

DAN CHRISTENSEN IN HIS STUDIO, C. 1967

DAN CHRISTENSEN CALLIGRAPHIC STAINS & SCRAPES

(PAINTINGS FROM 1977 TO 1984)

FEBRUARY 8 - MARCH 9, 2024



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"Sensual Delectation" and Phenomenology in Dan Christensen's Calligraphic Stains & Scrapes, 1977 to 1984

ne might ask if the tail is wagging the dog when it comes to chemistry and painting. Throughout human time, pigments and their possibilities have led artists to new forms of visuality and expression. This process stretches back to cave and rock painters in many lands who blended, oxidized, and hydrated minerals quarried from rocks with liquid binding agents. With its beginnings in Crete in 2000 BCE, fresco emerged from mixtures of sand, lime, and water, leading to Renaissance walls covered with stories still "read" today. Cennino Cennini's (c. 1360 - c. 1427) fifteenthcentury painting handbook, Il libro dell'arte, could almost be a chemistry manual. For example, it contains instructions for the compounds to be used in oil and fresco colors, including giallorino, a manufactured yellow comprised of an oxide of lead "pounded in a bronze mortar" and cinabrese, made of "the handsomest and lightest sinoper"—an earth pigment—that could be mixed with lime white for skin tones. In the late 1860s, the emergence of French Impressionist plein-air painting relied on pre-mixed oil pigments sold in portable metal tubes, including expensive cadmium colors; on discovering cadmium in 1817, the German chemist Friedrich Stromeyer pronounced more prophetically than he could have imagined: "It promises to be useful in painting."²

In this respect, the newness of Color Field painting in the mid-twentieth century is part of an old and ongoing trajectory. The movement's rise was propelled by industrial paint innovations. It began with Leonard Bocour (1910–1993) who, having learned to grind pigments while apprenticing with the European painter Emil Ganso (1895–1941), started Bocour Artist Colors in a paint factory in midtown Manhattan in 1932.3 In 1936, his nephew Sam Golden (1915-1997) joined him in the business. The company first experimented with acrylic resins as a base for paint in the 1940s, and Sam is credited with developing Magna, the first acrylic paint, as well as the first phthalocyanine and iridescent artist paints. Over the years that followed, the company produced many iterations in retail and custom synthetic, latex, and water-based paints, along with extenders, solvents, gels, pastes, and additives. An unusual aspect of the business was that Bocour and Golden invited artists to be partners in paint development exploring the capabilities of mediums and their interaction that were then made into products.

An artist with an intense passion for the possibilities of new paint materials and techniques, Dan Christensen (1942-2007) epitomizes the union of paint and science in late twentieth-century Color Field painting. He was driven throughout his career—from the late 1960s until his death in 2007—by a curiosity to see what would happen when he took advantage of the groundbreaking opportunities in water-based paint emulsions when applied with nontraditional tools, including window-washing squeegees, spray guns, rollers, rakes, industrial brooms, weed sprayers, and turkey basters. For Christensen, one line of inquiry led to another, with the result that he developed his art in phases.⁴ As noted by Karen Wilkin in the catalogue for the retrospective of Christensen's art held in 2007 at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City—the course of his "evolution might be described as a continuous exploration of alternatives. Each new discovery seems to have prompted him to wonder about its opposite."5

Such is the case in his *Calligraphic Stains*, rendered from 1976 to 1984, which are the subject of this exhibition.⁶ These works followed a series of *Slabs*, in which Christensen covered his canvases in pigment thickened with extending agents. Using trowels, knives, and rollers, he manipulated the resistant impasto with muscular force across the entirety of his surfaces. The *Calligraphic Stains* are the reverse. Using additives that diluted his paints and tension breakers that reduced friction, he soaked color, sometimes in layers, into the weave of unstretched canvases laid on the floor, uniting paint and surface. The "calligraphic" aspect of these works consists of gestural movements with sticks, brushes, and turkey basters, producing fragile and broken armatures around and into which he added areas of fatter color. Christensen's aim was to achieve unity among these disparate qualities, making each work come alive with its own internal integrity.

When his work was included in a show in 1981 of drawings by eight contemporary artists at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the curator John Elderfield stated in the accompanying catalogue that Christensen's recent paintings, along with his related drawings, represented a return in his art to a "more explicit kind of drawing in color than existed in the [earlier] spray-gun paintings, but of a kind that builds on both the geometric and gestural sides of [the artist's] preceding work." The latter reflected Christensen's admiration for the work of Jackson Pollock, which he first saw in an exhibition at the Denver Art Museum, Colorado, when he was sixteen.

Christensen's *Calligraphic Stains* are often considered a combination of the gesturalism of Abstract Expressionism and the more detached and formalist nature of Color Field painting. Like Elderfield, other commentators felt they were a welcome middle ground. The poet and critic John Ashbery stated in 1979 that Christensen had renewed the tradition of [Color Field painting] honorably, expanding "the language of modernism in a more traditional and serious way."⁸ Reviewing a show consisting of Christensen's *Calligraphic Stains* at Salander-O'Reilly Gallery in 1982, the critic Valentin Tatransky—among the most avid writers on Color Field Painting of the era—commented that Christensen always had good instincts but "he is now on top of them."⁹ It may have been on the basis of these works that shortly before 1990 the well-known critic-theorist Clement Greenberg called Christensen "one of the painters on whom the course of American art depends."¹⁰

Christensen's approach belongs to the discourse in the era on the nature of abstraction in painting. In an article on this subject in Artnews in 1983, the literary and art critic Steven Henry Madoff referenced abstract paintings as works "relieved from an obligation to reproduce the things of this world, or tediously to question the nature of representation itself," while admonishing that it would nevertheless be a mistake to describe such art as "detached from experience, abdicating to figurative art all social and political responsibilities." As Karen Wilkin pointed out in her 2003 book, Color as Field: American Painting, 1950–1975, the emphasis of Color Field painters on the visual over the verbal and narrative was not a retreat into the decorative, but an awareness that "the eye, the intellect, and the emotions are inextricably connected." In his 2005 Earth Mapping: Artists Reshaping Landscape, the phenomenologist Edward S. Casey identified a distinction between early Color Field painters—

such as Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Clyfford Still—who "all sought a transcendent abstract referent that was quite literally transcendent of the world of lived experience" and younger painters who "became concerned with a referent that could be considered specific and immanent. An emphasis on the self-absorbed icon gave way to a concerted connection with context, with the singularities of the surrounding world." This statement could apply well to Christensen.

In 1990, the art historian James Monte referenced Christensen's Calligraphic Stains in this light, noting their associative aspects, such as how "a shaping of thickly painted color" turned into "a fantastic creature, in one instance, a goggle-eyed amphibian emerging from a luminously painted ground."14 Monte saw biomorphic qualities in some of these works, which reminded him of Joan Miró (1893-1983), another artist Christensen held in esteem. Elderfield similarly commented: "certain organic allusions are inevitably suggested by Christensen's work. Its very creation of geometry from gesture invites comparison with spontaneous natural growth, just as the particular structures thus formed invite comparison with specific fragments and forms of the natural world. Associations of this kind are part of the work, not to be imagined away, and help to give to it its distinctive mood, which is more than a pastoral one, telling of the instinctual, of fragile as well as lush beauty, and above all of sensual delectation." Nonetheless, Elderfield felt that acknowledging this "did not compromise the abstractness of the work, for all abstract art, in one way or another, makes concessions to the appearance of things outside of itself."15

Throughout his career, Christensen's method allied with that of Action Painting but in the *Stains*, this factor is particularly significant because it was in his interaction with materials and trying out their possibilities that their associative place-based aspects emerged, consisting of sensations and qualities from the artist's context, experiences, passions, and memories. Thus, in spite of their ravishing color and exuberant rhythms, these works also exemplify abstraction as an art of the phenomenological (of the nature of experience).

How process and feeling merged in the phenomenological sense can be seen in Christensen's Atlantic Champagne, 1979 [plate 2], which Tatransky described as a "beautiful white painting." ¹⁶ Against a stained ground, the color of sand, Christensen used trowels and rollers to spread glossy white pigment across and into the surface. He probably used Golden Iridescent Pearl (Fine), a bottle of which remains in his former studio. The milky polymer emulsion consists of a heavy body acrylic suffused with embedded mica particles. The paint's sharp-edged rather than circular molecules make it a highly light-sensitive medium, impacted on a surface by the angle of the light in a given space. The result in Atlantic Champagne is that blue, yellow, and pink tints seem to magically emanate from the paint's luminosity while they are echoed in the ground, producing harmony between the boundless terrain of the depth and the dance-and water-like movements on the surface. Christensen clues the viewer to the prismatic nature of white in the presence of a few glimmers of color on the upper left. There is a remembrance of James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) in the harmonious rhyme of paint and surface.

Christensen did not choose titles to describe his works explicitly, and he often gave them enigmatic or punning titles that occurred to him in retrospect. However, *Atlantic Champagne* perfectly suits this painting, evoking the celebratory frothiness of champagne and

the coastal breezes of Long Island, where Christensen summered in Springs after his marriage in 1978 to the sculptor Elaine Grove. The work's horizontality conveys the spatial breadth of a shoreline.

Chumash, 1978 [plate 1] features the fragile, skittish lines produced with a turkey baster that appear in many of the Calligraphic Stains. In juxtaposing "calligraphy" with a limitless color field, Christensen contrasted essentiality, namely color (something not human-made), with embodiment. As the art historian Norman Bryson wrote in a 1988 article, calligraphy in Far Eastern art "is a particularly good counter-example to the 'mystical' case of color, since calligraphy turns on the entry of the body into the signs of language." For Bryson, calligraphy can also "be returned to Western painting" in the painter's embodiment, consisting of the "product and precondition of cultural skill in the manipulation of material signs."

This statement could well apply to Christensen's images in which he was challenged to unite the mystical and embodied, the forces beyond the human with those over which we have control. He achieved this synthesis in the shapes that respond to color and line, forming degrees of weight and energy in relation to both. In



GLACIER BAY, 1977, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 68½ X 48% IN.

Chumash, they parry between pure form and associations. Their ebullient airborne-ness suggests rigging, sails, and flags—perhaps akin to Raoul Dufy (1877-1953) sailboats—but their resonance depends on the viewer's perspective.

As the title suggests, the painting may have reminded Christensen of the paintings in the caves of the Chumash people in present-day California, which were rediscovered in 1976. Christensen, who grew up in an area of Nebraska that had been the ancestral home of many indigenous people, had a strong interest in Native American life and art, including owning several books on the subject. Intriguingly the painting's palette suggests that of the caves in which whites were made from limestone and the reds from hematite or red ochre. Both were mixed with binders produced with water, animal fat, or the juices of plants, constituting a way of painting apart from Euro-American methods that would have appealed to Christensen.¹⁸

Tuscarora, 1980 [plate 4], is another ambiguously titled work that could reference the Tuscarora people of the Northeastern Woodlands, known for their beadwork. Yet the painting's tree-like form also suggests the sinewy, fluted stems of the Tuscarora tree, a crepe myrtle often planted ornamentally. Perhaps Christensen liked this unlikely connection, or simply the sound of the name. Here he enunciated the thin calligraphic lines with viscous paint from which a tree with quill-like branches emerged. His process seems to have led him to emphasize this shape by covering the red stained canvas with a complementary pale-green brushy layer that does not blend into it, producing vibrancy. This was probably not how the painting started out, but it was clearly what the painting needed. It also may be significant to keep in mind that Dan and Elaine's two sons were born in 1979 (Jimmy) and 1982 (Willie). Thus, generative growth was on Christensen's mind at this time. In fact, he titled a 1979 painting with a treelike shape Couvade, which is a term for male sympathetic pregnancy.

The titles of two paintings, *Professor Bop*, 1980 [plate 5] and *Carib Cocktail*, 1981, pay homage to the trumpeter and be-bop creator Dizzy Gillespie, whose music—described as "the sound of surprise"—Christensen often played while painting. In *Professor Bop* the calligraphic lines seem to stretch out to connect sounds held, dropped, and pulsed, played both independently and interactively. The tone of the music is that of the warmth of the ground, painted in the pyrrole red light pigment that was in Christensen's studio. *Carib Cocktail* is also infused with jazz rhythms, long sounds, a crashing diminuendo, and riffs in a heartier piece of music, expressed with an amber-red or vermilion ground. *Tokyo Tattoo*, 1981 is similarly

jazz-inspired, with a sense of suspense conveyed by its suspended cantilevered shapes and lines that change tempo from quick to wavering, along with flecks that are like scat singing. The syllables of the alliterated title fit the painting's energies.¹⁹

Dizzy Gillespie first visited Cuba in 1977, and subsequently played an important role in incorporating Afro-Cuban rhythms into mainstream jazz. Christensen's *Calligraphic Stains* seem similarly energized by the syncopated complexity, key changes, and recurrent melodies of this new fusion.

In 1984, Christensen moved into a new phase in his *Calligraphic Stains*, applying his paint with greater ferocity and physicality. These works make it seem as if he had progressed from translating pieces of music into color and line to zooming in on particular sounds, as they vibrated in his ears. This idea is manifested in *Bajo Sexto*, 1984 [plate 6], its title referencing a twelve-string Mexican bass guitar, often played with slides. Here and in *Pioneer Flyer*, the calligraphic dominates, scattering the motif with firecracker electricity. The culmination of the series is probably *YT3* [plate 8], in which the paint energy blasts radially, so that areas of stained ground become thickly painted, splattering to all edges of the canvas.²⁰

Toward the end of the 1980s, Christensen reached a point of synthesis, combining several earlier approaches, including paint spraying, staining, incised hardened surfaces, and gestural movements with thickened emulsions that conjoin painting and drawing. Then, suddenly, in 1988, he started over in works in a new series limited to spray gun loops and orbs.

Constant inventiveness characterizes Christensen's career. The Calligraphic Stains belong within its ongoing continuum. They also seem one of Christensen's most interesting phases, when life and art came together more closely than in other series he produced. In these works, he stretched the possibilities of media innovations into new expressive forms, continuing a venerable history in the intersection of painting and chemistry. At the same time, he mined the art of the past, especially in his use of the fluidity of calligraphy, a cross-cultural form that translates to "beautiful writing." While the Calligraphic Stains suggest the adage that "everything old is new again," they could also illustrate the idea that everything new is old again.

—Lisa N. Peters, Ph.D. With much thanks to Elaine Grove for continuing conversations about Dan Christensen and his work.

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See Cennino D'Andrea Cennini, The Craftsman's Handbook: The Italian "II Libro Dell' Arte, translated by Daniel V. Thompson Jr. (New York: Dover Publications, 1954), pp. 23, 28.

On the impact of the development of systematic chemistry in the late years of the eighteenth century and the consolidation of this chemical understanding in the following century on the rapid evolution of artists' palettes in the late nineteenth century see Ashok Roy, "Monet and the Nineteenth-Century Palette," National Gallery Technical Bulletin 5 (1981), pp. 22–24.

In 1980, Sam returned from retirement to start Golden Artist Colors with his son Marc. See "Just Paint," published by Golden Artist Colors, https://justpaint.org/sam-golden-paintmaking-pioneer-and-found-er-of-golden-artist-colors-passes-away-at-82/, accessed January 14, 2024. The chemical formula for "artists' water-borne acrylic paints, or films, derives from the coalescence of acrylic polymers deposited from aqueous dispersions («-butyl acrylate with methyl metharylate (MAJ), or historically, ethyl acrylate (EA) with MMA)," as noted in Courtney E. Dillon, Anthony F. Laglante, and Richard C. Wolbers, "Acrylic Emulsion Paint Films: The Effect of Solution pH, conductivity, and iconic strength on film swelling and surfactant Removal," Studies in Conservation 59 (January 2014), p. 52.

⁴ For a summary of the artist's biography, see Lisa N. Peters, "Dan Christensen (1942–2007)," Berry Campbell Gallery, New York, https://www.berrycampbell.com/artist/Dan_Christensen/info/, accessed January 14, 2024. See also Sharon L. Kennedy, Douglas Drake, and Karen Wilkin, Dan Christensen: Forty Years of Painting, exh. cat. (Kansas City, Mo: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007).

⁵ Karen Wilkin, "Dan Christensen: Continuity and Change," in *Dan Christensen: Forty Years of Painting*, p. 36.

⁶ This period was previously considered in Lisa N. Peters, Dan Christensen: The Stain Paintings, exh. cat. (New York: Spanierman Modern, 2011), curated by Christine Berry.

John Elderfield, "Introduction," in New Work on Paper I, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1981), p. 12. The other artists included were Jake Berthot, Alan Cote, Tom Holland, Yvonne Jacquette, Ken IIf, P. Joan Snyder, and William Tucker.

⁸ John Ashbery, "Pleasures of Paperwork," Newsweek, March 16, 1981, p. 94

⁹ Valentin Tatransky, "Dan Christensen," *Arts Magazine* 56 (May 1982): 11.

¹⁰ Clement Greenberg's statement appears in *Dan Christensen: A Survey*, 1966–1990, exh. cat. (East Hampton, N.Y.: Vered Gallery, 1990).

¹¹ Steven Henry Madoff, "A New Generation of Abstract Painters," Artnews 82 (November 1983): 80.

¹² Karen Wilkin, Color as Field: American Painting, 1950–1975, exh. cat. (New York: American Federation of Arts, 2003), p. 75.

¹⁹ Edward S. Casey, Earth Mapping: Artists Reshaping Landscape (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota, 2003), p. xiv.

A James Monte, "A Note on Dan Christensen's Paintings," in Dan Christensen: A Survey, 1966–1990, exh. cat. (East Hampton, N.Y.: Vered Gallery, 1990).

¹⁵ Elderfield, ρρ. 12–13.

⁵ Tatransky

¹⁷ Norman Bryson, "Intertexuality and Visual Poetics," in *Visual Poetics* 22 (Summer 1988), p. 192.

¹⁸ On this subject, see Chumash Painted Cave State Historic Park, California Department of Parks and Recreation, https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=602, accessed January 14, 2024.

¹⁹ The title is possibly a reference to *Tokyo Tattoo*, a book of photographs featuring the Japanese tattoo artist Horibun I by Martha Cooper, published in 1970 by Dokument Press, Stockholm.

 $^{^{20}}$ This YT in this title refers to Youngstown, Ohio, where Christensen taught in 1984. The three indicates that the painting is the third work he painted in Youngstown.

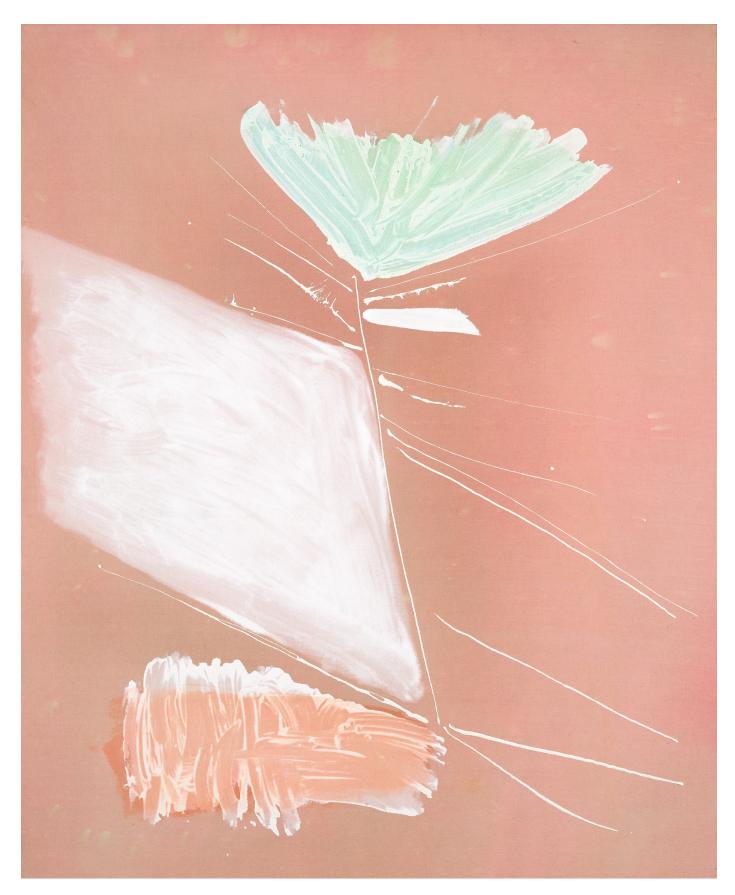


PLATE 1. CHUMASH, 1978, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 70 X 57 IN.



PLATE 2. ATLANTIC CHAMPAGNE, 1979, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 69% X 131% IN.



PLATE 3. BETHEL PLACE, 1978, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 72½ X 90 IN.



PLATE 4. TUSCARORA, 1980, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 82 X 66½ IN.



PLATE 5. PROFESSOR BOP, 1980, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 671/2 X 561/4 IN.



PLATE 6. BAJO SEXTO, 1984, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 65 X 561/2 IN.



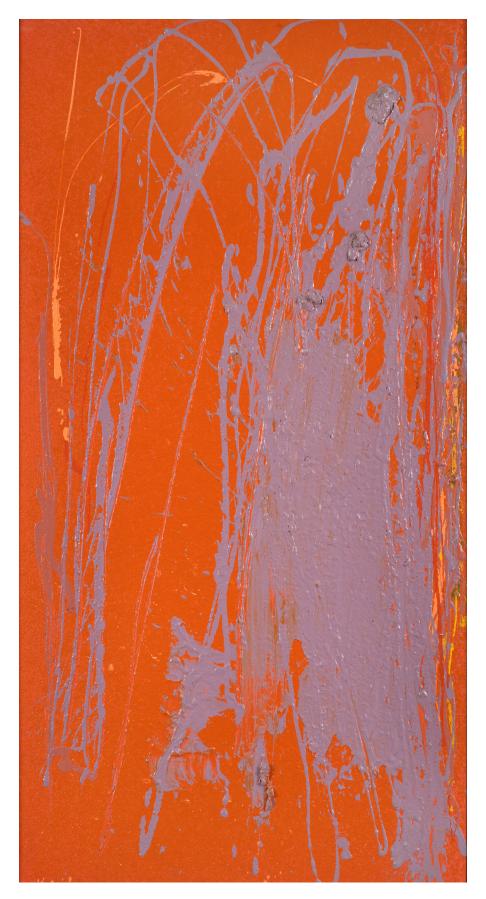


PLATE 7. **DE SOTO'S ORANGE**, 1983, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 58½ X 30 IN.

ABOUT THE GALLERY

Christine Berry and Martha Campbell opened Berry Campbell Gallery in 2013. The gallery has a fine-tuned program representing artists of post-war American painting that have been overlooked or neglected, particularly women of Abstract Expressionism. Since its inception, the gallery has developed a strong emphasis in research to bring to light artists overlooked due to age, race, gender, or geography. This unique perspective has been increasingly recognized by curators, collectors, and the press.

Berry Campbell has been included and reviewed in publications such as Architectural Digest, Art & Antiques, Art in America, Artforum, Artnet News, ArtNews, The Brooklyn Rail, Huffington Post, Hyperallergic, East Hampton Star, the Financial Times, Galerie Magazine, Luxe Magazine, The New Criterion, the New York Times, Vogue and the Wall Street Journal.

In September 2022, Berry Campbell moved to 524 West 26th Street, New York. The 9,000-square-foot gallery houses 4,500 square feet of exhibition space, including a skylit main gallery and four smaller galleries, as well as two private viewing areas, a full-sized library, executive offices and substantial on-site storage space. For further information please call at 212.924.2178, visit our website at www.berrycampbell.com, or email at info@berrycampbell.com.



PLATE 8. YT3, 1984, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 67 X 73 IN.

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