

Clifford Ross | What Remains...

The sun is half the world, half everything,  
The bodiless half. There is always this bodiless half,  
This illumination, this elevation, this future

Or, say, the late going colors of that past,  
Effete green, the woman in black cassimere.  
If, then, New Haven is half sun, what remains,

At evening, after dark, is the other half,  
Lighted by space, big over those that sleep,  
Of the single future of night, the single sleep,

As of a long, inevitable sound,  
A kind of cozening and coaxing sound,  
And the goodness of lying in a maternal sound,

Unfretted by day's separate, several selves,  
Being part of everything come together as one.

WALLACE STEVENS, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,"  
stanza XXIII, lines 1-14

# Clifford Ross | What Remains...

SPRING 2025

Foreword by Paul Goldberger

Interview by Andrew L. Schoelkopf

## Schoelkopf



## Acknowledgments

Clifford Ross and I met some time ago on the kind introduction of our mutual dear friend Megan Fox Kelly, and we share a great many common interests. We both love early American modernism and believe that Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, and John Marin are among the greats. Clifford and I also adore art generally and love to look at pictures together.

What began as a fast and close friendship has turned into an engaging and joyful partnership as well. Schoelkopf Gallery's representation of Clifford's painted works begins with this solo exhibition of new paintings, his first in thirty years. Many readers of this are already aware of the many facets of Clifford's unique and unbridled creative process. Clifford is a polymath and looks for a solution in every challenge in pursuit of his images and ideas. His creation of the R1 camera to enable a higher definition photograph of nature than had previously been accomplished is just one indication of the power of his intellect and energy. The outcome of that technological advancement helped Clifford to create one of the most beautiful and inspiring photographs of nature I have ever experienced.

The current exhibition is entitled *What Remains...*, which is the title of several works in the exhibition. That title emerged from our fun-filled conversations and process of pasting up Post-its on the walls of Schoelkopf Gallery months ago when we began to envision the physical presentation of this incredible body of work. It is also inspired by a Wallace Stevens poem, an excerpt of which is transcribed in this catalogue.

The most interesting part of the works for me is the manner in which they have come to life and evolved from a single photograph. Clifford's use of that source material for inspiration and a heavy dose of emotion and powerful expression in the painted marks have created a powerful body of work that I believe will resonate for decades and

is an honor to share with the public. The work that comprises the current exhibition is a creative process, a love story, an emotional journey, and a frenetic creative outburst that merits our serious attention.

Clifford and I would like to thank the representatives of his photography, Mary Ryan and Jeff Lee and their team at Ryan Lee Gallery who have been incredibly supportive of Clifford's wish to have an exhibition of new paintings after a nearly thirty-year hiatus.

We also wish to thank the members of Clifford's dream team in the studio, Paul DeCarli, Carly Sacher, Liron Unreich, and the Schoelkopf Gallery team as this project required the best work of them all. We would like to express our gratitude to Paul Goldberger, a Pulitzer Prize-winning critic whose writing has appeared in the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times*, whose compelling foreword anchors the reader's understanding of Clifford's work and experience of the publication. We are supported in each project by our longstanding relationships with designer Russell Hassell and printer Jay Stewart of Puritan Capital who we have worked with since our founding in 2001, and by photographer Olivia DiVecchia, who has capably represented our exhibited works since our collaboration began several years ago. Russell, Jay, and Olivia impress us each time with their professionalism and creativity and seem always ready to do their best work.

Finally, I wish to share a special thanks to Nicolette Donen for inspiring Clifford and attracting the birds of color and joy that you will see throughout the exhibition.

*Clifford Ross | What Remains...* is a unique and compelling project which has been a joy to produce. Clifford, my colleagues, and I are excited to share the work with you and look forward to your visit to the gallery and online.

Andrew L. Schoelkopf



It has never been easy to characterize Clifford Ross's oeuvre, only partially because it spans multiple mediums, including painting, photography, computer-generated animation, and stained glass. There is also the matter of Ross's sense of his mission as an artist, which I think is twofold. He approaches his work with both the outward-facing distance of the art historian and the inward-facing passion of the maker who is searching for insight into nature and himself. His art is at once coolly objective and deeply personal. He has always had a scholar's interest in the history of art—early in his career he edited a collection of essays by the Abstract Expressionists—and his early paintings were, in part, driven by a desire to experience Abstract Expressionism himself, to work through it, as it were, as a student might learn figurative drawing not because he was going to do it for the rest of his life but because he knew he had to understand it before he could move on to other things.

*What Remains...*, Ross's exhibition at Schoelkopf Gallery, both builds on all his previous work and goes beyond it, although perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it circles back around and revisits his earlier work, using it as the basis for entirely new pieces that emerge quite literally from his previous art. The pieces in this exhibition use elements from his photography and computer-generated animation, making them the starting point for a return to painting as he left off in 1994 after an earlier painting period of twenty years. He digs underneath his digital images and adds his own hand to them. Much of this new work is a quest to reveal that hand, and the revelation is in the form of both archeology and addition, at once celebrating his photography and computer-generated images and subverting them. These pieces are unquestionably paintings, but in the process of making them Ross acknowledges a photographic presence as a foundation and builds upon it with new things, with new gestures and new lines and new thoughts. Like every artist who cares about meaning, he is always making it new, and in this work, he is using his own past as the essential source.

If you are Clifford Ross—well, perhaps if you are any artist—your past is not only your own past work but also your past as a student of art and all that it means. You

can see that in this new work, where again there are hints of his abstract paintings of another era, this time emerging gently and with self-assurance, as in *What Remains IV* (pl. 22), where the richness of color and the brooding depths of darkness and a soft play of lines combine into a stunning and subtle composition. In this work, he has gone past the direct use of his earlier photographs to rely solely on his hand to express himself. There are other pieces, too, that combine warm and inviting color with dark tones that suggest complex depths, such as the *Nicolette and the Blackbird* series (pls. 8–11) and *Palaz of Hoon* (pl. 12) and *Blackbird* (pl. 13), all of which synthesize elements of color from Ross's earlier computer-generated animation with painting, in each case made into a different and resolved composition.

Not all the new work uses color or makes such conspicuous use of fragments of Ross's earlier work. In some cases, such as *Poem of Our Climate VIII* (pl. 4), *Creation of Sound III* (pl. 7), *On the Other Side of Time I* (pl. 5) and *On the Other Side of Time III* (pl. 6) the color is absent altogether, and the fragments of previous work are restrained and even, in some cases, barely visible; we are in a universe of gray darkness in which we can feel depth and movement, but no certainty. All is amorphous. Ross has referred to his work as bringing together late Claude Monet and late Francisco Goya, which tells us much about the duality he aspires to express, which he does more explicitly in paintings like *Number 1* (pl. 1), *Number 2* (pl. 2), and the two *A Death Left Incomplete* paintings (pls. 23–24), in which there are more defined lines, a clear sharpness to the composition, and a sense of two worlds, of two ways of feeling, juxtaposed. In some of the works in this exhibition, then, we feel these two aspects fusing together, and in others they stand apart. But in every one of them we feel as if we are pulled into Ross's lifelong quest to understand the history of abstract painting, as well as into his quest to understand himself and his own history as an artist—and how now, he has begun to weave these two things into one.

Paul Goldberger



## Plates









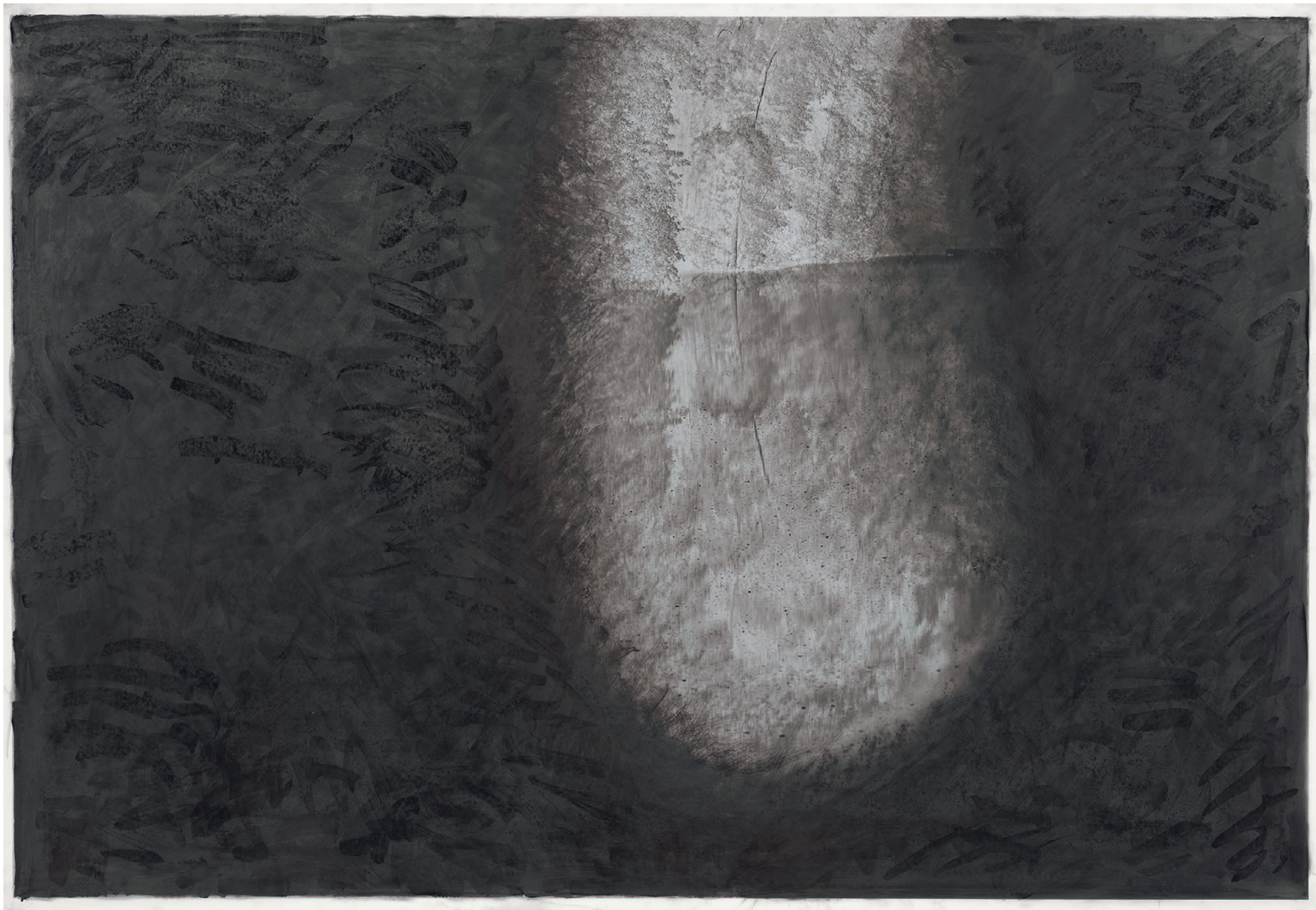


























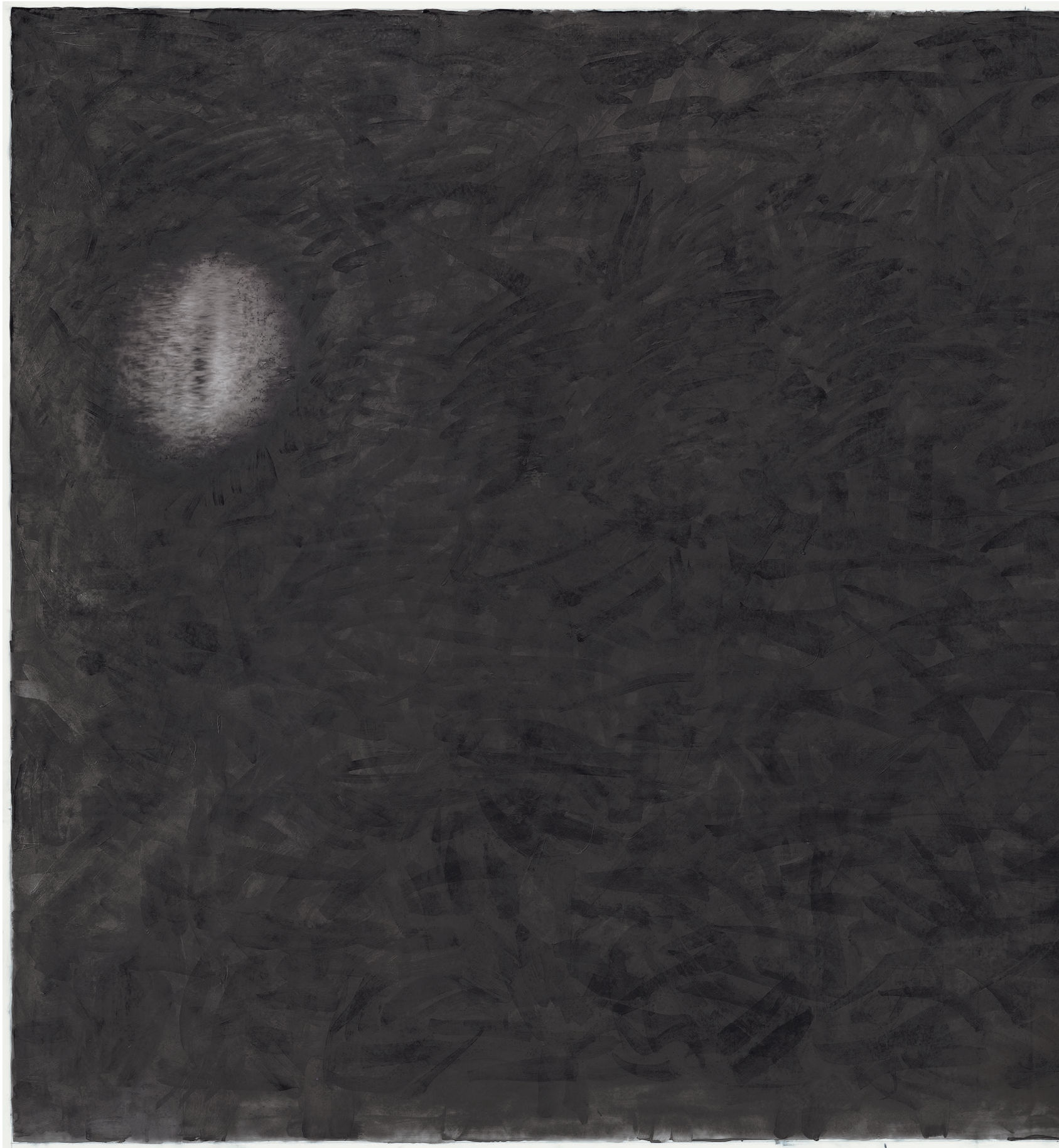






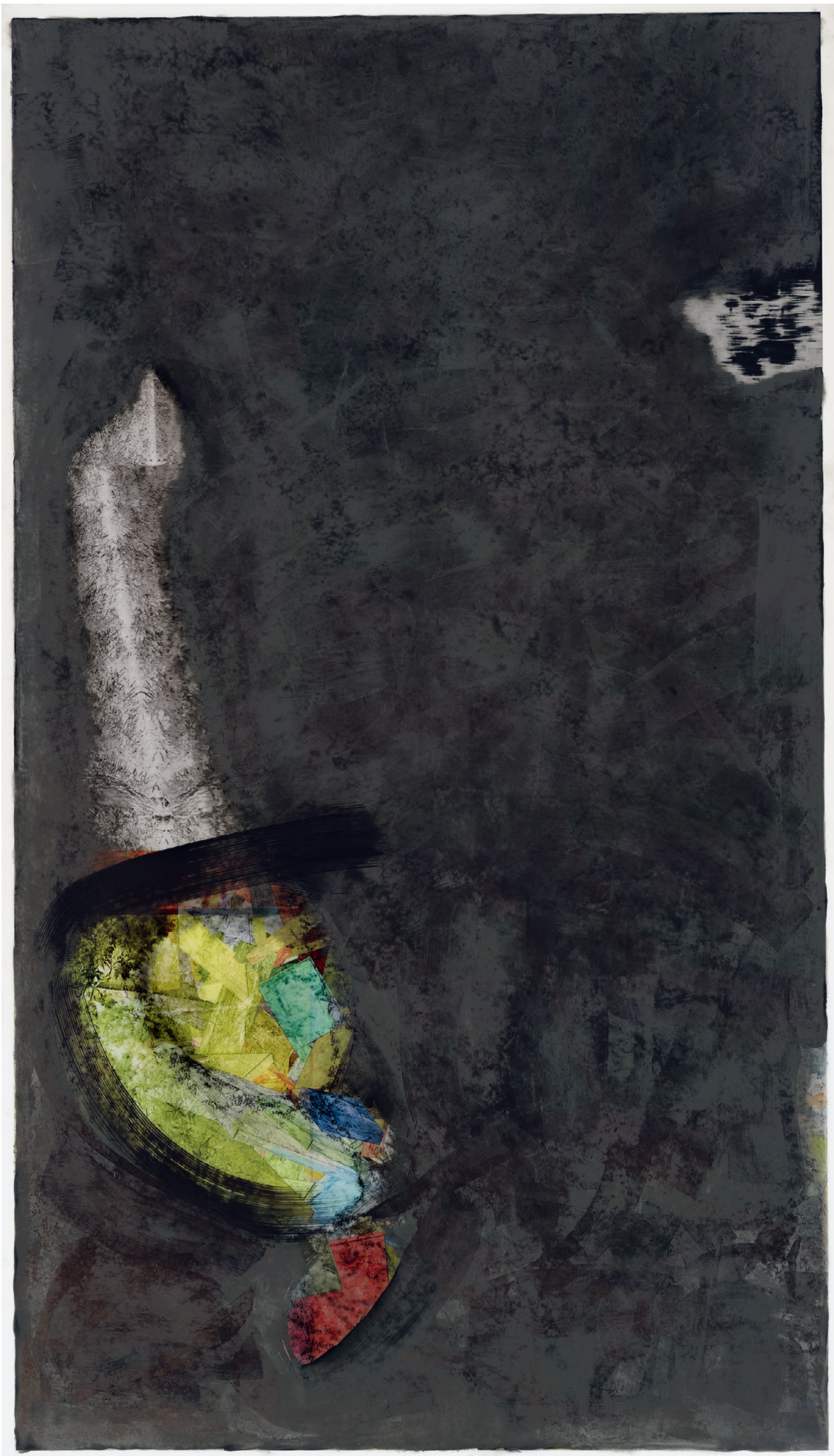
































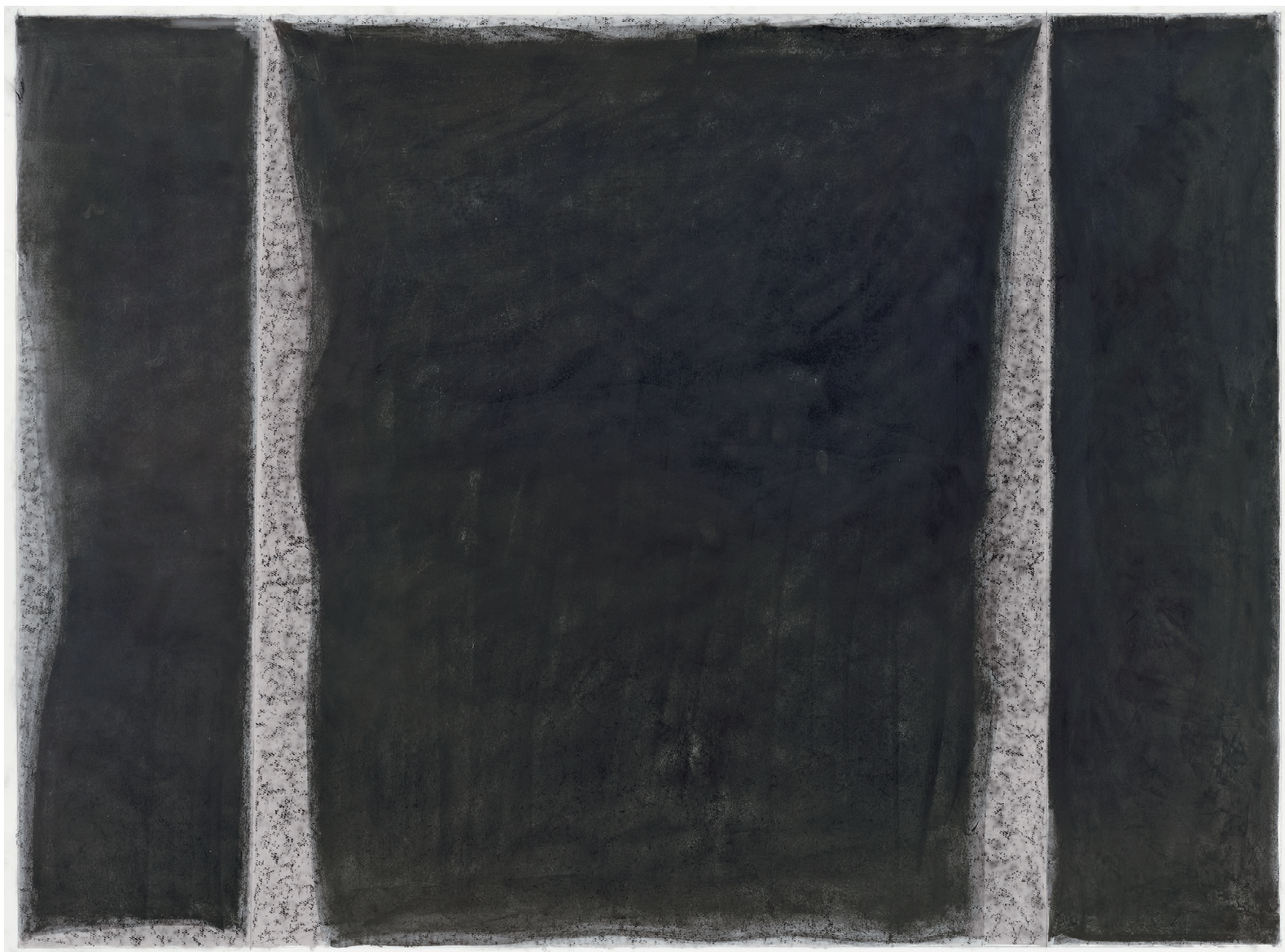














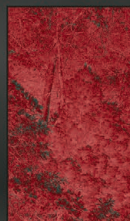
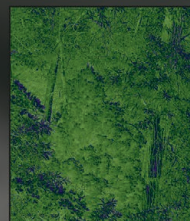
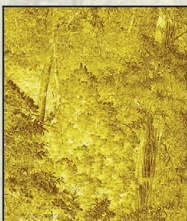
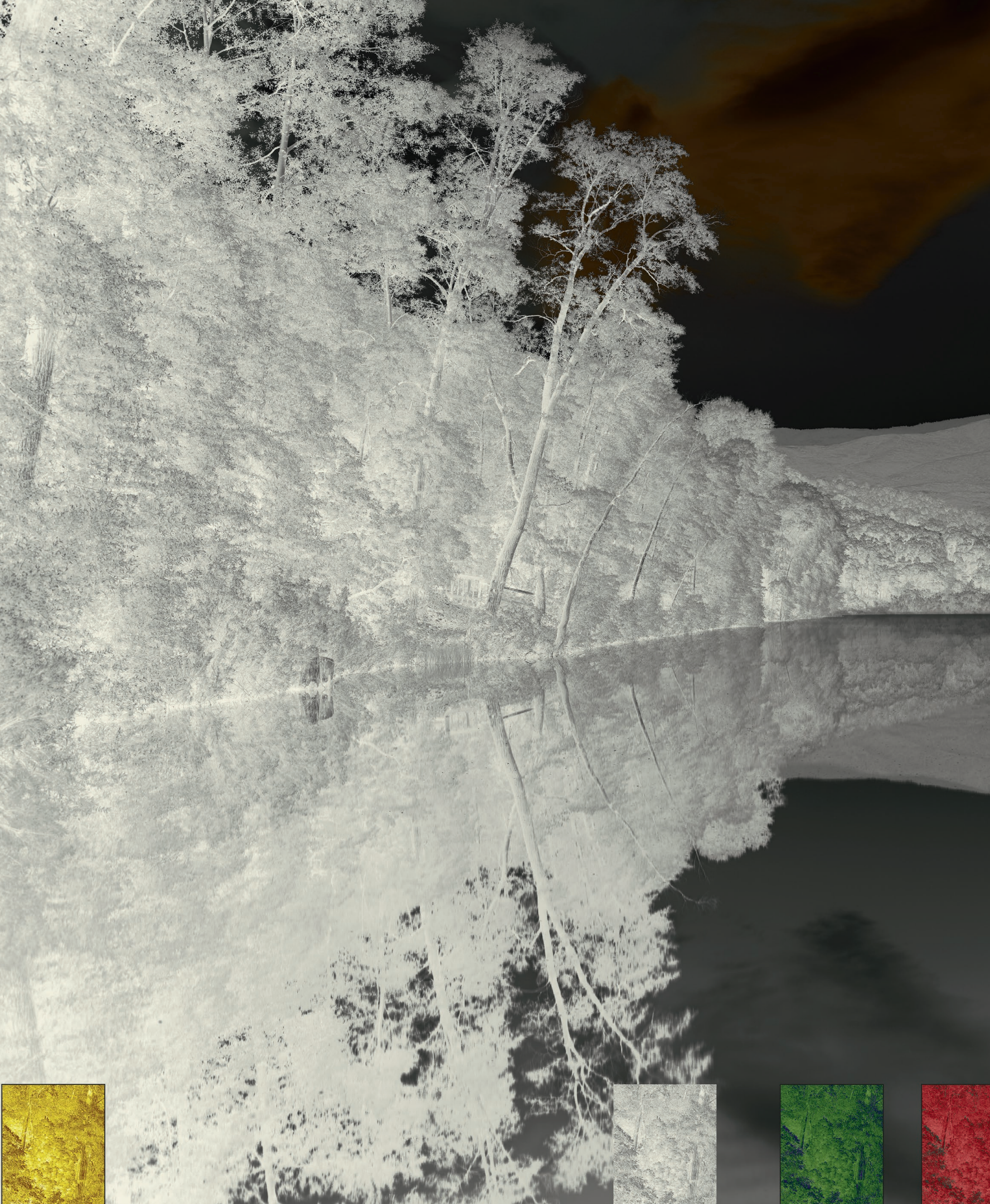


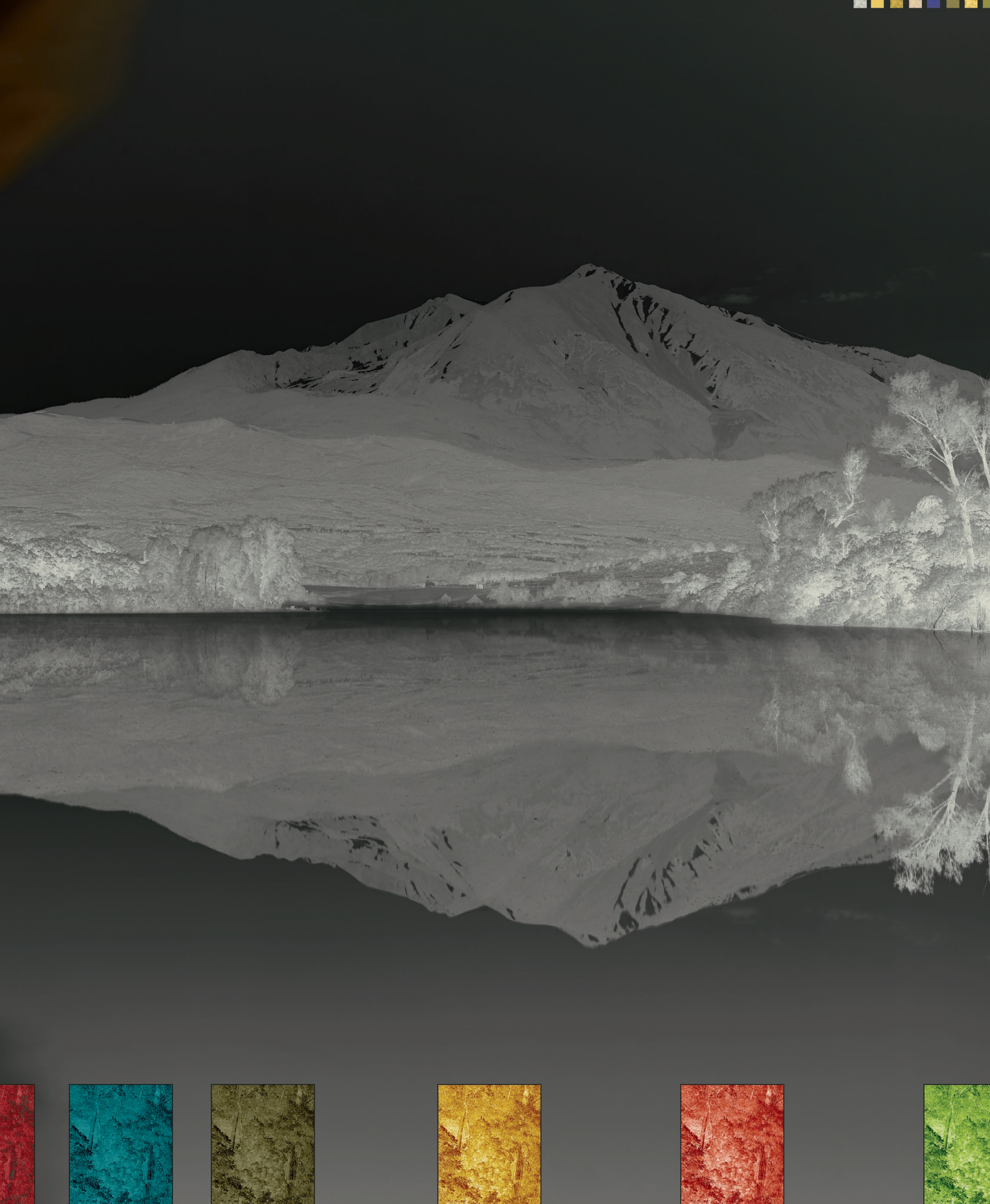












## In Conversation with Clifford Ross

Andrew L. Schoelkopf

**Andrew L. Schoelkopf:** Let's start at the beginning. Was there a moment you recall at which you determined that you wanted to be an artist or a painter or a photographer?

**Clifford Ross:** I went to college thinking I was going to become involved with law and politics, with no interest in becoming an artist. Freshman year, my advisor looked at the heavy course load I'd chosen and said that there was way too much homework and that I needed one class that was a bit lighter, like an art class. I grew up around art; it wasn't an unknown to me, so I signed up—but sort of as an oblique thing. By the end of a first semester sculpture class, I remembered how much I loved working with my hands in grade school, taking shop classes and making landscapes with crayons and cotton balls. I got hooked, took an art history class second semester, and another art class, and off I went. I've never looked back.

**ALS:** I've imagined, since we first met, our experiences as children were somehow similar, in as much as we were always immersed with artists and others around us who were devoted to art. Was that your experience?

**CR:** My family was basically split between business, politics, and the creative world of painting, writing, and so on. My father was a businessman with various other interests, and my mother made tapestries. Helen Frankenthaler was my aunt, and my mother's other sister was a writer. I was bathed in that *art* thing; I just didn't realize it. Helen was sort of a bohemian spirit in a generally uptight family, and I think it seeped into me. And as life unfolded, I became close not just to Helen but to her first husband, Bob Motherwell. They got married in the living room of our apartment when I was about six years old.

**ALS:** At one point in our discussions, we were talking about William Bailey, who was a huge part of my childhood because my father, Robert Schoelkopf, represented

him. We hung out at Yale a lot in those days and spent a lot of social time with the Bailey family, I had the experience of Bailey and other artists trying to teach me how to draw when I was a kid. Did you have anybody who sat down with you and taught you to draw?

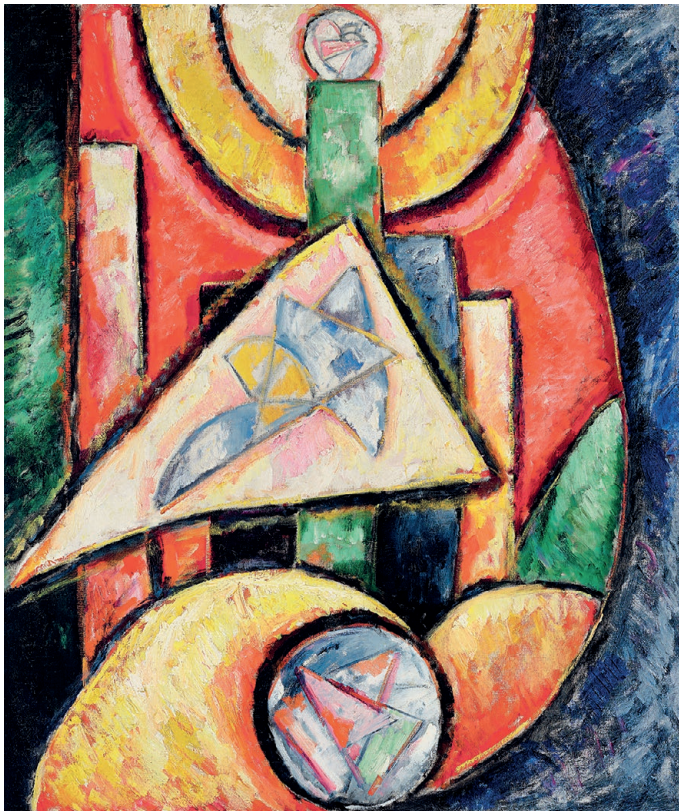
**CR:** Bill Bailey was a mentor of mine at Yale—a soft-spoken, very cultured guy who loved art history. He taught an intermediate drawing class, which I heard was great—although I had no business being in the class since I couldn't draw. He eventually let me into the class since I refused to take “no” for an answer. He's still underappreciated as an artist. And “yes” and “no” about drawing. Bill recognized figure drawing wasn't going to be my passion at Yale, but I picked it up pretty well years later at the National Academy of Design, along with sculpture and painting.

**ALS:** One of the things I didn't understand at first about Bailey's work, is that he was on the cover of the influential book *American Realism* and most people still think of him as a realist just as they do with Giorgio Morandi. It's sometimes hard to remember that their paintings had extraordinarily abstract qualities. Your work is abstract and evolves out of representation—realism to some extent. So, I just want to talk a little bit about how that idea formulates in your mind and how you had the initial instinct to start making abstract paintings based on perhaps your best-known works which are photographs of the natural world.

**CR:** Realism and abstraction are just tools of expression, like paintbrushes or cameras. For creative people, the job is to get across a feeling, a point of view—to share it with the viewer by whatever means. Titian's portrait of Charles V in the Museo del Prado resonates for me just like a great Mark Rothko. I've seesawed between realism and abstraction my whole career. When I'm jammed, having come up short somehow in a realist mode, I can pivot to

abstraction—and vice versa. Shifting gears allows me to refresh and take another shot. Trying to bottle the sublime is a reasonable pursuit in either mode. But, even as a photographer, abstract painting has always been a touchstone. My first show of photographs in 1997 was titled *Paintographs and Photographs*.

**ALS:** In previous conversations, we've talked about the generations of artists that really helped to create the early generations of abstraction. We have also talked about earlier Modernist works which one could argue are quite abstract even though we see clearly the natural inspirations they emerge from. Is that what you were thinking about at the time when you started making this body of work?



Marsden Hartley, *Abstraction*, 1912–13.  
Oil on canvas, 46½ × 39¾ inches (118.1 × 101 cm).  
Private collection



Arthur Dove, *Willows*, 1940. Oil on gesso on canvas,  
25 × 35 inches (63.5 × 88.9 cm). The Museum of Modern  
Art, New York. Gift of Duncan Phillips, 471.1941

**CR:** Hartley, Dove, and Marin became foundational for me starting in the late 1980s. I loved their commitment to the real world and abstraction—as well as to paint. Their works are central to what I'm doing now. Hey, my passion for Dove led me to your gallery a few years ago.

**ALS:** There existed different moods and different moments for Hartley, and we see them in a way we don't experience with many artists because the fissure between those two modes is faster and deeper with Hartley than it is with other artists. But if we look at John Marin, Dove, or if we look at that specific moment of 1911–12, which is a really extraordinary moment for American abstraction, most of those artists take a natural image and disassemble it. Or they use Cubism to assemble something around that natural image and create something different. Your approach here appears to be related but is quite different, which is that you've taken the inspiration from this extraordinary photograph, and you've changed its color register and moved different pieces of it around into a jumble of the natural world, and then you paint over it.

**CR:** You know, what's underneath these paintings differs. Some have portions of the “ancestor” photograph in black and white negative. Others have a Synthetic Cubist

structure with a lot of color, where the real world is abstracted using computer-generated animation and Photoshop. The underlying aesthetic of the early American abstract artists is mine too—just updated. One other element is automatism, central to the Abstract Expressionists, which allows for my wrist and subconscious to lead. I go into a sort of creative free fall, making marks in dialogue with previous marks—not just the underlying image. Instinct rules. I never know what a finished painting will look like. I don't even know which side will be up.

**ALS:** There are many great quotes from artists about how abstraction emerges from nature or art is a representation of the beauty of nature. There's one in particular that's always struck me, by Marc Chagall, which is: "Great art picks up where nature ends."

I'm wondering what you think of that when you take an image of nature. The great photograph that viewers can see in the catalogue and the exhibition is, at first blush, a very static, quite austere, and quiet image. My impression of the artworks that you've painted following

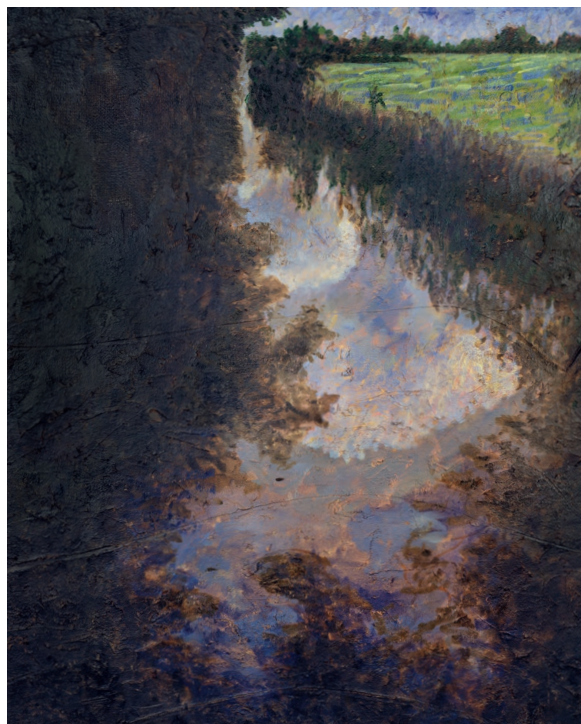
is that they are a complete departure in terms of the emotion and the energy you layer on top of them. I can almost envision a trance-like approach to obscuring that nature and leaving "what remains..."—the topic of the exhibition. But I think many people look at abstraction as an additive process. Your approach here is more of a reductive process seems to me.

**CR:** Right, the ancestral photograph under the graphite paintings is indebted to the quiet grandeur of the Hudson River School—Cole, Church, Bierstadt, and so on. But, some of the images underneath the works in this show are colorful and ecstatic. And the painted marks have the same attitude. The marks are a dance. Think Vaslav Nijinsky. If the work seems complete at an early stage, I stop painting, and the Nijinsky side of things is the story. It's the livelier side of nature. But the more the marks cover the surface, the quieter the works become. A somber quality gets in the door.

**ALS:** In looking at a few of the works in the exhibition, some of them contain that underlying image within an



Clifford Ross, *Mountain XIII*, 2006. Chromogenic print, 75 × 131 inches (190.5 × 332.7 cm). Courtesy of the artist



Clifford Ross, *Shadow of Basalt*, 1994. Oil and papier-mâché on panel, 71 x 58 inches (180.3 x 147.3 cm). Private collection



Clifford Ross, *Untitled (Study for Shadow of Basalt)*, 1994. Ink and pencil on tracing paper, 9 x 7½ inches (22.9 x 19.1 cm). Courtesy of the artist

image that is identifiable, and if one knows the source imagery for the colorful prints in the background, one can understand where it came from. You've changed the color register, you've dynamically turned, twisted, steered them, you've zoomed in and zoomed out on little captions or little pieces. And on the other hand, there is another picture that is almost completely blanketed with paint. So, that's what made me think that the abstraction is a reductive process. You're reducing, obscuring from our view of the underlying image. Is that part of your process or thought process, or no?

**CR:** After painting a lot of these paintings over imagery, I kept looking at one that had been completely over-painted. And that's when I wondered if I had the strength to paint something without any imagery underneath. To begin and end with abstraction. It was a challenge to tangle with an issue that I've been struggling with since I started painting. It came to this: can I paint a good picture without the runway of nature?

**ALS:** Let's use that as a point of departure to go back to the amount of time that's passed since you had your last

painting show, nearly thirty years. In between, you have been very active—always making art, relentlessly exhibiting art, creating very ambitious public installations of art. Was that a thoughtful decision to stop painting or stop showing your paintings for a period?

**CR:** I never abandoned painting. One day around '94, my dealer at the time saw hundreds of tiny photos, cheap black and white contact prints, on the floor of my painting studio and asked about them. I explained they were just my private notes. But he insisted on putting three of those photographs into my next painting show with him. I hated the idea. But he was persuasive, and the small photos stood up to my large-scale paintings. They seemed legitimate, they had a real message and feeling. That's the moment photography came and got me, but in my mind, I never quit painting.

**ALS:** One of the things that's always struck me about you is that you're not just having a series of experiences, you're on a journey. And these paintings have always felt to me like a journey. With the benefit of hindsight, now we can look back to where the imagery started, from a photo-

graph of a mountain and the step you took with that photograph into computer-generated animation. You even got Philip Glass to create an original score for your first video in 2010.

**CR:** I spent most of five years making fourteen photographs of Mount Sopris, building a camera, figuring out how to print 9-by-18-inch color negatives, convert them to massive digital files, and so on. Five years to make fourteen images. But at a certain point, I felt that I hadn't captured certain aspects of the mountain—the excitement I felt as the weather changed, the thrill of its size . . . so in steps over years, I turned the image into something else while searching for its hidden aspects. *Harmonium Mountain*, the video with Phil's score, was just another attempt to bring the mountain to the viewer. Although the computer-animation was built from a still image of the mountain—a serene start—it takes off into something effervescent, filled with movement and wild color, before returning to serenity.

**ALS:** One of the things I've wondered, particularly upon seeing these works in a sequence, is what are you hearing and thinking as you're painting them?

**CR:** I listen to music a lot. I've had phases over decades, love affairs with different types of music. I listen to classical, rock'n'roll, jazz. Clapton and Callas are good companions in the studio.

Not to be fancy pants about this, but one of my favorite quotes is from Walter Pater: "All art aspires to the condition of music." I read it years ago, and it stayed with me. My first book of photographs was called *Wave Music*. I aspire to the condition of music for my work, to make something that goes right to the heart.

**ALS:** Your gesture goes from applying a lot of very dense pigments to obscure something or cover something, to passages where a whole blanket has fallen over a big part of the picture, or alternatively, a very staccato gesture on top. I'm wondering if that is inspired by the mood or the music?



LEFT TO RIGHT: Clifford Ross, *Harmonium I*, *Harmonium III*, *Harmonium IV*, 2008. Archival pigment ink on Japanese paper, each 39½ × 31¾ inches (100.3 × 80.6 cm)



Clifford Ross, *Harmonium Rain II*, 2021. Pigment ink on matte film, 46 × 34 inches (116.8 × 86.4 cm). Courtesy of the artist

**CR:** Those marks, which are in all of the works, come from a movement in my wrist that's in my paintings all the way back to 1980. It's in my wrist somewhere, and there's something about an accelerating brushstroke that's always thrilled me. But the marks aren't just on top. They're my constant gesture, what's underneath the blanket of graphite . . . the hidden life. It's something in me, and the music just helps get the wrist going to put it out there.

Listen, I never know where these paintings are going. Never. At any given moment, I think I do, and then I'm surprised to see where they want to go. At some point, it

feels like a painting is done. Willem de Kooning said he stopped when a painting had “a countenance”—a certain stability, but he didn't look for a painting to be “finished” in a traditional sense. It's just where it wants to be.

**ALS:** Let's take a step back and talk about how they're made.

**CR:** There are a lot of steps—so many you don't want to hear about them all. It's quite mad: a color photograph of a mountain, coming up short, my love for nineteenth-century paper negatives, handmade Japanese paper, coming up short, color, computer animation, stained glass. It's a long trail. I'm propelled by a love of materials and nature. I was jammed in the studio during Covid, picked up a pencil and began to make marks on a print. I'm not a pencil guy, but something clicked. The more I used it, the more I discovered the magic—and eventually remembered that liquid graphite was used by a number of artists. The material is mysterious, sensual, allows for erasure, polishing, and has a certain will of its own. I felt liberated.

**ALS:** Which brings us back to the title of this current project and exhibition. *What Remains...* harkens back to a poem that was very meaningful to you. One of my personal favorite works in the show is also titled *What Remains...*, among the most abstract of the images to my eye. Do you think of that as a summation of this series?

**CR:** I don't think of this as a summation because this is never going to end. You'll have to knock on my coffin to tell me it's over.

This catalogue has been published on the occasion of the exhibition *Clifford Ross | What Remains...* organized by Schoelkopf Gallery, New York, and presented at the gallery Spring of 2025.

ISBN: 979-8-218-61317-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025933166

Schoelkopf Gallery Staff:

Andrew L. Schoelkopf, Owner

Alana Ricca, Managing Director

Erin Cecil, Director of Research

Maryanne Forsythe, Executive Assistant

Kelsey Gallagher, Research Manager

Nicholas Knapp, Director of Operations

Tom Morrill, Exhibitions Manager

Adele Whitmyer, Sales Associate

Photography: Tom Morrill (pls. 6, 9–10);

Olivia DiVecchia (pls. 1–5, 7–8, 11–24)

Design: Russell Hassell

Printing: Puritan Capital

Color and press supervision: Aaron Constant

All rights reserved

Reproduction of contents prohibited

Publication copyright © 2025 Schoelkopf Gallery

Cover: *Palaz of Hoon*, detail, 2021 (pl. 12)

Page 2: *The Blackbird Whistling or Just After II*, 2021 (pl. 14)

Page 4: *Nicolette and the Blackbird VII*, 2021 (pl. 11)

Pages 6–7: *On the Other Side of Time III*, detail, 2020 (pl. 6)

Pages 56–57: *Velvet Cloud*, detail, 2008. Archival pigment print on Japanese paper, 40 × 85¼ inches (101.6 × 216.5 cm)

#### PHOTOGRAPHY AND COPYRIGHT CREDITS

All work by the artist © Clifford Ross

Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images (p. 59, lower left) //

Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by

SCALA / Art Resource, NY (p. 59, upper right) //

Courtesy of Clifford Ross Studio (pp. 56–57; 60; 61, left and right; 62, left, center, right; 63)

Schoelkopf Gallery

390 Broadway, 3rd Floor

New York, NY 10013

212 879 8815

schoelkopfgallery.com

# Schoelkopf





Schoelkopf