RICHARD ROBLIN | A BIOGRAPHY

Richard Roblin was born in Saskatchewan, Canada in 1940. Inspired by the vast prairie sky, Roblin continues to pursue his vision of luminous clarity. As a young boy living in Southern Ontario, Richard developed a passion for drawing and was happiest when he was sketching in nature. The dynamic relationships in nature subsequently guided his intellect towards architecture and design.

Roblin's love of drawing and painting received early recognition and acknowledgement when his art was purchased by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts when he was 21. His journey as an artist has taken him throughout North America, Europe, the Orient, and India. He has imbibed the teachings of many cultures. His passion for creative activity extends through his practice of architecture, design, sculpture, and painting. Roblin's works are exhibited and collected widely through commercial galleries and museums including the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

As Roblin exclaims... "I love to paint. The nature of my painting activities is to engage with the magical resonances of colour and form. I play with the dynamics of luminosity to reveal the sense of joy which inspires it. My process of painting is to begin by drawing with colour, a line or shape. Everything that emerges is defined by that primary impulse which is like the leap of a dancer onto life's stage. Suddenly, the canvas begins to light up. Each canvas is an open door, a dance circle, a symphony of breath breathing its life through the action of the artist. Each artist, an understudy of creation itself, re-enacts the birth of the universe."

Always a pioneer of consciousness and a technical innovator in the realms of art, Roblin enthusiastically continues his explorations in his new home and studio on Vancouver Island.

RICHARD ROBLIN | A PERSONAL HISTORY

My formation as an artist started in my early childhood when I began to draw and paint. This was the post war period of the mid-forties. By the mid-fifties, I had developed many skills as a painter and had also developed a profound interest in architecture. Through the next decade, I was working as a professional artist and illustrator. I exhibited my first abstract works in Montreal with Quebec's major artists in 1961. The following year, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts began to acquire my work for their permanent collection. My travels and studies during this period took me to Vancouver, San Francisco, and Montreal, which became my adopted home. Throughout this time, I was studying Japanese traditional arts, calligraphy, and textile dying techniques, and I had developed unique processes in my relief paintings. I also involved myself in sculptural and environmental projects. By the late sixties, I had exhibited widely in commercial galleries and museums. In 1970, I had my first major show of constructive paintings in Montreal (figs.1, 2, 3 & 4).

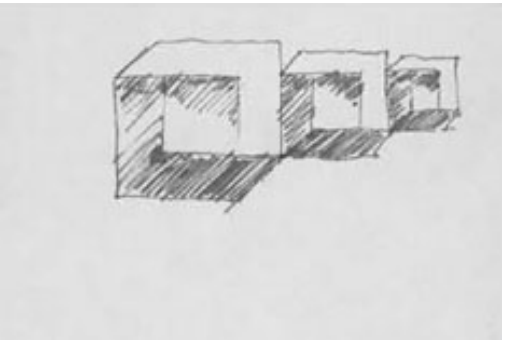


Fig. 1. *Sketch*, 1969.

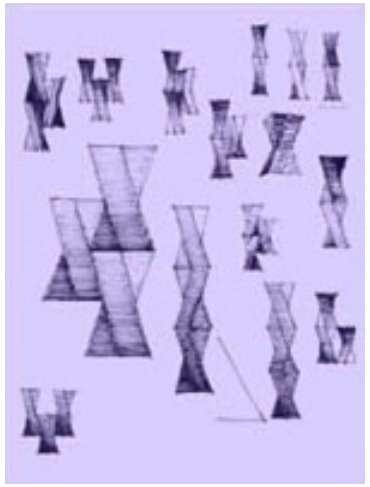


Fig. 2. *Tipperary* sketch, 1969.

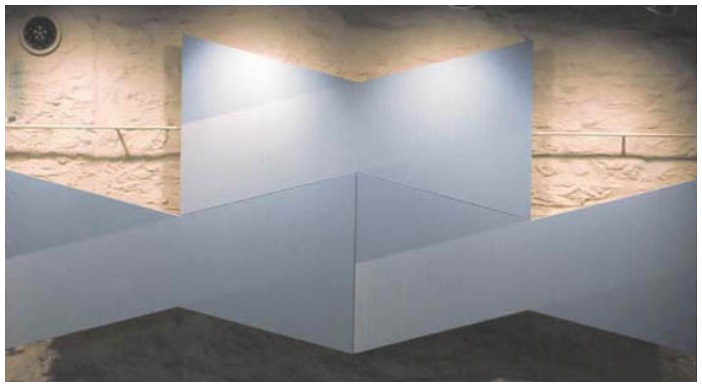


Fig. 3. *It's a Long Way to Tipperary*, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 54 x 144 inches.

Fig. 4. *Geometric Construction*, 1969/70, acrylic on canvas, 66 x 66 inches.

1970's

When I first began travelling in Europe in the early 70's, I was very drawn to the works of Matisse. The art that was most impressive for me were his dramatically simple works such as *French Window at Collioure* (fig. 5), *View of Notre Dame* (seen earlier in New York), and a particular few from his series of Moroccan paintings (*On the Terrace*, *The Casbah Gate*, and *The Riffian*), which I later viewed at the Musée de Québec in the touring Hermitage Collection. The directness and simplicity of form, which included drawn elements, implicated the process as subject of the painting. Matisse did not try to hide the construction scaffolding, the architectonic drawing of his work. As an artist/architectural designer, I had already, in my earlier works, demonstrated this understanding of drawing with colour.

The *Izumo Suite* paintings were directly related to sites and experiences of travel and living in Japan. *Nightfishing* (fig. 6) is actually a view from a cliff side house window to the ocean and night sky. Lights on the fishermen's boats were reflected in the water, as were the stars. The lighter interior opening provides a window on this scene, and a frame of reference to Matisse's *French Window at Collioure*.

Fig. 5. Henri Matisse, *French Window at Collioure,* 1914.

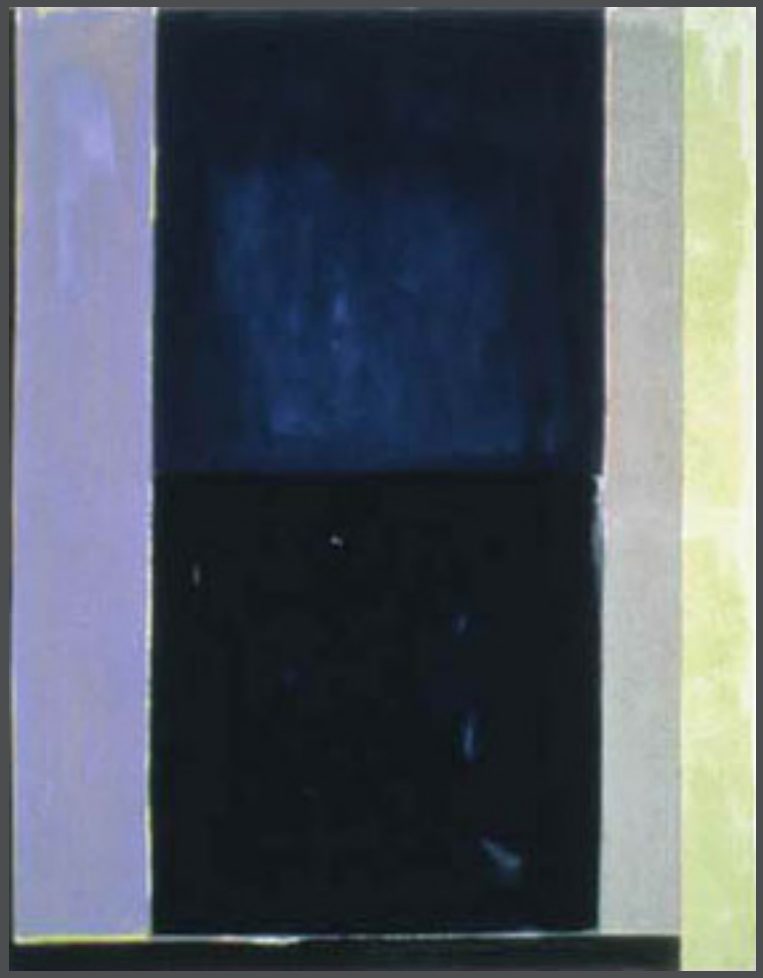


Fig. 6. Richard Roblin, *Nightfishing,* 1984, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 54 inches.

My study of Japanese textile art influenced my painting techniques as I incorporated natural dyes in my painting process, combining it with other media such as modeling paste and acrylic mediums. At this time, I developed the 'Stain Paintings'. The canvas was folded into a lattice of troughs, well soaked in water. The dyestuff which had been premixed and coded, was poured in and flushed out. The grid imposed by the folded canvas played against the fluid nature of the applied colour, which totally integrated with the canvas (fig. 7). These paintings were shown widely in my galleries and in museum shows during this period. Both the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the Museum of Contemporary Art purchased paintings from this series.

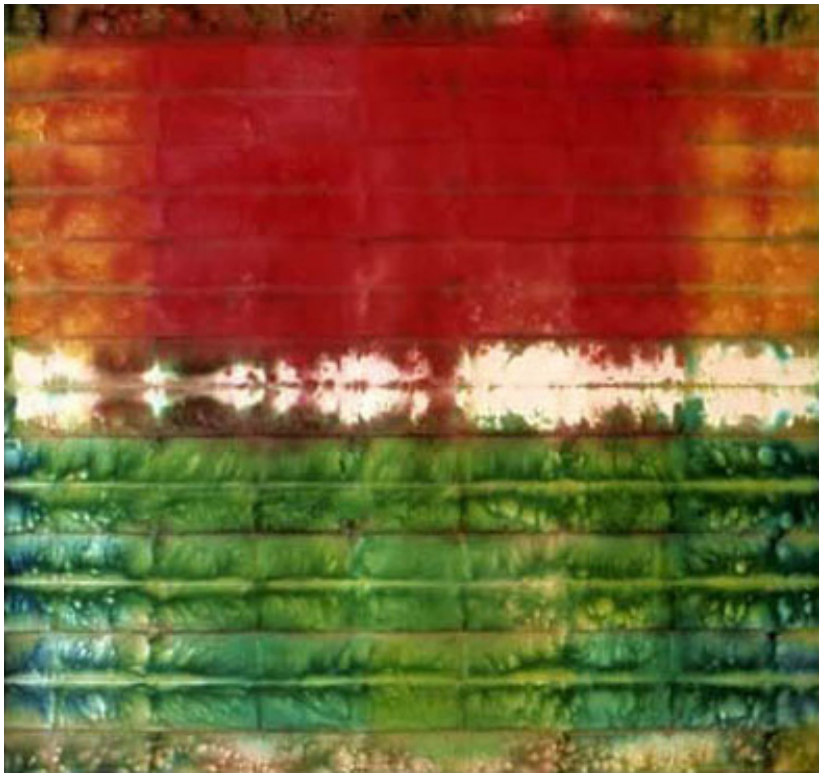


Fig. 7. *Stain Painting #33,*1973, dye on canvas, 72 x 84 inches. Collection of Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art.

Between 1970 and 1976, I founded a creative arts center in central Montreal. The goal of the center was to integrate the arts in education as a foundation for learning. I designed and directed the evolution of this program for the diffusion of art activities, including dance and drama, into the local educational system. During this time, I continued to paint, and I produced textile banners (figs. 8 & 9) which were shown at the Visual Arts Center in Montreal in 1975.

Fig. 8. *Navaho,* 1974, dye and wax on cotton, 90 x 70 inches.

Fig. 9. *Summer Snow,* 1974, dye on cotton, 70 x 60 inches.

By the mid seventies, I began to receive requests to do design projects. The years I had spent engaged in design and architectural studies were being put into practice. I designed a studio for myself (figs. 10 & 11), as well as other renovation projects during this time.

Fig. 10. Studio

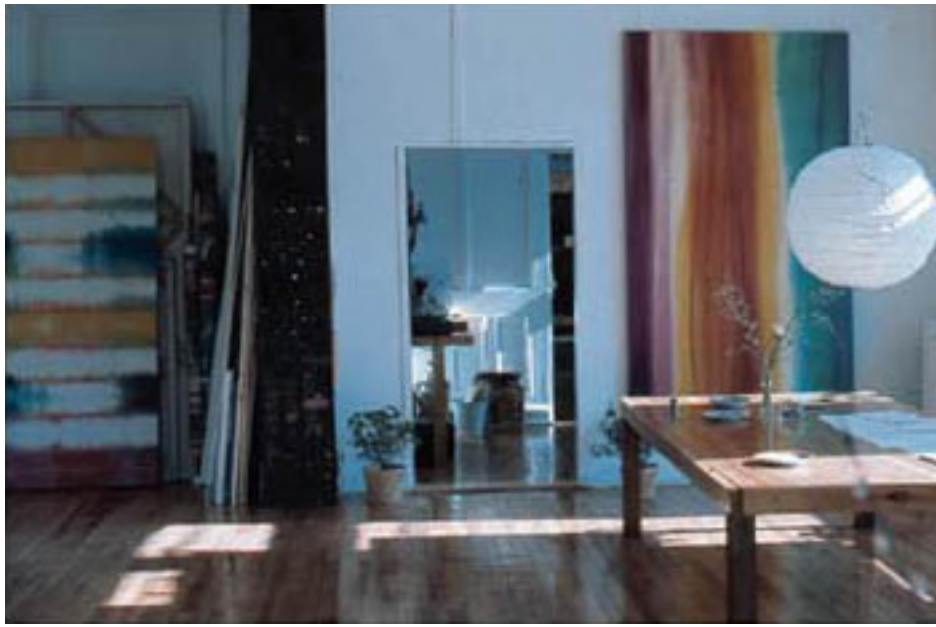


Fig. 11. Studio, 1974

One of my most interesting projects was also one of my first opportunities to develop design ideas related to Japan. It was a very minimal approach to design that I employed in the renovation and redesign of the townhouse, *Aberman House* (figs. 12, 13 & 14) between 1977 and 1978.

Fig. 12.

Fig. 13.

Fig. 14.

In 1977, I went to Japan to put together a collection of traditional arts and textiles. While I was there, I began a long awaited journey of discovery into the aesthetic culture I had long admired from afar. The extraordinary richness that I was to experience had a powerful impact on my life and subsequent work. Over the next several years, I would be totally engaged in the activities of design and architecture in Japan, Canada, and the United States. Although I did not paint during this period, I drew constantly, and became widely recognized for my design abilities. It wasn't until 1982 that I began to re-emerge as an artist and began to show more extensively. The period of travel to Japan had ended, but the impact of the oriental aesthetic remains (figs. 15, 16 & 17).

Fig. 15. *Tatami,* 1979. Retail shop and design studio featuring traditional and contemporary arts and interior objects of Japan.

Fig. 16. *Tatami Design,* 1979. Design office for Richard Roblin.

Fig. 17. Eve and Richard Roblin, 1977, Montreal.

1980's

Throughout this time, I more and more acknowledged the important influence of the arts and architecture of Japan on the developing modern movement in the West at the beginning of the twentieth century. Through the dynamic influence of the Japanese wood block print on Western art, and the dramatic architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, we see a continuous merging of this natural modern movement (fig. 18).

Fig. 18. Katsura Imperial Villa, Kyoto, 16th century modernist icon.

In 1982, I began to paint again with a great fervour. As I had not painted in several years, I worked with unusual vigour and simplicity of form. The years of travel, visual stimulation, and designing emerged in my paintings. I had a longing to use the brush, as my calligraphy practice was integrating with my painting. I first began with a series that was directly related to my Japanese experience. I called it *The Izumo Suite*, named after the Izu peninsula where I had spent some time. The idea of the paintings was that they were to be composed of three to five strokes of colour, each a unique gesture and each playing off each other in a dialogue, like Haiku poetry. These paintings eventually evoked images of experiences and places in Japan (figs. 19, 20 & 21).

Fig. 19. *Shiosai*, 1984, oil on canvas, 80 x 48 inches. Collection of Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art.

Fig. 20. *Dokusan*, 1983, oil on arches paper.

Fig. 21. *Kawana Night*, 1984, oil on canvas, 54 x 72 inches.

THE *FALLINGWATER* SERIES 1982 – 2002

I first began with works on paper of soft geometry. Within these paintings were floating fields of calligraphy. Although they were barely discernable, they provided a poetic ground. The idea of painting as poetry is a continuing aspiration for me. I think of Zen masters who developed and perfected this art. I also think of Western painters who have impacted on my awareness — Robert Motherwell, Milton Avery and Hans Hofmann — as poets of form. The architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright resonated with these new paintings. The first of these works (figs. 22 & 23) had an element which reminded me of a cantilever. This reference immediately suggested the title for the series — *Fallingwater*.

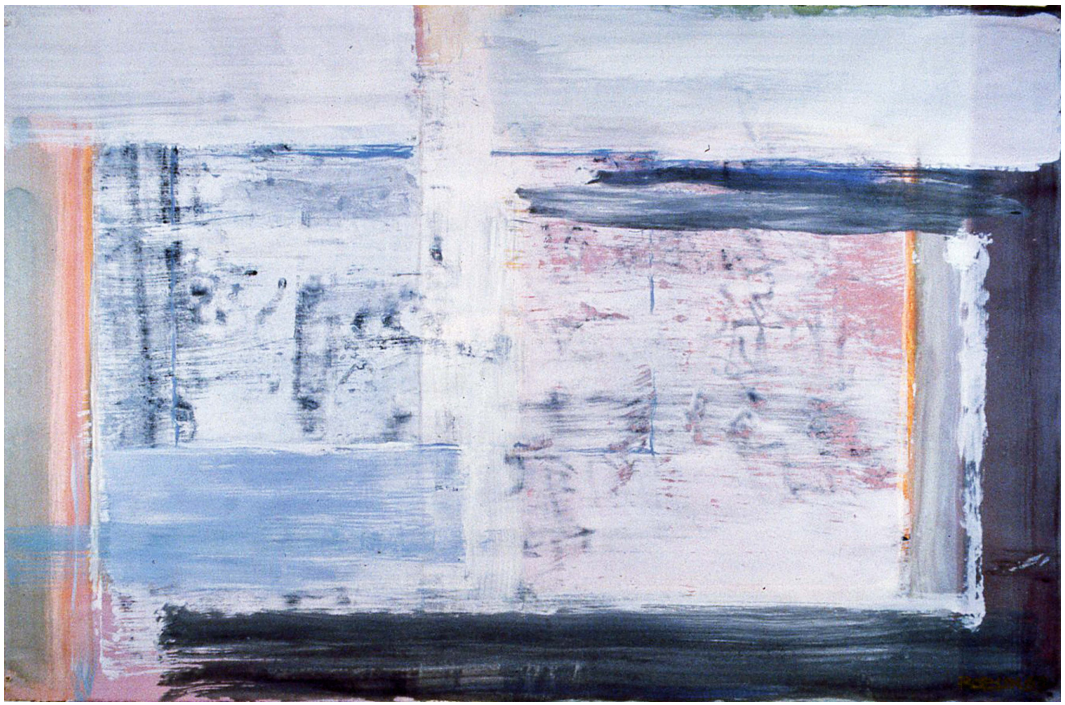


Fig. 22. *Fallingwater #1*, 1982/3, oil on paper, 26 x 40 inches.

Fig. 23. *Fallingwater #6*, 1982/3, oil on paper, 26 x 40 inches.

In 1983, I began the first large scale paintings in this series. In these early paintings, broader areas or fields of colour were layered to create more opaque and transparent elements. A broad stroke of white with a wide brush became evident in some works, suggestive of water falling in a cascade. A visual transformation occurs as one journeys deeper into the sensitized painting surface (fig. 24). The mapping of *Fallingwater #4* (fig. 25) is quite simple. The brushwork very basic and direct, the overlays of colour are quite painterly, or calligraphic.

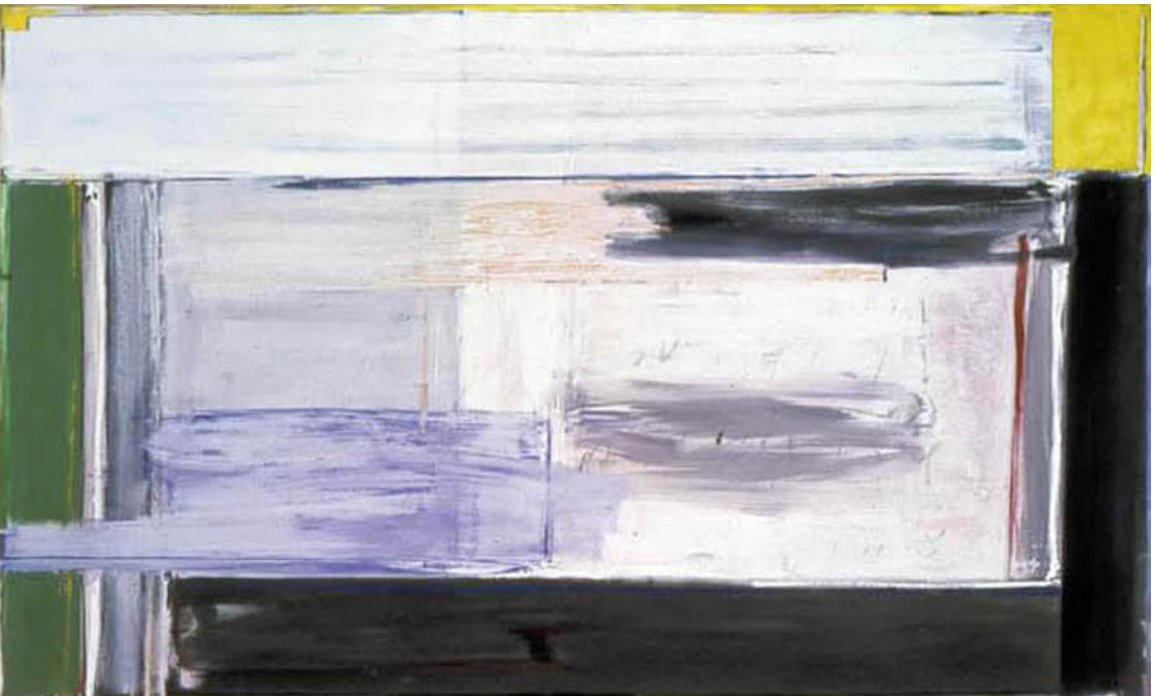


Fig. 24. *Fallingwater #1*, 1983, oil on canvas, 54 x 80 inches.

Fig. 25. *Fallingwater #4*, 1983, oil on canvas, 73 x 56 inches.

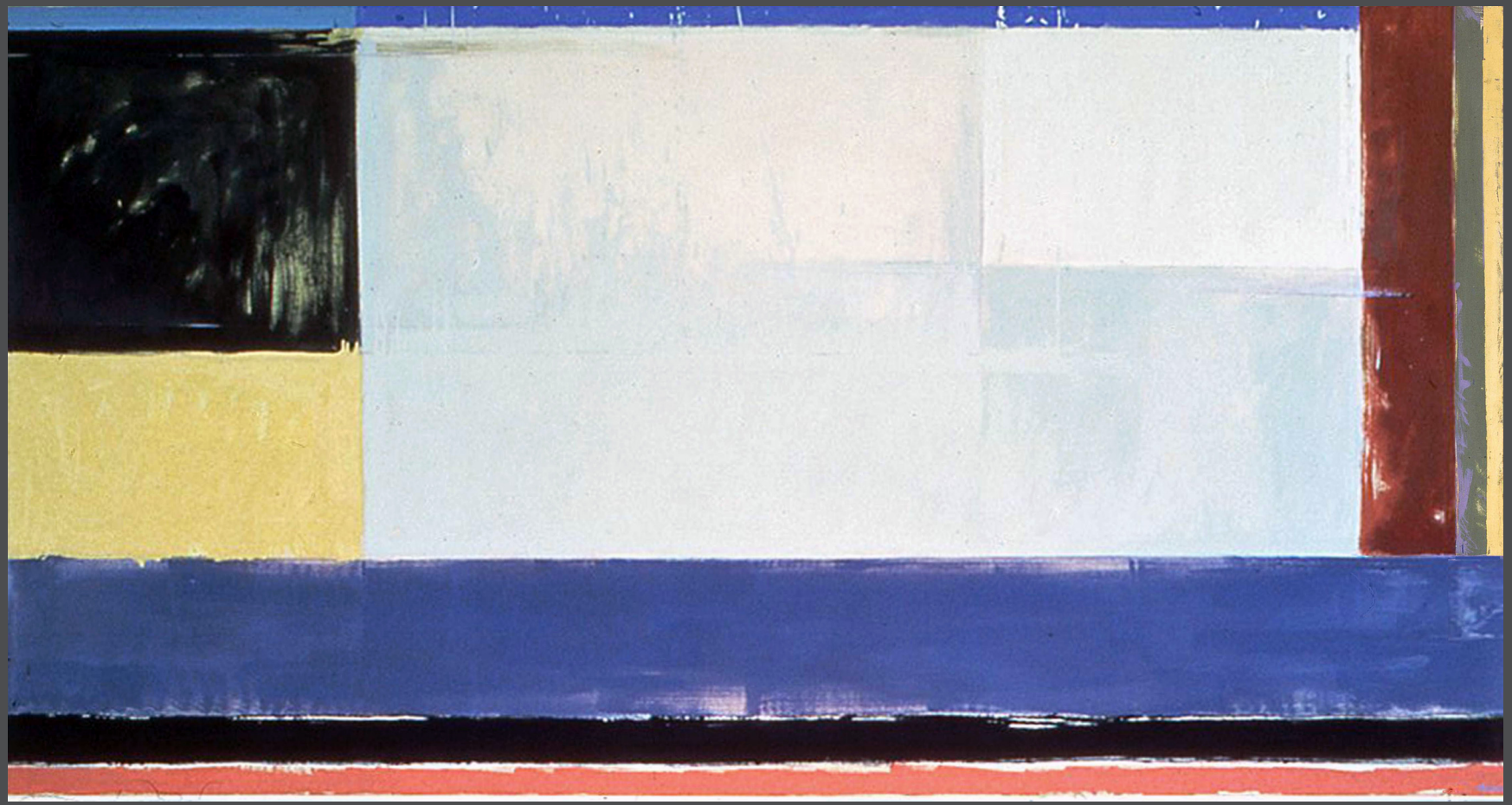


Fig. 26. *Fallingwater #11*, 1985, oil on canvas, 50 x 96 inches.

The immediate interest in the painting series *Wallseries*, which I started in 1984, left little time to continue work on *Fallingwater* paintings. However, in 1985, I included one new piece in a show of constructed works at the Gallery Esperanza in Montreal. In this work is the beginning of my use of the loose flow of colour and dripping as a result of the active handling of the brush. The more obvious use of colour bands of various dimensions displays the constructivist nature demonstrated in the show (fig. 26).

Partly as a result of the predominant use of knife painting in my *Wallseries* paintings of the period, I began to use the knife to a greater degree in a particular grouping of Fallingwater paintings (fig. 28). These works began with very delicate washes of acrylic primaries followed by washes of oil colour of various density. The final applications of paint are laid on with various widths of knives with colour direct from the tube and the mixing of this pigment happens on the surface of the canvas. The arc appears for the first time in this work and is drawn with conté. This drawn arc, which is faintly visible in figure 28, is from my fully extended arm. The arc becomes the signature of the *Fallingwater* series for several years. Ultimately, as the series unfolds, it would become the central element of composition in the *Yantra* paintings.

Fig. 27. Richard Roblin at Gallery Esperanza exhibition, 1985.

Fig. 28. *Fallingwater #18*, 1986, oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches.

Fallingwater-France (fig. 29) was inspired by a view through the arching gate which separates the old and new towns of Saint Paul de Vence in southern France. The original sketch for this painting reminded me structurally of Matisse's *Casbah Gate* (fig. 30). It is the first painting in the Fallingwater series to implicate the triangular element which later becomes a primary shape in my paintings.

Fig. 29. *Fallingwater-France*, 1990, oil on canvas, 80 x 54 inches.

Fig. 30. Henri Matisse, *Casbah Gate*, 1912.

On a trip to France, I visited the Pompidou Center in Paris. Located in the courtyard in front of the Museum, was the original studio of Constantin Brancusi (fig. 31). This space had a profound impact on me. The painting which is named after Brancusi (fig. 32), is an impression of that environment and its power.

Fig. 31. Brancusi's Studio, Paris.

Fig. 32. *Fallingwater Brancusi*, 1990, oil on canvas, 80 x 54 inches.

PARIS

Once again, after having had many years of travel in the Orient, I was to discover the enchantments of the city of light, Paris. By this time, I had shown solo in New York City, and had arranged to meet with some art dealers in Paris. Some of my works on paper were being represented by the Paris editor Laurier Dubé. I met with the famous art dealer Denise Renée at her gallery. She was particularly interested in my constructed works (fig. 34). She invited me to return to Paris for the opening of her new gallery near the Picasso Museum. On my next trip to Paris, my *Geometric Fallingwater* paperworks were shown at the Saga exhibition at the Grand Palais.

This trip had a very interesting effect on my *Fallingwater* paintings in that they became very urban constructs with very dense knife work and very compacted at the core (fig. 35).

Fig. 33. Richard Roblin at the opera, Paris.

Fig. 34. Construction: *Tenth Movement*, 1986, cut stone and wood, 72 x 24 inches.

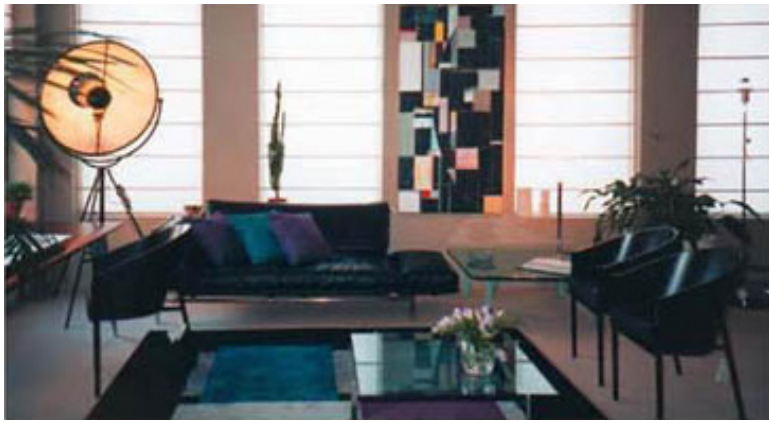


Fig. 35. *Fallingwater*, 1990, oil on canvas, 72 x 72 inches.

1990's

In 1988, I had moved to western Massachusetts with my wife, Eve, and young daughter, Tara. We lived at an old estate called Broad Meadows. My studio was in an old carriage house (figs. 36 & 37). The idyllic beauty of this setting, with its vast meadows and extensive gardens, was an extraordinary source of inspiration. Tanglewood, the summer music festival, was just down the road and Jacob's Pillow Dance festival quite nearby. The summer stock at Stockbridge Theater was fabulous. This was a truly remarkable place. My paintings at this time were filled with the colour and light of that space.

There was a curious convergence starting to happen between my two major series of work at the time. *Wallseries* and *Fallingwater* had merged in some of these works as the bands of colour at the upper register reveal, depicted in figure 38 below.

Fig. 36. Studio at Broad Meadows.

Fig. 37. Carriage house of Broad Meadows.

Although I had been painting the *Fallingwater* series for many years, and they had been shown widely, it was not until 1990 that they would be featured in a solo exhibition. This exhibition at the Gallery Elca London in Montreal was received by the collectors of Montreal with great enthusiasm. The cycle of *Fallingwater* exhibitions were started, even though my exhibition schedule was still filled with *Wallseries* shows.

The following year, I went with my family to India for several weeks on a Yoga retreat. While I was there, I did a project which helped me to develop some understanding into the nature of the primary elements of form — the point, the triangle, the square, and the circle. The dynamics of vision have equivalent parallels with sound and movement I discovered. The infinite combinations of these forms are called Yantras. They are the visual equivalents of sound Mantras.

Although in earlier paintings, I had worked with flowing washes of colour, *Fallingwater-Flight Path* (fig. 39) had a very particular influence on future *Fallingwater* works. It was the first in which the triangles' dynamic begins to assert itself. The idea of the Yantra, which I began to research in India, had seeded itself in 1991. I had not until this time begun to see its form in my painting process. The *Fallingwater* paintings were beginning to go through a fascinating metamorphosis.

Fig. 38. *Fallingwater*, 1990, oil on canvas, 72 x 72 inches.

Fig. 39. *Fallingwater-Flight Path*, 1993, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches.

The Yantras had their origins in India, but it took some time for me to assimilate and begin to integrate them into my work. In the summer of 1993, it began with three small sketched compositions, one each for the square, the circle, and the triangle. Each composition was drawn and painted in sequence, overlaying one on top of the other. The resulting work revealed to me a resonance and luminosity which I found to be enchantingly strong (fig. 40). The second of these new paintings (fig. 41), had a thematic intention. In the Orient, jade is a symbol of peace, so I wanted to use the jade colour to bring that essence into the painting.

Fig. 40. *Fallingwater*, 1993, oil on canvas, 72 x 72 inches.

Fig. 41. *Fallingwater-Jade Heart*, 1993, oil on canvas, 72 x 72 inches.

This pivotal work in the *Fallingwater* series (fig. 42) had, as its inspiration, the renowned work *View of Notre Dame* by Matisse (fig. 43), which I had seen over two decades before in New York. *The Bridge* is both an homage and an icon of my own creative journey. It contains within it many of my most personal and meaningful symbols. It is a painting of dynamic opposites and of primary shapes and colours. In my painting, where the circle, square, and triangle converge, is where Notre Dame would be in the work of Matisse. The bridge is indicated by a double arc drawn in the conté near the center of the painting. The washes of blue create an exaggerated flow simulating the river's flow. The green column with the red square has a double reference to Frank Lloyd Wright and to the seed of creation.

Fig. 42. *Fallingwater - The Bridge*, 1995, oil on canvas, 90 x 60 inches.

Fig. 43. Henri Matisse, *View of Notre Dame,* 1914.

My painting *Shakti* (fig. 44), which I included in my exhibition at the Dominion Gallery in Montreal, exemplified simplicity of articulation and power of colour. The red square represented, for me, the primal building block of creation. In Hindu philosophy, Shakti is the female power of creation, out of which everything is born. This was my first true Yantra.

The colour of indigo is very deeply rooted in my psyche. Many of the traditional folk textiles that I sought out in Japan were indigo dyed. It is the colour of the deepest night sky; it is a treasure house of wonders. *Lotus Bowl* (fig. 45), was deeply over-laid with saturated colour transparencies to accent its depth.

Passage (fig. 46), once again, is developed step by step with three compositions, one each for the circle, the square, and the triangle.

Fig. 44. *Fallingwater-Shakti*, 1995, oil on canvas, 40 x 40 inches.

Fig. 45. *Fallingwater-Lotus Bowl*, 1996, oil on canvas, 72 x 72 inches.

Fig. 46. *Fallingwater-Passage*, 1996, oil on canvas, 72 x 72 inches.

1997

Although we had an apartment in Montreal for a few years, I had maintained my studio at Broad Meadows where I would go to paint in the summers. Since I was painting more commissions of large format pieces, I needed a more permanent and larger space which I found in Montreal. Here I would continue to develop more interpretations on the theme of the Yantra (figs. 50 & 51).

Fig. 47. Montreal studio entrance, 1997.

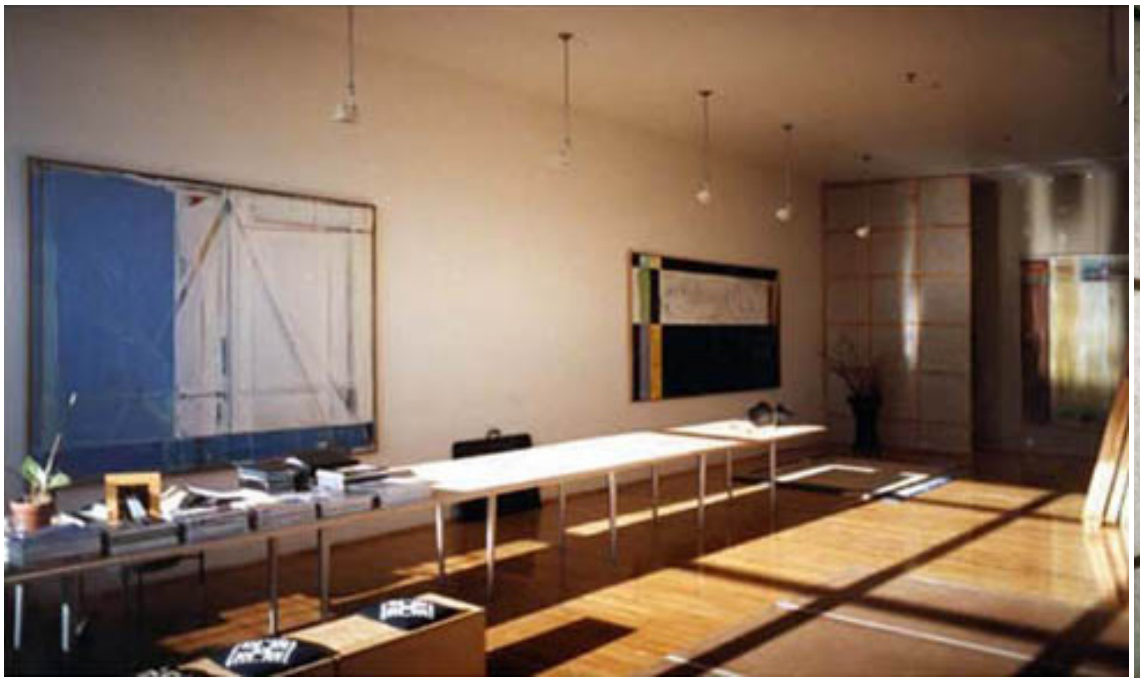


Fig. 48. Montreal studio with Fallingwater-Prism.

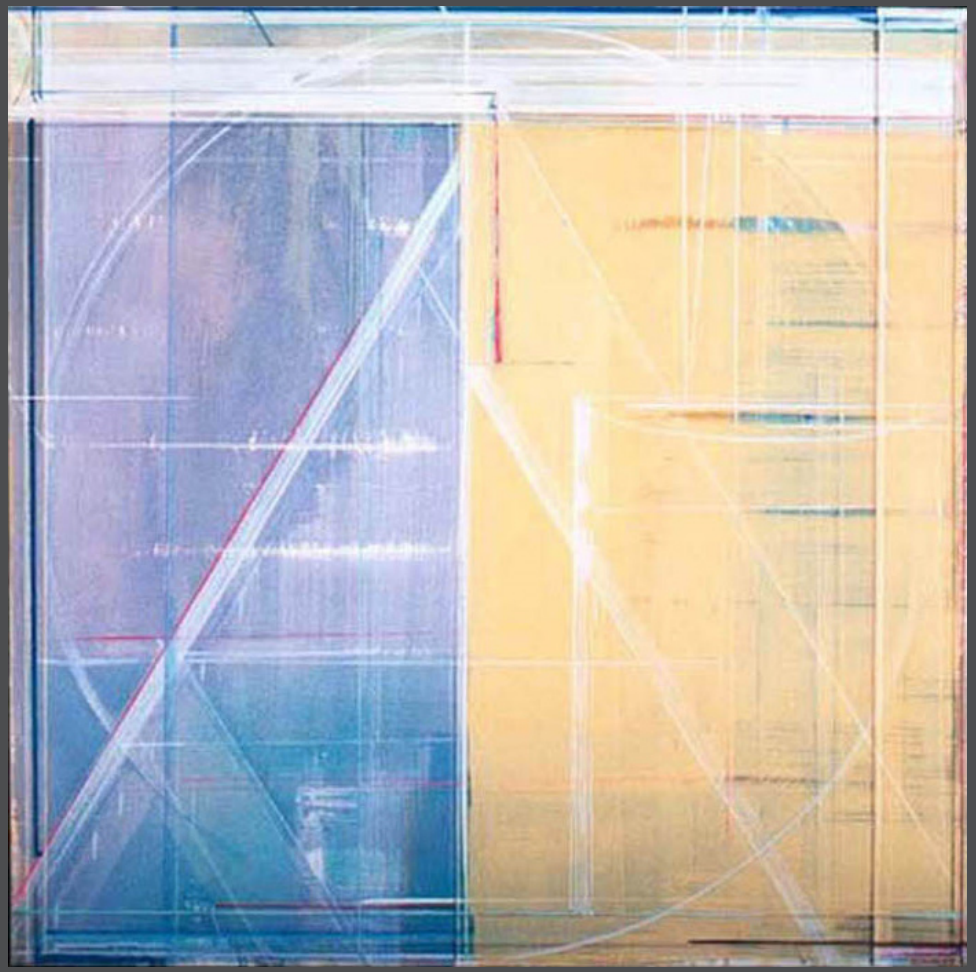


Fig. 50. *Fallingwater-Jewel*, 1998, oil on canvas, 40 x 40 inches.

Fig. 51. *Fallingwater-Yantra*, 1999, oil on canvas, 54 x 54 inches.

2000/1

By the end of the decade, the Yantra, as an established form in my painting cycle was well established. My *Fallingwater* series continues to captivate my imagination as it identifies itself in an endless cascade of possibilities (fig. 52).

Springtime in the Bay area of San Francisco is totally exquisite. I had been many times before, and always had a deep love of the setting, the architecture, the great people, and the sweet energy. The invitation to do an exhibition at the Bradford Campbell Gallery was deeply appreciated. To be an artist and breathe in the atmosphere of this place would sustain my creative energy.

Fig. 52. *Fallingwater-Shakti* 2, 2000, oil on canvas, 60 x 60 inches.

Fig. 53. Japanese garden in Golden Gate Park, April, 2001.

BRADFORD CAMPBELL GALLERY, 2001

Exhibition installation and artist (figs. 54, 55, 56, 57 & 58).

FALLINGWATER

Refreshing as a sunshower
Alert as a flame
Dancing with the joy of anticipation
Each drop of water
Like a dragon
Spirals up at the crest
Of the cascade
Its destiny fulfilled
As it joins in light
The grand parade
Thunder echoes on
The fullest moon
The grass the trees
Silent as a mist
This sudden clap
This radiant spark
This rainbow arc
Illuminates the night
My mind it opens
Like the parting of the sea
The sun of liberation
Awakening here in me
As dawning like a spring
I fall upon my knee
And drink the fullest cup
Of love's eternity

Fig. 54.

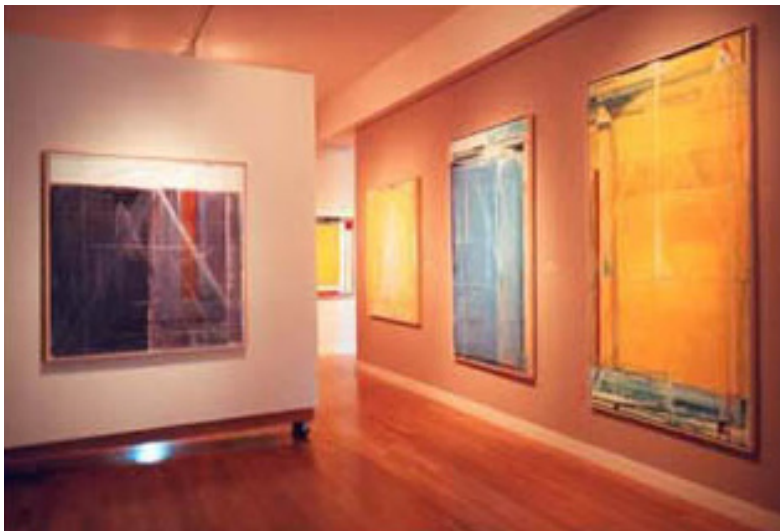


Fig. 55.

Fig. 56.

Fig. 57.

Fig. 58.

I have always perceived the act of painting as a dance, and in a very direct way, this is true. This dance process begins on the floor as I begin to map out the forms within the painting. The preliminary drawing is then overlaid with washes of primary colours. Several compositions engage one formal dynamic. Circle/Square/Triangle is painted in sequence, one over the other. As the process continues, the painting is then mounted on a stretcher. The flow of the paint on the surface of the painting becomes part of the drawing within that work. As the painting is turned from one side to another, as I move around the work, the paint is allowed to flow in many directions creating its own geometry. Heavier applications of colour direct from the tube enhance the clarity and luminosity of the piece. A continuous movement of the drawing motion expands into fields of luminous colour, as each layer, each sequence of this dance, merges into a unity of colour and form. A sound of poetic clarity emerges.

FALLINGWATER AND DIEBENKORN

Soon after completing my first *Fallingwater* paintings in 1982, I exhibited them to an enthusiastic audience in Montreal. By coincidence, a week later, I received a postcard from New York showing one of Diebenkorn's paintings. I had never seen his work before, and was fascinated by the similarity of composition. Later that year, I had a design project in Southampton, New York, and saw my first Diebenkorn at the Parrish Museum. I was astonished to see a painting from his 'Ocean Park' series. Later that year I saw Diebenkorn's paintings at the Whitney Museum and at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. I found his work to be totally admirable, and it confirmed to me my own path with my individual and unique modalities. I later discovered we had similar influences rooted in the paintings of Matisse. It was a way of seeing that we shared. Unfortunately, we would never meet although we held common inspirations. Later, after his death, I was to become friends with one of his Berkeley students who in her earlier years shared his San Francisco studio. Ellen Zimmerman provided me with many insights into the man as we toured the Diebenkorn retrospective at the Whitney in New York in 1987.

Although the similarities in our work remain, there are many ways in which we are unique from one another. What is similar? A way of seeing; an architecture; the luminosity; the love of painting; poetic balance. What distinguishes my work from Diebenkorn's? My focus on symbolism; the conscious application of primary forms; the inner journey of revelation through primary forms (The Yantra) which for me is a way of joining in the dance with all the painters of this world, as a unique voice with my own resonance, my own love of the act of painting. It is true that I have been inspired by Diebenkorn. From the first time I saw my first painting by him to the present, I have developed a keen interest in his accomplishments as an artist. I particularly enjoy the inventive masking devices and the delicate overlays of varied density of colour. The collage of transparent, opaque, and dense flat areas provide vast sensual experiences. The obvious pleasure he finds in chance gesture transcends every planned event. He challenges me as an artist to find and claim my own secret wish. After viewing a Diebenkorn, I want to paint anew.

What every great creative force exerts is a true touchstone. Matisse was certainly that for Diebenkorn. It is certain that Matisse is the same for me as I continue my explorations. I am inspired by greatness and realize my own potential. In my experience there have been many palettes on which to mix my colours. Indeed each time I paint, some new movement occurs in the dance. In a very real way I become the environment that I claim. Whatever my circumstance, I can claim my space, expand it or contain it by creating a mental state. My love of painting is what creates the first line or gesture. Everything unfolds from that primary impulse.

It all started with observation. First I saw someone drawing, so I wished to draw. I observed and drew from nature, and when I was my nature reflected in that, I was then able to draw from a vast resource. In my inner looking, I found many treasures, for the reality I find is boundless and eternal. It is a dance, and yes, I can dance.

Fig. 59. *Fallingwater - Ascendance*, 2001, oil on canvas, 180 x 108 inches.

Ascendance, commission for XL Capital head office, Bermuda, 2001.

MEXICO

After practicing Zen Buddhism for many years with my Roshi, Philip Kapleau, I had welcomed the opportunity to attend an extended meditation in Mexico. It was March of 1984 that I was flying over Mexico City. It seemed as though I was in the middle of deep space, for as I looked out the window of the aircraft all I saw were what appeared to be an endless radiant field of stars.

The site of our meditation retreat was an old monastery complex in Acolman. This town was in close proximity to the Great Pyramids of the Sun and Moon. The main building in the complex was a two story Spanish style structure of stone and brick with a large courtyard lined with arched columns. The rooms of the monastery were around this opening with a large covered corridor lined with vine covered arches. The arched corridor on the second story created a balcony open to the central court.

The rigourous practices of Zazen meditation began before dawn each day. The first round of meditation ended with the sound of the bell as we all dashed to line up on the balcony for the dokusan. As we sat to wait our turn the birds, which were nesting in the vines, began to wake up and sing. Their calls would echo in the court yard as one by one we would go for our private talk with Roshi.

Coming before my teacher in dokusan is much like a prayer, for when the secret wish I hold in my heart is expressed, it may touch my Buddha mind and draw a smile of compassion from my teacher. To the Roshi who is always loving, always accessible, I bow; I bow to his wisdom and to my own Buddha nature. In the fire of meditation there is an awakening of my divine creative nature, a blossoming with the fragrance of a life of freedom, clarity and joy.

Entering the final day of meditation, though my eyes were open, I experienced total blackness; then the braying of a donkey. This sound entered me so deeply it caused me to cry out and weep. It was a cry of longing, a crying of my heart. The final meditations left me with an understanding that would change my life and ground me on my path to create through the receptive vision of the heart.

The walls of Mexico had become the stuff of consciousness. Drawn out of the earth, they are fiery ash of the cosmic flame; that same stuff out of which I was born. I found the beauty all around me now, reborn in my awareness; for the walls were portals of the soul. To build a dream is the reaching out of a true loving hand, to celebrate with brick and stone and mud, to form and shape the spirit.

At the invitation of an architect friend in Mexico City, I was invited to visit Luis Barragan. My friend Gustavo Godinez worked with Ricardo Legoretto, who was a true disciple of Barragan. Gustavo took me on a tour of the recently completed Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City, which was one of their designs. Later in the afternoon, we arrived at Barragan's house, and as we entered, we were enveloped in an aura of golden light. We had come into the main architectural office where we would meet several of Mr. Barragan's associates. The ceiling of this lofty space was a brilliant yellow colour which gave off a wonderful luminosity. After a brief conversation I entered a small exterior enclosed courtyard (fig. 60).

The enclosure was surrounded by walls of various heights to about three stories open to the sky. A cluster of large rust coloured clay pots occupied one corner, contrasted by soft green foliage of vines behind. To one side was a small shallow rectangular pool, into which water poured gently from a spout. There was a concrete step bridge against one wall. Behind this was a surprisingly pink wood door (fig. 61). The construction was simple and stark, yet this small environment was serene, comforting and cool in atmosphere. We then went into the main living area. The white plaster walls were softly handsome. The contrast if the simple black opening of the fireplace balanced and grounded this remarkable elevation (fig. 62). At one extreme of that wall close by the window hung an Albers 'Homage to the Square' in yellow hues. The window itself looked out to a lush jungle of garden beyond.

Fig. 60.

Fig. 61.

Fig. 62.

The furniture in the room was of simple form. There was a square table of pine with chairs of pine with woven grass seats (fig. 63). There was a standing screen of three panels of grey-white parchment. This provided an intimate entry to this large space from the main hall of the house. There was a very imposing sculpted chair of wood and hide (fig. 64) by the firebox. Just to the left of the large widow, there was situated a stand for books, which held periodicals and images or interest on a sloping display. At the center of this room was a partial wall which rose to about 8 feet. On this white wall hung a black and white drawing study in stark light and shadow. This wall was exquisitely proportioned in the context between the pine floors and the densely beamed ceiling.

Fig. 63.

Fig. 64.

Behind this partial wall was a study with books and paintings on tables or propped against walls. Books lined the corridor on sturdy but elegant shelves of pine (fig. 65). This corridor also created an L shape which masked yet another study, reception, workroom and yet more book shelving. Above the two large square work tables a high expanse of glass block window fed a discrete light into this intimate space. On one table sat a slide projector aimed at the opposite wall. This wall was fascinating in that it was a partial wall with a darkened mezzanine above (fig. 66). There were two elements of particular interest to me. First of all there were the raised relief panels on the wall, one of yellow, which added to the composition and made it read as a painting. The other element was the penetrating of this black space by some stairs that were astonishing in their simplicity of form. They were pieces of equally square cut ponderosa pine, with both the step and the riser butting consecutively up, and cantilevered out of the white plaster wall (fig. 67). The stairs had the serene quality of floating in space. They appeared to be suspended and weightless against the whiteness of the wall behind them, yet I knew that they were integral with that wall. Barragan's thoughtful radical sensitivity to material was once again at play.

Fig. 65.

Fig. 66.

Fig. 67.

On one of the square tables there was a bowl containing spheres of glass of various sizes. These colourful spheres scintillated with reflective light and transformed the rigorous geometry of designed space. As I moved through the house, I saw the spheres in several more locations. In the entrance to the large salon was a bowl containing a mirrored globe, which reflected the entire space into a unified whole (fig. 68).

The presence of many books on Japanese architecture was of great interest to me, as I had immediately discerned elements of Japanese influence in Barragan's design. The detailing of the wood in the entry hall was particularly revealing, as well as the discrete placement of lighting. There were also covered stone water basins in the garden court, which were reminiscent of ones I had seen in Japan.

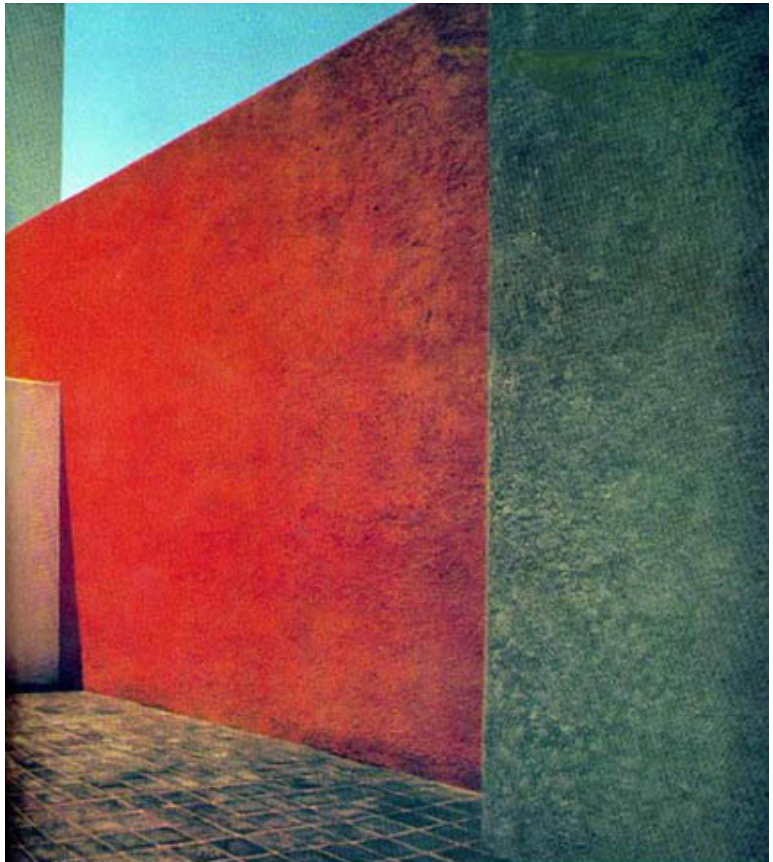
Just inside the main entrance was a hallway with stairs to the upper floor, and an entrance to the roof court (fig. 69). At the landing of the stairs, there was another relief panel. This one was much larger and was of gold leaf finish. The panel corner coincided with the juncture of a door and window above the adjoining outside wall. The panel of gold picked up the light from the window, and amplified that light in a golden glow throughout the given space. The wall seemed to dissolve into that golden light and its substance became the true nature of Barragan's genius.

Fig. 68.

Fig. 69.

Although I did not physically experience the roof courtyard, my journey of imagination was not thwarted, as I now feel that space within me, with its walls like wings, open to the sky.

Barragan's walls were physical, made of earth, and yet these walls were a vehicle through which his creative nature could be expressed. I decided then to use the walls as a metaphor in my painting practice. It has been said that architecture is the mother of the arts. The wall has been truly fundamental to our creative expressive life. In the evolution of mankind, through the very basic need for shelter, from cave to temple, the wall has been our most essential need for protection and nurturing to our highest intellectual and spiritual aspirations.



WALLSERIES 1984 – 2002

The first paintings in my new series called *Wallseries* were a direct application of my experience in Mexico. Essentially, it was the wall as subject, the wall in light, and that same wall with a step in it, in shadow. There was a subtle shift at the juncture between light and dark implied by the angular line at the bottom of the painting. That angle pointed to the earth, the material out of which it was physically built, and yet the spirit is integral with that form.

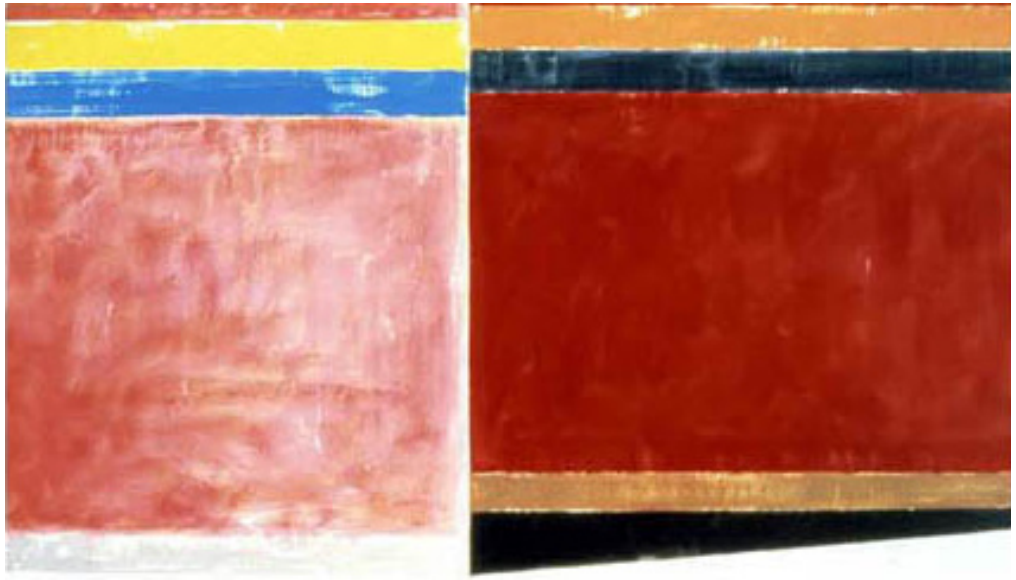


Fig. 70. *Wallseries #1*, 1984, oil on canvas, 54 x 80 inches.

My first exhibition of these paintings and works on paper was in Montreal at the Galerie Esperanza. Esperanza Swartz was born in Mexico, and was very familiar with the works of Barragan. She had a deeply rooted sensitivity to architecture, and helped introduce my work to a broader segment of the local community of architects. At this time, I was still very involved in the design realm, and had worked on projects internationally. This was truly an exciting and stimulating new beginning as a painter.

Fig. 71. Richard Roblin.

Fig. 72. Richard Roblin.

Fig. 73. *Wallseries*.

Fig. 74. *Wallseries #40*, 1986, oil on canvas, 60 x 132 inches.