

INTERCONNECTIONS: A STUDY OF CHICAGO-STYLE RELATIONSHIPS IN PAINTING

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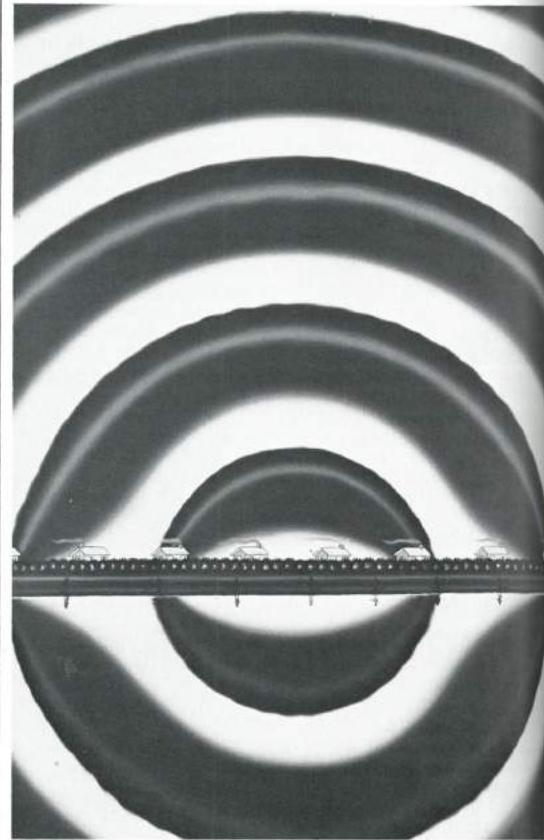
Abstract and Imagist art may not be the antipodes they are often supposed to be in Chicago. Instead, each art may be in some measure inflected by the other to the point that purported opposites seem very close to one another.

The legend which portrayed the city's abstract painters pitted against their Imagist counterparts enjoyed great currency in Chicago during the 1970s.¹ Within this same decade, the Imagists developed a definitive group identity as the inventors of a quirky new type of figurative painting—an identity carefully fostered by the Phyllis Kind Gallery where they all eventually settled.² By contrast, their "adversaries," the Abstractionists, comprised a much more heterogeneous, amorphous group. But the mythmakers had a solution for this problem, too: they invented a pedigree for the alleged internecine warfare, claiming that it continued an old battle for artistic supremacy in Chicago initiated by the Constructivist and Surrealist artists of the previous generation.³ This genealogy established the Imagists as the heirs of the Surrealists while narrowly redefining Chicago abstraction to make it synonymous with non-referential formalism. This new reinterpretation provided the Abstractionist/Imagist issue with opponents offering maximum contrast with one another—cool formalists versus funky figurationalists. But it ignored an important new development which did not fit this rereading of history: the flowering of a characteristically Chicago-style abstraction, a type of painting which was subjective rather than impersonal, evocative rather than formalist. Precisely because this type of abstraction seemed all too comparable with the oeuvre of the Imagists, its character had to be distorted and the art of its practitioners linked, now with that of various Chicago figurative artists (including the Imagists), now with that of the non-referential Abstractionists.

However, during this same period, one discerning critic, Denis Adrian, offered a very different definition of Chicago painting and the interrelationships between its figurative and abstract artists. His statement took the form of an exhibition, *The Chicago-Style Painting*, featuring twenty-two artists whose work ran the gamut from strictest formalism to frankest figuration. In his accompanying essay, Adrian argued that, despite their seeming disparity, these painters all shared a fundamental predilection for complex organic forms which not only linked them to one another, but also to the much broader tradition of organic abstraction in twentieth-century art.⁴ Perhaps because of its revisionist nature, Adrian's exhibit attracted relatively little attention at the time.⁵ However, several years later, two New York critics, Carrie Rickey and Reagan Upshaw, independently echoed Adrian's conclusions concerning the underlying unity of Chicago painting.⁶

This essay tests Adrian's hypothesis that the shared artistic roots of Chicago painters transcend the distinctions separating figurative from non-representational artists. If such a test is to prove valid, however, it must measure two groups of artists with equally strong, clear-cut identities. To satisfy this requirement, I would like to compare the Imagists, not with an imaginary coalition of abstractionists, but rather with an actual organization of non-figurative painters, the Allusive Abstractionists. This group comprises William Conger, Miyoko Ito, Richard Loving, and Frank Piatak. They banded together informally about a year ago, selecting their name to emphasize the evocative quality of their oeuvre, their utilization of form as metaphor.⁷ Their art exemplifies the new Chicago-style abstraction mentioned above, and its highly personal, illusory nature makes it especially comparable to the oeuvre of the Imagists.

Fig. 1. Roger Brown, *Night Fishing in a Calm Lake*, 1980. Oil on canvas, 72 x 48". Courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery.



In order to focus exclusively on Chicago-produced art, I would like to eliminate from consideration several artists traditionally associated with the Imagist movement, even though they left Chicago—and in several cases, Imagism as well—a number of years ago.⁸ My Imagist list includes only: Roger Brown, Philip Hanson, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Ed Paschke, Christina Ramberg, Barbara Rossi, Karl Wirsum, and Ray Yoshida. Although the comparisons to follow involve only these nine Imagists and the four Allusive Abstractionists already mentioned, it seems likely that they could be extended to other artists not specifically cited. For example, the oeuvre of Vera Klement and Amy Sheng-Kohler seems quite similar to that of the Allusive Abstractionists, and, as I write this, Suellen Rocca has returned to Chicago, the Kind Gallery, and the Imagist fold.

According to Adrian *et al.*, Chicago painters all share fundamentally similar attitudes toward certain formal and technical problems. These universal formal elements include a common preoccupation with graduated light, organic shapes, and—*one might add*—the depiction of illogical space. The shared technical problems reflect themselves in the ubiquitous interest in construction and finish which Chicago painters all display. (This obsession allegedly often leads artists to treat their works as object-icons. More will be said about this concept, which I consider rather fuzzy.)

In addition, two other important kinship factors unite Chicago artists: their common experience in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (hereafter SAIC or the School) and its parent museum, and their joint interest in developing a highly personalized type of iconography in which erotic imagery plays a predominant role.

In order to avoid creating monotonous lists of artists and

matching characteristics, I shall provide only a few examples of the ways in which these shared principles and experiences bind local artists in ties of Chicago brotherhood. Comparisons between various Imagist and Allusive Abstractionist painters convey absolutely no judgments concerning who influenced whom or which artist conceived of a particular idea or image first. Most likely, all these talented people resonate with one another to their mutual benefit. The Chicago art world constitutes a microcosm of shared experiences inconceivable to a New Yorker. Here, everyone can—and usually does—keep *au courant* of the latest developments occurring among colleagues.

The Shared Formal Characteristics

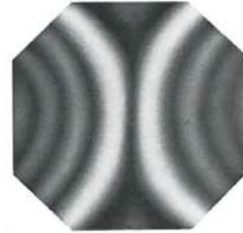
The Role of Abstraction. Throughout his brief essay devoted to *The Chicago-Style Painting*, Adrian hammers home his principal point: the essence of this style consists in a shared language of abstract organic form far more fundamental and consistent than an artist's more variable attitude toward the question of figuration or subject matter.⁹ The oeuvre of the thirteen artists under consideration here certainly corroborates this assertion. One simply cannot segregate Allusive Abstractionists from Imagists on the latter basis. To the contrary: if one posits a hypothetical continuum extending from total non-representation to frankest figuration, it seems possible to position each of these thirteen artists along this single line with a fair degree of accuracy.

The work of Piatek probably should be considered the most non-representational of the entire group. This assertion may seem surprising because, at first blush, his imagery appears more concrete, more quasi-identifiable as body parts than the forms generated by his fellow Allusive Abstractionists (hereafter simply Abstractionists), Conger and Ito. But Piatek repeatedly depicts similar tubular forms which act as screens on which he projects varied effects and associations. This suggests that these forms play a role more akin to the grids of Mondrian or the squares of Albers than to the more varied biomorphic and botanical shapes favored by Conger and Ito. Indeed, Ito's oeuvre should probably occupy a fairly central rank and position on this hypothetical continuum. Philosophically and stylistically closely allied with her Abstractionist colleagues, she has, nonetheless, been associated with the Phyllis Kind Gallery—home away from home for the Imagist coterie—for more than a decade. Perhaps because of this connection, plus her long friendships with Don Baum and Whitney Halstead (who both played key roles in the evolution of Imagism), Ito has frequently exhibited with her Imagist colleagues.¹⁰ But her personal artistic history and her exhibition pattern particularly suit her to a key median position. As the senior artist of both groups, old enough to be the mother of any of the painters under consideration except Loving or Yoshida, Ito arrived at her definitive style during the early Sixties, well before any of the others had reached a comparable stage of artistic maturity. This suggests that she probably played a key role in developing the precise type of organic abstraction currently practiced in Chicago. She utilizes this language to create paintings which cannot be described as truly non-representational. Rather, they portray abstractions of persons, places, and experiences, filtered through her unique temperament and charged with autobiographical significance. These qualities also relate her production to the Imagists, who have all developed personalized iconographic programs.

The oeuvre of Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilsson, and Karl Wirsum probably belongs near the representational end of the scale, despite the fact that their paintings reflect the same underlying interest in formal abstraction as that of the other artists under discussion. However, these three artists have more consistently depicted easily identifiable human protagonists (no matter how far they veer from the ideal towards the monster or comic-book type) than such fellow Imagists as Barbara Rossi, who prefers more ambiguous organic shapes, or Ed Paschke and Ray Yoshida, who have followed much more variable courses vis-à-vis abstraction.

Indeed, it seems difficult to assign Yoshida and Paschke definitive spots on the abstraction-representation continuum. One knows how to rate their latest paintings, but such ratings fail to reflect the fact that both these painters have repeatedly flirted with pure abstraction. Indeed, throughout his career, Yoshida

Fig. 2. Frank Piatek, Untitled, 1980. Oil on panel, c. 48 x 48". Courtesy Richard Gray Gallery.



has maintained a kind of cyclical pattern in this respect, alternating between more representational and quite abstract phases. The latter development reached a climax around 1974-75, when he produced a series of canvases filled with evocative, but ultimately unidentifiable, forms. Recently, his artistic pendulum has swung in the opposite direction; his current paintings contain the most explicit human figures he has produced thus far, images which would earn him a current position close to those of Nutt *et al.*, near the representational extreme of the continuum.¹¹

During 1975, Paschke produced a number of non-representational pictures featuring patterns executed in psychedelic colors. Seldom exhibited or reproduced (a fact which may or may not reflect their creator's ambivalence toward them), these canvases remain relatively unknown. However, ideas developed during that series nourished successor paintings portraying human protagonists as though in the process of being depersonalized—indeed, dematerialized—by mysterious rays whose lightning-like movements and brilliant colors recall these 1975 abstractions. Several of these 1982 "ray" paintings also verged on complete abstraction, but Paschke evidently recoiled from this step, for his most recent canvases reveal a return to a more definitive figuration.¹² Brown and Rossi have carried on similar dialogues with abstraction from time to time, but have both stopped short of traveling the route to complete non-representation.

It seems notable that so many of the leading Imagists have harkened to the siren song of abstraction. But like Ulysses bound to the mast of his ship, these painters seem too tied to their Imagist image ever to commit themselves wholeheartedly to the seductions of abstraction. One wonders whether their association with so many colleagues in a single gallery exerts some kind of pressure—possibly even of an unspoken or unconscious variety—not to jump the Imagist ship?

The Common Language of Form and Light. No matter how variable their attitudes toward subject matter, these thirteen artists have all demonstrated a persistent interest in the development of a common language of complex organic forms and delicately delineated light which marks their paintings as "made in Chicago." As in the case of the abstraction-figuration issue, one cannot successfully separate these two groups of artists from one another on the basis of the kinds of organic form they generate. Indeed, individual artists from each of the two groups show similar predilections for preferred shapes and light effects which transcend their special identities. For example, the large, irregular, head-like shapes which Ito intermittently features in paintings reveal striking similarities with certain Nutt pictures depicting an individual head or figure. Ito's canvas *Oracle* (1970) seems especially comparable to such roughly contemporary Nutt works as *Goodbye, Have a Nice Journey* (1973), and one can readily understand why the artist and his wife, Nilsson, acquired this particular Ito for their private collection. Their other Ito painting, *Morning at Seven* (1972), features the same pastel colors and delicate transparency so characteristic of Nilsson's own pictures. Indeed, although she typically works in watercolor and Ito in oils, they achieve strikingly similar light effects with their disparate media.

Piatek and Brown, both students at SAIC during the same era, have developed a shared preoccupation with depicting patterns, and one can discern many similarities between the for-

Fig. 3. William Conger, *Red Night, Chicago*, 1982-83. Oil on canvas, 54 x 72".
Courtesy Zaks Gallery.



mer's painted tubes and the latter's stylized clouds. Brown's *Night Fishing in a Calm Lake* (1980) reveals a preoccupation with glowing rounded forms and symmetrical reflections also notable in Piatek's untitled oil on panel painted the same year (Figs. 1 and 2).

But if Brown's forms show an affinity with those of Piatek, his lighting effects often seem much more reminiscent of those favored by Conger. The latter's canvases, such as *Red Night, Chicago* (Fig. 3), often portray biomorphic or botanical forms scurrying across a glowing night sky. Although Brown favors a much more stylized, ballet-type movement in his canvases, he, too, delights in depicting night scenes (which often include titillating views of the private doings of city dwellers whose forms appear silhouetted against the windows of their brightly lit interiors). The affection of both these artists for nocturnal light effects seems to stem from equally personal sources, for both recall childhood memories involving images of luminous night skies.¹³

The Shared Interest in Illogical Space. Each of these thirteen artists successfully addresses the quintessential modernist problem: the reconciliation of three-dimensional representation with the two-dimensional character of the picture plane. Their varied solutions all abjure the vanishing-point device of Renaissance perspective in favor of a variety of spatial depictions, including warped, emblematic, and patterned space. Piatek's compositions constitute an exception to this statement. He does not reject traditional perspective; rather, he utilizes it in revolutionary new ways. The close-up magnification and mysterious character of his large-scale forms, embedded in their glowing, enigmatic environments, seem reminiscent of hidden worlds visible only through electron microscopy.

Imagists and Abstractionists alike frequently borrow devices from theatrical space, confining the activities of their protagonists or the movement of their biomorphic images to the limited depth of a stage setting. Although Nutt has seemed especially fascinated with this device, theatrical allusions also recur regularly in the art of Yoshida, who likens himself to a playwright constructing painted dramas for his audience.¹⁴ Loving also often introduces allusions to the proscenium arch and stage wings into his canvases. His differential treatment of these elements lends an illusion of depth which partially counters the digrammatic spatial effects he cultivated via the repetition of flat, decorative shapes reminiscent of mosaic bits.

The Common Concern for Craftsmanship

Love of finish constitutes the magnificent obsession of Chicago artists, an obsession which holds Imagists and Abstractionists equally in its sway. Without exception, all thirteen of

the artists under discussion renounce bravura brushwork and expressionist gestures in favor of the most time-consuming approach involving repeated application of multiple layers and minute touches of paint. Many critics have remarked on the almost religious fervor characterizing such procedures; perhaps it is this spirit which prompts Conger to keep his small, boldly brushed panel pictures hidden from public view, like a secret heresy. He never exhibits these gestural panels, which are known only to intimates. (Unlike his major works, these small pictures seem truly non-representational, conveying emotion via brushstrokes, not imagery.) Probably in a rather similar spirit, Piatek consigns his performance works to the basement level of his studio space. (These works, in which the artist himself invariably plays a leading role, might be considered the ultimate form of representational art.)

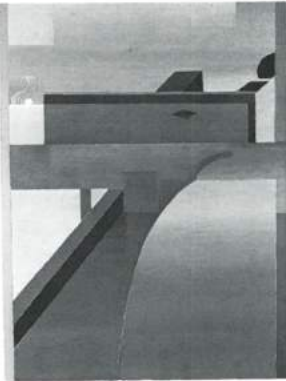
The typical painstaking Chicago technique inevitably limits productivity, and many of these painters complete no more than 12 to 15 works in a good average year. Piatek, busy with his performance art or the creation of total environments, sometimes paints even fewer, as does Nutt, who goes through phases in which he concentrates primarily on drawings rather than paintings. Of these thirteen people, only Brown, Loving, and Paschke regularly complete at least 25-30 pictures each year. (Although Brown works on a single canvas at a time, both Loving and Paschke paint four or five pictures simultaneously; their results suggest that this practice improves productivity—even in Chicago.)

The Shared Interest in Treating Paintings as Object-Icons. Critics often allude to the tendency of Chicago artists to treat their paintings as *objects*. This concept has always struck me as somewhat unclear, utilized as it is to refer simultaneously to the typical Chicago reverence for craftsmanship and the equally characteristic interest in constructing three-dimensional painted objects as opposed to conventional works on canvas or panel.¹⁵ (I have been amused to discover, via informal polls, that many Chicago artists and art historians have been just as puzzled as I concerning this vague concept.)

If one defines the object-orientation of Chicago painters literally, as the desire to create three-dimensional objects as opposed to paintings, it seems easy enough to document Rickey's contention that local artists seem to be haunted by their need to construct.¹⁶ Among these two groups of artists, only Ito and Yoshida have confined themselves to creating two-dimensional works. The other eleven painters all have a past or present history of object-making, ranging from Rossi's magnificent quilts, composed of etched and aquatinted squares on satin grounds, through Wirsum's zany toy figurines and Loving's five-panel screens complete with peepholes and attached wooden cut-outs. Their fascination with the theater also infects the object-making practices of Chicago artists. Nutt's miniature theater constructions, such as *Which Side Are You On?* (1975-76), with their three-dimensional stage space (in this instance complete with a large cast of cut-out characters), represent the most fully developed treatment of this idea. Although Piatek has never built miniature theaters, during the mid-Seventies he carved a race of totem animals and other mythic objects which he has utilized in the environmental installations which serve as the setting for his performance dramas.

Whether this typical Chicago will-to-construct represents the legacy of our glorious architectural heritage (as Rickey seems to suggest), or grows out of our more recent Chicago Bauhaus tradition, remains equivocal. Whatever its ultimate origins, this fascination with the constructed object received a more recent impetus from the example of the late H. C. Westermann, who began his career in Chicago. This renowned sculptor, with his love for the explicitly crafted, quirky object, served as a role model for all younger local artist-builders. The constructions of Don Baum have provided another important example of this type; he has not only crafted many marvelous constructions combining broken dolls with bits of flotsam and jetsam—he has also provided a showcase where like-minded younger artists could exhibit their off-beat objects and paintings. First as Director of the Hyde Park Art Center, and later, of the Illinois Arts Council, he has played a major role in providing exhibition opportunities for deserving young people; his role in the genesis of Imagism has yet to be completely explored.¹⁷

Fig. 4. Miyoko Ito, *Habitat*, 1979. Oil on canvas, 43 x 32". Courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery.



The School and Museum of the Art Institute of Chicago as Formative Forces

SAIC—the School of the Art Institute of Chicago—has played a role in shaping current Chicago art comparable to that of the Vatican in molding the character of contemporary Catholicism. (A significant number of SAIC students wonder whether “the School” doesn’t also regard itself as possessing the same divine infallibility as the pope when speaking *ex cathedra*. At least, budding artists interested in Minimalism or Realism often conclude that the institution encourages students to follow a developmental pattern favoring the creation of quirky figurative artists to the exclusion of other types. Artists trained elsewhere also complain that SAIC’s “good-old-boy” system discriminates against them and makes it more difficult to establish local reputations.)

The pervasiveness of SAIC’s role and influence becomes obvious when one reviews the resumés of the artists under consideration here. Ten of them received their undergraduate or graduate degrees (or both) from SAIC. Of the three non-graduates, two, Conger and Ito, studied at the school but took their degrees elsewhere. Loving, the sole non-SAIC ex-student among this baker’s dozen, has long played a key role there, both as a senior professor of Painting and Drawing and as Chairman of the department from 1970-75. Yoshida has taught at SAIC even longer; he began his career there in the late Fifties and currently holds a special endowed professorship in the department of Painting and Drawing. Both these popular, influential teachers have played leading parts in disseminating their particular versions of Chicago-style painting to younger artists. Yoshida taught many of the future Imagists and thus played a crucial role in helping to shape the very movement with which he later became associated.¹⁸ (But he also served as one of Piatek’s principal instructors.) Loving began his major teaching commitment at SAIC too late to play an important role in teaching any of the Imagists except Rossi, who certainly shares his devotion to exquisitely decorative surfaces layered with thousands of dots.¹⁹ But all these interactions might better be compared to the two-way flow of osmosis: Both Loving and Yoshida emphasize the stimulating effects on their own creativity of encounters with such talented students. Indeed, in this fraternal atmosphere, many types of osmotic processes occur; during virtually the same weeks in 1982, Yoshida and Loving both created canvases in which the image of a ladder plays a major role. Although these colleagues maintain a genial relationship, they are not intimates, and they do not exchange studio visits. One can only conclude that ladders must have been “in the air” at SAIC that spring. Characteristically, Yoshida’s *Learned Long-Limbed Ladder*, partaking of the humanized character with which he invariably endows objects, appears about to climb right out of the canvas, or, perhaps, even to ascend into a heavenly sphere. Loving’s ladder, by contrast, plays a more metaphorical role, apparently symbolizing the creative struggle in *Climbing Now Is Difficult*.

The school has also taken the lead in acquainting students with the oeuvre of certain local “outsider” artists. The enthusiasm of students and faculty members alike for the drawings of Joseph Yoakum or the church-form birdhouses of Aldo Piacen-

za helped to make these artists major forces on the Chicago scene. It should be noted that the Abstractionists admire Yoakum’s landscapes as fervently as their Imagist peers; his wonderfully schematic depictions of nature have exerted an equally potent influence on members of both artistic movements.

The Role of the Museum. If SAIC serves as the training ground par excellence for local artists, its parent museum, The Art Institute of Chicago, provides the salient examples of great paintings to be absorbed and emulated. As one might anticipate, the museum’s single most celebrated picture, Georges Seurat’s *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grande Jatte*, enjoys pride of place as the single picture which has most profoundly influenced contemporary Chicago painters. It exercises its fertile fascination equally on Imagists and Abstractionists, and its special role in Chicago art history deserves a special exploration, which I plan to supply in a future essay.²⁰

The other artist who has most affected modern Chicago painters is not El Greco, even though his great *The Assumption of the Virgin* competes with the *Grande Jatte* as *chef d’oeuvre* of the AIC collection. Rather, it is the wonderfully retardataire painter, Giovanni di Paolo, whose six panels depicting scenes from the life of John the Baptist have mesmerized as many local artists as Seurat’s canvas. Giovanni’s warped, emblematic spatial conventions have especially fascinated Chicago painters, from Nutt to Conger. Indeed, the settings of these panels, whether they depict buildings or landscape details, frequently seem reminiscent of stylized stage settings and may, in fact, have served as another source of inspiration for the prevailing preoccupation with theatrical conventions notable in Chicago painting. The single panel of the six which has exercised the strongest impact is probably *St. John in the Wilderness*, which inspired Brown to paint a transliteration, *Semi Returning to the Desert* (1971), transforming Giovanni’s imagery into Brownian terms while remaining remarkably faithful to the spatial conventions and glowing light of the Cinquecento original. The stylized mountain peaks portrayed in this same panel also suggested the stone steps to heaven depicted in Loving’s *Amaryllis Lust* (1982).

Among the modern artists featured at the museum, the painter who has stimulated the most generalized and persistent excitement among Chicago artists seems to me to be neither Miró, nor Dubuffet, nor even Picasso—although all three artists, along with many others, have played an important role here as models—but René Magritte. The Art Institute owns a major canvas and several important drawings by Magritte, but it was the 1965 retrospective of his career, rather than any of these locally owned works, which apparently created such a durable impression on Chicago painters.²¹ Brown and Piatek both credit the Belgian master with helping to generate their interest in patterned compositions. Piatek executed his earliest tube paintings a few years after the Magritte exhibition; both these forms and Brown’s stylized clouds owe a good deal to such Magritte compositions as *The Golden Legend*, with its cloud formations composed of loaves of French bread drifting slowly through the sky. Echoes of the latter canvas continue to reverberate through such relatively recent Brown works as *Intermittent Showers* and *Thunderhead* (both 1976).²²

No Chicago artist seems to have responded more wholeheartedly to the Belgian master than Nutt, who created a number of pictures during the early Seventies directly traceable to Magritte’s influence. To cite just one example: the Surrealist master’s late series of paintings depicting a mineralized universe apparently inspired a comparable group of pictures by Nutt, such as *What The Hell’s Going On? Or Where Is It?* (1973), portraying his protagonists and their surroundings as though they were all composed of fragmenting stone.

If Imagists and Abstractionists concur in admiring Seurat, Giovanni di Paolo, and Magritte, they diverge widely concerning the relevance to their own artistic development of other examples available at the AIC. The museum’s collection of Old Master paintings appears to interest the Imagists little, if at all. They emphatically reject the example of the great Venetians, and, one presumes, of the latter’s heirs, painters like Rubens and Delacroix.²³ But these are the very artists whose achievements have inspired some of Piatek’s and Conger’s finest canvases. Piatek recently completed a series of paintings depicting an

identical tubular composition as he believed Rubens, Rembrandt, Renoir, and other great masters well represented in the museum's collection might have executed them. Conger considers both Turner and Delacroix ideal role models as landscape painters whose brilliant achievements he seeks to reinterpret in 20th-century terms.

Nor do the Imagists seem to pay much attention to the AIC's wonderful collection of Impressionist paintings. (Hanson's oeuvre may constitute an exception; his recurring depictions of buxom draped nudes suggest that he is well acquainted with the museum's Renoirs, and perhaps as well with the Berthe Morisot painting showing a young woman at her dressing table.) By contrast, both Loving and Ito apparently have been mesmerized by the museum's many Monets. One perceives echoes of the latter's Normandy beach scenes of the 1880s and '90s in both the subject matter and palette of certain Ito seascapes, while the intricate surfaces of such canvases by the French master have inspired Loving to attempt new procedures based on descriptions of Monet's probable techniques.²⁴

The Common Interest in Erotic Imagery

The pervasive eroticism of Imagist art has been widely recognized, but less so the fact that sexual content also plays an important role in the paintings of the Abstractionists. Such references seem more obvious in the oeuvre of Piatak, whose intertwining tubes frequently suggest the limbs of coital couples, and Loving, whose exuberant sexual symbolism serves as a hallmark of his recent work. But such imagery figures just as importantly, if less obviously, in the compositions of Conger and Ito, where bold erotic forms combine with luscious surfaces and colors to produce a strongly sensuous effect. Despite her fragile, feminine appearance and delicate brushwork, Ito is a surprisingly aggressive painter, capable of producing images suggestive of great masculine power and force, such as *Habitat* of 1979 (Fig. 4), with its dynamic phallic form thrusting through space like a giant steel beam.

By contrast, the sexual mood projected by many Imagist pictures seems more perverse than genital, stimulating the viewer's voyeuristic or sado-masochistic fantasies. Thus, Paschke parades the sexual flotsam and jetsam of society before us, introducing his audience to the world of tattooed strippers and beefy transvestites. Ramberg's repeated visions of truncated, tightly bound female figures, encased in corsets and laces which at once display and imprison them, seem designed to appeal to particularly fetishistic males and, perhaps, their submissive female counterparts.

If Ramberg's female images project a helpless eroticism, those created by Nutt frequently exude an ominous power. His pictures of this type often combine seemingly incompatible views about sexuality (or perhaps even the entire human condition). The witty comments or titles written right on the surface of such paintings seem designed to defuse, even deny, the import of the grim figures and events accompanying them. At his most disturbing, Nutt evokes horrifying fantasies of castration and mutilation. For example, *Running Wild* (1970) portrays a female harridan with a hook in place of a left hand; she uses this weapon to inflict yet another wound on the bleeding priapus which confronts her, like a battered opponent in a gladiatorial contest. In an essay titled "Inwardness: Chicago Art Since 1945," Max Kozloff suggests that images of this type seem less like comments on the human condition than "outlets for artistic exasperation."²⁵ Whatever its genesis, such deliberately unpleasant sexual content occurs far more often in the art of the Imagists than the Abstractionists. If Kozloff is correct, one can only conclude that the Imagists must experience more artistic frustration than their Abstractionist brethren.

Conclusions: The Crucial Differences

One of the artists included in this survey describes Chicago painters, himself among them, as "sort of self-indulgent." Artistic self-indulgence as he defines it includes the ubiquitous formal and technical concerns which preoccupy all the painters treated in this essay, as well as the universal fascination with quirky, personalized imagery evident in the oeuvre of Imagists and Abstractionists alike. But if Chicago's spirit expresses itself as a kind of wilful regionalism which infects all our artists,

Fig. 5. Richard Loving. *He Glowed from the Smell of Her Perfume*, 1982. Oil on canvas, 52 x 72". Courtesy Jan Cicero Gallery.



this pan-Chicago style does not prevent the expression of certain crucial differences which enable us, unerringly, to identify Yoshida's work as that of an Imagist, rather than an Allusive Abstractionist, no matter how non-representational a given canvas of his might be. What cues enable us to separate Imagists from Abstractionists with such assurance? I believe we respond to subtle philosophic distinctions which divide these artists into two easily distinguishable camps. Perhaps the most fundamental differences concern the artistic antecedents with which each group aligns itself. As noted above, both Imagists and Abstractionists look to such common sources of artistic inspiration as Flemish and Italian "primitives," Far Eastern art, etc. But at the frontier of the High Renaissance, the two groups part company. Like the Poussinists and the Rubenists, or the followers of Ingres versus those of Delacroix, these two "schools" of Chicago artists adhere to two quite different traditions. The Abstractionists find in the masters of the Renaissance a well-spring of inspiration for various technical and formal experiments which transform the attainments of a Leonardo, a Rembrandt, or a Turner into modern terms. If the Imagists disdain the High Renaissance tradition—especially the Venetian model from which Rubens, Delacroix, etc., sprang—the Abstractionists reject with equal firmness many of the prime sources of Imagist inspiration: the comic books, trade catalogues and the like, which fuel the imagination of their figurative peers.²⁶

These philosophic differences not only reflect themselves in technical distinctions (like the Rubenists, the Abstractionists tend to be more painterly and, within the narrow Chicago connotations of this term, more gestural painters than the Imagists), but also in apparent substantive differences in their attitudes toward life. The Imagists seem to perceive themselves as the quintessential "cool kids" on the Chicago block. They assume a somewhat satiric or parodying style, an attitude reflected as well in the caricatural figurative types they favor. Within the Imagist camp, this lampooning style often seems to serve markedly different goals. It is difficult, for example, to read any serious social criticism into the perverted goings-on of the creatures who frolic and gambol through Nilsson's charming watercolor. Yet, it seems equally difficult to avoid the implications of the underlying moral message Brown so frequently presents.

The Abstractionists, by contrast, seem more genuinely optimistic. Theirs is a more rhapsodic view of life which appears to differ from the jaded, worldly-wise attitude the Imagists often project. This fundamental difference colors their attitudes toward our environment, our sexual natures—in short, toward our entire existence. The contrasting "cool" and "hot" attitudes toward life of the Imagists and Abstractionists, respectively, become quite obvious when we compare the erotic nature imagery generated by the two groups of artists. Loving's *He Glowed from the Smell of Her Perfume* (1982) forms a striking study in contrasting sexual imagery with that provided by Yoshida's *Playful Private Pricking* from the same year (Fig. 6).

and 6). One practically experiences the exploding rockets in Loving's canvas, which literally flames with the hot erotic imagery to which its title refers. Yoshida's subject is also sexualized, but his heroine satisfies her libidinal needs without human intervention, aided by an obliging group of very lively "inanimate" objects. If one can infer the painter's attitude from his imagery, their differing depictions suggest that Loving ignites—takes off like a rocket—while Yoshida, like the male protagonist portrayed in his painting, quietly observes our human picaresques from the sidelines. Insulated by his art, he never risks the meteor's fate, but perhaps does not experience, either, the ultimate rapture of catapulting freely through the atmosphere.

A similar contrast in moods and attitudes becomes evident when one compares Conger's treatment of the landscape motif in *Red Night, Chicago* with that portrayed by Brown in *Night Fishing in a Calm Lake* (Figs. 1 and 3). Both compositions depict nocturnal landscapes in which watery imagery assumes a predominant role. But Conger responds to the sublime quality of nature, presenting us with a world of wild beauty, untamed and unnamable, a vision in which man plays an insignificant part. Brown, by contrast, portrays a world of pattern and order; neat houses, each chimney as smoke, line up behind neat rows of hedges, before which equally tidy rows of fishermen cast their lines. Even when Brown depicts some major natural or man-made catastrophe, he emphasizes its patterned order. His *Fallout at Three Mile Island* presents the nuclear firestorm as a series of descending petal-like forms. His vision of *A Hurricane Passing over the Southern Tip of Florida* transforms this phenomenon, too, into a floral image; the storm resembles a giant whirling sunflower or a child's pinwheel toy, a vision from which all the realistic debris, dust, and disorder is miraculously removed. By contrast, Conger, in another of his 1982 paintings, *That August Day*, portrays an ordinary thunderstorm in the Virginia mountains with all the *terribilità* of an overture to the end of the world.

In summary, then, the Imagists, like their beloved comic book heroes, offer cool comments on the human condition, from which they distance themselves, portraying their protagonists in caricatural or stylized forms. The Allusive Abstractionists, by contrast, ally themselves with the great tradition, seeking to translate into twentieth-century terms the same impulses which motivated the classical and romantic painters of the past.²⁷

1. In her assessment of the Chicago art scene in "Midwest Art: A Special Report" *Art in America*, July 1979, Carrie Rickey points out: "Jane Allen and Derek Sutor of Chicago's lively *New Art Examiner* do a lot to maintain the abstractionist/Imagist dialectic In the view of Allen and Guthrie and corroborated by Franz Schulze, 'Chicago is a town where Constructivists and Surrealist traditions are still battling it out.'" (p. 48.)

2. Russell Bowman, *From Chicago: A Personal Idiom* (Pace Gallery, January-February 1982), contains a succinct review of the Imagist movement. The group of artists usually designated as the Imagists has recently become increasingly notorious in objecting to this name. For a discussion of this attitude, see Roger Brown's essay, "Rantings and Recollections," in *Who Chicago?* (Sunderland, England: Eofrith Gallery, 1980), pp. 29-33. The term Imagist was originally coined by Franz Schulze, a critic currently out of favor with this group of figurative painters. Brown lampooned Schulze, along with his fellow Chicago art critic, Alan S. Arner, in the 1981 painting, *Giotto and His Friends (Getting Even)*, which portrays the gentlemen as a pair of "effete monks" unaware of the revolutionary artistic breakthrough simultaneously occurring in nearby "Florence." For Schulze's reconstruction of the history of Imagism, linking it to the Chicago painting of the previous generation, see *Fantastic Images: Chicago Art Since 1945* (Chicago: Follet, 1972).

3. In January, 1975, the Museum of Contemporary Art mounted an exhibition featuring Imagist art (*Made in Chicago: Some Resources*, with an introduction by Jan Baum). Allen and Guthrie simultaneously mounted a counter exhibition at the neighboring Michael Wyman Gallery, *The Other Tradition: Abstract Painting in Chicago*. This show, which ignored Organic Abstraction and its practitioners, viewed local Abstraction solely as an outgrowth of the Chicago Bauhaus movement and featured the work of such geometric Abstractionists as Roland Cleveland and Martin Hurtig.

4. Dennis Adrian, *The Chicago-Style Painting*, The Center for Continuing Education of the University of Chicago, 1974.

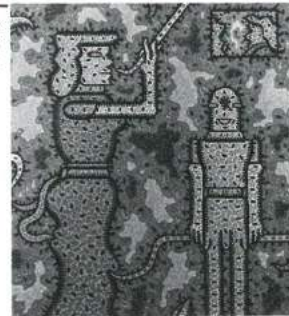
5. Franz Schulze praised Adrian's exhibition without, however, espousing the latter's viewpoint in "Chi-art shows its formal side," *The Chicago Daily News*, February 23, 1974. As recently as the spring of 1982, the *New Art Examiner* attacked the thesis underlying Adrian's exhibition. During the course of a brief hypothetical sketch devoted to the critic, Judd Tully noted: "Whatever the notion, the chinks in Adrian's esthetic armor are minor. It is especially easy to whittle off his short-lived courting of 'Organic Abstraction,' a movement that just couldn't get off the ground." See "A Portrait of the Artist as Collector," *New Art Examiner*, March 1982, p. 4. For Conger's response to this assertion, see his letter, *New Art Examiner* (June 1982).

6. Rickey, "Chicago," p. 48. Reagan Upshaw, "Painting in Chicago: Blue-collar Surrealism Meets Prairie Abstraction," *Portfolio*, May/June, 1982, pp. 60-63.

7. For a brief history of this movement and the careers of its organizers, see Mary Mathews Gedo, "Abstraction as Metaphor: The Evocative Imagery of William Gaye, Miyoko Ito, Richard Loving, and Frank Platek," *Arts Magazine*, October 1982, pp. 112-17.

8. I have omitted Art Green, who resides in Vancouver, British Columbia, although

Fig. 6. Ray Yoshida, *Playful Private Pricking*, 1982. Acrylic on canvas, 32 x 28". Courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery.



he continues to show with Phyllis Kind. James Falconer and Ed Flood both live in New York City; neither man currently produces Imagist art. Suellen Rocca stopped practicing as an artist during her period of residency in California; as I noted in the text, she has recently returned to Chicago and to art.

9. Adrian, *The Chicago-Style Painting*, n.p.

10. For a complete list of the exhibitions in which Ito has participated, consult the catalogue of her recent retrospective, Dennis Adrian, *Miyoko Ito: A Review*, The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 1980.

11. For an overview of Yoshida's career, see Mary Mathews Gedo, "Ray Yoshida: Master of Magical Metamorphoses," *Arts Magazine*, January 1983, pp. 97-99.

12. Paschke did exhibit one of his non-figurative canvases in *Visions, Painting and Sculpture: Distinguished Alumni 1945 to the Present*, introduction by Dennis Adrian; The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1976, catalogue entry #126.

13. Conger vividly describes his childhood memories of the Chicago skyline at night in an essay I have in preparation, "The Objective Made Subjective: Abstraction As Autobiography." For Brown's recollections of this type, see Katherine Lee Keefe, "Introduction," *Some Recent Art from Chicago*, The Ackland Art Museum (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1980), p. 13. Keefe provides an extensive quotation from a videotape interview with Brown conducted by Lyn Blumenthal and Kate Horsfield (Chicago: Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1976).

14. Gedo, "Ray Yoshida," p. 98.

15. For an example of the dual usage of the term, see Adrian, *The Chicago-Style Painting*: "Karl Wirsum's cutouts and manikins, Jim Nutt's object-paintings, Ed Flood's boxes, and Barbara Rossi's layered paintings belong to the same family" (n.p.).

16. Rickey, "Chicago," p. 52.

17. Russell Bowman, "Chicago Imagism: The Movement and the Style," *Who Chicago?*, p. 22, discusses Baum's role. Baum participated in the group interview published as "A Conversation," in *Some Recent Art from Chicago*, pp. 20-37. His comments during this session shed further light on his attitudes and role in Imagist history.

18. Yoshida taught Brown, Hanson, Paschke, Ramberg, and Rossi (as well as Falconer, Green, and Rocca, not considered here). He also had some pedagogical contact of a more peripheral variety with Nutt.

19. Recently, Rossi has moved away from the dot-encrusted surface treatment described above. For illustrations of her current style, see *Who Chicago?*, entries 151-53.

20. This essay is scheduled to appear in a special issue of *Museum Studies* which the Art Institute of Chicago plans to devote exclusively to the Seurat canvas.

21. James Thrall Soby, *René Magritte* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1965).

22. As Russell Bowman points out, Georgia O'Keeffe's cloud paintings undoubtedly also served as a source for Brown's cloud imagery, and perhaps for Platek's repeated tubular forms as well. The Art Institute owns the largest O'Keeffe canvas of this kind, *Sky Above Clouds, IV* (1965). (One might add that her representations of gigantic floral forms probably helped to inspire such Hanson paintings as *Rose Conch*, 1980.) For Bowman's comments on Brown's relationship with Giovanni di Paolo, see "Roger Brown: Style and Emblem," in Mitchell Douglas Kahan, *Roger Brown* (Montgomery, Alabama: Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, 1980), p. 27.

23. For a concrete demonstration of the anti-High Renaissance bias of the Imagists, see "A Conversation," *Some Recent Art from Chicago*, pp. 24-25. According to Baum and Yoshida, the anti-Venetian bias of this movement derives, ultimately, from the teachings of Kathleen Blackshear, a highly influential instructor in the Department of Art History at SAIC during the years when these men were students at the school.

24. Loving was greatly impressed with Robert Herbert's "Method and Meaning in Monet," *Art in America*, September 1979, pp. 88-108.

25. This essay appeared in *Artforum*, October 1972, pp. 51-55.

26. In his "Introduction" to *Who Chicago?*, p. 11, Victor Musgrave provides a much more exhaustive listing of the unusual sources of inspiration which have fed the creativity of the Imagists. Among other such sources, he mentions the collections at the Field Museum of Natural History, an institution which played as important a role in nurturing the Imagist movement as did its sister museum, the AIC.

27. As this essay is being completed, Franz Schulze, "Made in Chicago: A Revisionary View," *Art in America*, March 1983, pp. 122-28, has just appeared. This statement requires a response (which I can only make via a footnote at this late date). Although he labels his statement "revisionary," Schulze actually exhumes the moribund Abstractionist/Imagist dialectic, complete with a definition of Abstraction as synonymous with Bauhaus-derived formalism. He concludes that Imagists have won the day, while the Abstractionists have lost out to their New York peers. This assessment fails to take cognizance of the complexities of the actual Chicago art scene and certainly does not agree with the conclusions offered by Rickey, Upshaw, and myself. Schulze chooses to ignore both the wide range of abstract styles currently available in Chicago and the healthy state of this type of painting. The recent exhibitions of such well-known abstract painters as William Conger, Roland Ginzel, and Dan Ramirez scored an enormous critical and financial success and attracted widespread public attention.

Schulze uses this same article to recant his earlier assertion that the art of the Imagists sprang from that of the previous generation of Chicago painters. He now finds the oeuvre of the Imagists (except for Paschke) too suave, mannered, and "glittery cute" to sustain comparison with the work of Leon Golub, June Leaf, and other mature Chicago (or ex-Chicago) artists whom Schulze singles out for praise as people whose work reveals a degree of toughness which the Imagists no longer demonstrate—or perhaps never possessed.