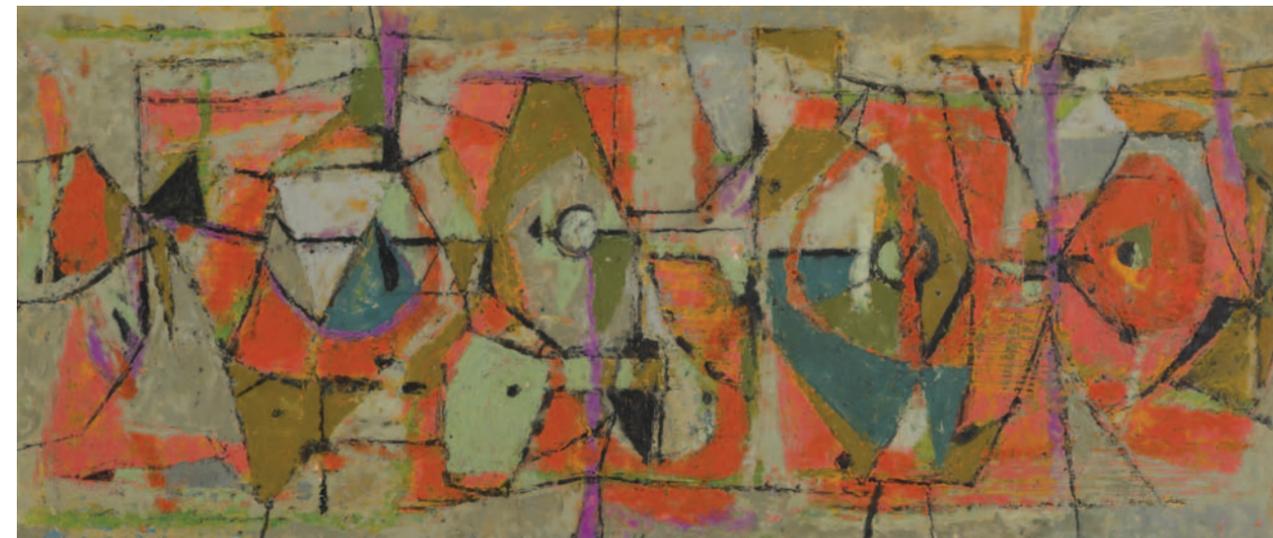
Right:

23 Frank Okada  
*Untitled*  
1957  
© The Okada Estate.  
Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.



Below:

24 Wallace Mitchell  
*Spangle*  
Circa 1953  
© Estate of Wallace M. Mitchell.  
Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.



25 Robert Knipschild  
*No. 17, Red, Grey and Blue Encaustic*  
1951  
© Robert Knipschild Estate. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.

Following:

26 Jack Madson  
*San Romano*  
1961  
© Jack Madson. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.



to include three-dimensional works. In *Untitled* (1966, plate 27), an early example of Mitchell's painted sculptures, the repeated geometric motifs recur as in his earlier practice, as triangles of slightly varying color and size accumulate over the surface of the work. But quite unlike *Spangle*, in which the shapes disperse over the seemingly neutral ground of the picture plane, in *Untitled* the triangles extend along multiple surfaces of a three-dimensional object. And not just any object—a vertically oriented slab of wood provided the weathered surface along which Mitchell elaborated his exploration of abstract form. In a Duchampian move, the artist appropriated an object from the world around him into the hallowed realm of fine art—in this case, a chunk of driftwood from the northern Michigan shoreline, where he built a summer home. In the interval between these two works, we observe the emergence of two dynamic conceptual innovations that would propel Mitchell's subsequent work for the remainder of his career: the introduction of found, non-art materials and the extension of the artist's practice into three dimensions. Later instructors at the Academy, such as Jack Madson and Donald Willett, followed in Mitchell's footsteps in providing an abstractionist counterpoint to Sepeshy's representational mode.

Though implicitly endorsed by the Academy through their continued employment of Mitchell, abstraction did not always enjoy popular acceptance on campus. A letter addressed to the leaders of the Academy from a community group of adult painters who had visited the 1952 *Alumni Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture* at the Museum of the Cranbrook Academy of Art registered distinct dismay at

the proliferation of abstract painters. Included among the artists in this show were Elizabeth Eddy, David Fredenthal, Ivan Majdrakoff, Jack Keijo Steele, and Robert Knipschild, whose painting *Red, Grey, and Blue* (1951, plate 25) was reproduced in the exhibition pamphlet. Noting that "the whole show was almost entirely slanted toward modern art, abstractionism, etc.," the letter grumbled that "the paintings were a maze of mad color, of wild shapes, of wilder still lines and bewildering fantasy—plus a complete lack of reality that was almost maddening."<sup>16</sup> After enumerating a host of grievances regarding the lack of representational painting, the note goes on to provocatively inquire: "Have you divorced yourself completely from reality and even sanity, if this is your show of shows for 1952?" Cranbrook administrators mounted a comprehensive response to this inquiry, including letters from Zoltan Sepeshy, then the director of the Academy, Wallace Mitchell, William McVey, the head of the Department of Sculpture, and Eva Ingersoll Gatling, curator at the museum. Sepeshy's letter, in particular, indicates the spirit of personal freedom the Academy hoped to inspire among its students:

It is the function of our institution not to proscribe or prescribe standards of beauty, but to nurture and to encourage the spirit of inquiry especially during the artists' formative years. I myself happen to agree with you that the too abrupt departure from conventionality in art is often disturbing, especially to those of us who are steeped in long tradition. It is because at times

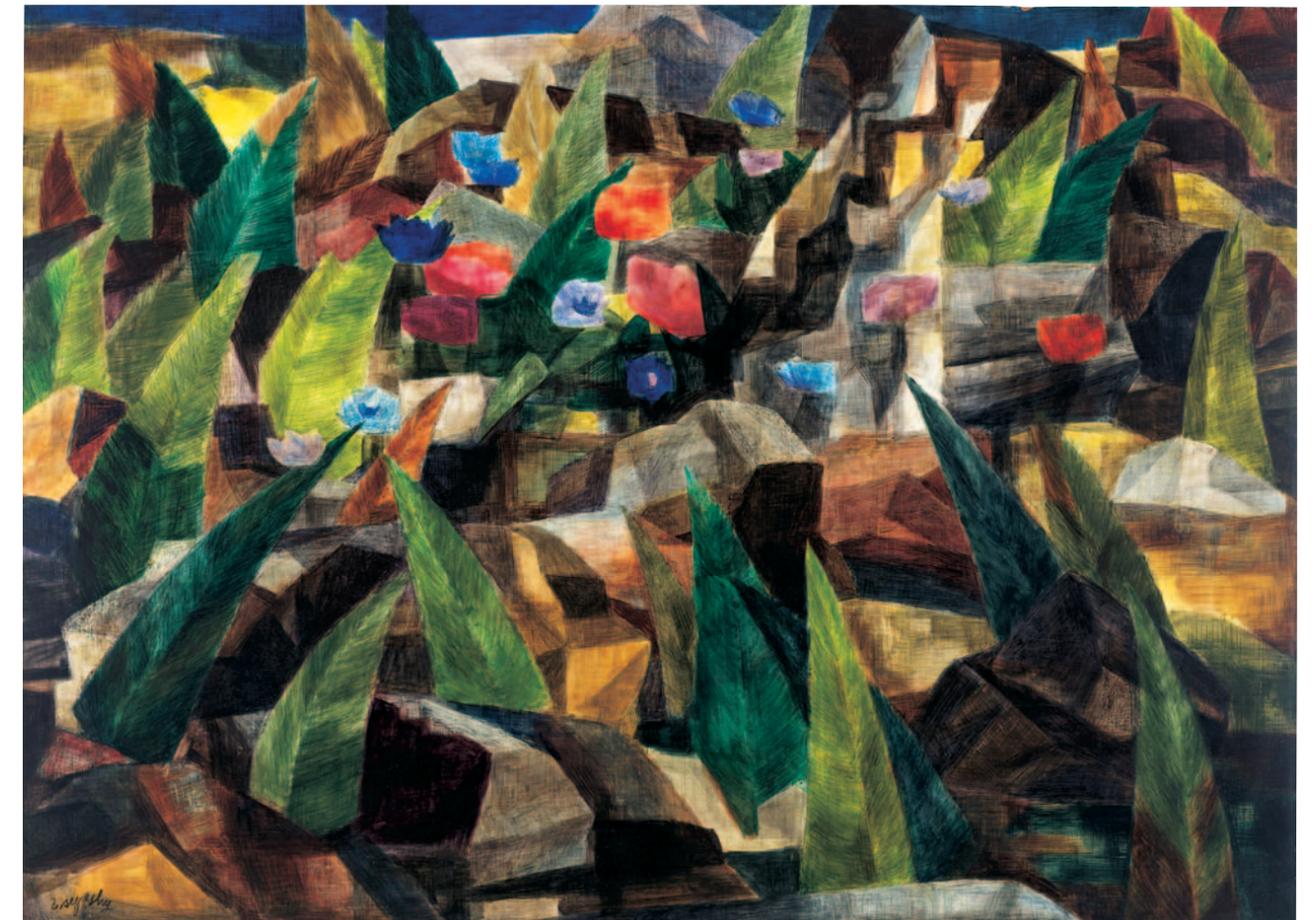


Left:

27 Wallace Mitchell  
*Untitled*  
1966  
© Estate of Wallace M. Mitchell. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.

Below:

28 Zoltan Sepeshy  
*Rock Garden*  
Circa 1955  
© Estate of Zoltan Sepeshy. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.



I mistrust my own standards that I hesitate to impose them with rigidity, but rather encourage the fine workmanship that youth brings to the very deviation from dogmatic standards.<sup>17</sup>

This unequivocal embrace of individual artistic inquiry, even as it seemed to fly in the face of widely accepted standards for beauty in art, constituted a cornerstone of the Academy's philosophy. The rise of abstraction among Cranbrook painters during this period indicates the extent to which such a philosophy endured as the Academy evolved beyond the generation of its founders.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What to paint, and why?" Kyle Morris asked in 1947. Some answers to the first question—the "what"—emerge readily enough from the five themes covered here. For that more central and ineffable question—"why painting?"—we return to Eliel Saarinen's dictum, iterated just before the official foundation of the Academy, that "creative art cannot be taught by others. Each one has to be his own teacher. But [contact] with other artists and discussions with them provide sources for inspiration."<sup>18</sup> In the years from Mitchell's arrival as an instructor until Sepeshy's death, the inspiration

Cranbrook painters found, both in their instructors and each other, directed them to their own distinct responses to the problem of painting. The wide variety of subjects, styles, and formats of these works reflect the atmosphere of creative inquiry and individual personal expression cultivated by the Department of Painting. The paintings themselves, both representational and abstract, by turns aloof and effusive, endure as a testament to this fertile period of experimentation and discovery.

*Chad Alligood is the 2012–2013 Jeanne and Ralph Graham Collections Fellow at Cranbrook Art Museum. He previously taught art history at Brooklyn College. He holds a BA from Harvard College in the History of Art and Architecture and an MA with distinction in Art History from the University of Georgia. He completed coursework for a PhD in Art History at the Graduate Center, CUNY, where he also held an Enhanced Chancellor's Fellowship. His research centers on American art since 1900.*



29 Donald Willett  
Untitled  
1966  
© Estate of Donald Willett. Photograph by R.H. Hensleigh.

- 1 Kyle Morris, "The Abstract of a Painting Student" (MFA thesis, Cranbrook Academy of Art, 1947).
- 2 George Booth, address delivered at the Detroit Museum of Art during the Second Annual Exhibition of Arts and Crafts, December 7, 1905, Papers of George G. Booth, Box 5, Talks 1902-17 folder, Cranbrook Archives, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.
- 3 *Cranbrook Academy of Art Announcement, 1934-1935*, CAA Publications, 1998-05e, Cranbrook Archives. David Fredenthal, "The Life I Know," *Magazine of Art* 35 (April 1942): unpaginated.
- 4 David Fredenthal, "The Life I Know," *Magazine of Art* 35 (April 1942): unpaginated.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Correspondence between Zoltan Sepeshy and Thomas Hart Benton, Cranbrook Academy of Art Records of the Administration 1942-1973, Acquisition Number 1981-09, Cranbrook Archives.
- 8 "A Conversation with Zoltan," *The Cranbrook Magazine* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1969): 13.
- 9 *Cranbrook Academy of Art Announcement, 1937-1938*, CAA Publications, 1998-05e, Cranbrook Archives.
- 10 Martha Lauritzen, quoted in Jeff Schlanger and Toshiko Takaazu, *Maija Grotell: Works Which Grow From Belief* (Goffstown, NH: Studio Potter Books, 1996), 89.
- 11 *Cranbrook Academy of Art Announcement, 1945-1946*, CAA Publications, 1998-05e, Cranbrook Archives.
- 12 Oral history interview with Marianne Strengell, January 8-December 16, 1982, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- 13 *Cranbrook Academy of Art Announcement, 1943-1944*, CAA Publications, 1998-05e, Cranbrook Archives.
- 14 Memorandum, War Department Art Advisory Committee For War Art Units To Be Sent Overseas, March 1, 1943, George Biddle Papers, Philadelphia Archives of American Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, microfilm reels P17-18.
- 15 Wallace Mitchell, quoted in Wilma Greenway, "Local Artists Hear Noted Painter," *The Pontiac Press*, March 13, 1954.
- 16 "The letter of provocation," Cranbrook Academy of Art Records of the Administration 1942-1973, Acquisition Number 1981-09, Cranbrook Archives.
- 17 Reply by Zoltan Sepeshy to "The letter of provocation," Cranbrook Academy of Art Records of the Administration 1942-1973, Acquisition Number 1981-09, Cranbrook Archives.
- 18 "The Cranbrook Development," address by Eliel Saarinen, AIA, given at the American Institute of Architects' Convention in San Antonio, Texas, April 1931, pp. 3-4, Cranbrook Archives.