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Botanical Variations

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THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Anthony Bernert for the Master of Fine Arts in Art: Painting were presented November 8, 1995, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Anthony Bernert for the Master of Fine Arts in Art: Painting.

Title: Botanical Variations

The botanical theme in my art developed from years of photographing the native flora of Oregon with a macro-lens and studying botany and natural history. The appreciation which I developed for the evolution of flora and fauna and for the balances and complexities of the environments that sustain them is reflected in the work that I completed during my two years in the Master of Fine Arts program.

The composition of the abstract paintings in acrylic medium which I completed my first year in the program were based on the cycles and seasons of nature. Repetition and variation of pictorial elements were symbolic of the recurring and changing conditions of seasons and the life cycles of plants. As I became interested in developing the textures and transparencies of these paintings, I turned to the work of several Abstract Expressionist painters. To create fluid veils of color, the acrylic medium was thinned by the addition of much water, and this change in the viscosity of the medium lent itself to a more calligraphic handling of the lines and shapes which make up the visual and symbolic structure of these paintings.

After my first year in the graduate program, I was introduced to the techniques of monotype. The layering process of monotype seemed appropriate for the subject of floral forms, since in both the anatomy of the print and the morphology of flowers, forms are made up of layers and possess intricate overlapping structures. The images in these monotypes are based on generalized floral forms which serve as springboards for imagination to develop.

BOTANICAL VARIATIONS

by

Anthony Bernert

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS
in
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The sense of wonder that nature can evoke often depends on the degree of our attentiveness at a given moment. We perceive our surroundings by continually shifting our focus between things far and near. In a meadow, we may look out onto a vast expanse of land and observe its graduated planes, its diffuse colors and the general condition of light. Yet at another moment we may stop to look closely at a plant and concentrate our vision onto the minute details of its form—its textures, surfaces and the intricate geometry of its growth—symmetries unfolding out of symmetries. With the shift of an eye, we move from macro to micro realities of natural phenomena.

In Aldous Huxley's book, *The Doors of Perception*, the author states that one of the biological functions of the brain is to keep everything one knows from flooding into consciousness simultaneously. This function is likened to a valve which necessarily maintains consciousness at a low trickle so that we may concentrate on daily tasks and survive. Huxley uses the term "Mind at Large" for that condition in which the valve of consciousness is opened and we experience vast expansions of awareness. Such heightened states of awareness are often provoked by chance impressions, yet an important point in Huxley's book is that transcending ordinary perception should not be left to chance alone. Awareness, like an internal lens, can be magnified at will.

Nature provides an infinite abundance of material for illumination. All that is required as catalyst is the soul of a sensitive person to engage its process.

My appreciation of natural landscapes was fostered early on by the presence of the Willamette River which flowed behind the home of my childhood. It was a mysterious and primal landscape, and the impressions I absorbed there will always have a life in my memory. The scenery of the river remains magnetic and I never tire of watching its languid but perpetual current flowing past muddy banks like a great artery of the earth. At the river's edge, one can watch the inverted sky melding with aqueous tints or observe reflections as they scatter and reassemble with the patterns of wind. With its changing mirror and unchanging course, the river is a hypnotic combination of monotony and effervescence.

My interest in plants developed over several years of hiking in areas of Oregon and Washington. During these hikes, I began to take note of the individual species of plants along trails and soon began photographing them. By returning to certain areas at different times of the year, I was able to observe plants at different stages of growth and learned to appreciate the harmony among these cycles and the passage of the seasons. About eight years ago, I began to use a macro-lens to photograph plants. During this time, I was compelled to study botany and natural history. The amazing diversity and specialization of forms in plants prompted me to try to under-

stand the adaptive significance of some of their specialized features. Gradually I learned to discern certain adaptations of forms and this led to increased awareness of the dynamics of evolution which has molded, through the passage of time, the design of living things. Natural history teaches one to look at living forms with an understanding of their morphology. It gives one a knowledge of things that can be observed by the eye. The more I learned to perceive the dynamics of evolution behind different forms, the more the diversity of all living things came together into a unifying idea. I began to see forms not merely as gratuitous parts to a whole, but as purposeful adaptations. I believe evolution is a unifying principle that helps close the illusory gap between mind and nature, for the fiction of nature-as-other gradually gives way to a humbling consciousness of the origins of all life.

Western tradition and religious orthodoxy have created an artificial division between man and nature. Created in God's image remains the preferred solution to the question of human origins. This anthropocentric matrix is at odds with the fundamental lesson of evolution. As the environmentalist Steve Rowe pointed out, ". . . that people have the God-given right of dominion over all creation, perpetuates hubris and the rift between man and nature." Although this "rift" cannot be explained merely by pointing to the effects of religious beliefs on perception, it remains true that it is a separation that can only be sustained by a belief which ignores a blind-spot in its viewpoint. The perception of nature-as-other begins to erode when we study

evolution and learn to perceive all of life, including humankind, as having developed from earthly, as opposed to unearthly, processes.

The concerns and appreciations discussed so far make up part of the foundation of my views regarding nature and these views are inextricably linked to my choice of subject in art. Nature has been the stimulus of all my work. My work, in turn, is an attempt to generate appreciation of the natural world.

Prior to entering the Master of Fine Arts program at Portland State University in 1993, I had painted three large landscapes in oil. Incorporated into these landscapes are several of the floral forms which I had photographed in previous years. A sense of two-dimensional space is maintained in these paintings by emphasizing planar relationships between the flat surfaces and interlocking patterns of leaves, stems and flowers. The interplay between flat and volumetric forms and the tension between spatial recession versus flattened patterns that echo the picture plane were among my concerns in these paintings. The first of these paintings was executed in 1990. The last was completed in 1992. Before these landscapes, the paintings completed during my undergraduate years were largely inspired by the abstract paintings of Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian. I had worked on a number of abstract paintings which explored the possibilities of line, color and shape relationships to evoke various forms and processes of nature. It was to

this body of work that I returned upon being admitted into the graduate program.

During my first year in the graduate program, I worked on a series of canvases in acrylic medium. My interest was to use line, shape and color symbolically, as a means to evoke the cycles and seasons of nature. The duality of continuity and change, inherent in the passage of seasons and the cycles of living things, was fundamental to the conception of these paintings. My aim was to express this duality by the repetition and variation of starkly contrasted relationships of line, shape and color.

Each painting in this series was begun by using a compass made of string and tacks to draw a line from the left side of the canvas to the right. The line formed a series of repeated circles. Its path seemed to extend beyond either side of the canvas, where on the one side it entered and the other it left. Shapes were then painted into the composition. As various sections of line were painted over by these shapes, the line was drawn over again with a compass.

The configuration of circles provided the element of repetition, whereas the element of variation occurred in the continually changing relationships of this line to the shapes that it passed over, under or in between.

Eventually the circular lines were drawn freehand and as the character of the line became calligraphic, the shapes became more organic and less geometric. This transition was partly due to an interest in exploring different surface qualities in these paintings, such as the fluidity, density or transpar-

ency of the paint. Thinning the acrylic paints to a watery consistency lent itself to a calligraphic handling of the medium because of the speed with which the paint runs out of the brush when it is this thin. The transition to a more expressionistic handling of the medium was also partly due to my interest in the later paintings of Arshile Gorky. In these paintings, a fluid atmosphere is animated by biomorphic shapes which are distinct yet harmoniously inter-joined in organic masses like landscapes full of strange vegetation. Nuances of texture, color and fluidity of paint are sensitively handled in Gorky's work. By observing his paintings, I gained a greater awareness of various surface qualities and their expressive value. At this time, I was also looking at the work of Helen Frankenthaler, Diebenkorn, Motherwell and Mangold.

The development of my interest in Abstract Expressionism was concurrent with my studies of the French Symbolist poets—Mallarme, Valery and Baudelaire. While an undergraduate at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I enrolled in a class on aesthetic theory in which Mallarme's poetry was studied in relation to twentieth century art. Parallels between Symbolism and Abstract Expressionism particularly fascinated me. I soon learned that certain artists of the later movement, such as Robert Motherwell, acknowledged strong connections to the Symbolist poets. Motherwell compared Baudelaire's conception of "correspondences" to the visual associations in abstract painting. He also related Abstract Expressionism to Mallarme's maxim, "The task of the artist is not to paint the thing itself, but the effect that it

produces.” Central to the aesthetic creeds of both Symbolism and Abstract Expressionism is the importance given to the subjectivity of perception in the creative process. The Symbolist concern for an “expressive synthesis” in art, which weds the interior life of feeling to external forms in art, was fundamental to the aims of many Abstract Expressionist painters.

In my own work, I always have placed great importance on the subjective component of experience in making art, for I believe in the value of exploring, in the words of Wallace Stevens, “that part of the truth of the world that has its origin in the feelings.”

Although the paintings of my first year in the graduate program became more expressionistic and less minimal in composition, the main framework remained the same. The basic relational structure of each composition was based on circular lines counteracted by relationships of shape.

The scale of these paintings was generally four feet in height by six feet in length. The horizontal orientation of the canvas was to stress the subject of landscape. Two diptychs were made with total lengths of twelve feet each. These were both made earlier in the year, while I was still using a compass to make the circular lines. In these diptychs, the element of repetition that is created by line is echoed and accentuated by the equal division of the canvas itself into two halves.

By the end of my first year in the graduate program, I had worked out numerous variations based on the repeated circle motif. Yet the aesthetic and

conceptual limitations that I had set myself were proving too restrictive, for I was finding that I could not develop my deeper appreciations of nature within these limitations. What I needed was the flexibility to create images that changed and lived with the momentum of my perceptions. With the encouragement of my advisor, I began to work in monotype.

I was introduced to the processes of monotype the summer before my second year in the graduate program. I found the techniques and materials immediately compelling and was very interested in working on the smaller, more intimate scale of paper as opposed to the large scale of my “loop” paintings. The smaller scale lent itself to working on images of single floral forms, and by developing intricacies within these forms, the viewer could be drawn into an intimate mode of observation.

In the prints that I completed during my second year in the graduate program, I have not been concerned with the particular appearances of specific plants. I base the image on a generalized floral form and allow the organic shape to work with my aesthetic sensibility. This way, spontaneous sensations are allowed to materialize directly in the medium and the natural activities that unfold in the mind, unfold in the image. Art, to me, is an affirmation of the life of the mind, of a consciousness that has absorbed, distilled and transformed its subject. Part of the value of art is that it unites object and perception, which is a fusion between two different orders of reality—inner nature and outer nature. As Paul Klee wrote, “All ways meet in the eye and

there turned into form, lead to a synthesis of inward vision and outward sight.” The synthesis of nature and human imagination in art is not only symbolic but literal, as Alfred North Whitehead affirmed when he wrote, “It is a false dichotomy to think of nature and man. Mankind is that factor in nature which exhibits in its most intense form the plasticity of nature.” I believe that if we are to conserve nature and appreciate its intrinsic value, we must first perceive unity rather than separation between our human origins and existence and the origins and existence of the rest of creation. Art, as Whitehead suggests, is an expression of this unity.

The methods of producing images in monotype vary, but most of my images are made by rolling ink onto sheets of plexi-glass and templates cut out from very thin gauge aluminum. The inked surfaces are then positioned onto printing paper lying on the bed of a press. By turning a wheel, the bed of the press is made to roll underneath a leather covered bar. As the paper, templates and plexi-glass are pressed together between the bar and the bed of the press, ink is transferred onto the paper.

The image develops through a succession of transfers. As these transfers build up, layer by layer, relationships between the strata generate awareness of an inward/outward dimension in the anatomy of the print. I often accentuate this dimension by working with transparencies that allow one to see underlying elements so that the eye is drawn beyond the surface. Overlapping elements can also draw the viewer’s awareness to this inner

dimension by hinting at the spaces between adjacent layers. This sense of an internal anatomy, made up of overlapping layers, is one of the main differences between creating images in monotype versus painting. In monotype, as layers are built up, certain shapes get covered or partially veiled beneath ink so that one is always aware of topographical and subterranean components of the image. This duality is intrinsic to the medium of monotype and is an essential stimulus of the psyche in its unfolding role in the image. The monotype process, for me, has also been much more of a hands-on experience than painting. The shapes and lines in an image involve tearing paper, cutting templates, rolling ink, scoring lines, working with the press, the different consistencies of the inks, etc. Each step is an integral part of the process and the image.

One of the merits of monotype as a medium is its versatility. Whether one builds up an image patiently and methodically, or rapidly and spontaneously, there are various methods for developing an image and obtaining diverse effects. After learning some of the basic techniques for creating lines, shapes and textures, one begins to form personal insights into the processes and secrets for handling the materials to bring about certain effects. Like an alchemist, one stores up a mental index of these individual insights, for they are an integral and valuable part of the creative process.

Lithographic inks are oil based. They can either be used directly from the can or an ink modifier may be added to improve certain properties. An ink

which is too thin may be stiffened by adding small amounts of magnesium carbonate until the desired body is obtained. On the other hand, a stiff ink may be thinned by the addition of reducing oil.

There are a number of ways to manipulate lithographic ink once it has been rolled onto a sheet of plexiglass in preparation for transfer onto paper. Powdered pigments may be sprinkled onto ink to produce granular textures, as well as diffuse shapes and subtle colors in the image. Other additives include solvents such as lithotine or turpentine. These may be flecked onto the ink by scraping the bristles of a toothbrush dipped in solvent and held over the inked plexiglass. As the tiny droplets land on the ink, they spread out in the form of small aureoles, creating watery or atmospheric effects.

While the plexiglass is inked, lines may be made by drawing grooves into the ink with any pointed implement that does not damage the plexiglass. Lines can also be made by placing string onto the inked plexiglass or paper. The string forms a barrier between the ink and paper during transfer. Another method to create lines is by rolling ink, stiffened with magnesium carbonate, onto tracing paper. With the inked side down on paper, the top side can then be drawn on.

Shapes can be made with an aluminum template or any torn or cut piece of paper which blocks the ink from reaching specific areas of the paper during transfer. Because the aluminum template is rigid, ink may be rolled directly onto it using a brayer. The shape of the template may therefore be

used to create a positive shape when inked or a negative shape when blocking ink from making contact with the paper. Lines, shapes and textures may also be scored or embossed into this thin gauge aluminum template.

If too much ink gets built up on an image, excess ink may be lifted off by placing a clean sheet of newsprint over the image and running the image through the press again. Ink will be lifted off onto the newsprint. There is a limitation to how many layers of ink one can build up on printing paper during one working session. Too much ink on the printing paper causes problems with registration since the tack of the ink will no longer adhere well to underlying layers. An additional problem with too many layers is that the printing paper may slide on the ink as it is rolled beneath the pressure bar of the press, creasing the paper.

In working in the medium of monotype, fortuitous effects are a constant source of intrigue. Part of the mystery of this medium, for me, is that there is a curious level on which you control the image and a level on which accidental effects take on a life of their own. At times, I am aware that I am making the image. Yet there are times when the image is like a life whose metamorphosis unfolds before my eyes.

An ovoid form is used as the foundation of many of my images. Its elemental form is suggestive of an egg or the seeds, buds or pods of plants. It is an archetype of birth, fertility and metamorphosis. In symbology, the circumference of ovals and circles signifies a generative process. “[B]y virtue

of its movement as much as by its shape, circular motion carries the further significance of that which brings into being, activates and animates all the forces involved in any given process.”

In many of my prints, I use a template to create the dominant form of the floral image. The template produces a strong silhouetted shape and the clarity of this shape acts as a foil to more subtle and intricate visual elements. In my monotypes, I have tried to set up the same general visual condition that exists in the plant forms they refer to, for the print, like a plant, possesses both clearly visible and inconspicuous elements which are revealed to the eye at different stages of the viewer’s awareness.

In the layering process of monotype, shapes can be created, veiled or concealed by controlling the transparency or opacity of individual layers. This creates a range of stark and muted elements. The inks, which are typically very thick and dense, can be mixed with a transparent medium or applied in thin layers for atmospheric effects. A thickly applied layer, on the other hand, produces an opaque skin of ink that stops the eye at its surface. This duality of looking into translucent spaces versus looking onto opaque surfaces relates to our perceptual experiences of sky, earth, water or stone. Other qualities of color, light and shape can evoke night or day, stillness or transience, or numerous other conditions. Although my monotypes are based on a single image, the image is a composite that combines multiple associations. In *Aquatic Plant*, for example, the ochre background is suggestive of land, while

the translucent, fluid shape contained within the contours of the floral form evokes the watery environment to which the plant is adapted. The general quality of light in the image is reminiscent of midday.

In the prints *Day*, *Dusk*, and *Night*, three different stages in the opening of a nocturnal flower are represented. In *Day*, textures, incised lines in the ochre background and distinct edges of shapes, accentuate the sense of sunlight. In *Night*, there is an absence of texture and the edges of shapes are less distinct as they meld into the darkness of evening.

In my floral images, I have allowed imagination to change and recombine impressions of nature. As Immanuel Kant wrote, "The imagination (as a productive faculty of cognition) is a powerful agent for creating, as it were, a second nature out of the material supplied to it by actual nature." Nature vitalizes and nourishes imagination; art, in turn, is the mirror into which one's collected sensations of nature are transformed.

The paintings and monotypes that I completed during my two years in the graduate program reflect my appreciation of natural forms and of the continual renewal of life in the cycles and seasons of nature. As an artist, my work is grounded in the belief that art provides paradigmatic images that function to join human perception with the natural world from which we evolved. As Wallace Stevens wrote, "The relation of art to life is of the first importance especially in a skeptical age since, in the absence of a belief in God, the mind turns to its own creations and examines them, not alone from

the aesthetic point of view, but for what they reveal, for what they validate and invalidate, for the support that they give.” For both the artist and the viewer, art reflects facets of the natural world which we can observe with our eyes and absorb with our souls.

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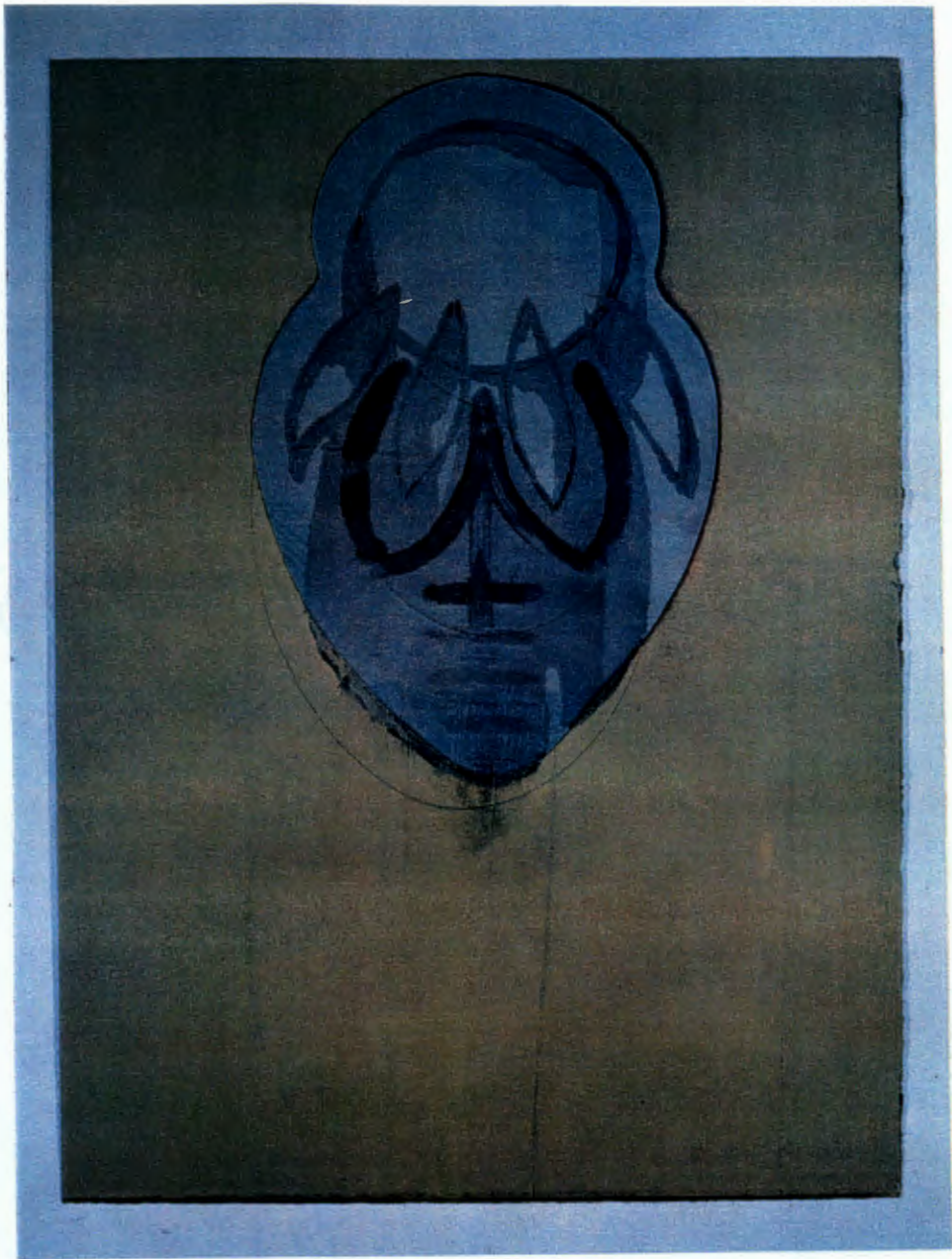
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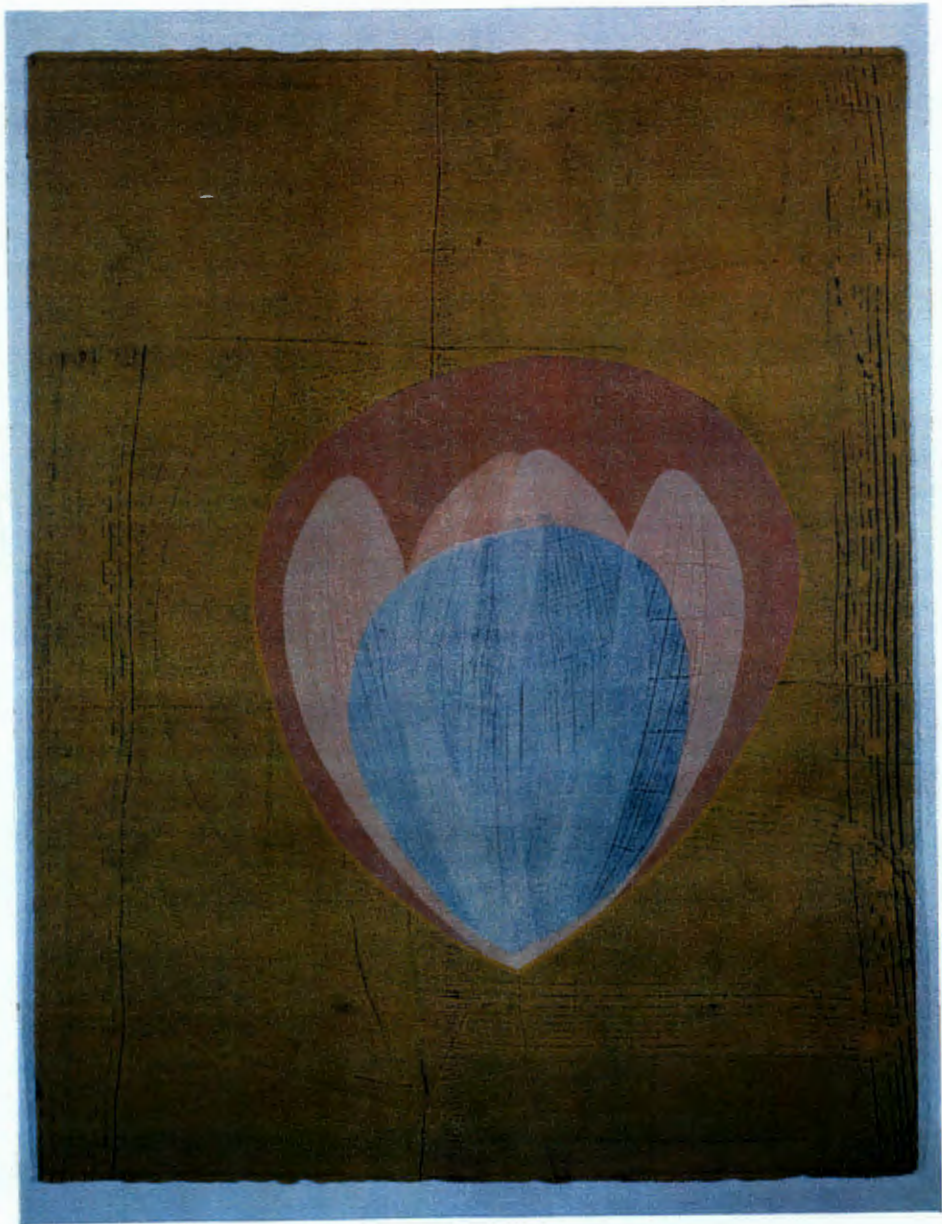
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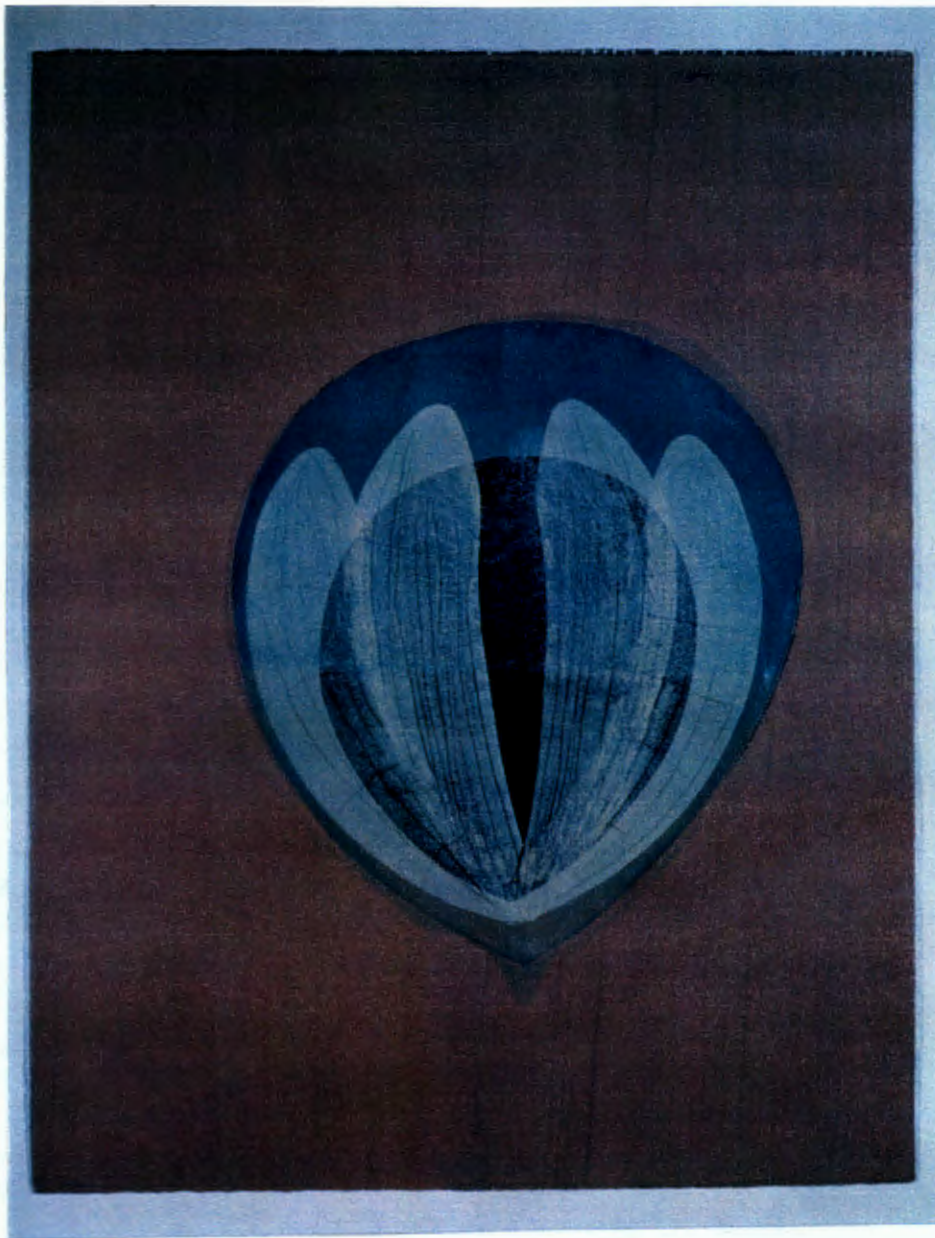
Aquatic Plant

Monotype 1995



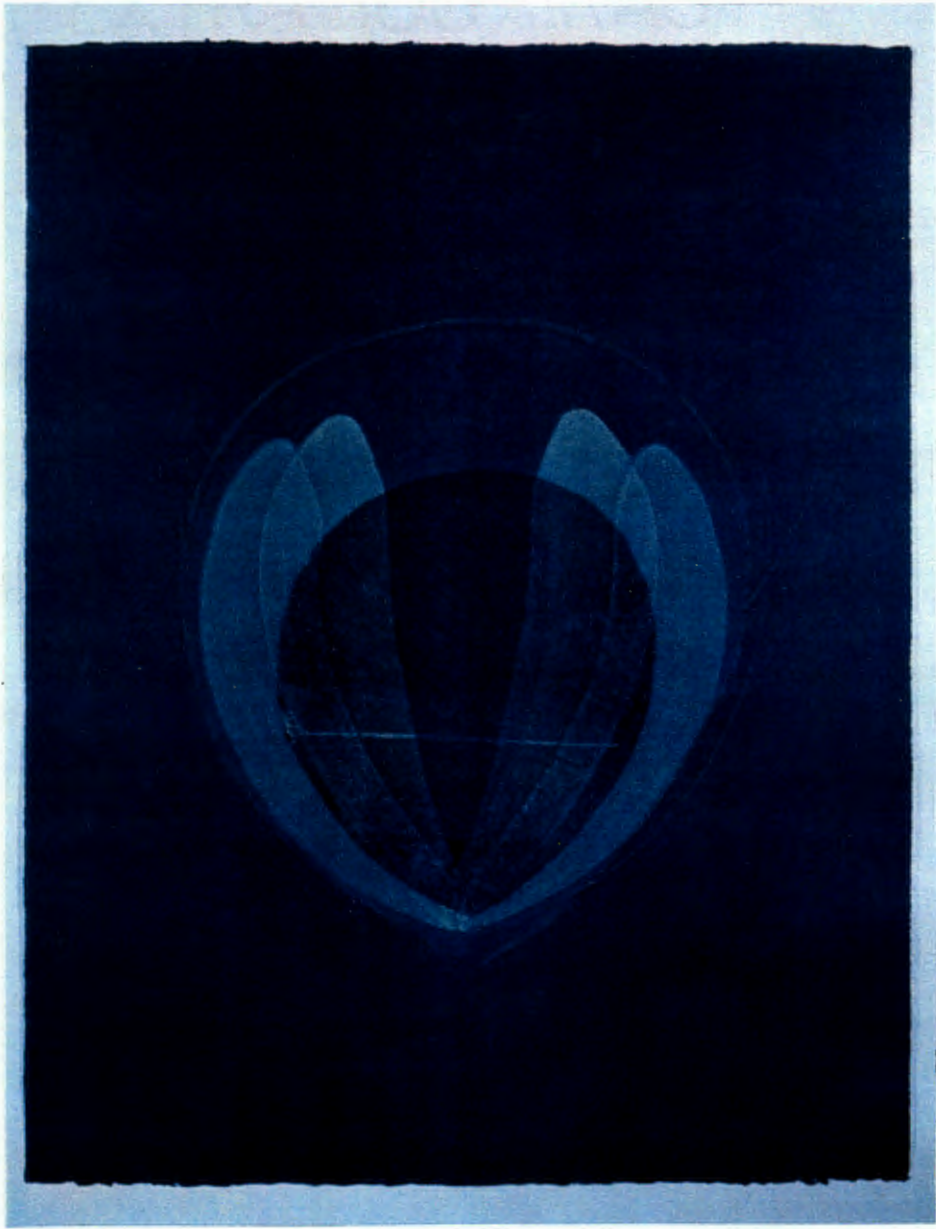
Day

Monotype 1995



Dusk

Monotype 1995



Night

Monotype 1995