Clem's Cache

Last year, the Portland Art Museum acquired an extensive art collection assembled by the late Clement Greenberg. The public recently got its first chance to view the critic's holdings, a time capsule of Greenberg's taste during his most influential decades.

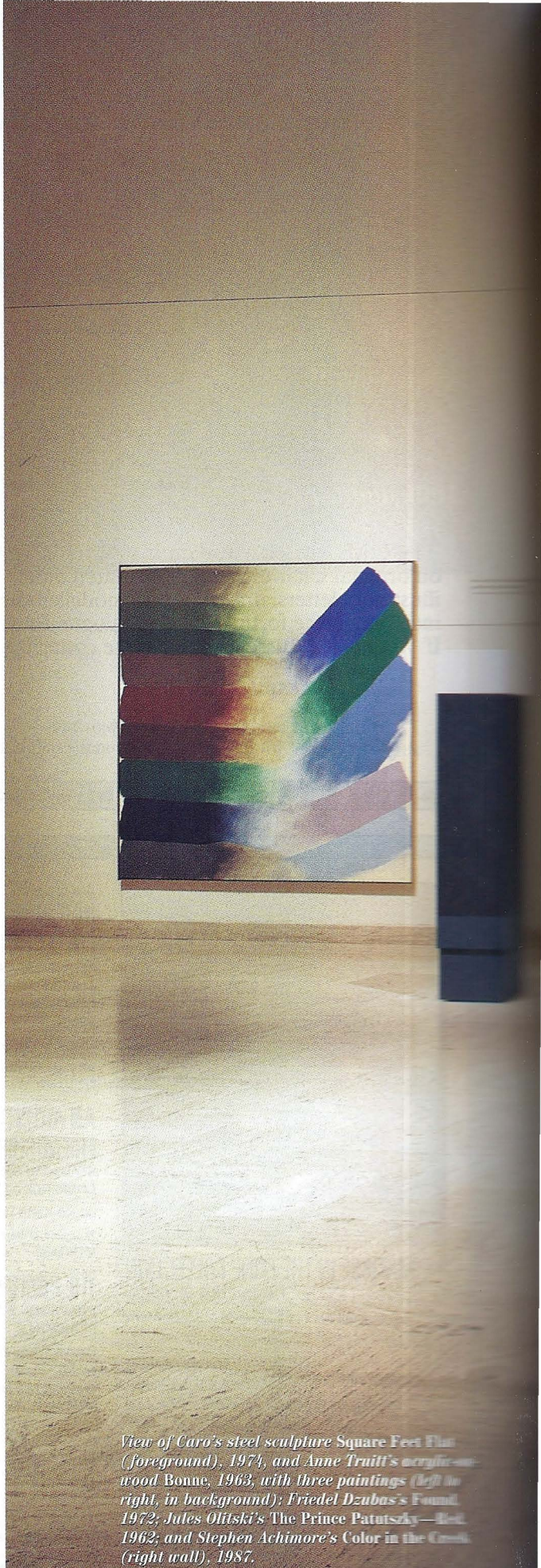
BY SUE TAYLOR



Anthony Caro:* Bust of Clement Greenberg, *1990, bronze, 18 by 11 by 8¼ inches.

In 1956, his influence as an art critic still on the rise, Clement Greenberg married writer Janice Van Horne. Although divorced in 1977, the couple remarried 12 years later. Since Greenberg's death at 85 in 1994, Van Horne has proved a dedicated and capable custodian of his legacy. After arranging the sale of the critic's papers to the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles in 1995, she edited and published Greenberg's lectures on taste and value in *Homemade Esthetics*, as well as his youthful correspondence, spanning nearly two decades, with his college friend Harold Lazarus [see *A.i.A.*, Dec. '00].[1] Her next task was to find a museum repository for her late husband's private art collection, a visual document of his enthusiasms and, because the works were gifts to him, of his intense friendships with artists of several generations.

The new owner of 159 paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures amassed by Greenberg is Oregon's Portland Art Museum. Built on an initial 1895 acquisition of plaster casts of antique sculpture, the museum has developed impressive concentrations in Northwest Coast Native American art, Asian art, English silver, 18th- and 19th-century European and American painting and sculpture, and German Expressionist graphics, but has only recently turned to more contemporary material. Thus director John Buchanan, Jr., moved decisively when he learned through Portland art dealer Tracy Savage that the Greenberg collection was available. During his yearlong



View of Caro's steel sculpture Square Feet Flat *(foreground), 1974, and Anne Truitt's acrylic-on-wood* Bonne, *1963, with three paintings (left to right, in background): Friedel Dzubas's* Found, *1972; Jules Olitski's* The Prince Patutsky—Red, *1962; and Stephen Achimore's* Color in the Creek *(right wall), 1987.*





Helen Frankenthaler: **Summer Scene, Provincetown,** ***1950, oil on canvas, 16¼ by 20¼ inches.***



Buffie Johnson: **Fish and Shrimps,** ***1945, oil on canvas, 30⅛ by 25⅛ inches.***



Horacio Torres: **Seated Nude,** ***1975, oil on canvas, 36 by 23¾ inches.***



Olitski: **Nude Lying on Her Right,** ***1965, charcoal on green paper, 11¼ by 17½ inches.***

ence or absence of a libretto has to do with value in music."[3] In this light, the one still life in the exhibition, *Fish and Shrimps* (1945) by Buffie Johnson, also makes sense, as do the handful of land- or seascapes by Helen Frankenthaler, Henri Hayden, Dorothy Knowles (a Canadian realist whom Greenberg actually dissuaded from pursuing abstraction), Ernest Lindner, Pat Service and even a self-taught British painter, Alfred Wallis.

The Frankenthaler, a fresh oil sketch titled *Summer Scene, Provincetown*, dates to 1950, the year she met Greenberg and fell in love with him. (Pollock whimsically inscribed her first name at the right edge of the ink drawing he gave to Greenberg for his birthday on Jan. 16, 1951.) Considering her romance and subsequent enduring friendship with the critic, and his excitement over the soak-stain technique she developed with her famously influential *Mountains and Sea* (1952), it's surprising to find only three works by Frankenthaler in the collection, two of them quite small. This and other omissions suggest that as both a historical survey and a measure of Greenberg's own allegiances, "A Critic's Collection" is inevitably skewed. Lee Krasner never gained Greenberg's attention as an artist, but absent as well are Arshile Gorky, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still and others of the New York School he supported early on. (Willem de Kooning so resented Greenberg's ranking of Pollock's contribution to modern art above his own that there was hardly a question of goodwill, let alone gifts.) Although a calligraphic ink-brush drawing David Smith dedicated to Van Horne in 1959 is here, his sculpture is not, nor do we find any canvases by Greenberg's great protégé Morris Louis.

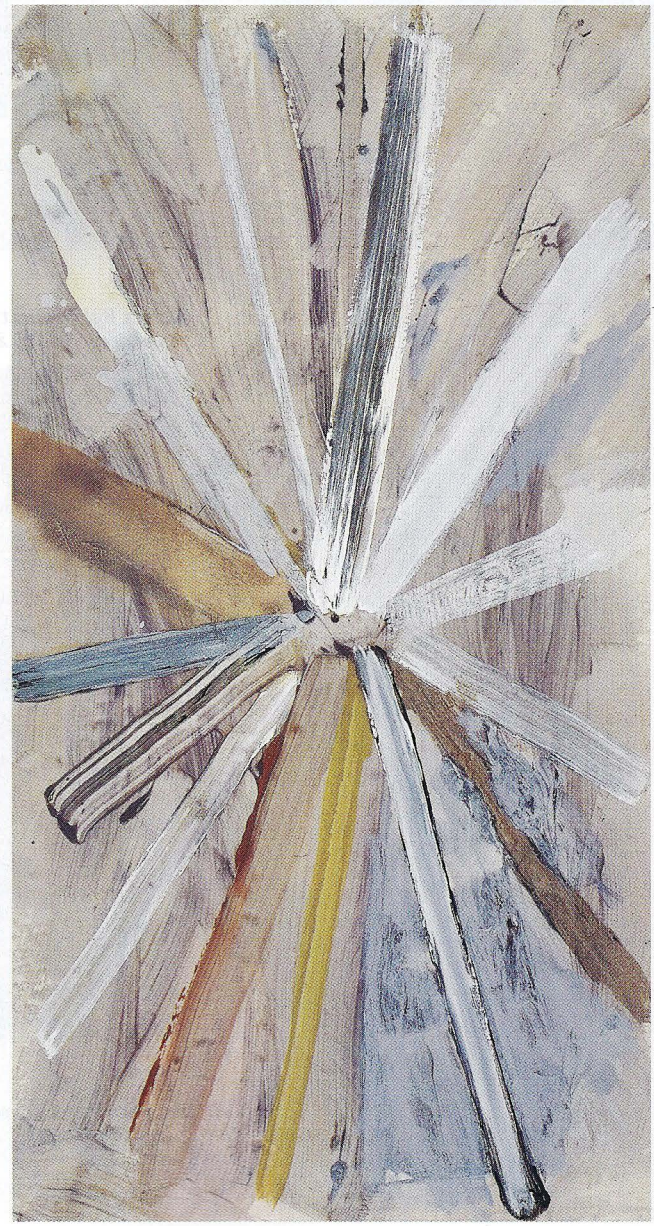
In her excellent catalogue essay and in a lecture at the museum, independent scholar Karen Wilkin explained some of these distortions: certain objects had been sold when the critic's finances demanded it. To help pay for his daughter's college education, he sold Smith's steel sculpture *VB XXIII* (1963), which the artist had given to the newborn Sarah Greenberg and which for years had graced the living room in the family's New York apartment on Central Park West. Paintings by Frankenthaler and Louis and a small gouache by Pollock (a wedding gift) were similarly sold through the years. Greenberg, moreover, never set out to collect in any systematic fashion; he merely accepted things that were offered, or occasionally chose an object from the studio when invited to do so. And according to Van Horne in her remarks at the opening at the Portland Art



Joseph Drapell: Rolls, *1984-85, acrylic on canvas, 63¾ inches square.*

Although visually jarring, the nudes and landscape paintings are reminders of Greenberg's insistence that the esthetic quality he searched for so single-mindedly was never a matter of abstraction per se.

Harold Feist: Whistler's Sonata, *1981, acrylic on canvas, 56¼ by 30 inches.*





Dorothy Knowles: Lake Waskesui, *1981, oil on canvas, 23½ by 46½ inches.*



Seymour Lipton: Tower, *1952, wood and sheet lead, 11½ by 3⅞ by 4¼ inches.*



Larry Poons: Tamy, *1972, acrylic on canvas, 99¾ by 84⅛ inches.*

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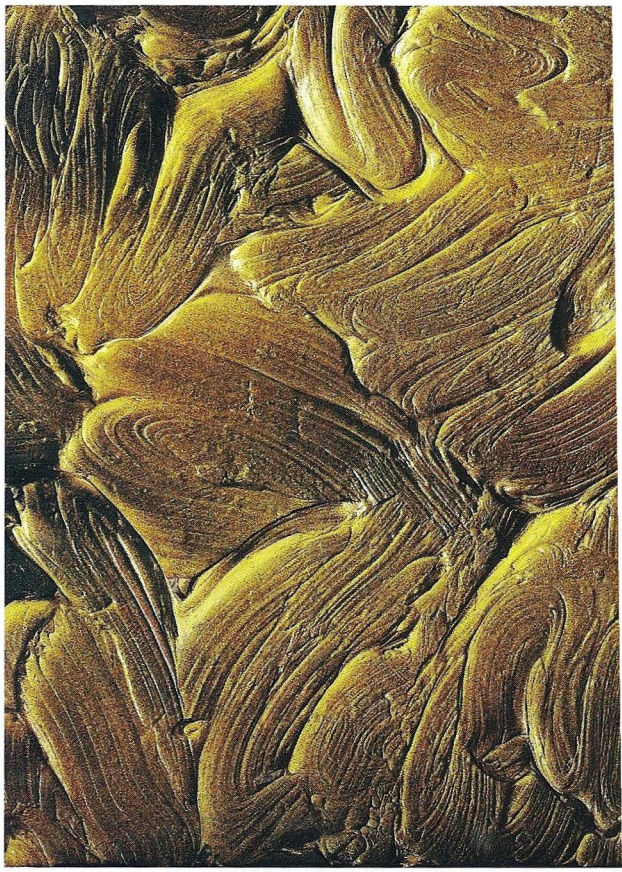
based acrylic to build a crowded, swirling, allover network of huge, fat strokes; outsized and sculptural, they give an intriguing impression of mutant gigantism.

Olitski is among the chorus of artists cited in Wilkin's essay who recall Greenberg's studio visits with warm appreciation. Invariably, they pay tribute to his powers of discernment. Walter Darby Bannard and sculptor James Wolfe invoke his "amazing, surprising eye," his "superb eye," which Caro describes in the exhibition catalogue as nearly "infallible." "He knew how art is made," Caro continues, "what the process involves—how a real artist thinks and works." Greenberg understood this from his intimate relationships with artists as well as from his own amateur experience. A talented draftsman, he had studied at the Art Students League as a teenager and was thrilled years later when he painted his first picture on a cabinet door in his bedroom: "The colors, the colors came just right, flowed smooth from my conceiving eye," he wrote excitedly to Lazarus in 1939.[6]

By all accounts a difficult, often belligerent personality, hotly resented by those who failed to win his approval, Greenberg had a passion for art that redeemed him for the many painters and sculptors whose creative lives he touched and encouraged. Their gifts



Noland:* No. One, *1958, acrylic on canvas, 33¼ inches square.



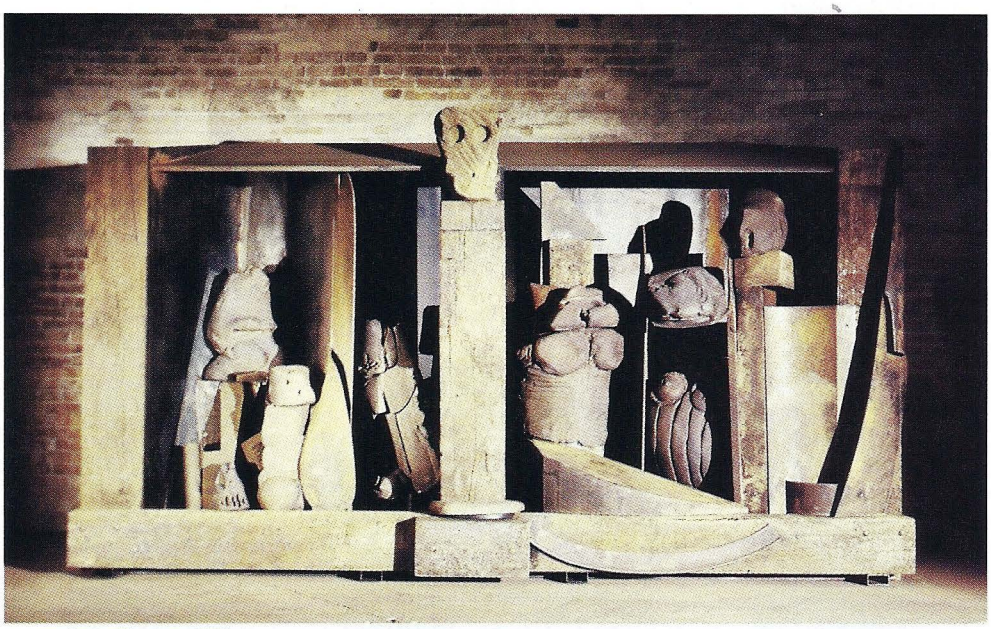
Olitski:* Noble Regard, *1989, acrylic on canvas, 38¼ by 29⅞ inches. Photos this article courtesy Portland Art Museum.

to him of art works acknowledged what he gave to them in the form of encouragement, recognition and affirmation of their achievements. Olitski remembers Greenberg's engagement with paintings in the studio, reporting to Wilkin, "It was like falling in love for him—a rapture." The analogy brings to mind what his own most sensitive interpreter has claimed for the art criticism which Greenberg sought to place on a firm epistemological footing. In 1978, Donald Kuspit noted that in Greenberg's scheme, "Criticism now comes to know art precisely rather than to accompany it poetically—to possess art, not simply to love it platonically."[7] □

1. Clement Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics: Observations on Art and Taste*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, based on his 1971 seminars at Bennington College; for the correspondence, see Greenberg, *The Harold Letters, 1928-1943: The Making of an American Intellectual*, ed. by Janice Van Horne, Washington, D.C., Counterpoint, 2000.
2. Greenberg, "Hans Hofmann: Grand Old Rebel," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, ed. by John O'Brian, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. 67-72.
3. Greenberg, "Abstract and Representational," in *Collected Essays*, vol. 3, p. 187.
4. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Collected Essays*, vol. 4, p. 85.
5. Jo Crook and Tom Learner, *The Impact of Modern Paints*, New York, Watson-Guptill, 2000, pp. 25-26; see also Andrea Kirsh and Rustin S. Levenson, *Seeing through Paintings: Physical Examination in Art Historical Studies*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 147.
6. Greenberg, *The Harold Letters*, p. 195.
7. Donald Kuspit, *Clement Greenberg, Art Critic*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1979, p. 154.

"Clement Greenberg: A Critic's Collection" opened at the Portland Art Museum, Oregon [July 14-Sept. 16] and will travel to venues that have yet to be announced. The 190-page catalogue, which is copublished by Princeton University Press, contains essays by Anthony Caro, Bruce Guenther and Karen Wilkin, with a preface by John Buchanan, Jr., a collector's statement by Janice Van Horne and 59 succinct artist biographies by Hrag Vartanian.

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Caro: **Shades of Night,** *one of the 25 units from his* **Last Judgment** *sculpture, 1996-99, stoneware, wood, steel, 7⅛ by 12⅝ by 3⅞ feet; at the 1999 Venice Biennale. Photo courtesy Annely Juda Fine Art.*

his early pieces as being about what it was like to inhabit the body, an idea that seems to have freshly engaged him, this time from the perspective not of an eager young man of 30 or so, but of a grandfather.

Caro is increasingly fascinated with mass and volume, building sculptures in which charged, enclosed interior spaces—sometimes visually or physically penetrable, sometimes opaque—compete for attention with the plates and planes that define them. At one extreme are the "sealed" volumes of the "Gold Block" series (1997-2000), seen at Marlborough Gallery in New York last year, which includes such enigmatic and memorable works as the clenched, waist-high *Pierced Block* (1997), a portly stack of subtly distorted, brutal steel cubes, irrationally interrupted by chunks of wood. At the opposite extreme is an eminently enterable, immense outdoor sculpture installed last year in Palma de Mallorca: a procession of stepped steel towers, like systematically spiraling arches constructed according to some alternative geometry, through which we can trace a slow, stately path. *Pierced Block* is a truculent, self-contained presence, like an inhabited body; *Palma Steps* is a mysterious place, clearly separate from ordinary experience, but despite its monumental size, nonrhetorical—a special zone that quietly announces itself but insists that we pay attention to our perceptions as we move through it. It will be fascinating to see how Caro further develops these notions of interior and exterior, place and object, in two major current projects—one, the interior of a ruined Gothic church in Picardie, the other a large work for a public site in London. The evidence in his studio suggests that we are likely to be surprised once again.

If Caro is rethinking issues that concerned him when he first grappled with his identity as a sculptor, his friend Kenneth Noland is also reexamining the implications of his early works, returning, after four decades and many other preoccupations, to his "signature" Circle format. At first acquaintance, his new Circles appear rooted in the unassailable assumptions of his initial statements of the theme. Like the ravishing early Circles—and all of Noland's subsequent work, for that matter—the current versions, some of which were shown earlier this year at Ameringer/Howard/Yohe, are "cool," deductive, disembodied, deliberately nonassociative, and lush. As in most of Noland's pictures, the hand is little in evidence; they are about the fact of paint on canvas, not the act of putting it there. And, as we expect of this master orchestrator of color, they are about the weight and associative power of hue, interval and edge. Yet 40-odd years of making and thinking about paintings (with occasional forays into sculpture and other mediums) inform Noland's recent Circles, making them strikingly unlike what preceded them.

The singleness and transparency of the first Circles have been replaced by a new complexity. While the remarkable chromatic harmonies of the early Circles demanded (and rewarded) close attention, they were easy to read. Their symmetrical, declaratively frontal, deadpan imagery was readily apprehended, and their rigorously close-valued color structure kept their subtly varied rings in a single plane. Noland's new Circles are no less symmetrical or frontal than their antecedents, but since they depend on nuances of scale, surface and tone as much as they do on seductive, unnameable color relationships, they read differently. The recent Circles are based on edge-to-edge sweeps of single hues that establish mood and emotional temperature the way a musical key does.

Noland: **Nimbus,** *2001, from the "Mysteries" series, acrylic on canvas, 48 inches square. Photo courtesy Ameringer/Howard/Yohe.*

