

Robert Reed

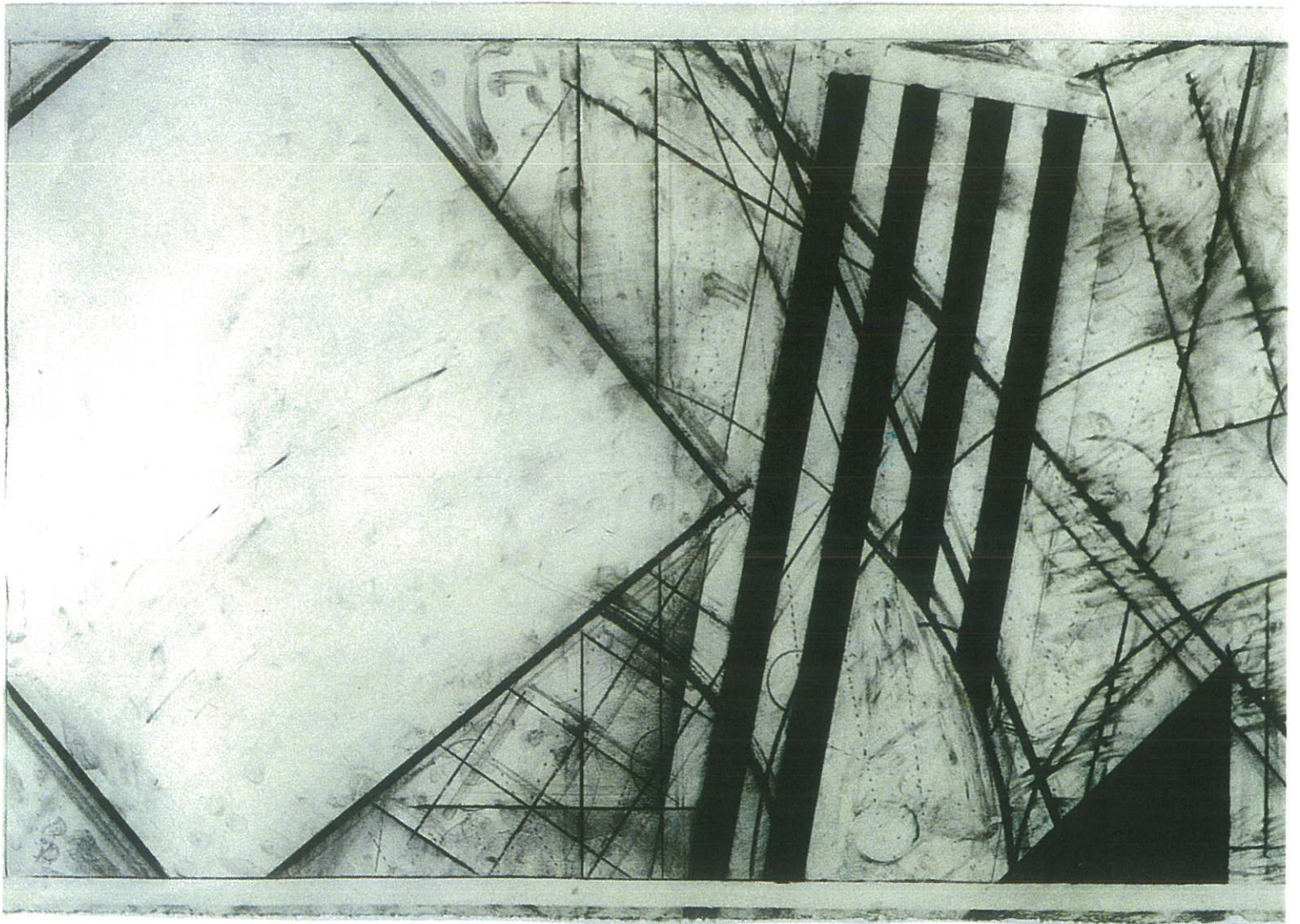
As Martha Scott points out in the *Introduction*, in Robert Reed's eighteen works in the Searle collection, paintings, drawings, collages and monoprints which date from 1980 to 1991, we follow in part "his decades-long search" for personalized symbols. There appears to be a progression from his *San Romano* series, 1979-1984, in which Reed denies "figuration and description in order to create a language of abstraction" from the art historically-inspired symbols rich in historical references of the clashing medieval spears, shields, and helmets, "to his newest *Tree for Mine* series," rich in personal references. In the latter series "he plugs into his family tree in his birthplace of Charlottesville, Virginia. Along the way he has absorbed the formalist vocabulary of *cubism* and *constructivism* as demonstrated in his juxtaposition of specific abstract forms. At the same time he...[expresses]...a new-found self-awareness."¹

Reed's art in the Searle collection begins with five works from among the many paintings, drawings, collages and monoprints included in his *San Romano* series. Of these five works, four are monoprints: *Two, San Romano, Armstead Homestead*, 1980, and *San Romano, Balance*, 1980, include charcoal and pastel along with printer's ink, while the other two, *San Romano, Desert Peach*, 1980, and *San Romano, Pine Garde*, 1980, in addition to printer's ink include other mixed media. The fifth work from this series, *San Romano, Romantic Notion*, 1983, is a painting in aqua-tec on canvas. Symbols that appear in these works, lances, spears, helmets, and shields, are abstracted and emblemized from Paolo Uccello's *The Battle of San Romano*, circa 1455, Reed's first acknowledged art historical source.² Reed's interest was in the formal structure of Uccello's painting, an interest that may have derived from his awareness of Philip Guston's early exploration of the construction and dynamic rhythm of this same Uccello work, since Guston's and Reed's time at Yale University overlapped and they had become good friends. Reed has indicated however that he discovered his own affinity for the Uccello aesthetic quite by chance when, in 1978, he was moving to a new studio in New Haven, Connecticut, where he was teaching as an adjunct professor at the Yale University School of Art. While going through old boxes during the move he rediscovered a reproduction of Uccello's painting that sparked his new interest in it and eventually led him to the National Gallery in London, England.

Paolo Uccello's three-part painting, commissioned by Cosimo de Medici, is what really made the battle of San Romano famous. Actually the battle, which took place during one of the long wars in Italy between Florence and Siena, was neither a large nor politically important fifteenth century battle. Nevertheless it was important to Cosimo de Medici because it commemo-

Born: 1938, Charlottesville, Virginia.

96 *San Romano, Armstead Homestead*, 1980. Monoprint with charcoal and pastel. H. 42" (106.7cm) W. 55" (139.7cm).



rated a military hero of fifteenth century Italy, Niccolo Mauricci da Tolentino. The painting by Uccello, an Italian quattrocento artist, originally decorated the bedroom of Lorenzo de Medici but the three parts have since been dispersed to the National Gallery in London, the Louvre in Paris, and the Uffizi in Florence. To share in his reawakening to Uccello, and on the occasion of his son's twelfth birthday, Reed decided to take himself and his son to London where the beginning battle, and also the best preserved of the three-part painting, can be seen at the National Gallery.

For Uccello, the three-part painting, *The Battle of San Romano*, combined his fascination with linear perspective and his fondness for decorative color and contours. While the subject was Florence's victory over rival Siena, the paintings do not depict action battles, but carefully measured battles. Uccello's style, a brilliantly quirky amalgam of Florentine rationalism and Sieneese lyric tendencies, shows an extreme preoccupation with stereomatic shapes. Discarded weapons and pieces of armor create a grid-like design on the ground and, including a fallen soldier, become a neatly arranged display of perspective which nevertheless produces strangely disquieting effects. Even the landscape background was subjected to stereomatic abstraction. Spots of brilliant color and lavish use of gold decoratively reinforce the surface pattern.

For a large number of modern and contemporary artists, for example, Joan Gris, George Braque, Fernand Leger, Dubuffet, Carra and Philip Guston, Uccello's aesthetic presented a striking affinity. Whatever actually directed Reed's interest to the Uccello triptych, this historical model could hardly have been more congenial to him, and it led to his own dynamic *San Romano* series of paintings and graphics. For Reed, who had an enduring preoccupation with the coupling of hard-edge geometry and color-field abstraction, what was intriguing was the manner in which Uccello had frozen his figures and horses in time and set them against a rich foliated landscape opening up to space. By lifting passages from the rigid frieze-like arrangements of Uccello's metal puppet soldiers and wooden horses in the first panel of the famous triptych, Reed created his own activity of a heightened battle scene. In Reed's drawings, watercolors, or tracings of Uccello's battle, there are no figural depictions of horses or knights in armor. Instead there are elliptical forms for the horses' bellies, cylinders for the knights' legs, or prisms of helmeted heads, and the arc is transcribed from the horses' studded rump harnesses. Reed extracted from Uccello's earlier painting and rearranged the broken lances and spears, horse harnesses and studs, and the banners and shields. In his own works there are curlicue banners, bold stripes and grid patterns to represent the lances and spears as they crisscross, push diagonally into action or are broken in a conscious disarray. Sometimes he even painted the works of his *San Romano* series directly on top of his own earlier works.

97 *San Romano, Balance*,
1980.
Monoprint with charcoal and pastel.
H. 28" (71.1cm) W. 42"
(106.7cm).



Opposite: above

- 98 *San Romano, Desert Peach*, 1980.
Monoprint with mixed media.
H. 26" (66cm) W. 38" (96.5cm).

Opposite: below

- 99 *San Romano, Pine Garde*, 1980.
Monoprint with mixed media.
H. 26" (66cm) W. 38" (96.5cm).

In his own past styles in earlier paintings Reed had created bold yellow and black striped banners and had been attracted to the pomp, circumstance and splendor associated with flags and banners. In Uccello's banners, shields, and chevrons, Reed saw similar motifs defined. Interested in the maneuverability of a body in armor, Reed also wanted to enact a real panoramic battle in his own works, a loud and noisy clash. From Uccello's world of ideal objectified solid forms of knights and horses, swords and lances, frozen in time, Reed unleashed geometric elements to harangue the viewer with the visual noise of broken shapes, shattered planes, and chromatic violences. He isolated elements of Uccello's composition and pared them down to their nonobjective bones in preliminary sketches. When the results particularly intrigued him, he fused them with patterns and shapes from his own creative repertoire of forms and shapes. Although the only visible combatants are vibrant hues and vigorously counterposed geometries, several of his *San Romano* works seem to ring with the clash of warring armies. Circles and arcs, cylinders and elliptical forms, crisscross lines, triangles and prisms, appear in Reed's works, all representing elements of Uccello's painting, the horses bodies and decorated rumps, fighting men, shields, and the flashing, clashing weapons. Reed combined scissor-sharp geometric shapes with big, bold improvisational gestures to create dynamic visual impact. The multi-layered color shapes create the loud clang and noise of battle.

The spatial complexity in Reed's work depends on the general quality of overlaid planes together with the local incidents of in-front/in-back relations among adjacent areas that often result in spatial paradoxes. Much of the broken quality of shape and color comes from collage or the emulation of it in paint. In his actual collages highly varied elements are held in place with staples, and the staples themselves are part of the artistic structure of the work, more than part of the mechanical or physical structure. Each staple is strategically placed to be visually active, zips and dashes of energy, field deployed incidents that vivify the surface and contrast with the substantiality of the very shapes they hold. As Martha Scott has noted, "Reed's use of paper staples in his collages can be equated to the act of building. They speak of architecture," and become little fillips to the eye.

Al Held was also teaching at Yale University from 1962 to 1980, during Reed's years as a student and later as a teacher. Interestingly, in his paintings and drawings of the same time and earlier, Held also was involved in the creation of Euclidian geometric forms; arcs, triangles, circles, rectangles and cubes in illusionistic space, often against underlying supporting or overlaying floating grids. The small black and white circles and triangles that served as punctuations in Held's paintings of larger geometric shapes on black or white fields seem to be echoed in the punctuating circles, and even in the arrangement of similar geometric forms in works of Reed's *San Romano* series.

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- Fig. 7 Searle Executive Reception with Robert Reed's painting, *San Romano, Romantic Notion*, 1983. Number 100.

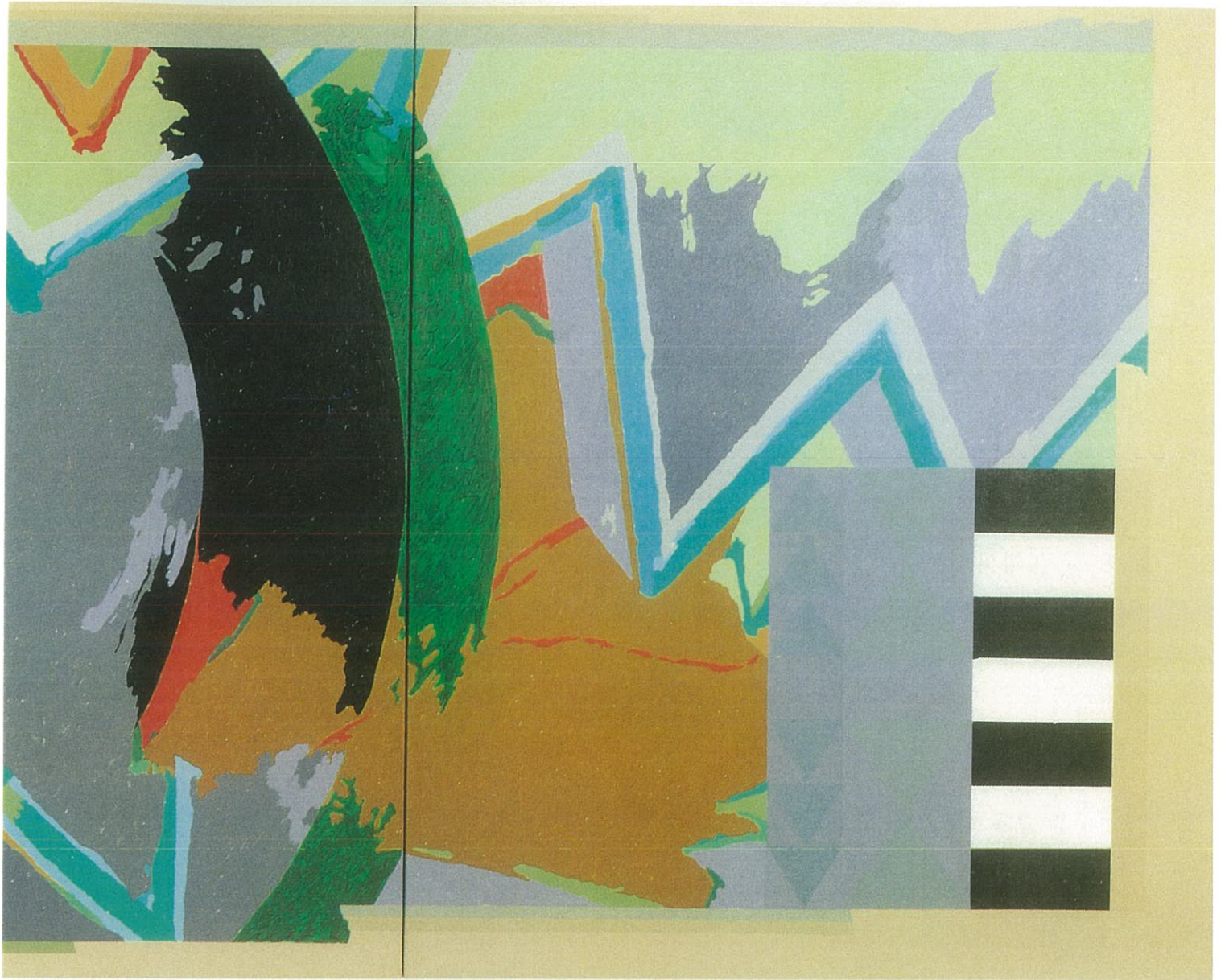
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- 100 *San Romano, Romantic Notion*, 1983.
Aqua-tec on canvas.
H. 60" (152.4cm) W. 72" (182.9cm).











Opposite:

Fig. 8 Searle Staff Dinig Room with painting by Robert Reed. *Tree for Mine, Boxwood*, 1987. Number 101.

Foldout:

101 *Tree For Mine, Boxwood*, 1987.
Acrylic on canvas.
H. 84" (213.4cm) W. 216" (548.6cm).

Concurrent with his interest in the Uccello painting, Reed experienced personal changes in his own life. The personal changes led him to search for his roots and his heritage in Virginia where he had lived until he was fifteen years old.³ The *Tree For Mine* series, whose title obviously refers to his family tree, became Reed's new thematic series and in it he makes use of an enlarged repertoire of specific symbols that derive from his return to Virginia. An example of this is the image of three steps that appear in the new works in the same overt way as the circles and arcs appear in the *San Romano* series. Three crisply outlined black and white steps serve as a dominant motif in many of Reed's paintings, drawings and collages in the *Tree For Mine* series and its form is quite evident in appearance in *Boxwood*, 1987, the Searle painting from the series. The steps allude to the steps from his family home where Reed used to sit and think. For Reed, the painter, however, the form of the steps was the vehicle that enabled him to work with a black and white scheme.

Moreover in the *Tree For Mine* series pairings of colors in narrow bands repeatedly occur, for example, two-color combinations of four units, representing the school colors of the four schools Reed attended, including Morgan State College, Baltimore, Maryland, where he received a Bachelor of Science degree, in 1958, and Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, where he received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1960, attended the Yale Summer School of Music and Art, in Norfolk, Connecticut, in the summer of 1960, and then received his Master of Fine Arts degree in 1962. The colors may further suggest the 'then' and 'now' of Reed's life: 'then' being his boyhood in Charlottesville, Virginia; 'now' reflecting the prestigious academic climate of Yale University where he has been a respected and admired professor of art since 1969.

All the imagery Reed uses he manipulates in an illusory space, with the motifs pressed so flat against the picture plane that they almost bounce off it. Yet there is so much to look at beyond and beneath what is so aggressively presented in the foreground. Everything appears to weave backward and forward within the space as if receding and emerging. Every motif also seems to have a meaning beyond pure decoration: For instance, the staples that parade across the surface of some of his work, the *art deco* starbursts, and the many subtle references to Reed's boyhood in Charlottesville. The titles of his works also are signposts of definition. Even in the *San Romano* series, *Armstead Homestead*, 1980, refers to his family's birthplace, making one wonder at the association of home and battle. Some of the titles are a play on words from experiences he has shared among the people with whom he grew up and, although often assigned with tongue-in-cheek and wittily, they may provide some identification of the associations the imagery offers.

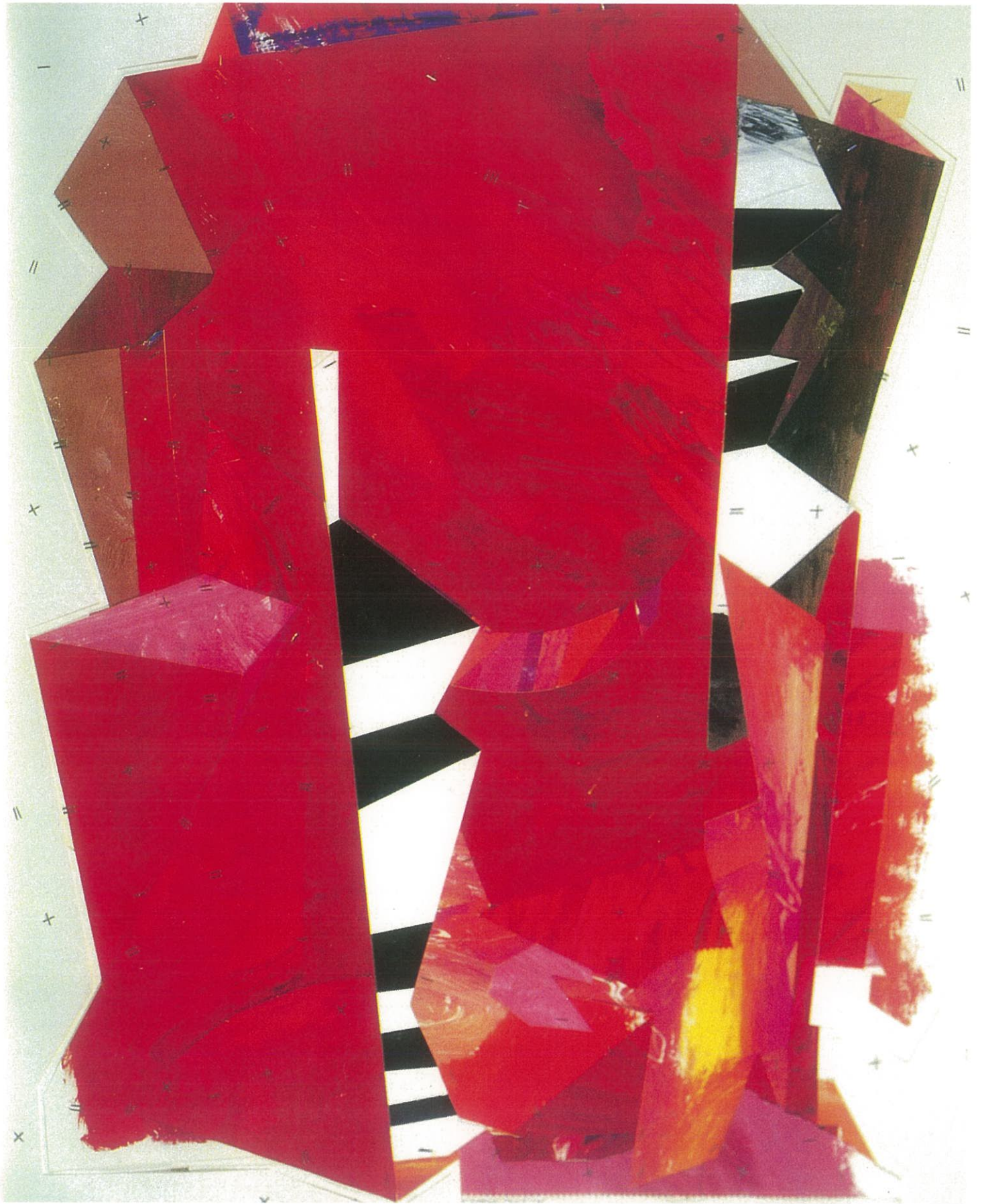
In his more recent works of the 1990s Reed has introduced more curvilinear

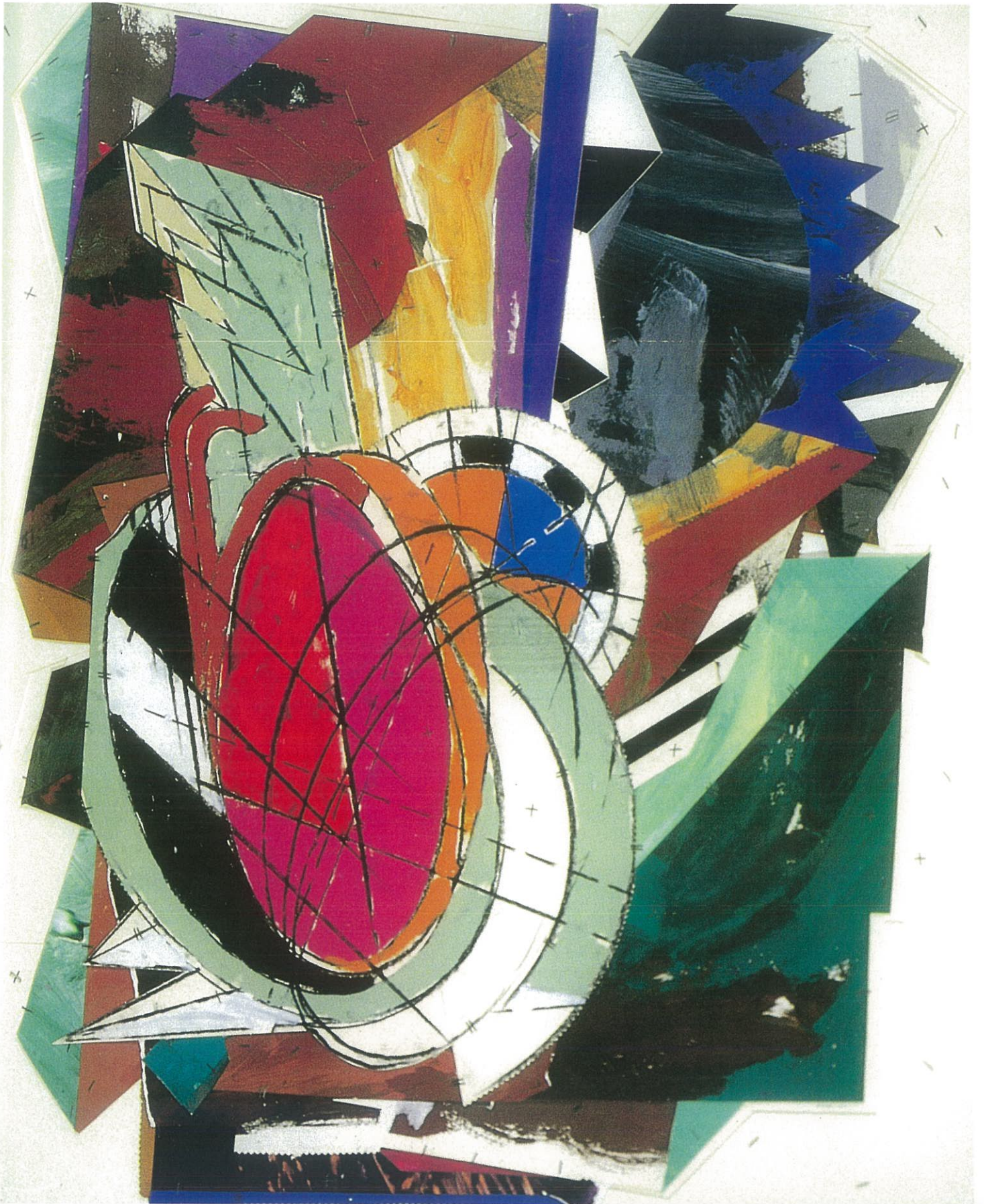
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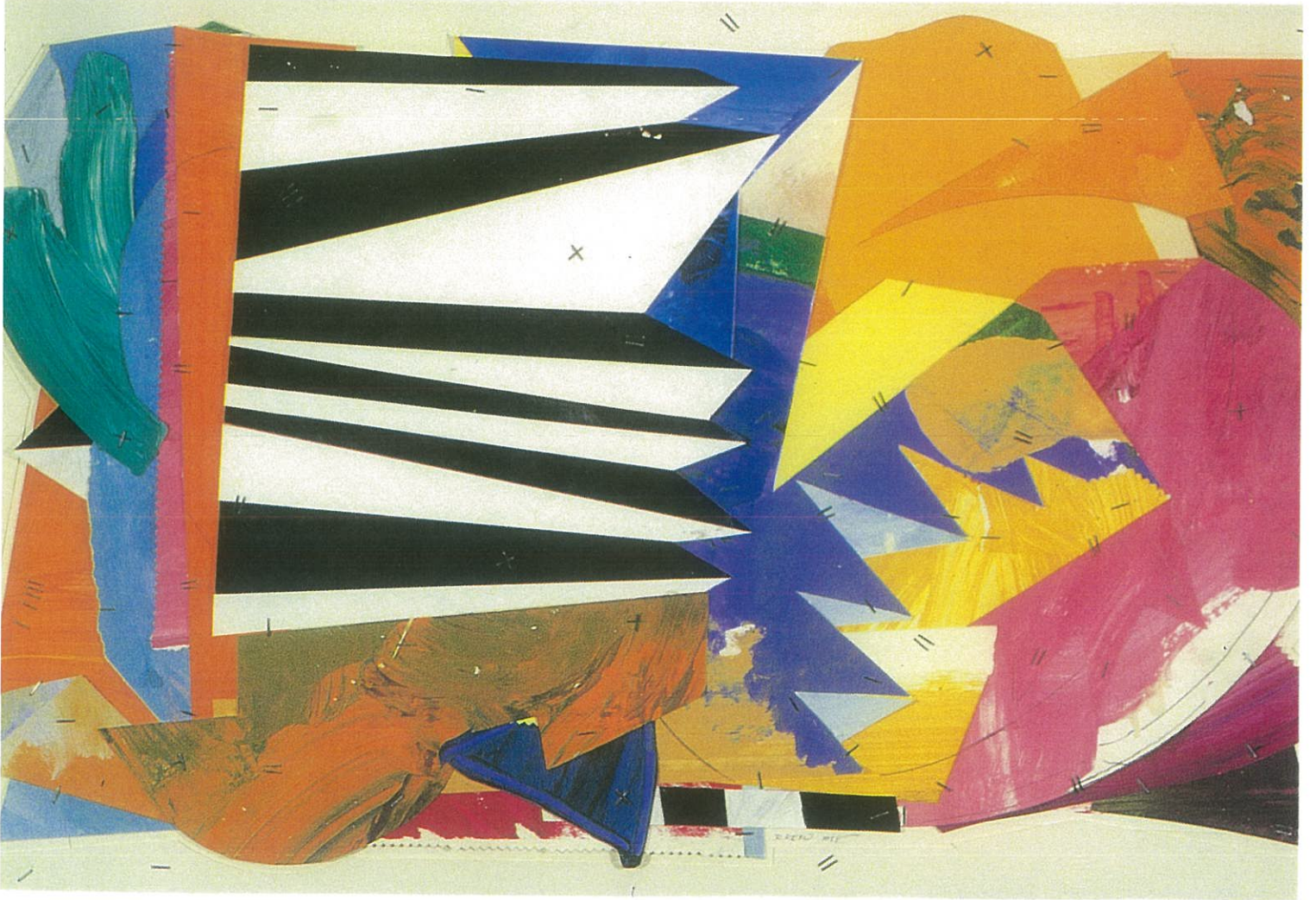
102 *Tree For Mine, Jefferson Red Devils*, 1988.
Collage and acrylic on paper.
H. 40" (101.6cm) W. 32" (81.3cm).

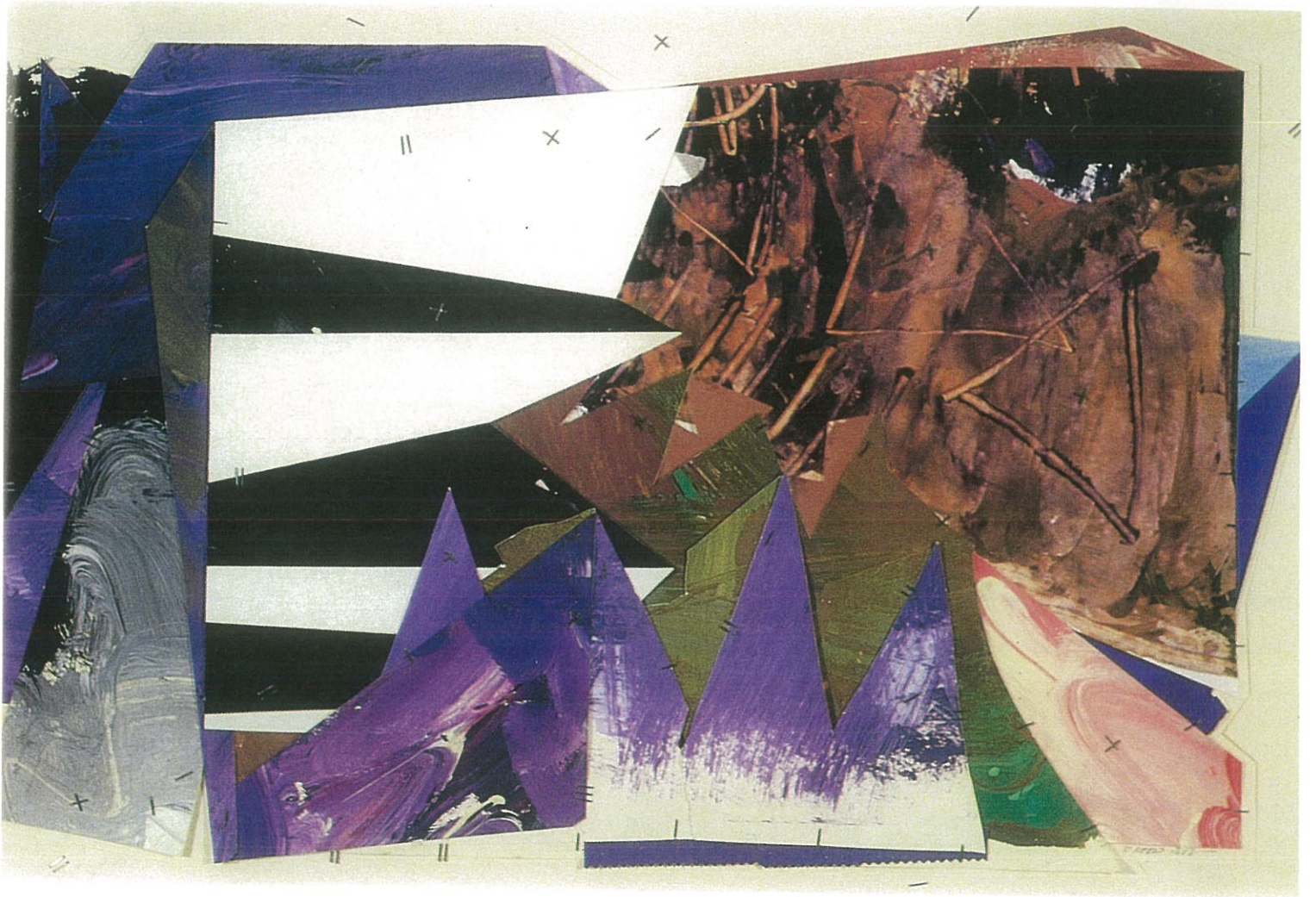
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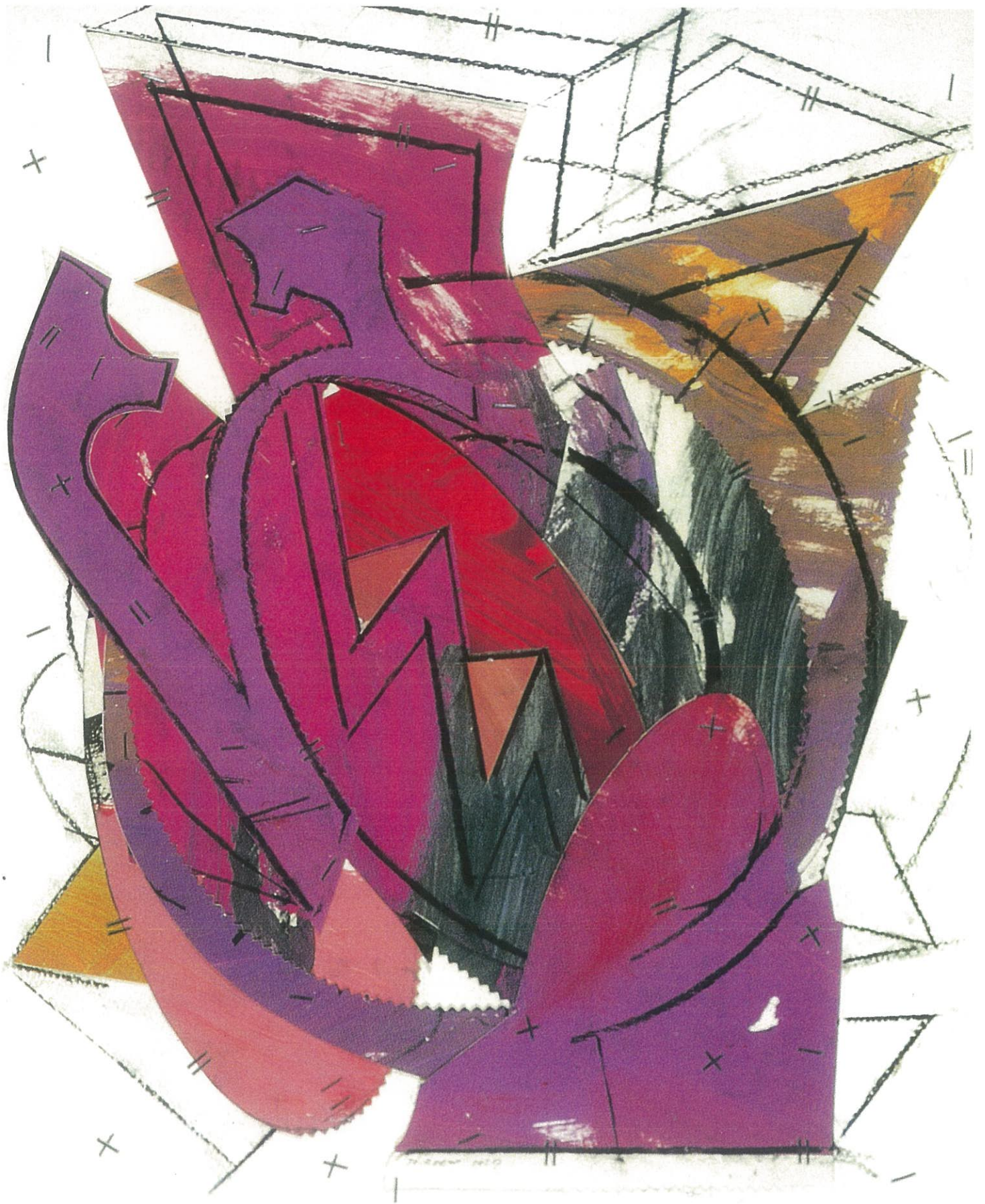
103 *Tree For Mine, Two the Point*, 1988.
Collage and acrylic on paper.
H. 41" (104.1cm) W. 33" (83.8cm).











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- 104 *Tree For Mine, Just For Now*, 1988.
Collage and acrylic on paper.
H. 21" (53.3cm) W. 32" (81.3cm).

Overleaf: right

- 105 *Tree For Mine, Pan Tops*, 1988.
Collage and acrylic on paper.
H. 33" (83.8cm) W. 21" (53.3cm).

Opposite:

- 106 *Tree For Mine, FBC, Purple*, 1989.
Acrylic on paper.
H. 20" (50.8cm) W. 16" (40.6cm).

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- 107 *Tree For Mine, Suite East Market*, 1990.
Collage and acrylic on paper.
H. 30" (76.2cm) W. 25" (63.5cm).

Overleaf: right

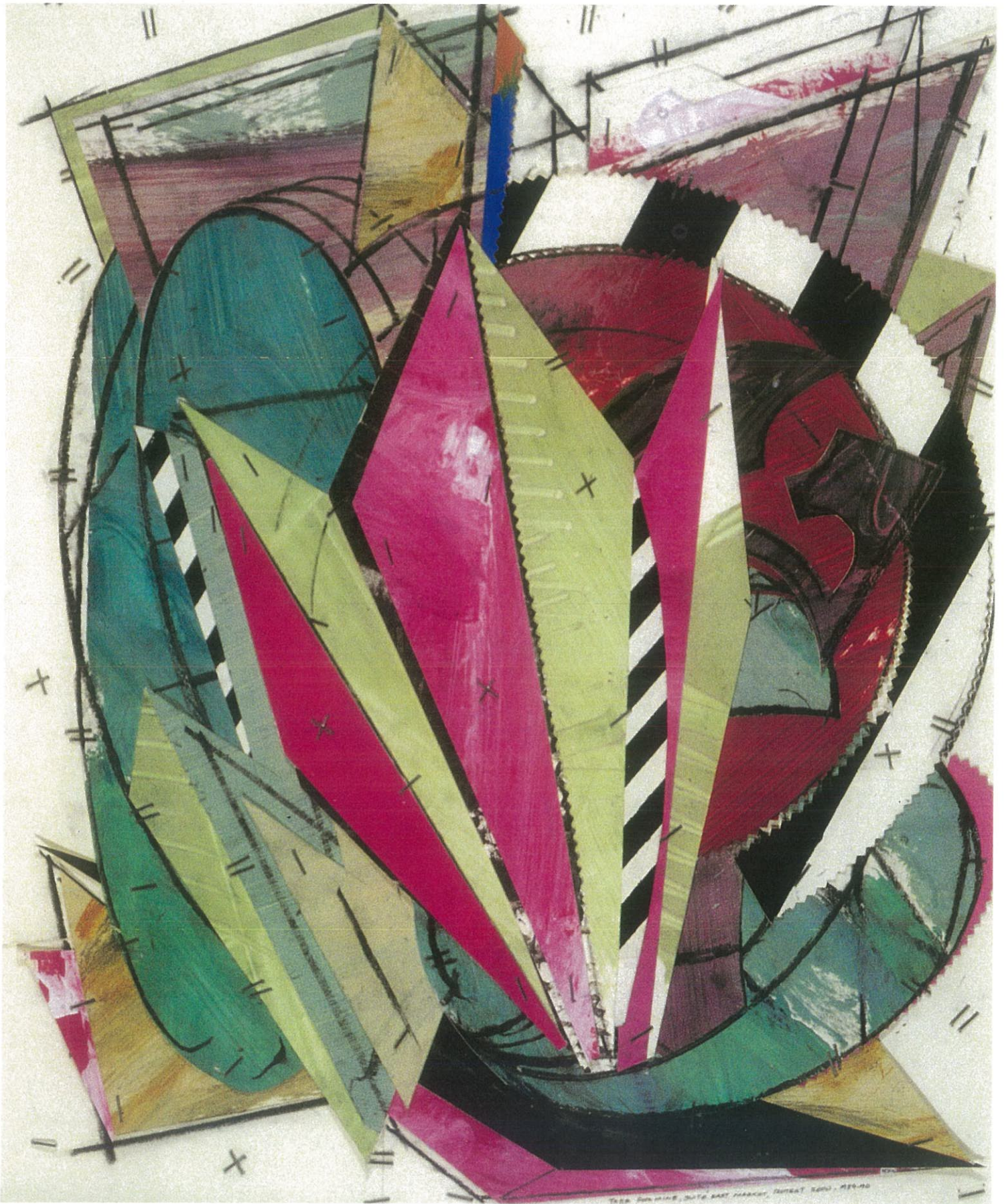
- 108 *Tree For Mine, Suite Market Street*, 1990.
Collage and acrylic on paper.
H. 30" (76.2cm) W. 25" (63.5cm).

ear elements and gracefully curved lines defining expansive swelling forms, as in the Searle collection's latest images in the *Tree for Mine* series. The rigidity of geometric forms has loosened and, as Frank Stella did, Reed seems to be moving in a new direction. In his earliest works of the 1960s "he found his symbols in flags and banners painted in bold, bright colors [that] heralded the spirit of pomp and splendor in celebrations."⁴ In the 1970s in his *Plum Nellie* series, the source of Reed's imagery also derived from meaningful experiences of his formative years in Charlottesville, Virginia, where he was born in 1938 and lived until the age of fifteen. The works in the *Plum Nellie* series represent his first overt homage to the locus of his youth. Eventually a grid pattern entered into the works in the series and became a dominant new symbol with a personal reference that continued to appear in other works as well. It derived from a checkerboard box brought to him from Haiti by his son.

To some the title *Plum Nellie*, apparently meaning "almost" or "nearly," suggested that the central strategy of the works in the series was a dialogue between what is almost there and what is not, that a structure, surface, or form, is "almost" defined, but not quite. To Reed however these works, even with their overall sense of abstraction, were landscapes based on some reaction to or movement in a landscape space, perhaps suggesting growth, or a literal view in terms of a ground-sky orientation. Thinking landscape provided the input for the imagery and informed Reed's decisions and moves in the paintings as they progressed. Such landscape orientation came out of his earlier literal concerns in 1960 while attending the Yale Summer School of Music and Art in Norfolk, Connecticut. At the time he was actually painting very large open landscapes with illusions of tree-like forms.

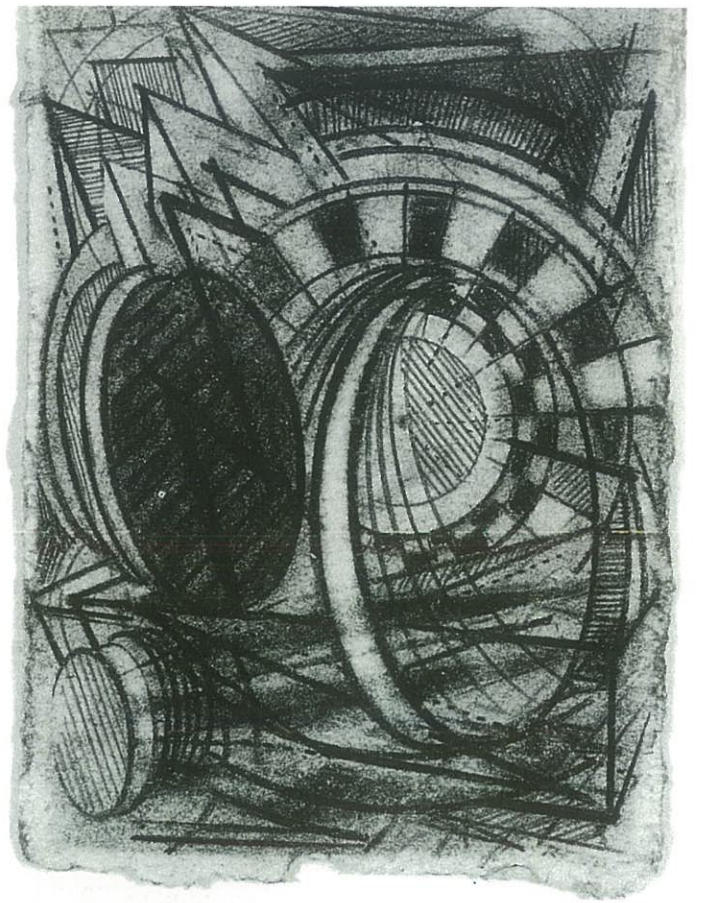
In the *Plum Nellie* series Reed also began to paint with dioxidine purple poured onto raw canvas to create amorphous organic forms which he then extended and continued with gestural brushstrokes and against which he juxtaposed geometric, rectilinear forms. The violet sucked into the canvas surface resembled velvet and Reed let it contrast with matte surfaces of planar shape as well as with the raw canvas. Sensuous, nuanced, soaked areas of purple swelling outward in an organic sense of expansion played against the whiteness of an assertive geometry of rectangles sometimes also forming a doorway idea, or a post and lintel construction of horizontals and verticals meeting together. The juxtaposition of rectangular forms and atmospheric expanses recalls the late paintings of Hans Hofman, for instance, his *Memoria in Aeternum*, 1962, now in the Museum of Modern Art, in New York City, in which Hofman's planar tensions, rectangular slabs of color with hard edges cut with a knife, dilate through thinner atmosphere of amorphous shapes formed from bold active brushstrokes.

The paintings from the *Plum Nellie* series brought Reed into the New York City art scene. It was their general sense of elegance, as in their elegant sur-



THE SUMMER SUITS EAST HANDED OUTSET 1960 - 1960-60





Above: left

- 109 *Tree For Mine, Culia II*, 1991.
Charcoal on paper.
H. 11" (27.9cm) W. 9"
(22.9cm).

Above: right

- 110 *Tree For Mine, Iga*, 1991.
Charcoal on paper.
H. 11" (27.9cm) W. 9"
(22.9cm).

faces, as well as a presence their images exuded, and the sense of illusion they created, which made them immediately appealing, and brought Reed recognition at the 1972 biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, and in 1973, at exhibitions in two New York galleries and the Whitney Museum. His paintings have been regularly exhibited since then, and he continues to teach painting at Yale University.

1. Martha Scott, *The Quest of Robert Reed*, a catalogue essay for the exhibition *Robert Reed, The Tree for Mine Series*, February 5-28, 1988, Second Street Gallery, Charlottesville, Virginia.
2. Martha Scott, in the *Introduction* to this catalogue, p. 15.
3. Martha Scott, *The Quest...*, *op. cit.*
4. *Ibid.*

Below

- 111 *Tree For Mine, Odd Fellows All*, 1991.
Charcoal on paper.
H. 11" (27.9cm) W. 9"
(22.9cm).

Overleaf: left

- 112 *Tree For Mine, Park Her Gray*, 1991.
Collage and acrylic on paper.
H. 38" (96.5cm) W. 68"
(172.7cm).

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- 113 *Tree For Mine, Maggie Walk Her*, 1991.
Collage and acrylic on paper.
H. 70" (177.8cm) W. 37"
(94cm).



