

2-26-1992

# Narrative Painting

Gina Strecker Wilson  
*Portland State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/open\\_access\\_etds](https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/open_access_etds)



Part of the [Fine Arts Commons](#), and the [Painting Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

## Recommended Citation

Wilson, Gina Strecker, "Narrative Painting" (1992). *Dissertations and Theses*. Paper 4527.  
<https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.6411>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations and Theses by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: [pdxscholar@pdx.edu](mailto:pdxscholar@pdx.edu).

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF Gina Strecker Wilson for the Master of  
Fine Arts in Art: Painting presented February 26, 1992.

Title: Narrative Painting

APPROVED BY THE MEMBERS OF THE THESIS COMMITTEE:



Craig G. Cheshire, Chair



Claire Kelly



Thomas Cochran Buell

The thesis is in the form of a commentary on the development of meaning  
and content within work done for the Department of Art Graduate Program.

**NARRATIVE PAINTING**

by

**GINA STRECKER WILSON**

A thesis in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

in

**ART: PAINTING**

**Portland State University**

**1992**

TO THE OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES:

The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Gina Strecker Wilson  
presented February 26, 1992.

[Redacted Signature]

Craig G. Cheshire, Chair

[Redacted Signature]

Claire Kelly

[Redacted Signature]

Thomas Cochran Buell

APPROVED:

[Redacted Signature]

Barbara A. Sestak, Acting Chair, Department of Art

[Redacted Signature]

C. William Savery, Interim Vice Provost for Graduate Studies and Research

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
LIST OF FIGURES .....	iv
INTRODUCTION .....	1
PROCESS .....	4
CONCLUSION .....	22
REFERENCES .....	23

## LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE		PAGE
1	<u>Untitled</u> .....	2
2	<u>Untitled</u> .....	3
3	<u>Untitled</u> .....	5
4	<u>Untitled</u> .....	8
5	<u>Untitled</u> .....	10
6	<u>Untitled</u> .....	11
7	<u>Untitled</u> .....	13
8	<u>Untitled</u> .....	15
9	<u>Untitled</u> .....	16
10	<u>Untitled</u> .....	18
11	<u>Untitled</u> .....	19
12	<u>Untitled</u> .....	21

## INTRODUCTION

In 1975, when I began to paint, excitement over the visual world around me seemed to offer the promise of endless involvement. This visual focus ended when I began to notice the pattern of negative spaces in my grandfather's chair. As I lost interest in representing the visual world around me on its own terms, my grandfather's chair provided a loaded memory image capable of deeper personal involvement.

My search for more direct involvement with content continued with a series of self portraits, but little thought as to content beyond the formal visual interplay of shapes, was achieved. Instinctively I had turned to the visual potentials involved in the use of a striped robe to 'present' myself, Figure 1. My mother's work in printed fabric brought an affinity for flat patterns that would continue to influence my work.

While visually pleasing, these elements were unable to take me beyond what had become a design game of patterns and arrangements, Figure 2. They challenged my ability but provided little intellectual or emotional depth. I began to see the striped robe and mask as a facade, a shield. A shield that not only protected the figure from the outer world, but me from developing a deeper involvement with it.

So I removed them. This began my concerns with the manipulation and abstraction of the long hidden figure and a deeper concern with content.

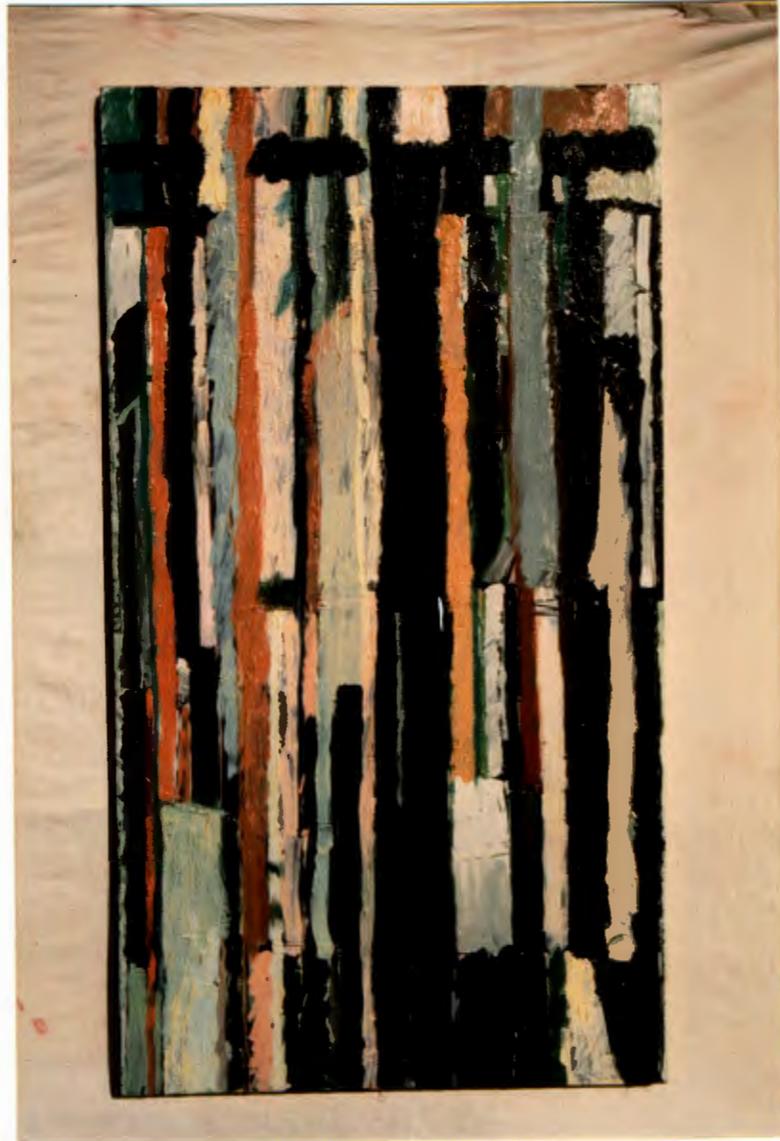


Figure 1. Untitled, 60"x60".



Figure 2. Untitled, 60"x30".

## PROCESS

At this point the figure had evolved into a silhouetted form that cared little for details beyond those needed for its readability as human. The focus was on its 'reactions' not its individuality. As shown in Figure 3 the figure began to use expressions of movement to explore the spacial confines of the canvas itself. Edges of the canvas acted as a wall or force that defined and limited the space as the figure rolled, tumbled, or fell against them. This also reaffirmed the idea of the painting as an object, which I now realize I have continued to address, as I have the issues of the edges.

All this acrobatic movement across the canvas, while visually exciting, seemed increasingly inconclusive and superficial for me. I was growing aware that statements within the work reflected philosophical attitudes within myself toward my experiences of life. I decided to do a piece directed by this introspective content. Up to this point I had been employing an open approach in my work, one that could freely develop from a work's initial direction. Beginning with a raw idea and allowing it to develop so it could evolve, change often, and finally be resolved within the piece itself. This new piece, with its consciously directed start, raised some new

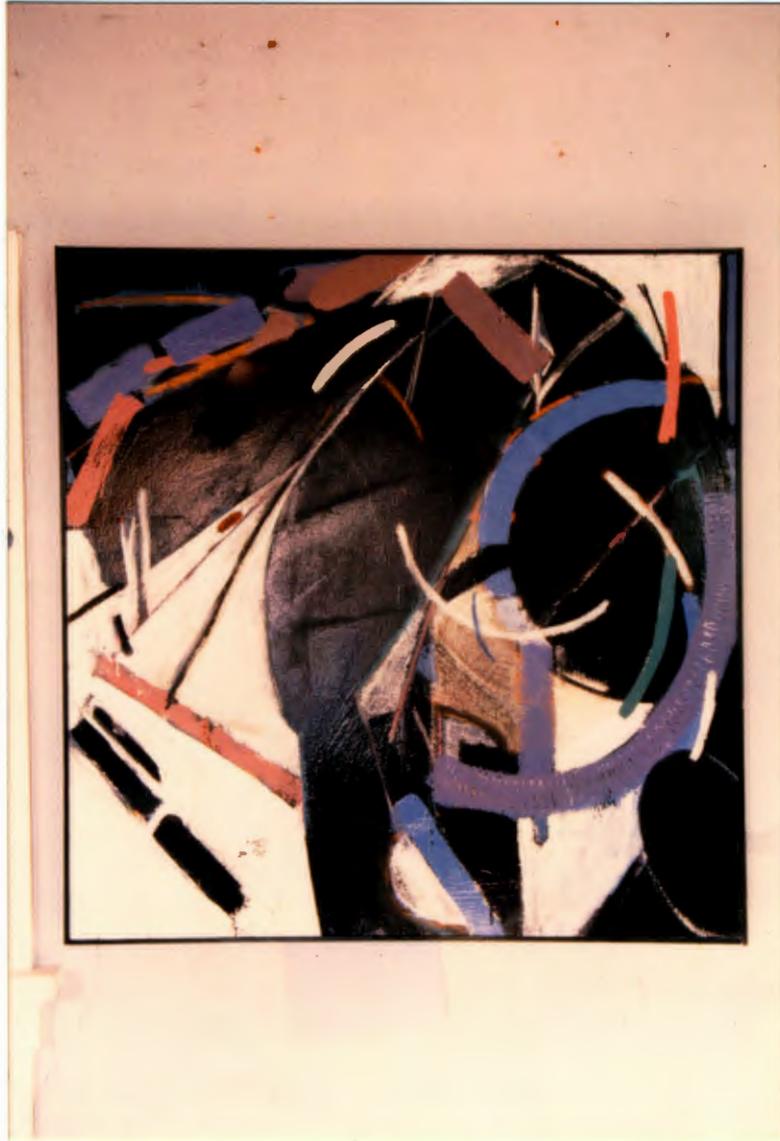


Figure 3. Untitled. 48"x48".

issues for me. The central concern was now whether I was illustrating as opposed to creating and what these two words meant to me.

In this work I manipulated the figure into being pulled across the canvas by three leashed dogs. The lack of personal control over the continuously changing experience called life was a strong inner issue, which became the basis for this new painting. I have since come to realize that control, in its various forms, is a reoccurring and central issue for me in my work and my life as well. I drew many analogies between what the figure was experiencing and my experiences of being a passenger in the ever changing reality of life.

My experiences were now limiting and guiding the content of the work. Within my new framework I began to question whether I was fulfilling the nature of the work or myself . . . were they separable? With such personal content was all this just therapy or self-indulgence? (Was self-indulgence even possible? What about the work of Frida Kalho?)

I felt that art, like any creation, must innately carry the mark of its creator. But each creation is also separate from its creator. As the soil to the tree, each is intimately involved with the other for life, but each is independent in their being. If all art, whatever its focus, did innately require human intervention somehow to declare it art was not my use of this focus then an involvement with an intrinsic element of the work itself? The relationship between myself and the work became a

central issue that I struggled with as I strove to bring the work into its own and yet use the self as source.

I wanted my work also to respond to my awareness of the historical development of ideas in art. I wished to learn from the past as I searched for a valid approach to my art. As Lucy Lippard had so clearly stated,

The question "Is it art?" is no longer paramount. The ramifications and refinements of Duchamp's fifty-year-old assertion that anything is art if the artist says it is, have made the query beside the point. The question boils down to "Is it good art or bad art?" (Lippard 1967).

Art now seemed to be judged more on depth and clarity than on its source.

This thought mixed with ones such as Picasso's "When I paint my object is to show what I have found not what I am looking for" (Picasso 1923). These ideas lead me to more clearly define the figures issues.

In an attempt to get a closer and clearer idea of what I had to deal with I removed everything except the figures and the paint, which I felt were the essential elements involved. Without posing any conscious question or focus I tried to see what, if anything, two figures would do with only each other to react to. Using only intuitive response to guide the figures' movements, all their actions evolved into fights! Canvas after canvas, no matter how I began, would maneuver around until they were again in battle. The idea that each of us deals with an inner struggle seemed too obvious and surface a meaning for me. Although, (as in Figure 4) this

could often be visually and emotionally satisfying, I felt that the real issue for me had to be the source of the fighting not the fight itself.



Figure 4. Untitled, 36"x36".

I decided that if I were to understand what the figures were dealing with they would have to interact in some way, other than fighting. During this process I was often at a loss as to what to do with them. The formal element interests that the work carried for me, the familiar elements of edge and surface, again became my focus.

The edges intrigued me in their role as the physical boundary to the inner reality of the work. I applied an enamel-soaked paper garland to Figure 5 and Figure 6, a fringe of nails to another as I tried to disperse energy into the outer world. The feeling of their reaching out somehow to unite or touch an outer reality, although not completely successful, was clearly an element of their intent. These items also reinforced the awareness of the paintings as objects. The aura or field of energy this set up added a sense of ritual that touched something vital for me. I still have few words for it.

The imagery within the pieces also fused inner and outer as they passed the confines of the edges. No longer was the interior just an arena for the figures. It had become a window.

I continued to address the surfaces more in terms of paint than additions, such as papers or photographs. This time the emphasis was more on textures than colors. Surfaces were worked with varnishes or shellacs that often contained metal powders, sand or crushed glass. My palette was becoming severely limited as I could



Figure 5. Untitled. 48"x36".



Figure 6. Untitled. 48"x36".

deal with only three or four colors at a time. Colors were taking on symbolic and emotional importance. To deal with the multitude of color variations available seemed not only overwhelming but beside the point as content grew into clearly the frontal issue.

Eventually the figures could interact without violence and when this happened, new opportunities opened. Continuing with the open-ended approach I initially sought no conscious statements about life, art, or myself while always trying to understand whatever would present itself.

As I worked I became aware of two main themes that seemed to evolve out of this approach. First was the pressure and misconceptions involved in the expectations I felt others holding for me and an intense desire to avoid becoming the focus of attention. Having a mother who was an artist often caused expectations of my talent that I felt were based more on her than me. Not believing the perceptions of others caused an experience of vulnerability toward the outer world in general. Was my choice of self-source a reflection of this skepticism with the outer world? Was the vulnerability I felt the source of the directness in my adhering to the flatness of the surface? The marks retaining the readability of the process of creation? Colors coming directly from the cans unmixed? The illusion of the firmness of canvas giving way to the 'genuine' firmness of wood? Could the motivations behind this seeming 'search for truth' return me only to the issues of control?

Finally, what part could this awareness play in the creation and strengthening of the work?

The second theme involved the anger I felt over the death of my parents. With their death I felt the need for a God but lacked the intellectual structure that could allow for one. Had my turn to art been an attempt to fill the needs and answer the questions their death had brought? Figure 7 is an example of work that grew from this source.

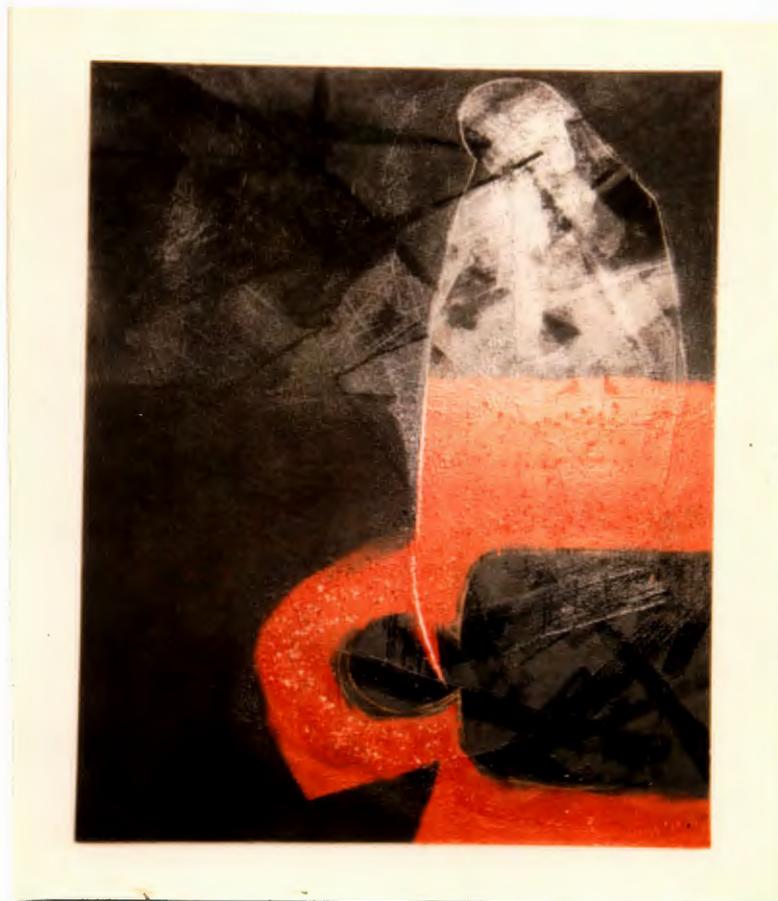


Figure 7. Untitled, 36"x48".

As this intensely introspective narrative content within my work developed the imagery within, it began to take on symbolic associations for me, as in Figure 8 and Figure 9. Houses (their roofs and bases), running legs with shoes, pointing fingers, hands with fingers spread wide, open mouths, the colors black, gold and red all became a repertoire of thought associations of which I grew increasingly aware.

The dominant function of the house, for example, was a metaphor for the division I found within myself. The base represented my physical and spiritual needs for routine and structure in life. It became the unquestioning functionary. Self-contained, without thought, desiring only comfort and to believe without having to know why. A figure from the waist down was often depicted within it. The roof represented my desire to know, to achieve a higher understanding. Its desires all centered on the need for 'truth'. The roof often contained the head and hands: those elements that are my sources, or by God. God in the form of a pointing finger coming down out of the summit making His expectations known. "You-You" He points, betraying the extent to which He needs to be right. Each element grew in its meaning and complexity as I worked.

Visual and emotional sides had dominated my earliest work. They had then been put to the intellectual test of trying to understand why and what I was dealing with. In the past I had often reacted against issues that I felt might be covering

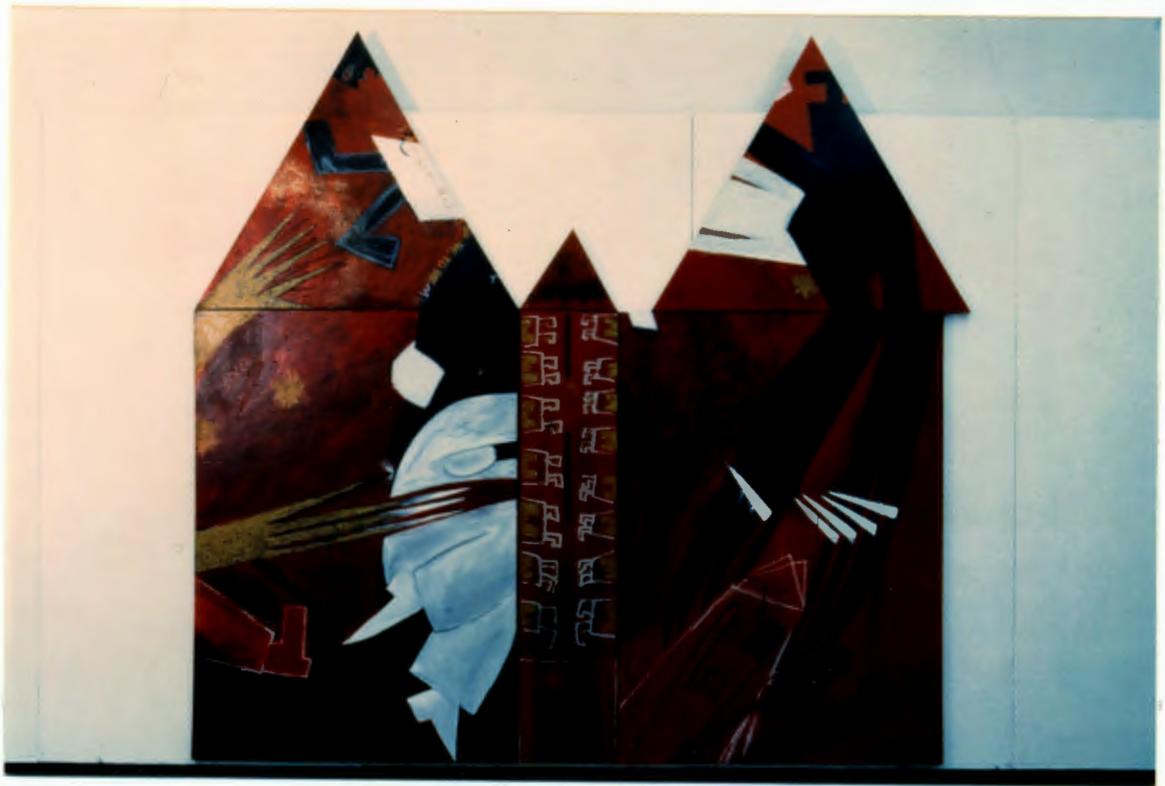


Figure 8. Untitled. 96"x96".



Figure 9. Untitled. 48"x96".

deeper ones for me. I now felt that these issues were no longer superficial.

Concepts of God, death, the unpredictability of life -- each seemed now in danger of becoming content that, without inner effort, could automatically bring depth into my work. Did not most activities in life hold this potential: the participant becoming more aware of the nature of being if the activity is deeply experienced and thought about?

I felt the need to shake off some of the self-awareness I had submerged into. The internal issues I had brought and had to bring to my work felt understood. Although the potential for greater depth seemed endless I knew that they would remain 'unanswerable'. I had felt the degree to which they were perhaps understandable. I began to feel that I had concluded too much to deal with them anymore. Was there a depth of response to be found apart from such an introspective alignment with the inner self? The need was not to lessen my involvement with the work but to see if I could change the focus. I began to do work where I consciously did not want to understand intellectually what the imagery was dealing with. A 'rightness' I cannot explain guided them. Figure 10 and Figure 11 are two examples.

In reflective moments this approach again seemed unresolved. The depth of involvement I sought seemed to elude me, yet the more conscious approach left me unfulfilled as well. Perhaps what I really felt limited the work for me was the self



Figure 10. Untitled. 144"x96".



Figure 11. Untitled, 192"x48".

conscious meanings behind the symbols. When one asks the 'meaning' of a work, does the response reveal the work or the self? Was I, by asking this of the work, missing its own nature, and learning only mine?. Were these 'meanings' limiting the work's ability to fulfil its own truth? How could I create a reality based not on an illusion to something but on itself. If a work were able to attain its own reality would it not then also address universal 'truths' of which all realities were a part? Could I learn to trust 'rightness' whether it spoke from the visual, the intellect, or the emotions? Could I value all of me equally as source? Was adherence to a *self truth* then what gave the work, and hence myself as well, life? These thoughts again propelled me into a series of work. My most recent work in the thesis exhibition reflects these concerns (Figure 12).

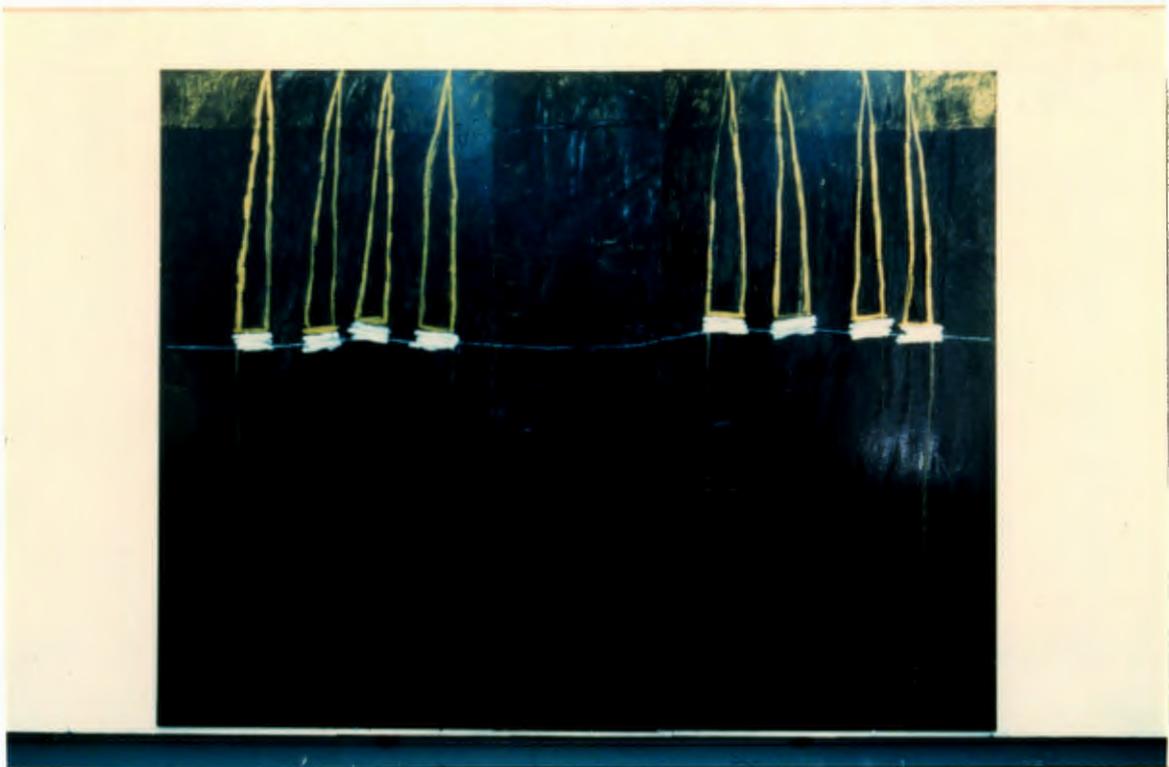


Figure 12. Untitled, 192"x96".

## CONCLUSION

I have now taken the process of my natural propensities to where they seem to interfere with themselves. Pushing my need to understand into an interference with process. Allowing for the 'rightness' and rejecting the justification of words. Stepping away from a judgement of which source is most valid and allowing each a voice. Learning to follow, to release control.

I have found art and life inexorably interwoven in complexity, each reflecting the other. Difficulties in the work are the ones I have in life. What brings richness to life brings it to the work. So close that to begin to understand one is to touch both. To understand one I have but to ask the other.

## REFERENCES

- Lippard, Lucy R. "Change and Criticism: Consistency and Small Minds." Art International, Vol.XI No. 9, Nov. 1967. Reprinted in Changing essays in art criticism, 23. New York, E.P. Dutton and Co. Inc., 1971.
- Picasso, Pablo. "Picasso Speaks." The Arts, May 1923, p. 315-326. Reprinted in Theories of Modern Art a Source Book by Artists and Critics, 263. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1968.