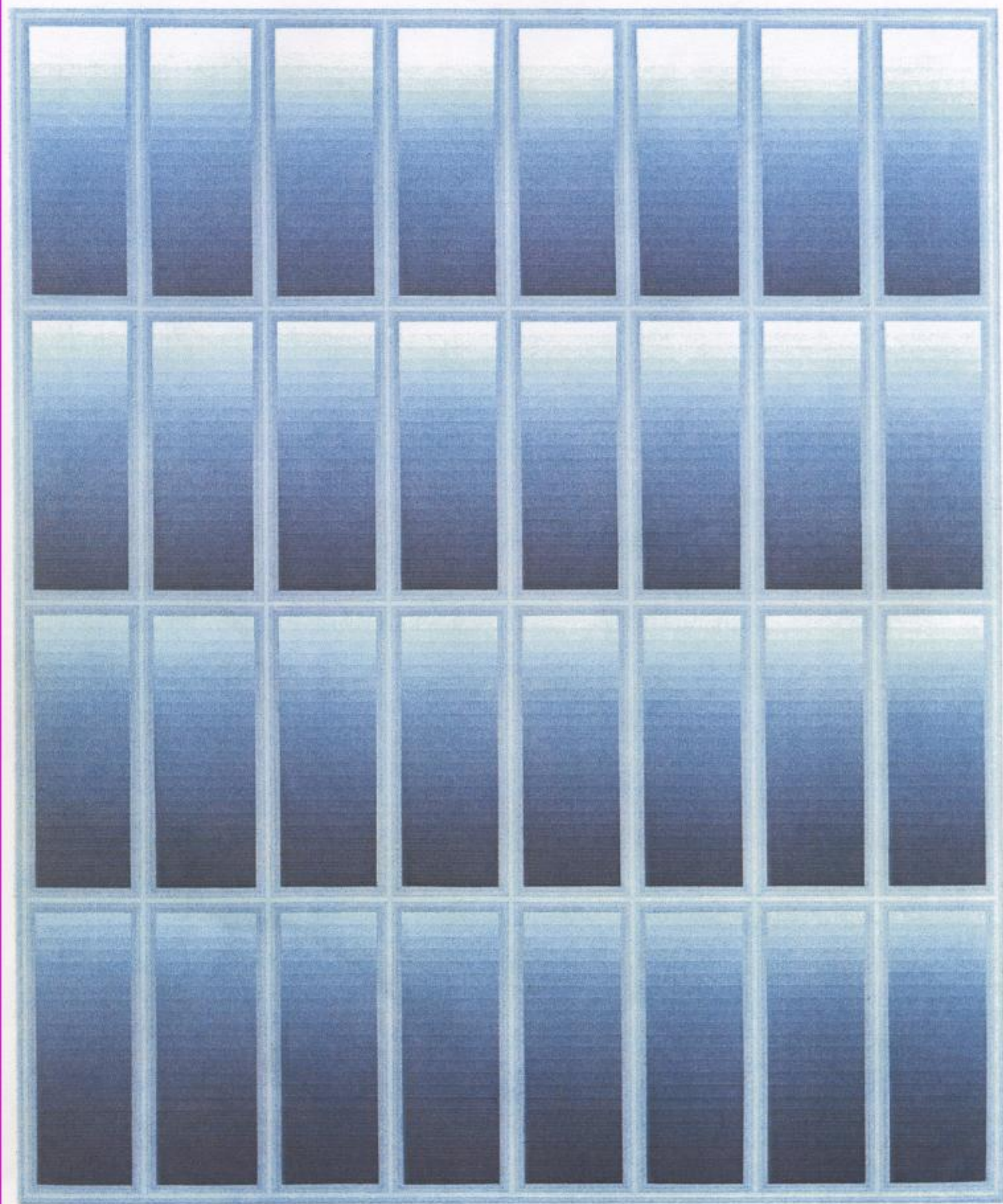


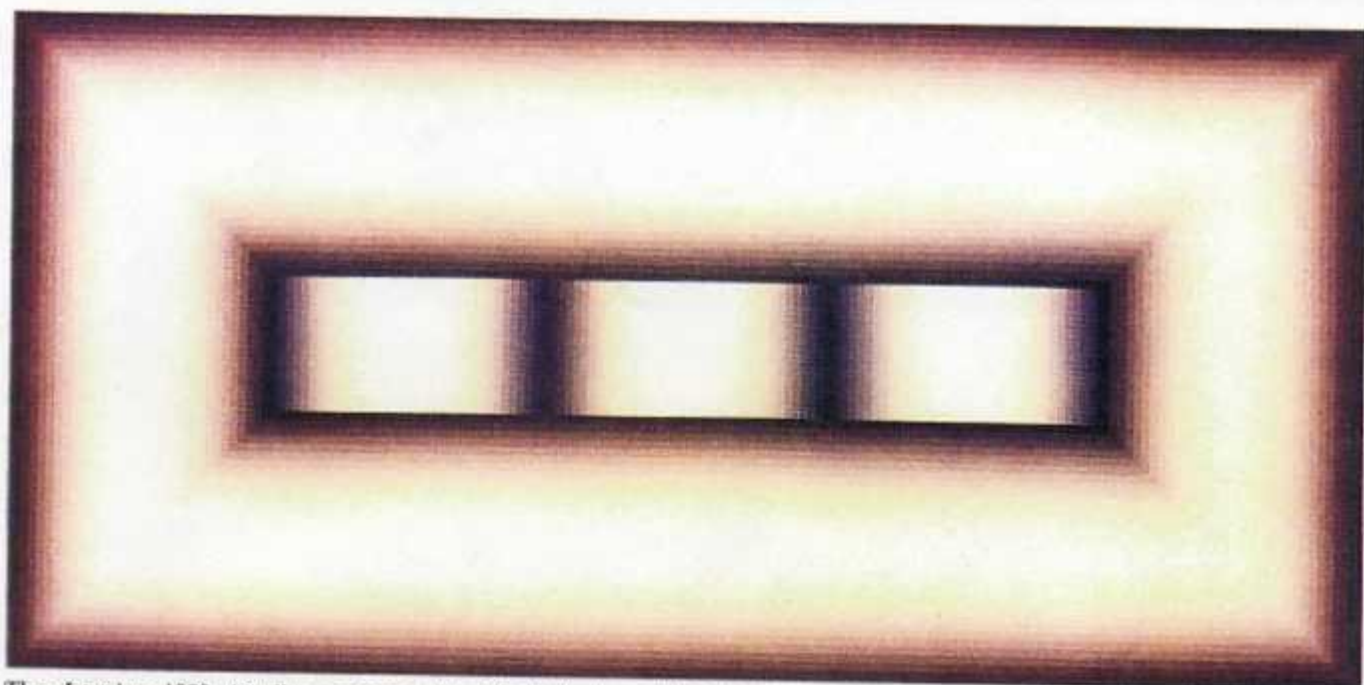
NEW LUGANO REVIEW

EDITOR: JAMES FITZSIMMONS

1976/8-9

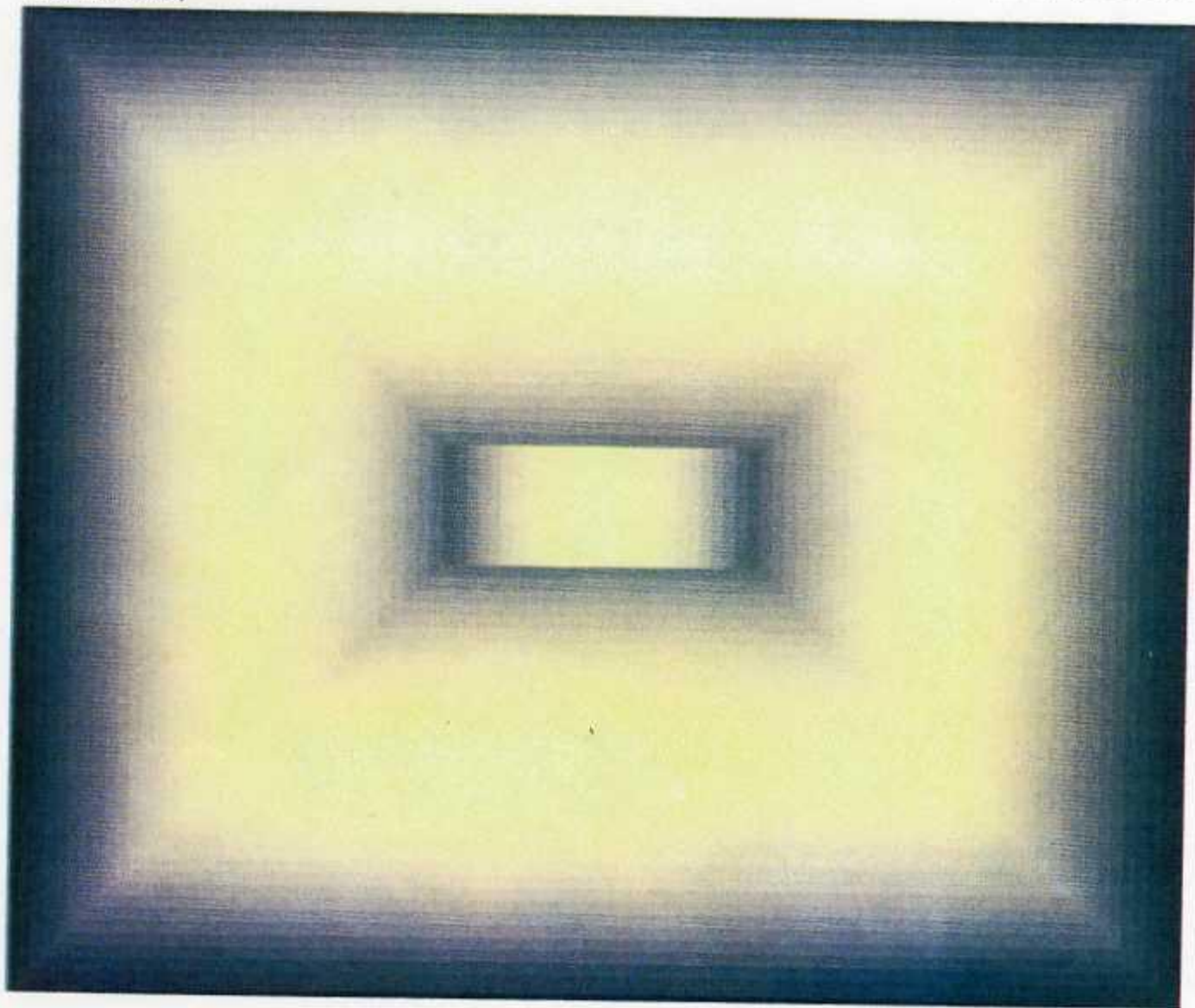


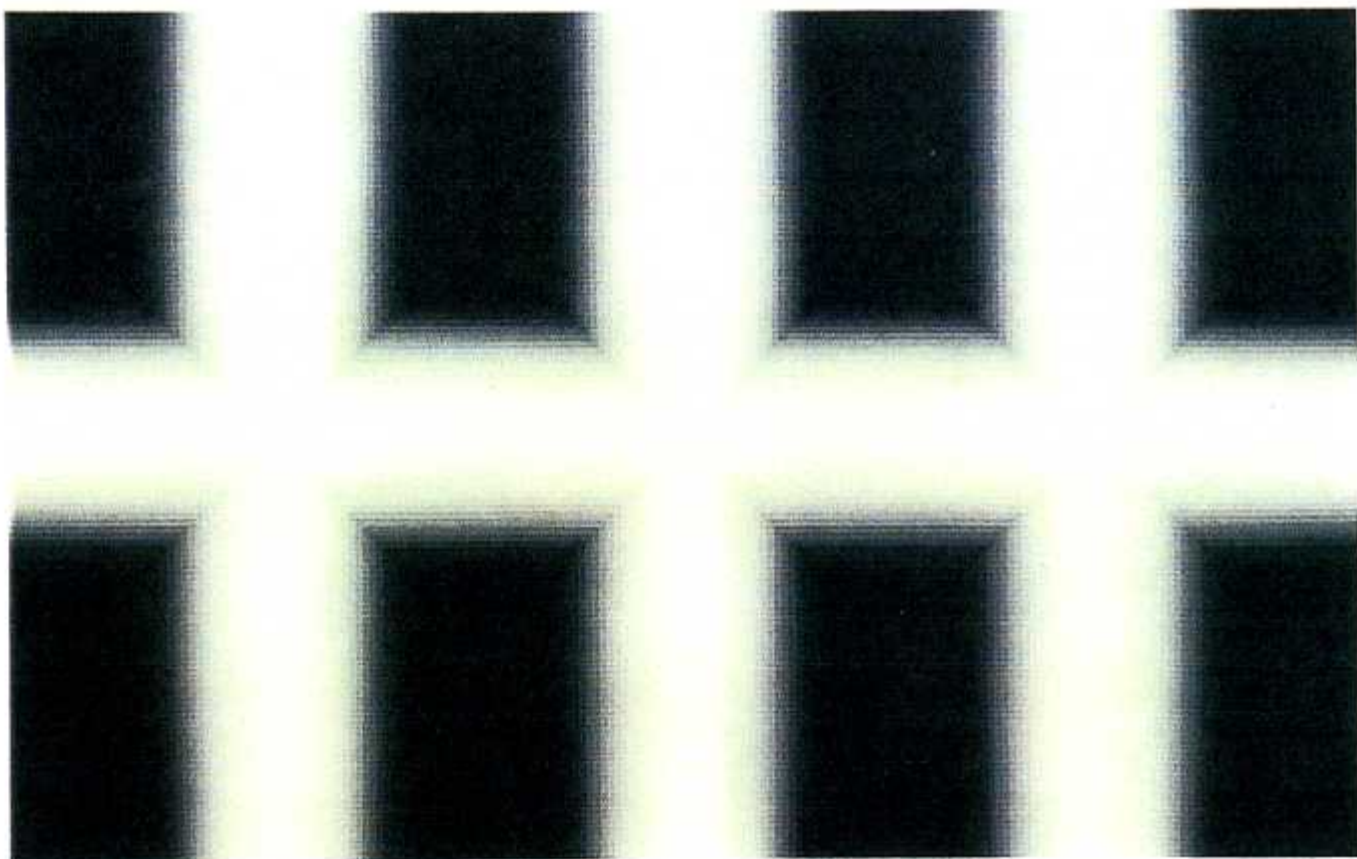
BABE SHAPIRO



These Intrusions, 1973. Acrylic on canvas, 42" x 86". Collection of Mr. Walter Netsch. (All illustrations of Mr. Shapiro's work appear by courtesy of the A.M. Sachs Gallery, New York)

Separate Sheets, 1973. Acrylic on canvas, 60" x 72". Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Frederick R. Weisman. (All photographs by Eeva-Inkeri, New York)





Undercover Writings, 1972. Acrylic on canvas, 62" x 100". Collection: Alan Groh.

PAINTINGS OF BABE SHAPIRO

by LINCOLN F. JOHNSON

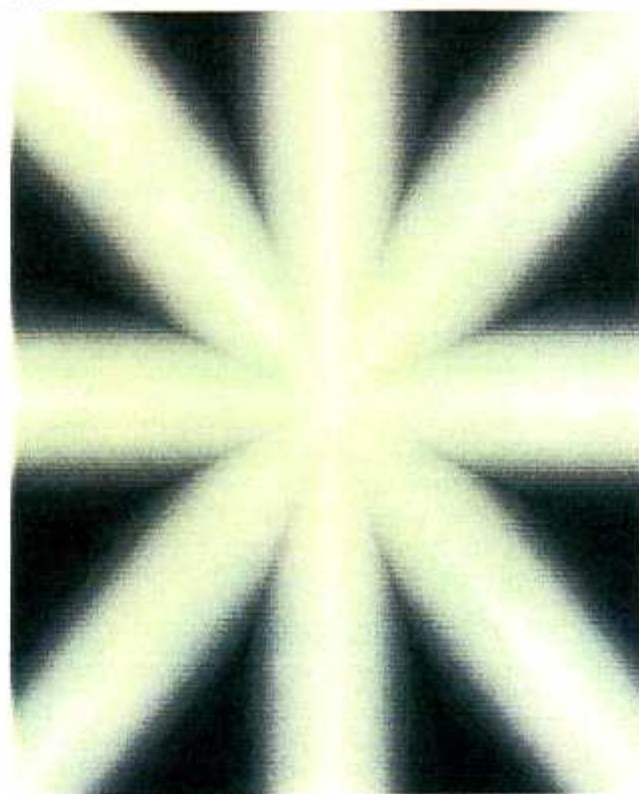
On November 1, 1975 a survey of ten years of work by Babe Shapiro opened at the A.M.Sachs Gallery in New York. The show recalled the summer of 1969, when Shapiro's studio caught fire and all the paintings he had planned to exhibit at the Stable Gallery that fall were destroyed. It is a dismal situation to contemplate, but Shapiro did carry the images in his head, and with the encouragement of Elinor Ward, of the Gallery, and the help of some friends, he repainted the show. And what initially seemed like a disaster apparently was not without its compensatory value, for some of the technical aspects of the pieces were improved, Shapiro thinks, and the expressive content of the color was clarified, and a now characteristic optically induced haziness—or smokiness?—began to manifest itself.

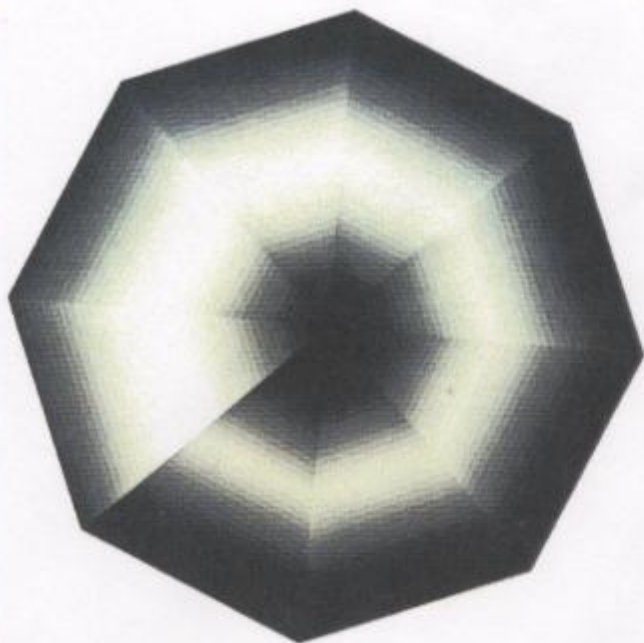
What emerged was the culmination of a seven year evolution in style, which involved the adoption of an unfamiliar medium, acrylics, after years of working in casein; a transformation of imagery from organic free forms to rigorously controlled regular geometric shapes; and a movement from images that were dark and somber in tonality to structures that seemed to shimmer with transparent and incandescent light.

Shapiro based most of those works on one or two fairly regular, usually rectilinear geometric motives, which he developed in neutralized tonalities. Using a

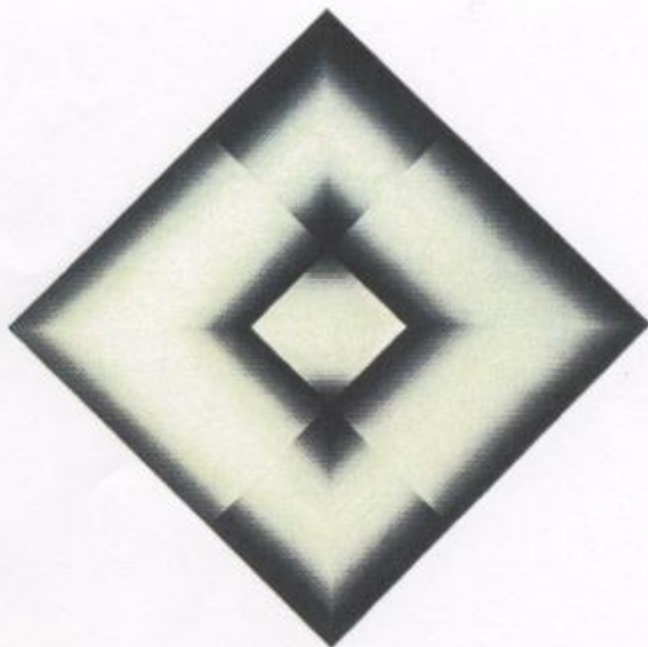
meticulously precise technique involving masking tape, he built his volumes and planes from half inch stripes of color, arranged in systematically ordered scales from light to dark, as in *Vaun*.

Incontrovertible Premises, 1972. Acrylic, 72" x 60". Collection: Robert Tobin



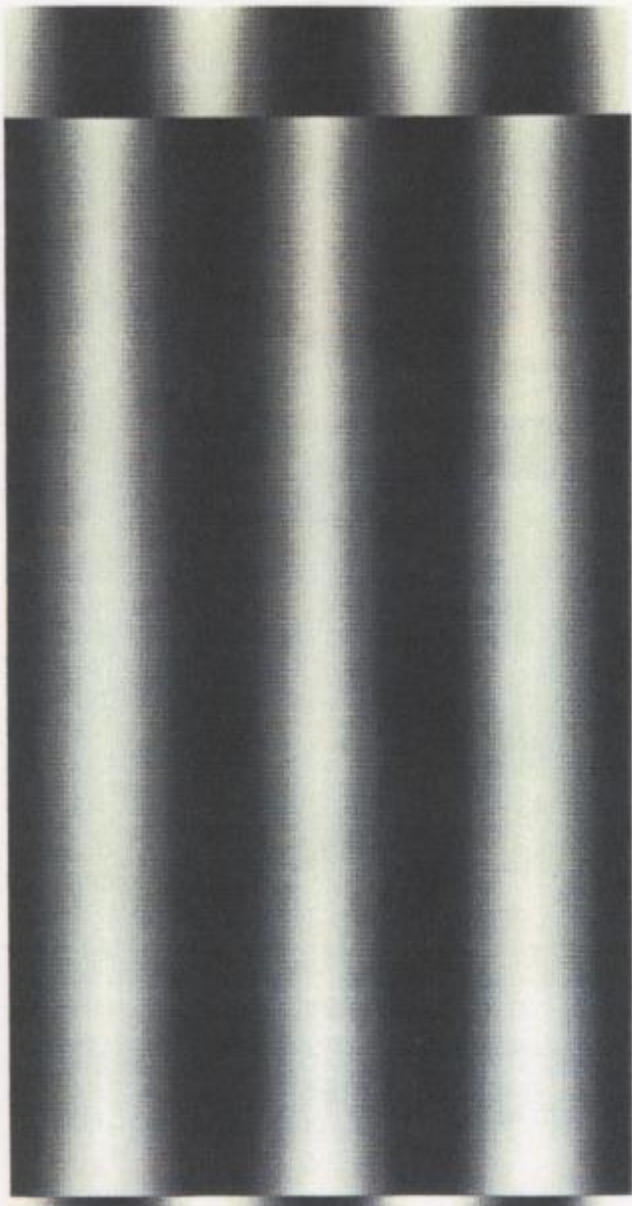


Marmottan, 1974. 60° octagon

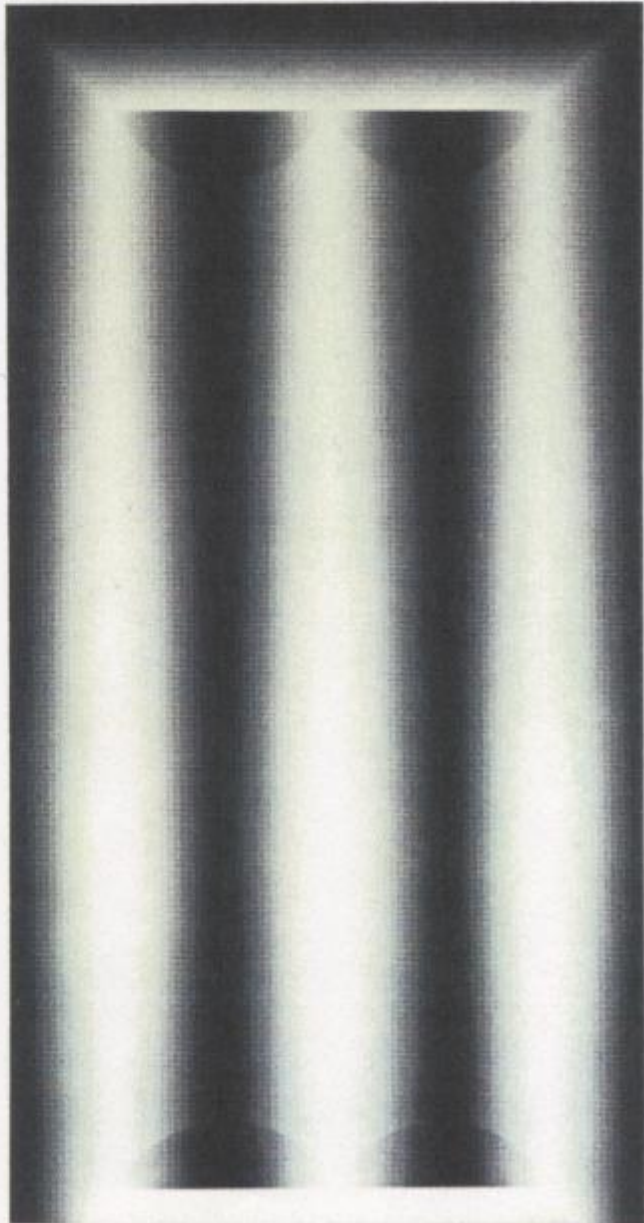


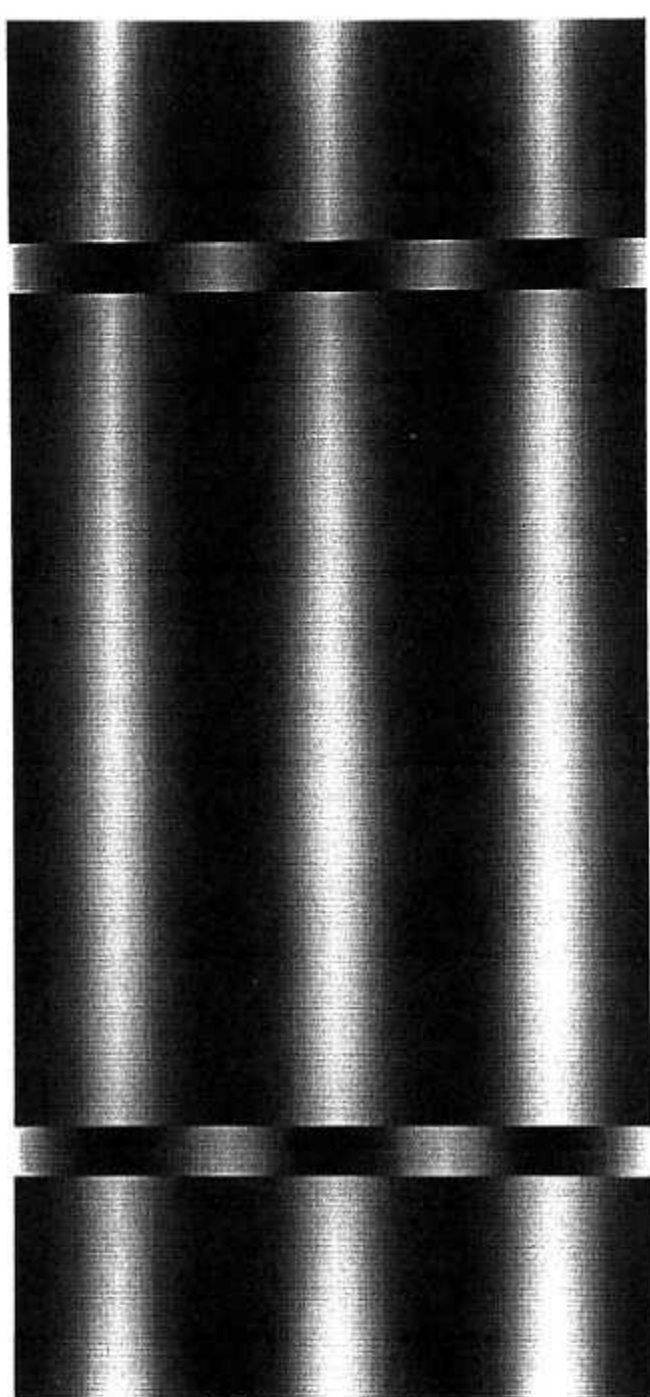
Weequahic, 1975. 71° diamond. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Stan Taylor, Detroit

Between the Hammers, 1973. Acrylic, 90° × 43°. Collection: Mr. and Mrs. Frederick R. Weisman



Swallow the Call Note, 1973. Acrylic, 96° × 54°. Collection: Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art

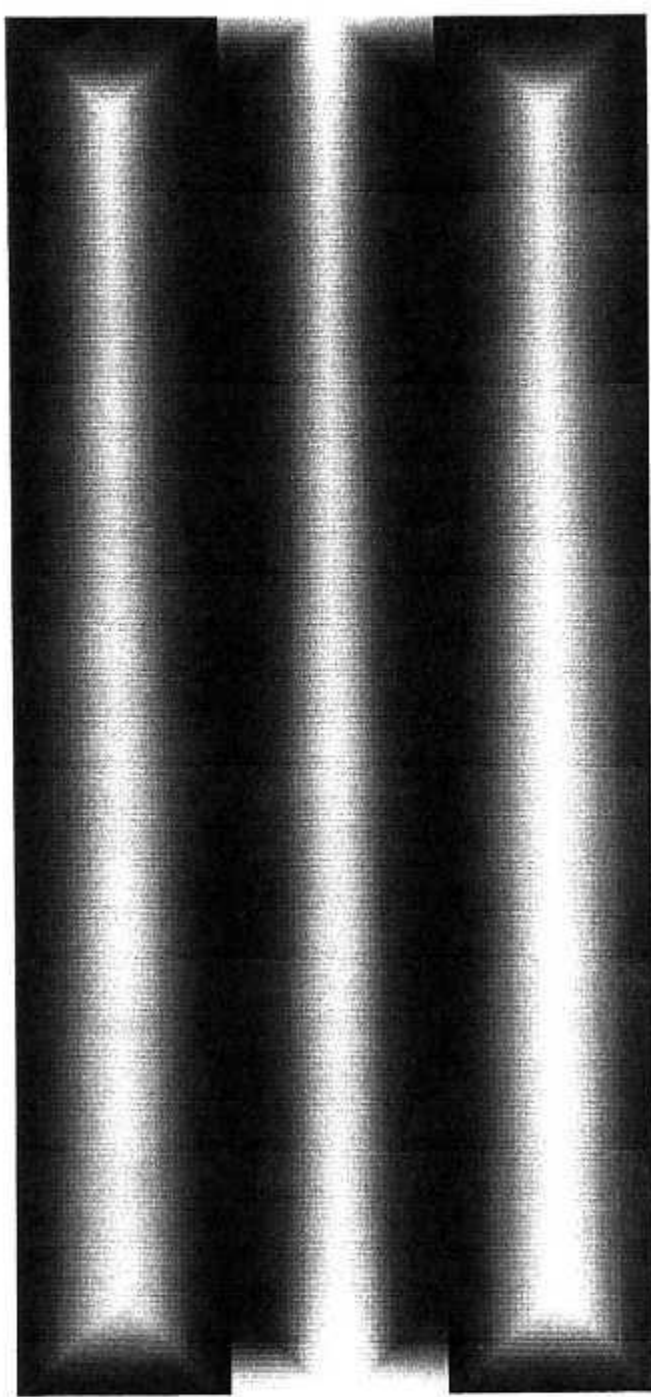




High Up-Beating, 1973. Acrylic, 110" x 51"

The resulting structures are imbued with a mysterious life that has its source in a number of calculated ambiguities in the manipulation of space and tone. The gradations of value mold the surface into high relief and then turn it into flat plane so easily and gradually that the point of transition is impossible to perceive or to calculate. Simultaneously the volumes and planes seem to push the edges of the canvas into curves.

Often the hues are so neutralized that they become evanescent; and at a certain distance, when the stripes are on the verge of fusing in the spectator's eye, the tangible canvas becomes as insubstantial as air; the pictures seem to breathe, transformed into living presences, some stately, solemn and portentous, some



Pampered Godhead, 1973. Acrylic, 110" x 51". Collection: Lowell Nesbitt

energetic and agile, all of them shining with a seductive purity, and the best of them imbued with an ever-changing mystery.

Scale is an important factor in the effect these works create and when the size of the paintings approaches the height of the spectator or is even larger, they take on an awesome authority as impossible alternatives to our familiar space somehow seem to become possible.

The metamorphosis of plane into volume, the dissolution of solid into void, the presentation of the plane so that it is simultaneously advancing and retreating, the geometric precisionism and the optical confusion, all of these are familiar aspects of twentieth

(Continued on page 65)

JOHNSON: SHAPIRO

century visual dialect and dialectic. But Shapiro has derived from them his own very personal dialectics in which the canvas seems less to reflect light than to emit it, while volumes and masses seem less to be revealed by light than created from it.

Shapiro seems to be working some kind of magic. And like most magic it is the product of knowledge, skill and poetic invention. His formal training occurred at a time when abstract expressionism was gaining dominance in the schools. As an undergraduate at New Jersey State Teacher's College in Newark, he was immediately immersed in an environment that fostered abstract expression. And as a graduate student at Hunter College, he studied with Robert Motherwell, who was immensely influential, he says, not so much in matters of technique as in concern for human expression.

Shapiro's interests as he recalls them were remarkably consistent. He admired the abstract artists exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum, especially El Lissitzky. He read poets who worked with ambiguities of form and image, like Pound and William Carlos Williams—with whom he became friendly late in the poet's life. He was attracted by the music of Charles Ives and especially Ives' simultaneous use of contrasting ideas, and he tried to achieve something comparable to Ives' effects in his painting. And early in his career he investigated film, in which light is the medium.

All these interests—abstraction, ambiguity, simultaneity and light—are consistent with the style that announces his maturity.

Shapiro's delight in poetry has manifested itself more specifically in his titles, which, even though he thinks of them simply as convenient handles for reference, generally seem to suggest aspects of the works or to evoke other dimensions of meaning. Sometimes the titles recall an incident, "Marmottan", for example.

"Marmottan" is a 60" octagon divided into pie-shaped sections which carry a series of value changes in a bronze hue in a clockwise direction around the center. Like most of his works, it seems to present itself as a solid form and then dissolve into light; or to balloon into space and then collapse in on itself.

As the name may suggest to anyone familiar with the Marmottan Museum in Paris, the painting is an homage to Monet. A curious tribute, it would seem, considering its monochromatic, neutral tonality. Yet it is appropriate in fact, in its illusion of light; for Monet brought to the art of painting after all not only his near-iridescent color, but also an internal, ambient light.

Throughout his professional life, Shapiro has been fascinated with color and drawn to those painters who tease the eye with coloristic sumptuousness or energize space through sophisticated manipulations in tone; but he has been wary of color, even convinced he was no colorist, and he has wondered sometimes if his delight in the luminous hues of the color television set were not serving as a kind of compensation for the lack of color in his work.

Color when it appeared in his grey paintings was reticent; its presence as ambiguous as the spaces it occupied; but in 1974, though it remains monochromatic, it begins to assume a more energetic role, as in "Lazerlegs", which, like all of the octagonal and lozenge-shaped canvases of his recent production, takes on a metallic quality that enhances the appearance of solidity and at the same time supports the transformation of solid into light.

Some of the recent works play with ideas of infinite space, presenting what seems for a moment to be a window or doorway onto the sky; others open like mysterious gates onto undefined spaces; and others resist penetration, standing stubbornly like walls of pipes. And as one looks at all the variations it becomes clear that one is dealing not simply with geometric or coloristic exercises, optical gymnastics, but with a kind of expressionist geometry which projects not merely esthetic but more broadly human states of mind and fulfills Shapiro's desire to "reaffirm ideals of humanity and portray the humanness of the human condition".