

MARK BAUM

ELEMENTS OF THE SPIRIT

with an essay by Leora Lutz

krowsworkbooks

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ELEMENTS OF THE SPIRIT**

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Artwork photography: Nick Pishvanov; cover image:
Adventure, 1968. Acrylic on canvas, 66 x 80 inches.

INTRODUCTION

Jasmine Moorhead

“As members of this human race, we have spiritual life. As artists let’s hope our spiritual life is more intense than average. I find this spiritual life a blessing. When an artist in the course of his work shares his blessings with those about him, he communicates at the best possible level.”—Mark Baum

Although there is certainly a line—a before and an after—in Mark Baum’s work, there is nonetheless also a continuum between his representational painting that spans the 1920s to the late 1950s and the non-objective work that consumed him completely from that point on until he stopped painting shortly before his death in 1997.

Even in the earliest of his landscapes or city-scapes, we see the seed of something different, something that is to come. We are not wrong when we see a certain restlessness, an obsession with an all-overness, flatness, and patterning that compelled him even as he painted fields in Ithaca, overpasses in Queens, or water on the shores of the Atlantic. Maybe we can even place that seed to his unusual childhood in what is now Poland but was then the Austrian Hungarian Empire. In a conservative Jewish household, his mother divorced his father—virtually unheard of— and was exiled to the United States. (There was no place for her there, her father warned her.)

So perhaps the seed is there when one morning the four-year-old Mark work up and his mother was missing.

Raised in his grandfather’s house, he found instead a sense of aesthetics and daring. There was nothing to lose and everything to gain. He would often, later, recall a moment from that period when he was playing in his yard, his

grandparents’ yard, and had been at it for so long—digging for so long in the dirt that when he looked up he was struck by the change in the light. He had been in one world (his imagination grounding him) and looked up and the light had changed. The world. The reality. That which surrounded him. All of it had changed.



Yet he was still there.

Following World War I Mark'schutzpah took him across Poland, occupied Germany, and through Copenhagen to the Atlantic, where in New York he started completely fresh. The rest of the story you see as completely as I could tell you in the paintings.

Mark was jovial, passionate, and disciplined. He sought to make meaningful works but he was never at a loss for what that meaning was or where it was to be found. ...



MARK BAUM: FROM LIFE TO LIFE

Leora Lutz

///TOWARD ABSTRACTION///

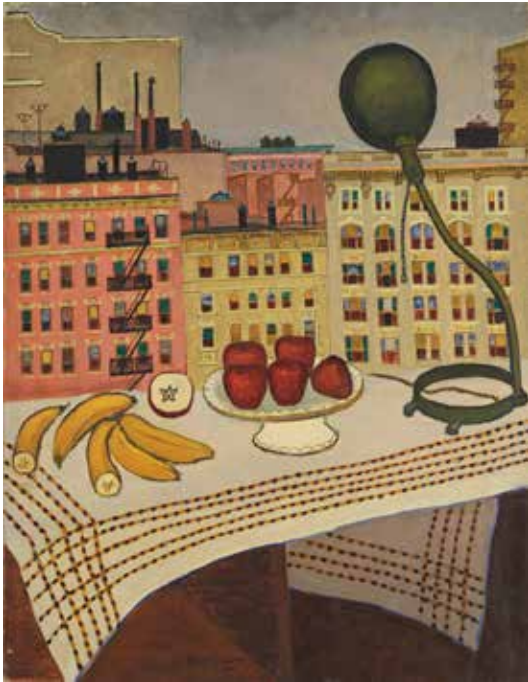
Because of its elusive and open interpretation, abstraction is a very private and sacred formality. In the quest for finding solutions to formal problems, many artists turn to systems as a means of developing their own individualized visual abstract language. Contemporary artists such as Sol LeWitt, or his lesser known contemporary Channa Horwitz devised mathematical rubrics or series of instructions to create artworks. Others such as John Cage composed games of chance, or used series of questions, to form visual and musical compositions.

Mid-century modern critics tried to debunk spiritual notions as passé, but in reality the historical roots of abstraction and its early inception in the late 1800s was spawned with a certain type of spiritualism in mind. The Polish artist Kasimir Malevich developed Suprematism as a means to create art of pure artistic feeling rather than representation of object. Later, Frank Stella also created his minimalist works with the intent that abstraction was a reflection of the artist's emotional world, and that painting was an object, rather than a representation. Agnes Martin was a foundational minimalist who embraced spiritual inclinations toward art making, and thus toward life. And, of course, particular credit in this concern goes to Vasily Kandinsky and his seminal book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, a text often called upon for support in this essay.

For these and other twentieth and twenty-first century artists, phenomenology and its philosophical study of the consciousness point toward the desire and purpose to tap into a deeper, meditative outcome with artmaking. So it was also with the painter Mark Baum (1903–1997) whose work spanned the better part of a century and bridged formal and spiritual concerns, ultimately merging them into a single, visceral experience.

///FROM LIFE///

From the late 1920s until 1948, Mark Baum was a representational painter, focusing on landscape, cityscape, and still life. The scenes are warm and serene, despite their sometimes condensed subject matter, and full-bleed of imagery extending beyond the edge of the canvas. One piece in particular seems very influenced by early Expressionists: a window view of New York tenements and rooftops in the 1946 piece *Still Life with Fruit and Lamp*. The upright skewed two-dimensionality of the table cloth in the foreground is reminiscent of early table scenes and still lifes by Henri Matisse such as *Still Life with Shellfish* (1920) or *Still Life with Apples and Pink Table Cloth* (1924). Meanwhile, the color palette and urban scene out of the window recall Mario Sironi's *Periferia (il tram e la gru)* (1921) and similar works. Other urban and suburban landscapes that he was creating were complete with brick build-



Mark Baum. *Still Life with Fruit and Lamp*. 1949. Oil on canvas, 30 x 20 inches.

ings, crisscrossing fire escapes and meticulously stippled shrubbery and trees. *Ithaca Landscape* (1949) is an important piece because it is here that a meticulous patterning begins to form in Baum's interpretation of plant matter, particularly representation of distant trees and bushes, and foreground details of shrubbery and plants. Each object is painted with distinct care, taking each node, leaf, or branch into consideration.

From the beginning, some early critics applied the terms "naïve" and "primitive" to Baum's work, monikers which the artist rejected, stating plainly: "I did not fit into the category of 'primitive.'"¹ Art historians Harriet and Sidney Janis concurred later that Baum "was too advanced for a primitive painter."² Their clarification implies that "primitive" was a somewhat diminutive term to which Baum was erroneously aligned, and also then justifies Baum's objection to this term as ultimately pejorative.

These early pieces by Baum maintained both folk-art flatness and early modernism two-dimensionality. There are also early signs of Cubism's influence, strictly for the abstraction and flattening of objects. All of these qualities in the early works, the flatness, the finite detail, the intense looking, and the meticulous patterning are at the basis of his practice, even as the work begins to take on new direction and develop new layers of intensity and meaning.

///CRISIS///

Baum had been attracted to art exactly as an antidote to the material, and in his initial art education in the galleries and museums of New York City in the 1920s he would have certainly encountered the works of American artists such as Marsden Hartley who rejected bourgeois materialism in favor of a "quest for spiritualism" which Donna Cassidy defines in her book *Marsden Hartley: Race, Religion and Nation* as, "the manifestation of an anti-modern anxiety."³ Europeans such as Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and later Rudolf Bauer, all of whose work was part of the original Guggenheim collection housed in the Museum of Non-Objective Painting in New York, adopted abstraction because it represented a complete renunciation of materialism and focused instead on the purity of form, composition, and color. The removal of figurative or landscape representation gave rise to new pictorial and visual language where a larger philosophical context could be talked about freely through abstraction.

Baum began to be more fully a part of this conversation at the beginning of the post-World War II era, when in the late 1940s, he found himself questioning the popular art of his time, Abstract Expressionism. Even though he was still working in a representational style, his objection to it had nothing to do with the abstraction itself. Instead Baum felt that the work

was about individual hype and recognition, rather than exploring the meaning of painting and human existence. In a long statement written in 1962, Baum recalls his feelings during the late 1940s: "Painting seemed worthless. Many factors produced this crisis, among them was Abstract Expressionism which was at the forefront of American painting; and to which I was bitter and antagonistic, not to its originators but to the imposters who practiced this solely for their own reward. I watched them cling to it."⁴

Part of the blame can be put on critic Clement Greenberg (1909–1994) who insisted Abstract Expressionism to be simply gesture, ignoring the possible spiritual concerns of the artists.⁵ In his 2003 lecture "Reconsidering the Spiritual in Art," historian and critic Donald Kuspit argues against Greenberg's view that the "spiritualist effect of art...is a case of misplaced materialism."⁶ Kuspit points out a disconnect that helps explain what Mark Baum must have sensed at that moment: "Greenberg once said that abstract art reflected the materialistic positivism of modernity, but Kandinsky's abstract art refuses to do so, which is no doubt why Greenberg did not care for it. He did not believe in the possibility of transcending the basic attitude of one's times."⁷ Baum believed very much that art could transcend his times. Because Greenberg was a dominating critical voice at that time, one can see how Baum's frustrations might have been fueled by the kind of critique and spectacle that was surrounding Abstract Expressionism.

But Greenberg's impact was real: it is from this point in abstraction, particularly in the United States, that any emphasis or talk of spirituality in abstraction becomes either ignored, certainly was no longer fashionable, and such topics and associations become reserved for outsider artists, visionaries, and art movements like Art Brut.

In 1948, as he saw these changes happening, Baum's response was to withdraw, spending time in Pennsylvania, immersed in the gloomy landscapes of a small mining town. He began painting landscapes in a new light, prompted by self-reflection. "My search at that point, not very conscious," he states simply in his notes, "was for an approach to the spiritual in painting."⁸



Mark Baum. *Centralia Coal Mine*. 1951. 18 x 24 inches.

///THE STAIRCASE///

Baum continued to paint landscapes and representational work, but shifted away from the urban scenes to abstracted compositions comprised of imagery culled from the landscape paintings, particularly the staircase as subject. *Movements in the Backyard* (1947) is one of the first paintings using multiple staircases, as well as many later including *Homecoming* (1948), and *Abstract Garden* (1948) which feature bold and less detailed style than others.

Of this work, Baum considered the painting *Aspirational Staircase* (1948) the pivotal piece. "I realized [the staircase] to be from the point of view of aesthetics, a diagonal movement across the canvas; a movement that was composed of one and the same units, a movement that had direction," he noted in his artist statement from 1965.⁹ The painting's somber dark green

sky and ominous, jagged darker green clouds scatter above a meticulously painted beige staircase with white railing that bisects the picture plain from the lower left, ascending to a doorway at the edge of a building with a teal door. The repeated units that Baum referred to are most likely the tiny layered triangles



Mark Baum. *Aspirational Staircase*. 1948. Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches.

that comprise the steps themselves. Each step is painted with care and study, and forms a linear composition that leads the viewer slowly, shape by shape up to the top. Baum saw the staircase not only as a directional object, but as a symbol for emotion: “What is involved here is a parallel of the directional movements in a painting to the movement or flow of human emotions in life. . . . It is an up-going movement. We experience the same inner movement when we aspire for something.”¹⁰ Similarly, Kandinsky compared the upward movement of human spiritual quest to the pyramid, also an angular shape with ascending sides: “Anyone, who absorbs the innermost hidden treasures of art, is an enviable partner in building the spiritual pyramid, which is meant to reach into heaven.”¹¹

During this time, Baum’s work becomes more lyrical in its use of the stairs, and some of the compositions still bleed off the edge of the frame. *Stairs and Garden* (1949) is another important

piece during the middle of his transitional period. It is the first piece where Baum begins to closely study aspects of nature, painting small groupings with care and consideration, ordering them in asymmetrical clusters on a solid beige background. The focal point is unclear. In the general center, two staircases, one darker than the other, each end with indistinct orange swaths at their base. Around them are other solid asymmetrical shapes in dark brown, shades of gray and green. Scattered about are floral and plant studies, each with their own unique shapes to differentiate, ranging from circles, to groups of lines or clusters of strands. Most unusual is a large bright green orb hovering above, with black twig-like shapes pointing downward toward the scene. It is unclear if this is a cloud, an inverted groups of shrubs, or a distorted two-dimensional rendition of landscape in the implied distance.

Simultaneously, other works follow the path of *Stairs and Garden* in that various clusters of greenery, flowers, plants, grasses and branches are situated in small groupings of stippled or striated marks. Backgrounds continue to be solid, and shapes no longer go beyond the edges. There are also elements from urban surroundings, indicators of progress and modernity, such as traffic signals and manicured clusters of bushes. By 1954 Baum’s compositions resemble temples, or fantastical netherworlds. *Brown Landscape* (1954) is the first of the later minimal compositions to include what can be seen as a mystical or spiritual portal or gateway. The background is a warm sepia reddish brown. Objects are placed in the composition in a two-dimensional manner; perspective is completely abandoned for flat, frontal representation. In the upper left hand corner is a shining yellow gazebo-like portal gateway surrounded by radiating brushstrokes alluding to vibration or energy. A rustic staircase descends diagonally toward another tent-shaped red structure also featuring a staircase, this one with several

close rails lining the tiny triangular steps. The entrance to a final staircase is flanked with tall torches at the top. In the inferred sky of the composition are seven asterisks, implying stars. Scattered throughout the foreground and background are clusters of torches, or tall poles with glowing lights at the top, are a repeated subject in many of the future works, as are the continued staircases and clusters of plants.

Meanwhile, Baum becomes increasingly prolific with this new direction, and his quest for the spiritual heightens. In these works there is evidence of issues of the divine, and mystical or imaginative sacred locations and buildings. The titles of the works during this time also provide clues to Baum's early spiritual questioning as well as personal reflections. *Struggle and Growth*, *The Uphill Climb*, and *The Thinker* (all 1954) all continue to explore solid backgrounds with carefully painted plants and flowers. *The Thinker* features an extremely rare image of a person. In this case the viewer can assume that it is a self-portrait, rather than a reference to the sculpture by Auguste Rodin of the same title. No people are present hereafter and the work becomes increasingly abstract, though still representational.

///**SEEDS OF SPIRITUALITY**/// ///

Throughout all of this exploration, Baum seems to be growing closer to spirituality through the study of secular things, such as the staircases, traffic lights, plants and light bearing architecture. The outsider artist Vassilij Romanenkov comes to mind, whose work addresses the destruction of Eastern Orthodox Christianity by Communists. Much like Romanenkov, Baum's experience in war torn Poland, and his displacement from his family and immigration to the United States could have also caused a certain amount of trauma that left Baum seeking solace and answers within his work. Triads of subjects begin to appear in Baum's work.



Mark Baum. *Stairs and Garden*. 1949. Oil on canvas, 26 x 20 inches.

Three Paths (1956) includes a traffic signal in the center, with radiating poles emanating toward other urban shapes, such as a telephone pole; but esoteric symbols start to appear also, such as a burst of light, a Romanesque gateway or portal, a trio of stairs. As in *Three Paths*, the number three repeats in many works. For example, *Levels* (1956) includes three platforms, one blue, one orange and one striped orange, yellow, and blue. Each platform has a glowing light and is flanked by three white pillars on either side. *Guiding Lights* features three tall pillars with five-pointed shields at the top, one green, one red and one blue. It also includes three staircases and three paths to the left in green, red and yellow each, and coordinating doors. The complex narratives in all of these works are an indication that Baum is thinking spiritually and grappling with how to convey that in the work. In a 1963 talk he gave to the



Mark Baum. Levels. 1956. Oil on canvas, 37 x 44 inches.

York (Maine) Association, Baum explains his methodology and what he believes is at the essence of painting. Citing Plato, Aristotle's *Poetics*, and James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Baum offers his own personal analysis:

“Ad pulcritudinem tria requiruntur integritas, consonantia, claritas. Three things are needed for beauty: wholeness, harmony and radiance. Integritas: It is based on something out of life. But you are creating a different life, a life that can only happen in a painting. Consonantia: Do the lines, the colors and the space all work together and help each other to create this aesthetic life. Do the parts of the painting help each other, support each other in the making of one unified whole? Claritas: That is the moment of conception, the real exciting moment in an artist's life. Without it there can be no art.”¹²

With these three canons in mind, it seems likely that Baum was keeping these virtues close to his thoughts while painting. Likewise, Kandinsky references three mystical aspects, or “elements” of which artists must consider when painting: 1. Every artist has to express an element of their personality; 2. Every artist

must consider the zeitgeist; 3. Every artist is a servant of art, creates pure and eternal art.¹³ Kandinsky utilizes three repeatedly whether to explain and derive color combinations or to composing symphonic compositions. Not only are both Baum and Kandinsky references three paths to follow for creating painting, but the number three can be seen repeated in a number of religious practices. The Trikaya practice of Buddhism is comprised of three “bodies” of Buddhahood: Dharmakaya (truth), Sambhogakaya (enjoyment), and the Nirmankaya (created). Three emerges in the Christian Holy Trinity and the three levels of Muslim faith, which include Islam, Iman, and l'hsan. Three is also symbolic of the three pillars in the Kabbalistic Tree of Life; there are three days and three nights of personal journey in the Jewish numerological practice of Gematria; three patriarchs of Judaica: Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph.

Baum practiced the Jewish faith, though he was not orthodox. References to God and spirituality are found throughout his personal writings, whether toward the spirituality of the maker himself in general terms, of himself and his convictions and even in his explanation of the evolution of abstract painting. Beginning with Manet, Baum traces a path of abstraction from polytheistic Greek culture to Impressionism and its radical use of color and shape. Next, he equates Abstract Expressionism with new avenues of creative process pertaining to texture, drawing a parallel with a line from Genesis. Thirdly he discusses the importance of unity in work: “For Man always aimed in his thinking at a unified concept of the world about him. It is so in religious thinking.” Expanding on the notion that, “In our art, painting,” meaning the painting of his time, “involves complete transmutations of all subject matter treated and the nature of this transmutation has to be integral to the medium of painting.”¹⁴

In another instance, Baum's reference to faith comes through in a touching and memory from childhood during Chanukah. "I lit a number of candles; I look out the window, it's snowing. I see a light, vertical, 4-5 feet long. After a while I realize it's a reflection of a brass pole, part of the floor to ceiling lamp on which 4 lights are mounted." He realizes he is seeing a reflection in the window and rationality takes hold with what he is seeing. Yet, "the aura suggests these lights, as well as all other lights, are part of light which began with the formation of the universe."¹⁵

This epiphany through everyday objects continued to interest Baum during this prolific time. As he delves further, fictitious structures situated in fictional spaces start to appear as subjects. The flatness has a hieroglyphic quality, as if archiving a ritualistic locale. Ancient burial rites, stairways to the heavens, trees of life, and enclaves of worship are all alluded to in these works. The titles clue the viewer in to the meanings as well, such as *Pathways*, the previously mentioned *Guiding Lights* (both 1956), *Growth and Processional* (both 1957). Yet, there are also many works during this time that are surprisingly untitled. This perhaps references a moment during the process wherein making begins to evolve faster than the ideas are fully formed. The ideas are flowing faster than they can be named and classified. Much like the Surrealists who practiced automatic writing to access the subconscious, Baum to seems to be churning out ideas and images to get closer to the formal concerns of painting, and perhaps closer to himself and to the meaning of life.

/// THE ELEMENT ///

In 1958 Baum exhausts his study of representational work and begins to work in only abstraction. The concept of the staircase continued, but this time all references to buildings, landscape or everyday objects is gone in exchange for a

shape that Baum calls *the unit* or *the element*. From 1958 to 1967 Baum creates over 100 paintings, and from 1968 to 1996 he created over 300 paintings, all including unique compositions and patterns using the element exclusively. Even without the history of the previous work and seeing the trajectory of the element pass from one decade to the next, the entire body of work from 1958 to 1996 is blatantly faithful in its commitment. This commitment is not only symbolic in its faith to spirituality, but to its faith in the formal concerns of painting, and to the faith in one small shape. To return to Kandinsky, "Whether consciously or not, the artists gradually turn to their material to test the balance of each separate element's innermost value, out of which they derive their creations of art."¹⁶ Kandinsky's direct use of the word "element" in his writings is so uncanny, that it is easy to conclude that there was a collective consciousness at work between the two artists. In a way, the element became a material for Baum. More than the paint itself, the element as object is a repeated over and over, *ad infinitum*, in order to assess its "innermost value" as Kandinsky says. And to that end, it provides Baum with endless options out of which to create his art. Much like his aesthetic study of the staircases, the new elements



Evolution of Mark Baum's "Element," 1958–96.

are studies of mark-making and shape in order to solve certain formal problems, ultimately leading to a meditative place.

Plants and nature prove to be a poignant subject in creating the element; the elements are macro interpretations of the same marks made to make plants in the earlier paintings. In particular, the shape of the stippled gesture that is used to create the distant shrubs in *Ithaca, NY* (1949) appears again in the late elements of the 1980s and onward. Gardening, the light of the sky, and the seasons all comprise the element. Memories of digging with a shovel as a child in the spring after his mother left Poland for the United States was burned into his psyche: "I am digging and digging for a long time. Suddenly I see a change in the atmosphere; I turn around and see the change: Dusk and evening has come."¹⁷



Mark Baum. *Celebrating Growth*. 1984. Acrylic on canvas, 68 x 56 inches.

In his personal writings, Baum recalled several memories of his personal relationship to nature,

"For many years I have experienced states of mind euphoric in nature. These come about without any stimulant or effort."¹⁸ Here, Baum is stating that he is experiencing the sublime, an awe and veneration often noted by painters of the Romantic period, most notably Caspar David Friedrich or the poet Victor Hugo. Baum continues: "Forgotten, they [the shapes] have a residue."¹⁹ His gathered memories become tethered to the element's psychological importance and impact. The sublime impact of the evening light reemerges often in his work. This is seen in the progression of color shades, from light to dark that add depth perception as well as vibrations on the eye when viewing them.

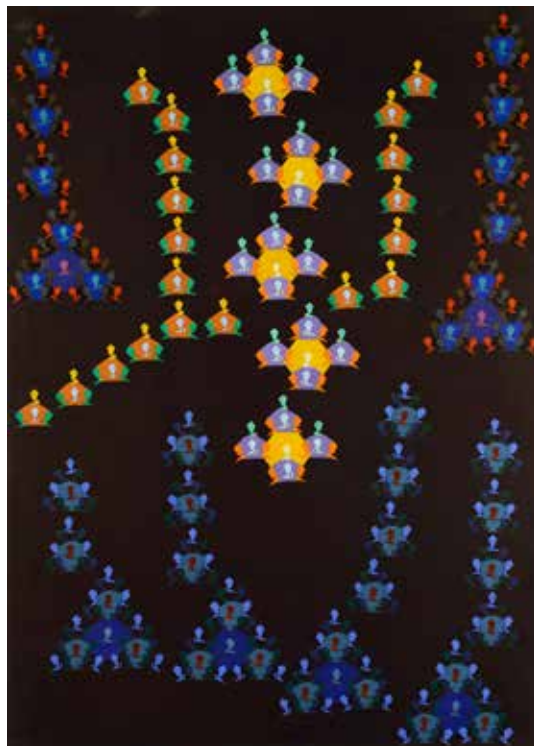
Furthermore, his methodology for shape is developed through his study in the progression of modern art, citing Manet and the Impressionists as a team that disrupts natural interpretations of surroundings, turning them into modifications of reality. "The naturalist shapes are modified, then distorted and finally shapes per se are invented."²⁰ In relation to color, Baum's palette also follows Impressionistic logic: "Local colors were violated more and more as time went on to build new color relationships. And after a while, local colors were completely discarded and invented colors and their relationships became a matter of interest and a preoccupation of painting."²¹ Both shape and color become integrated into one interwoven relationship, which is seen throughout Baum's element works.

On each canvas, one shape is used repeatedly. The element is almost exclusively painted on solid backgrounds, some bright and later more subdued and finally deep, rich dark browns and blacks. The fully abstract works and the element go through several iterations beginning with the earliest form—a long 5-pronged shape, similar to a pine needle cluster. After the elongated five-pronged shape, a wide curved element appears similar to the silhouette of a bird in flight. Arrangements vary from linear strands that ex-

ceed the edge of the canvas, to clusters that resemble cast metal geometric brooches. The shape is often arranged in groups of five, which are then grouped to create triangular clusters whose interior composition is filled with a contrasting solid color, which are then arranged into yet a larger cluster. The final element, which has the appearance of a head in profile, first appears in 1967. He uses this shape exclusively until his last painting in 1996. These new elements are placed one after the other, side by side in rows. Some of the rows are straight, and some bend at 45 or 90 degree angles, while others curve.

In Baum's work, a definite lyricism is present, be it in the curvature of the line formations, or in the vibrant color spectrum. In the York Association lecture mentioned earlier, Baum explains that the elements are, "like the notes in music."²² Concepts of 1960s holy or scared minimalist Classical compositions come to mind. Composers such as Arvo Pärt and Alan Hovhaness who were influenced by Steve Reich or Terry Riley start creating droning and melodic works, using repetition and lyrical movements to impart feelings of reverence or meditative chant-like qualities. The spaces Baum creates on the canvas are full of gaps that allow the mind to wander. The rich and bold colors dance on the eye, almost with psychotropic results.

When Baum starts using the element, the micro and the macro converge in what can only be described as a type of cosmic order and an understanding of the universe that Baum was trying to achieve. Visually his work bears similarities to the patterning associated with ancient culture, particularly sacred geometry commonly seen in the Islamic religious architecture and or Hindu decoration such as Mandalas. Geometry has a deep-seated place in the revelation of a divine being for many eastern cultures, rooted in both the Golden Mean or Fibonacci spiral, commonly found in nature and heavily used for compositions in sacred geometry along with



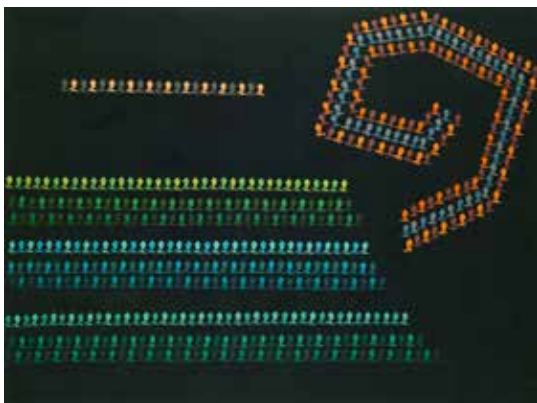
Mark Baum. Prayer. 1972. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 51 1/2 inches.

notions of repetition. The triangle is used on several occasions, further indication of Baum's continuous consideration for the triad, and perhaps alluding to Kandinsky's pyramid mentioned previously in this essay. Titles enrich the spiritual narratives.

///LATE WORKS///

Towards Certainty (1968) features three rows of elements arranged in clusters of nine. Seven large arrangements of these nine clusters are stacked into triangle formations. A vibrant teal background creates a hopeful implication for the varied element structures in an array of colors, including lavender, red, orange, pink, purple, sepia, and yellow. *Blessing* (1971) and *Prayer* (1972) offer deep royal purples, often a Christian liturgical color that represents the seasons. Analogous shades of blue, lilac, navy, and

turquoise are accented by flex of vermilion and sage green. By 1979 the clusters go away, concentrating on linear patterns and distinct shapes using only the singular portrait-shaped element. *Of Faith and Flow of Life* (1977) includes three rows of three elements in shades of green, lime, and cobalt. *Ascension* (1979) features four narrow columns rise in orange and cream. Surrounding purple vessels imply ritualistic containers. A narrow path of kelly and forest greens stagger along the bottom—a recall of shrubbery in older works, while a curved row of three in shades of periwinkle and teal march in the background.



Mark Baum. *Of Faith and Flow of Life*. 1977. Acrylic on canvas, 52 x 70 inches.

Later work done in the 1980s continues in the minimal vein, but also sometimes portraying symbols as a whole. *Celebrating Growth* (1984) includes meta-shrubbery shapes called out in individual elements that gradate from dark to light creating dimension. Deep blackish purple fades to sky blue, chocolate brown fades to pale orange. In the center, a stalk in pale celery greens with four branches in cream and pale yellow extend like arms at its side. *Life Span* (1988) has the appearance of a winged creature, one wing in shades of green, the other in blues with a red tip. Beige tentacles and lavender legs extend from an orange body with a beige stripe. It is as if Baum is thinking of metamorphosis, his life analogous with the transformation of a caterpillar crawling amongst

the branches, transforming into a winged being that can fly. One of his last pieces, *Welcoming Truth* (1994) is most minimal, yet most complete in its simplicity. Pairs of charcoal grey and red elements pace in a curvilinear path, forming an incomplete circle. At the end, two pale yellow strands have broken away from the path, falling toward an abyss.

In Baum's late works, no references to people and their habitats, real or spiritual are present. In this way, the viewer is inserted into the gaze of the artist. This gaze is a direct link into a deeper, cerebral place rather than a physical site, real or fictitious. The viewer now becomes a direct participant in the abstract compositions that are portrayed, and thus a direct participant in the spirituality that Baum was personally experiencing. Through a dizzying array of patterns, psychotropic color palette, compulsive and repeated gestures, and body-sized scale, Baum propels the viewer to take heed of his every movement and thought—to stand with him every step of the way.

The work exudes an aura.

///TO LIFE///

Toward the end of his talk "Reconsidering the Spiritual in Art," Donald Kuspit asks the audience: "The question today is where are the few artists who are ready and willing to reaffirm the spiritual, and, more crucially, who can convince us that their art does so—that it is a beacon of transcendence in dark materialistic times."²³ This present essay is written in what seems like evolving yet still incredibly violent times. Just a few days ago Paris was struck by religious extremist attacks, reminding the western world that other nations, such as Syria, Nigeria, and Lebanon are facing violence every day and have been for years. Baum himself saw two world wars.



Mark Baum. *Life Span*. 1988. Acrylic on canvas, 68 x 60 inches.

In the constant wake of such pain and loss of human life, perhaps it is through his eyes that one can glean a sense of solace that lingers beneath Mark Baum's meditative and prophetic works. He painted because that was his way of being in the world. "If there is a way toward human greatness and if it be the kind that is independent of social approval and if it be the kind that is achievable in our human life, then this is my way."²⁴ His practice gave life meaning for him, and his dedication to his craft and his ideas carved a remarkable space for his legacy to nestle historically amongst his peers of similar spiritual and abstract affiliations.

Yet, through his solitary practice he maintained a level of conviction, favoring a meaningful life over the trappings of the art world. "The appreciation of all life [. . .] to rejoice in joy and absorb sorrow; to give fully and to receive humanly. To live thusly is to feed the substance of one's paintings."²⁵ Baum's private existence can be likened to a clergyman, dedicating his life to one path—his sacred cloth the canvas. In the dark materialist world that Kuspit refer-

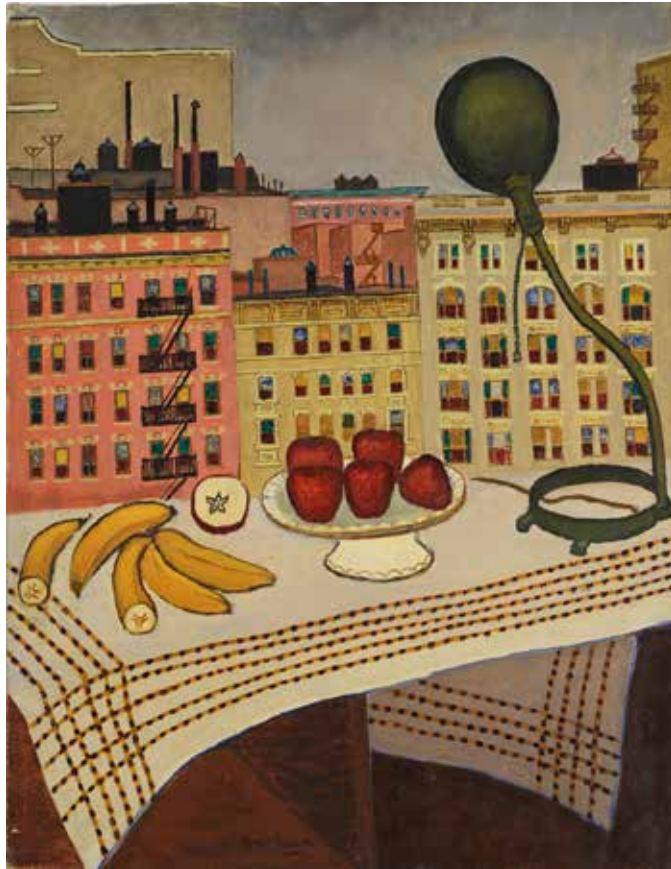
ences, we look to artists like Baum for solace, for inspiration and perhaps even for closure. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word spiritual firstly as, "Of, relating to, or affecting the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things," and secondly as "not concerned with material values or pursuits." Baum succeeds according to both of these definitions, above and beyond the connotation of religion, beyond the elements.

Leora Lutz is a Toronto-born, Los Angeles-raised artist and writer now based in the San Francisco Bay Area. She received both a Master of Fine Art in Sculpture and a Master of Art in Visual and Critical Studies from California College of the Arts. Her personal ideology stems from the fruition of DIY, punk rock reasoning, and a life-long practice with the handmade—continually questioning the active role that art plays in shaping history.

1. Mark Baum. Statement in personal notes, 1963-1965, p. 4; all Mark Baum papers courtesy of the Estate of Mark Baum.
2. Ibid.
3. Cassidy, Donna M. "Marsden Hartley: Race, Region, and Nation", UPNE, 2005. p.9
4. Baum, Statement in personal notes, 1963-1965, p. 4.
5. Galerie St. Etienne, essay for "Fairy Tale, Myth and Fantasy: Approaches to Spirituality in Art," <http://www.gseart.com/Artists-Gallery/Klee-Paul/Klee-Paul-Essays.php?essay=3>
6. Donald Kuspit, "Reconsidering the Spiritual in Art, Part 1", Blackbird, Spring 2003, Vol. 2, No. 1, par. 22. http://www.blackbird.vcu.edu/v2n1/gallery/kuspit_d/reconsidering_text.htm
7. Ibid.
8. Baum, Statement in personal notes, 1963-1965, p. 6.
9. Ibid.
10. Baum, "Abridged version York Association Talk 10/16/1963, Explanation of My Style of Painting and How I Arrived At It," p. 6.
11. Vasily Kandinsky, *Concerning The Spiritual in Art*, edited and translated by Hilla Rebay, New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, for the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, 1946, p. 36.
12. Baum. "Abridged . . .," p. 7.
13. Kandinsky, p. 55.
14. Baum, "Abridged . . .," pp. 2-3.
15. Baum, Statement, 1980, p. 2.
16. Kandinsky, p. 34.
17. Mark Baum, Statement, 1980, p. 1.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Baum, Mark. "Abridged . . ." p. 2.
21. Ibid.
22. Harry Dulany, ". . . of the apple towns," *Ogunquit Star*, October 31, 1963.
23. Kuspit, op. cit.
24. Baum, Statement, 1963-65, p. 9.
25. Ibid.



SUNNYSIDE, QUEENS
1943 oil on canvas 24 x 30 inches



STILL LIFE WITH LAMP AND FRUIT
1946 oil on canvas 30 x 20 inches



WAYCROSS, GEORGIA
1944 oil on canvas 24 x 30 inches



ITHACA LANDSCAPE

1949 oil on canvas 20 x 30 inches



ASPIRATIONAL STAIRCASE

1948 oil on canvas 24 x 30 inches



STAIRS AND GARDEN

1949 oil on canvas 26 x 20 inches



CENTRALIA COAL MINE
1951 oil on canvas 18 x 24 inches



BROWN LANDSCAPE

1954 oil on canvas 24 x 30 inches



THREE PATHS

1956 oil on canvas 26 1/2 x 41 inches

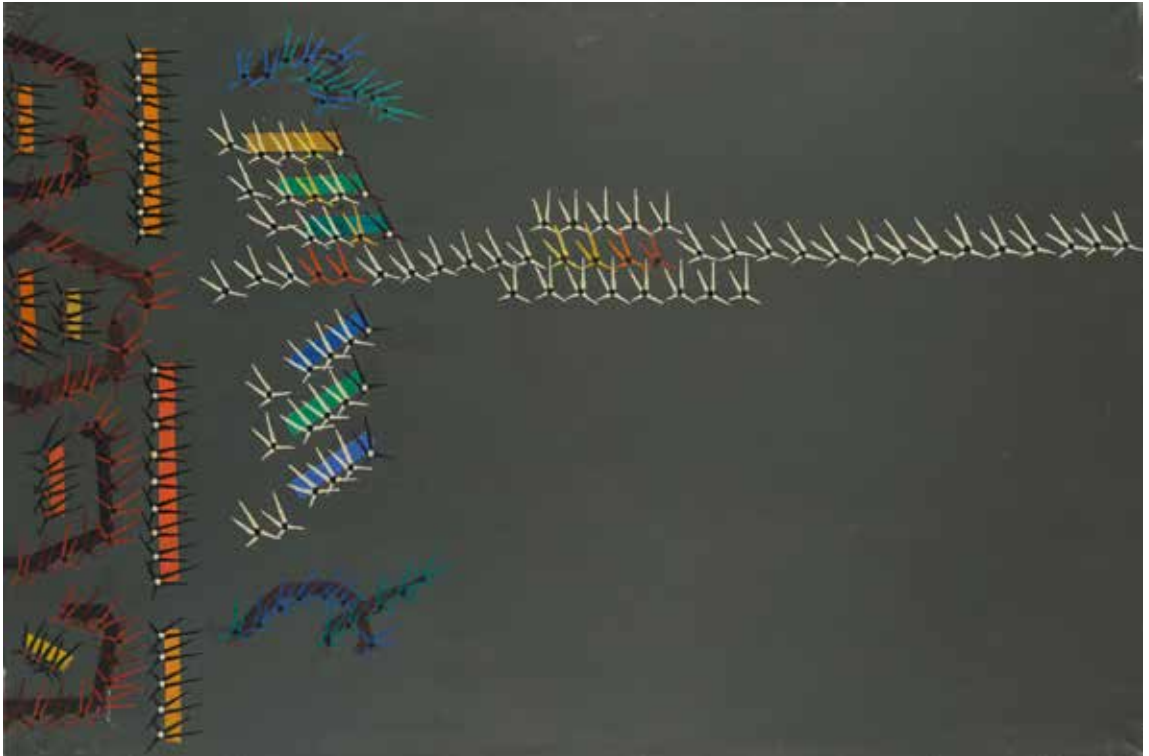


PATHS IN YELLOW LANDSCAPE
1956 oil on canvas 36 x 22 inches



LEVELS

1956 oil on canvas 37 x 44 inches



MEETING AN OBSTACLE

1958 oil on canvas 35 x 52 inches



A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

1959 oil on canvas 52 x 38 inches



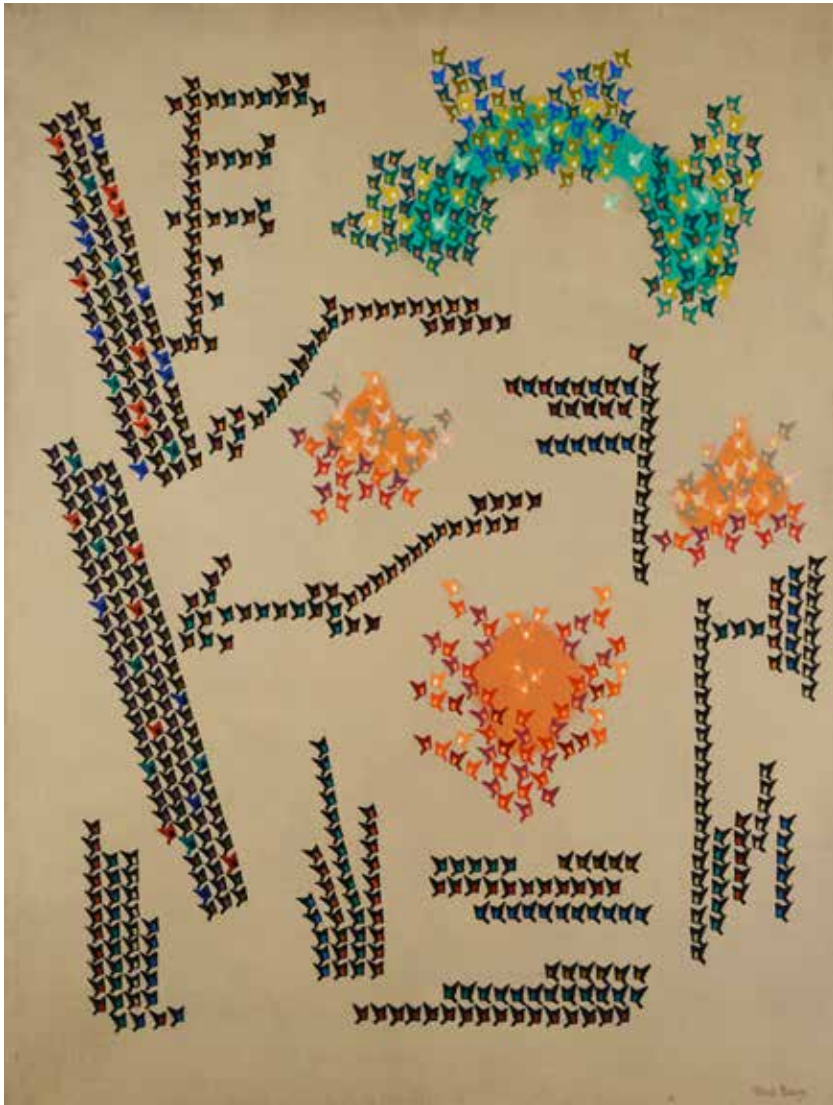
UNTITLED BLUE (MOSES AND THE BURNING BUSH)

1959 oil on canvas 28 x 36 inches



WITHIN REACH

1960 oil on canvas 44 x 38 inches



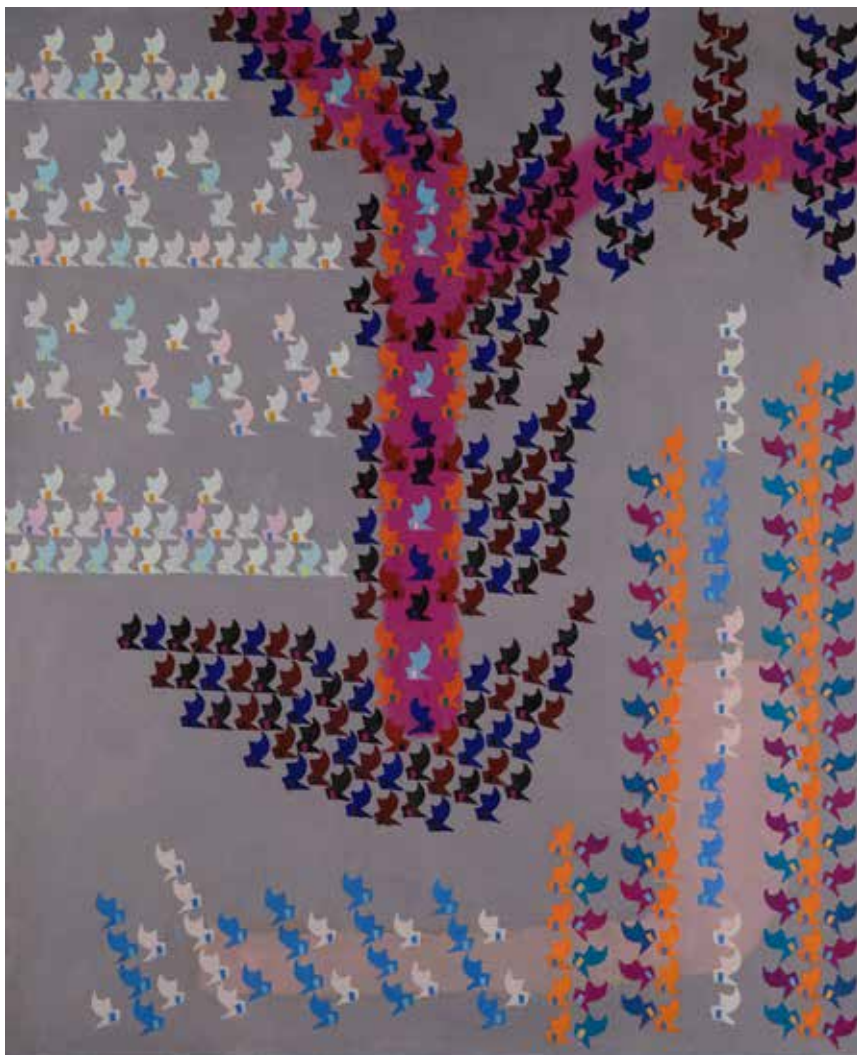
HOPEFULLY

1962 oil on canvas 60 x 46 inches



A PRAYER

1964 oil and acrylic on canvas 48 x 37 inches



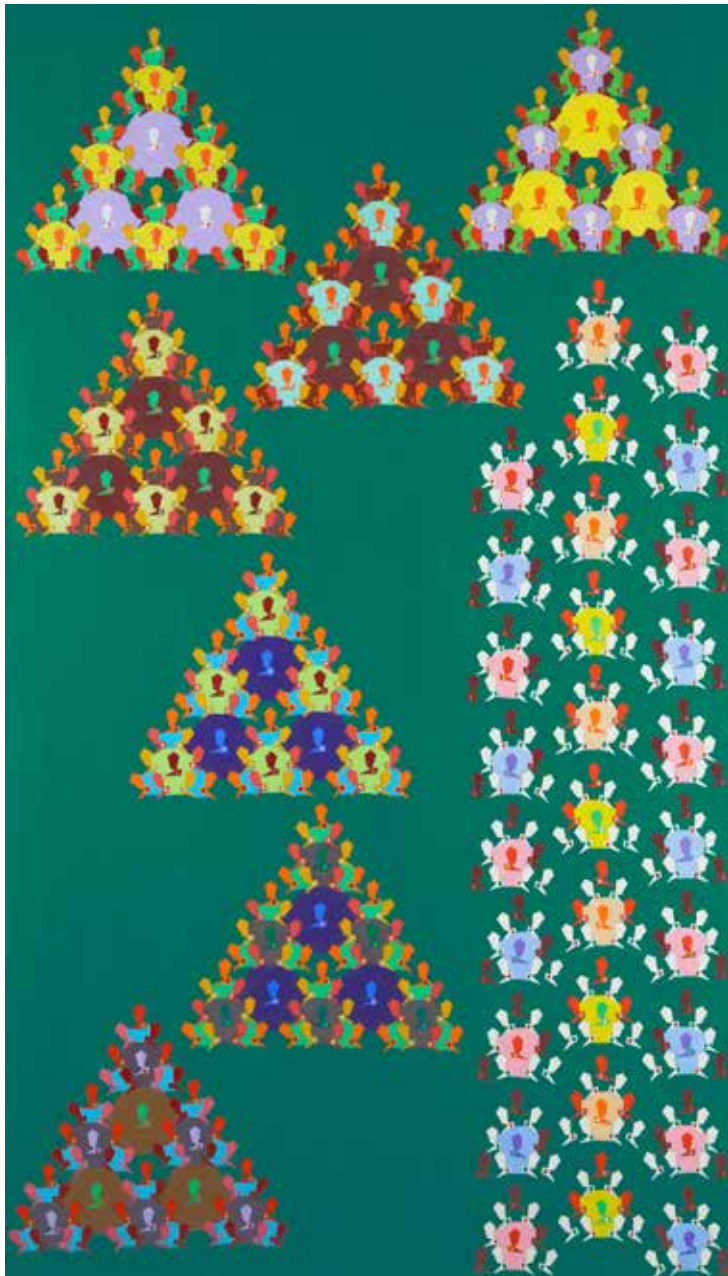
INVOCATION

1964 oil and acrylic on canvas 58 x 48 inches



SUMMER MORNING ARISING

1964 oil and acrylic on canvas 70 x 48 inches



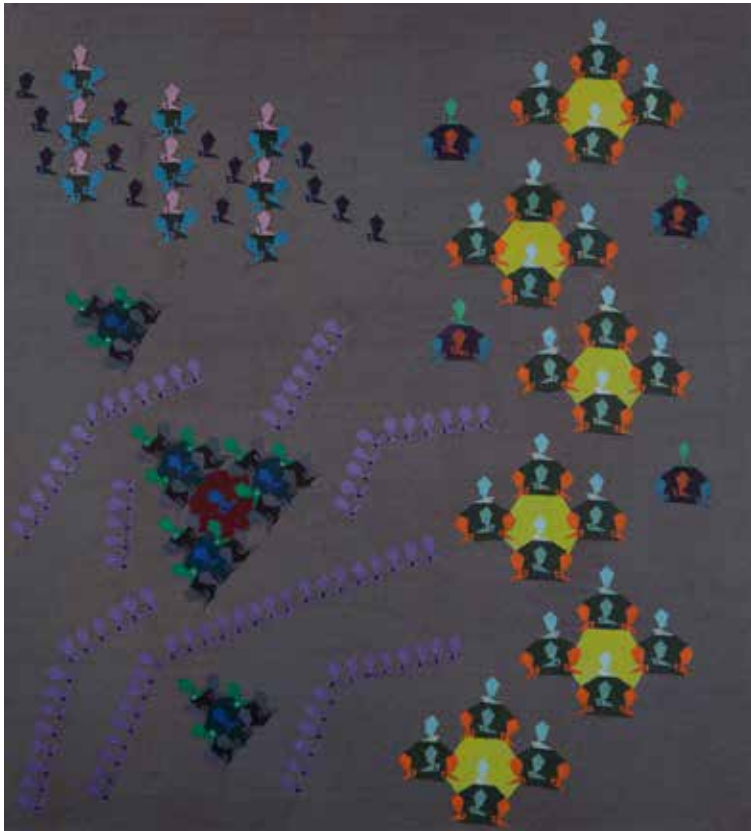
TOWARDS CERTAINTY

1968 oil and acrylic on canvas 76 x 44 inches



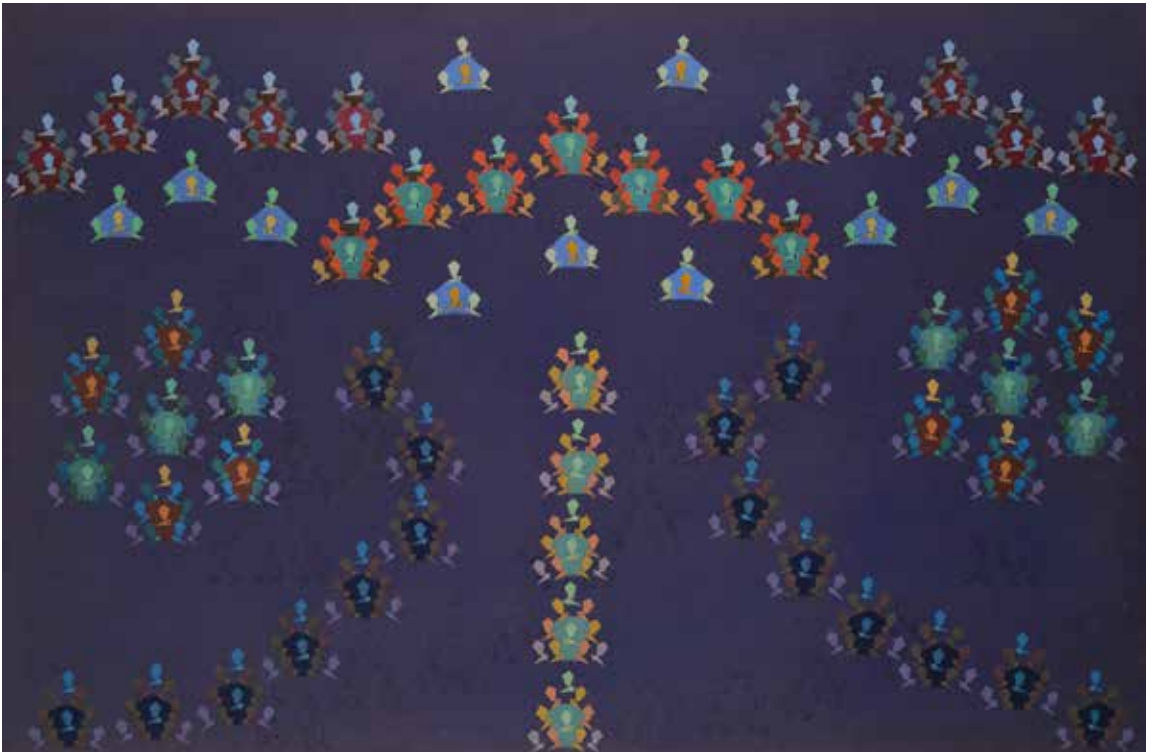
ADVENTURE

1968 acrylic on canvas 66 x 80 inches



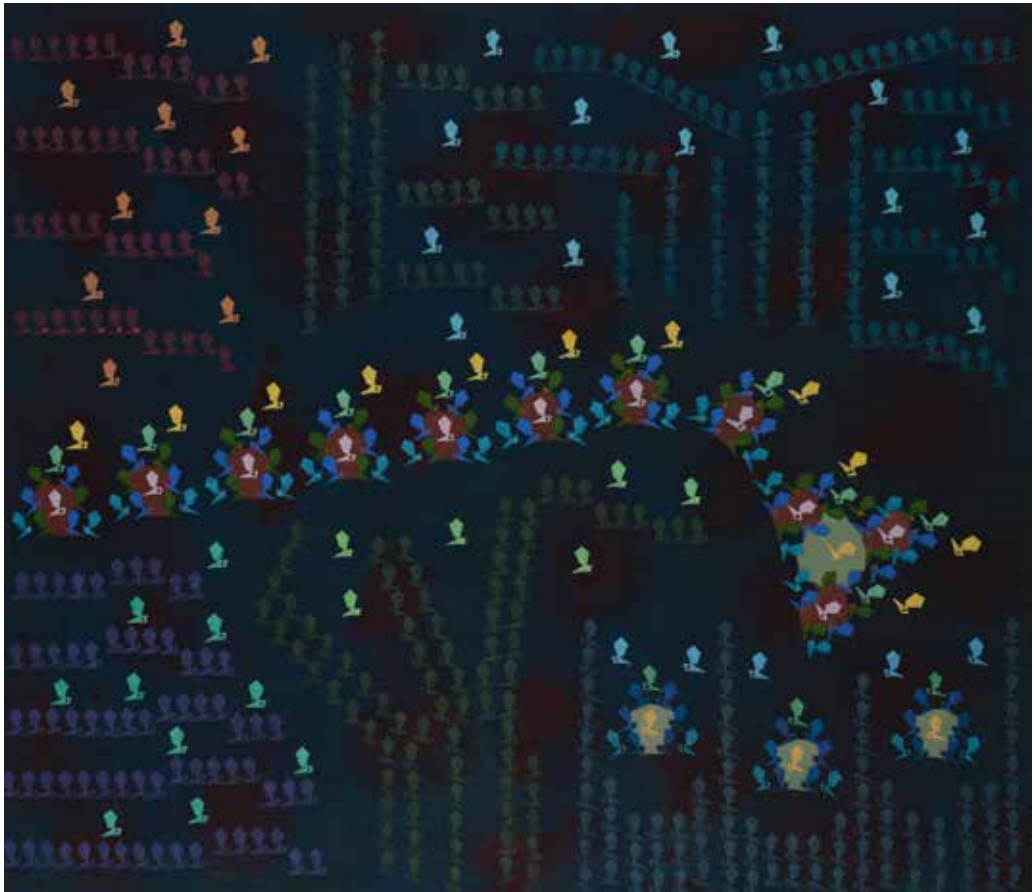
MOVEMENT IN PURPLE

1970 acrylic on canvas 48 1/2 x 44 inches



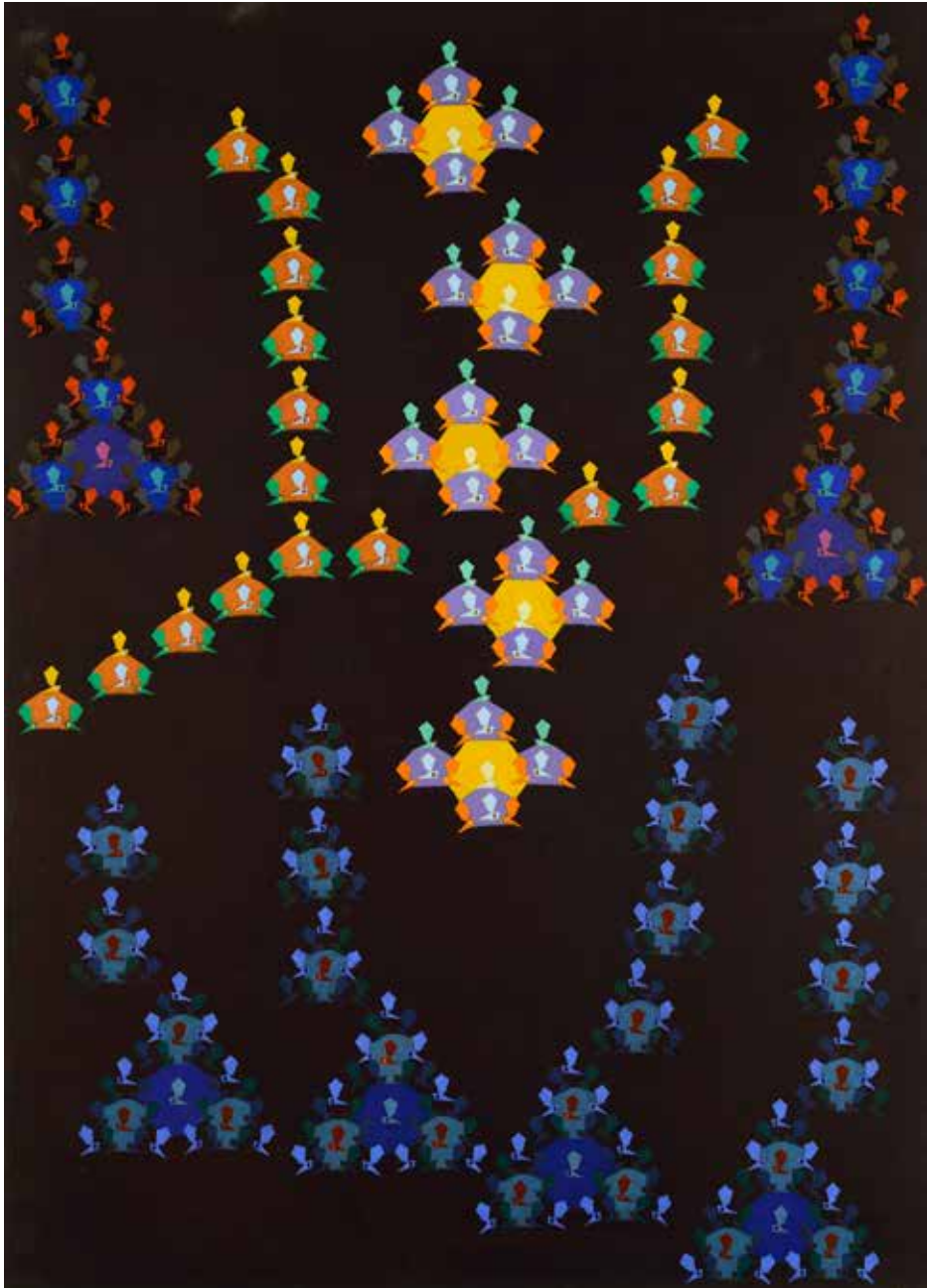
BLESSING

1971 acrylic on canvas 50 x 76 inches



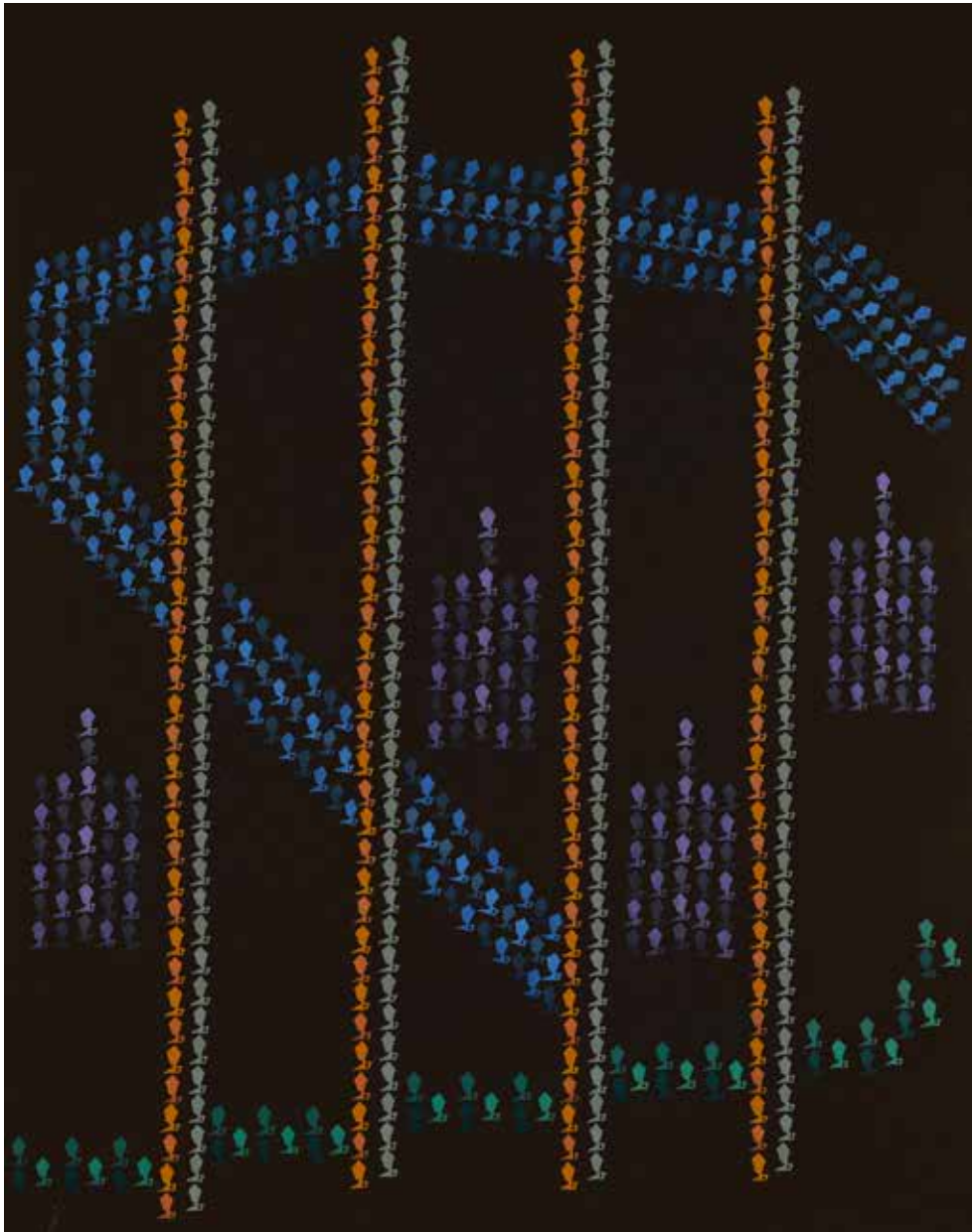
DOWN BEAT

1974 acrylic on canvas 52 x 60 inches



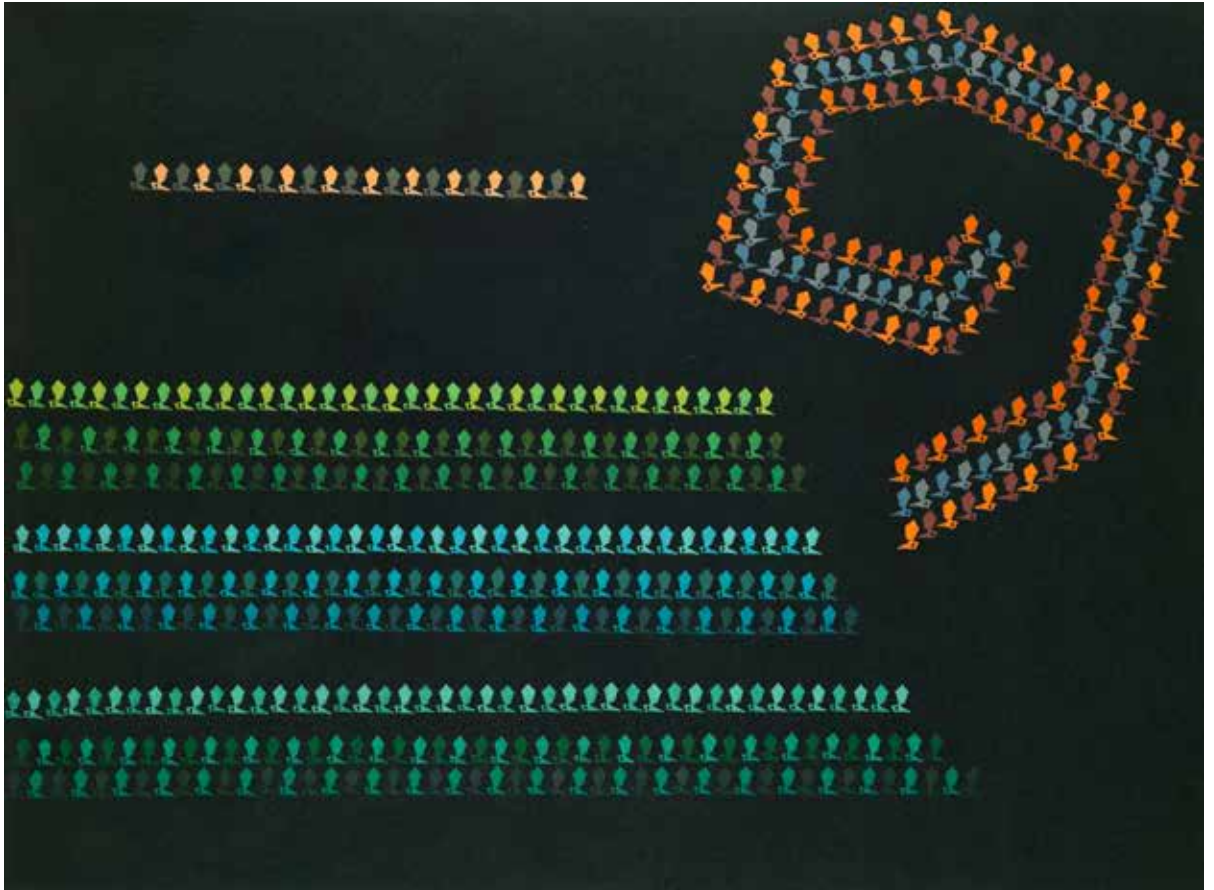
PRAYER

1972 acrylic on canvas 72 x 51 1/2 inches



ASCENSION

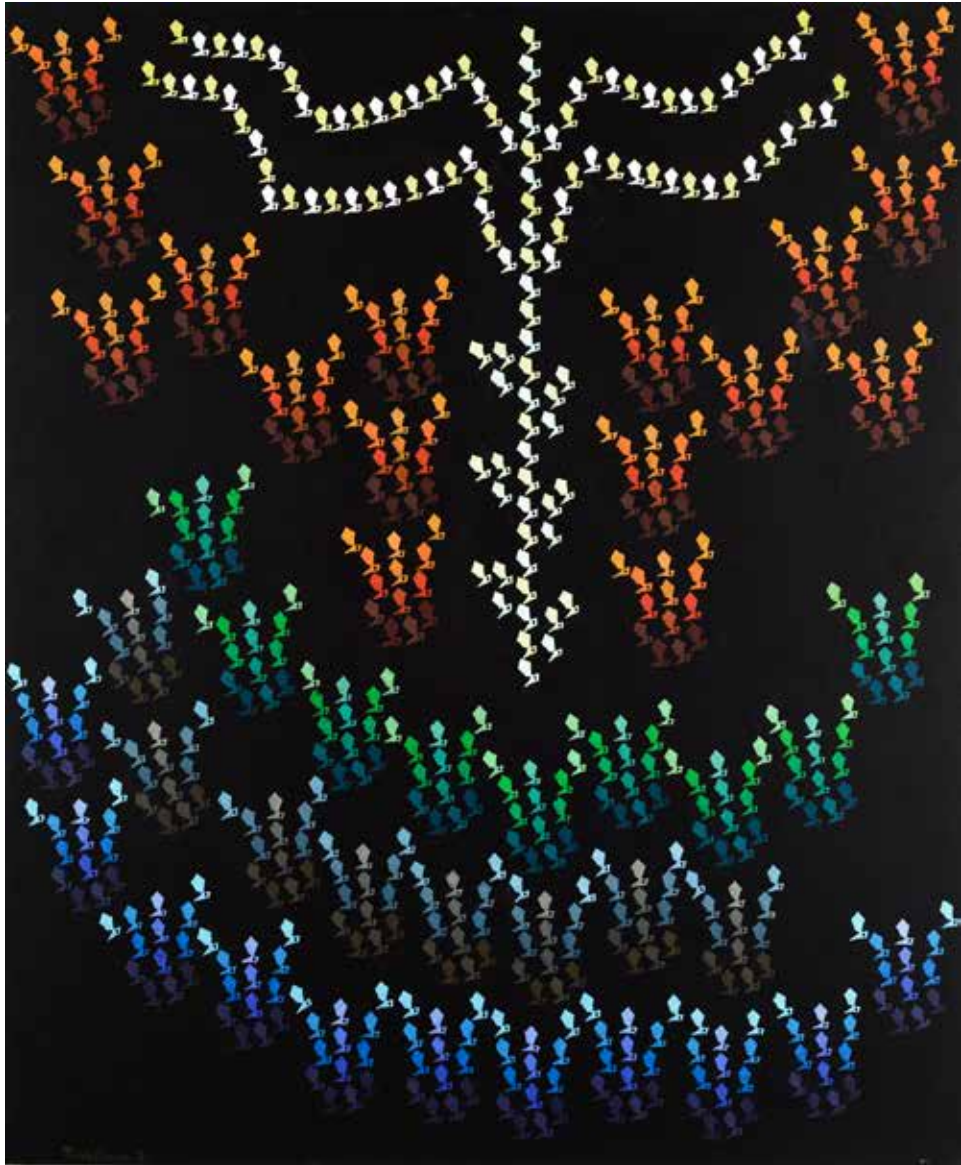
1979 oil on canvas 66 x 52 inches



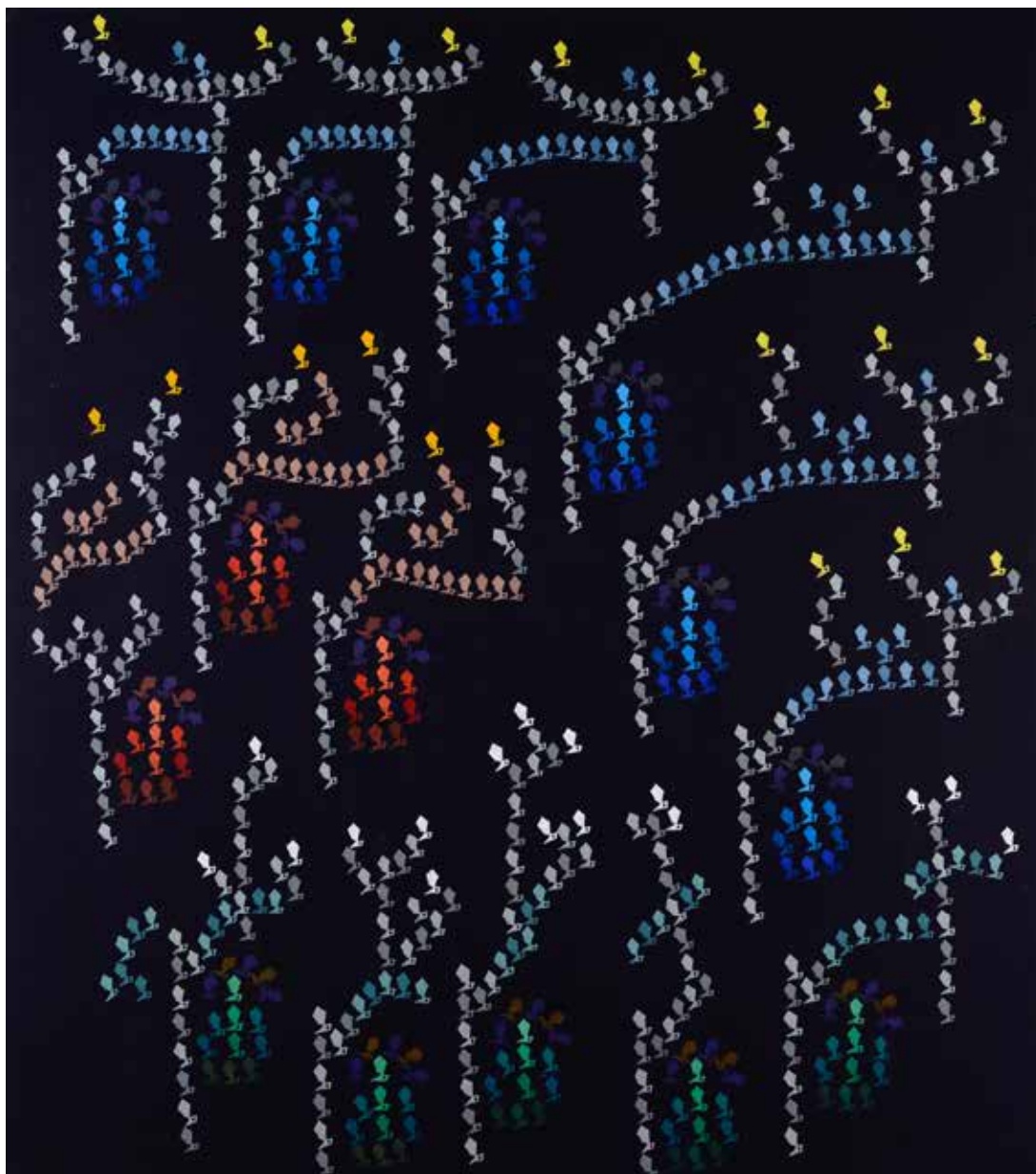
OF FAITH AND FLOW OF LIFE
1977 acrylic on canvas 52 x 70 inches



BOTH SIDES OF THE ARGUMENT
1984 acrylic on canvas 56 x 72 inches



CELEBRATING GROWTH
1984 acrylic on canvas 68 x 56 inches



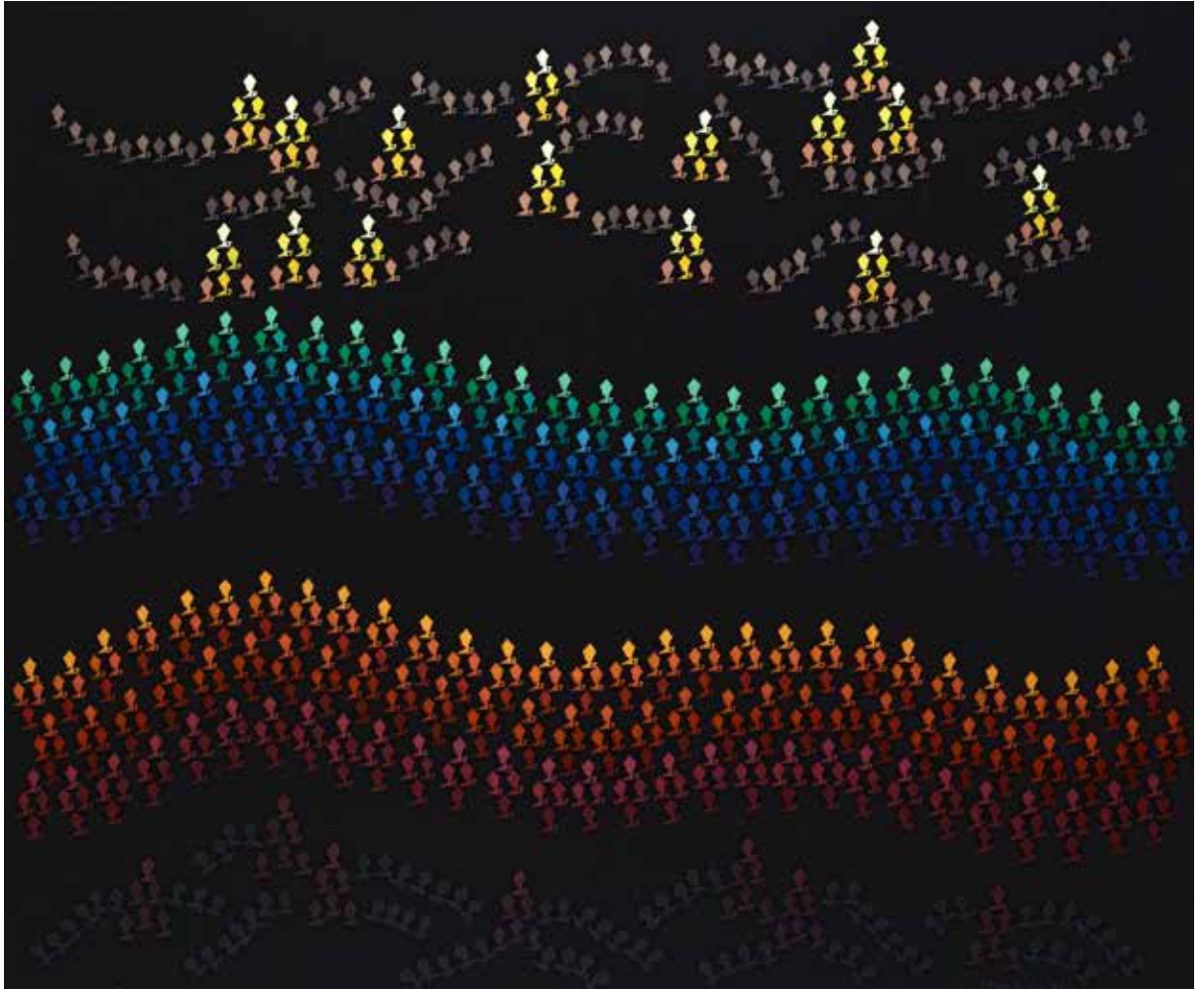
RISING EXPECTATIONS

1985 acrylic on canvas 68 x 60 inches

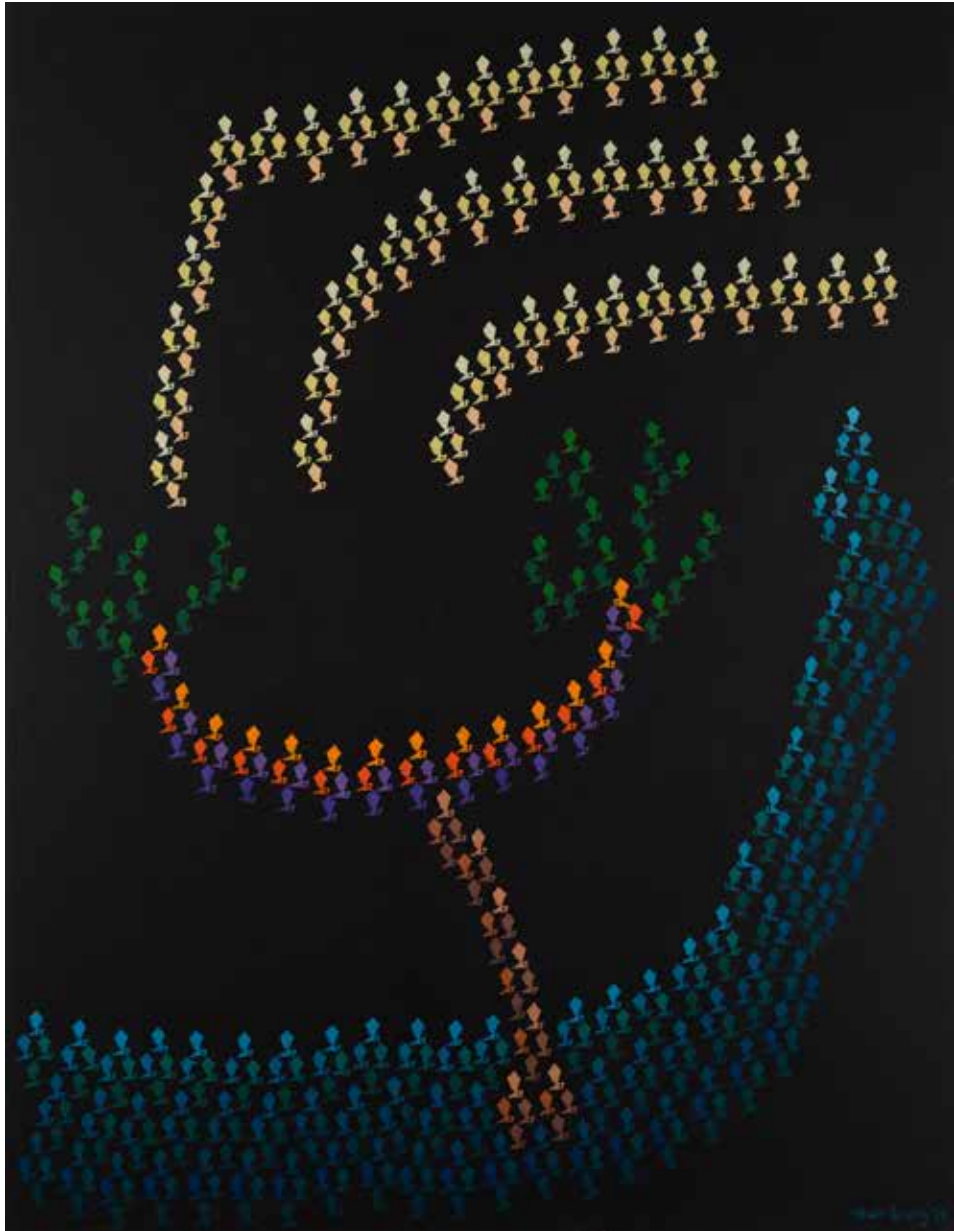


DEFIANCE

1987 acrylic on canvas 58 x 68 inches

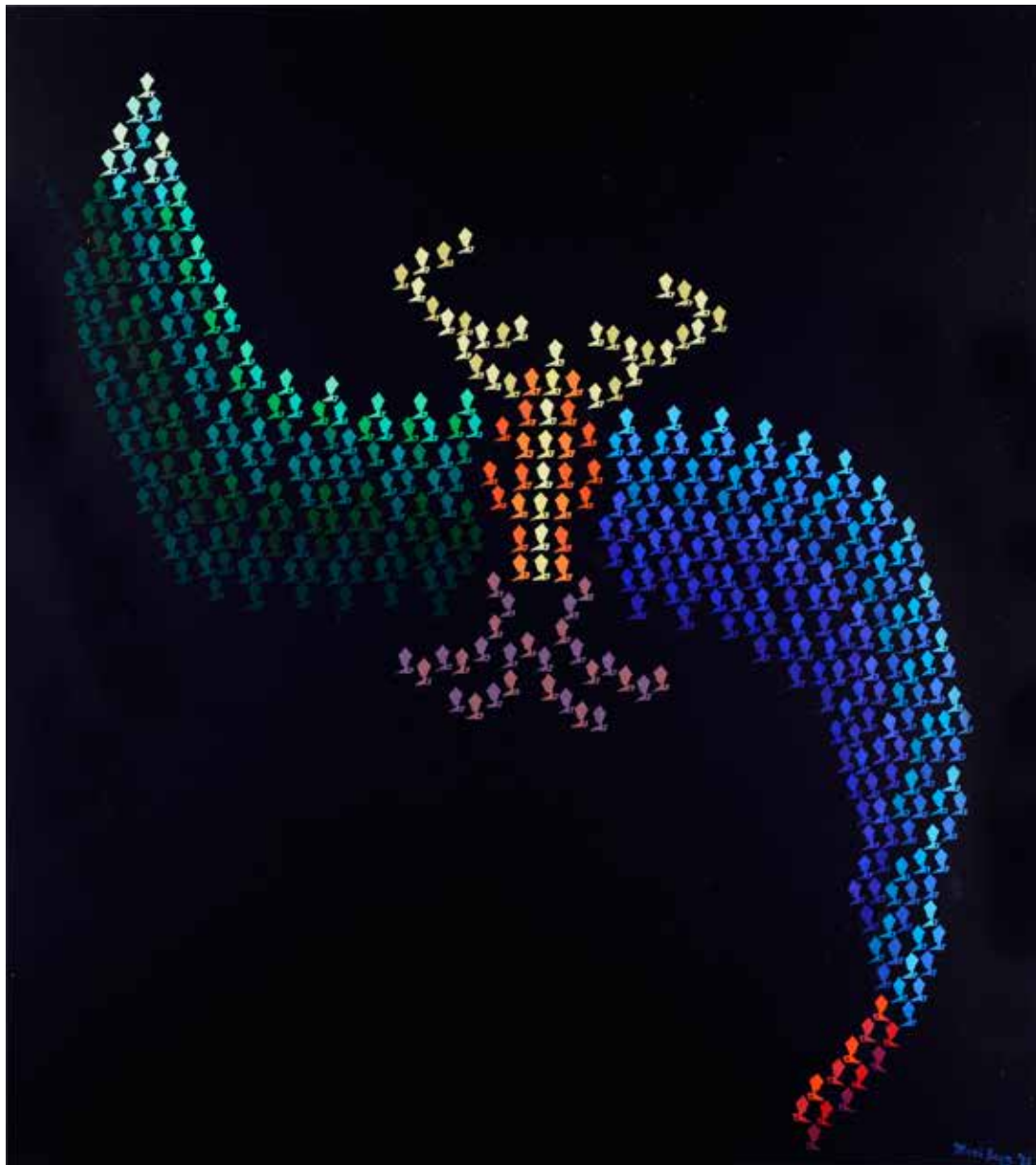


GREETINGS FROM THE UNIVERSE
1988 acrylic on canvas 60 x 72 inches



THE CALL

1989 acrylic on canvas 68 x 52 inches



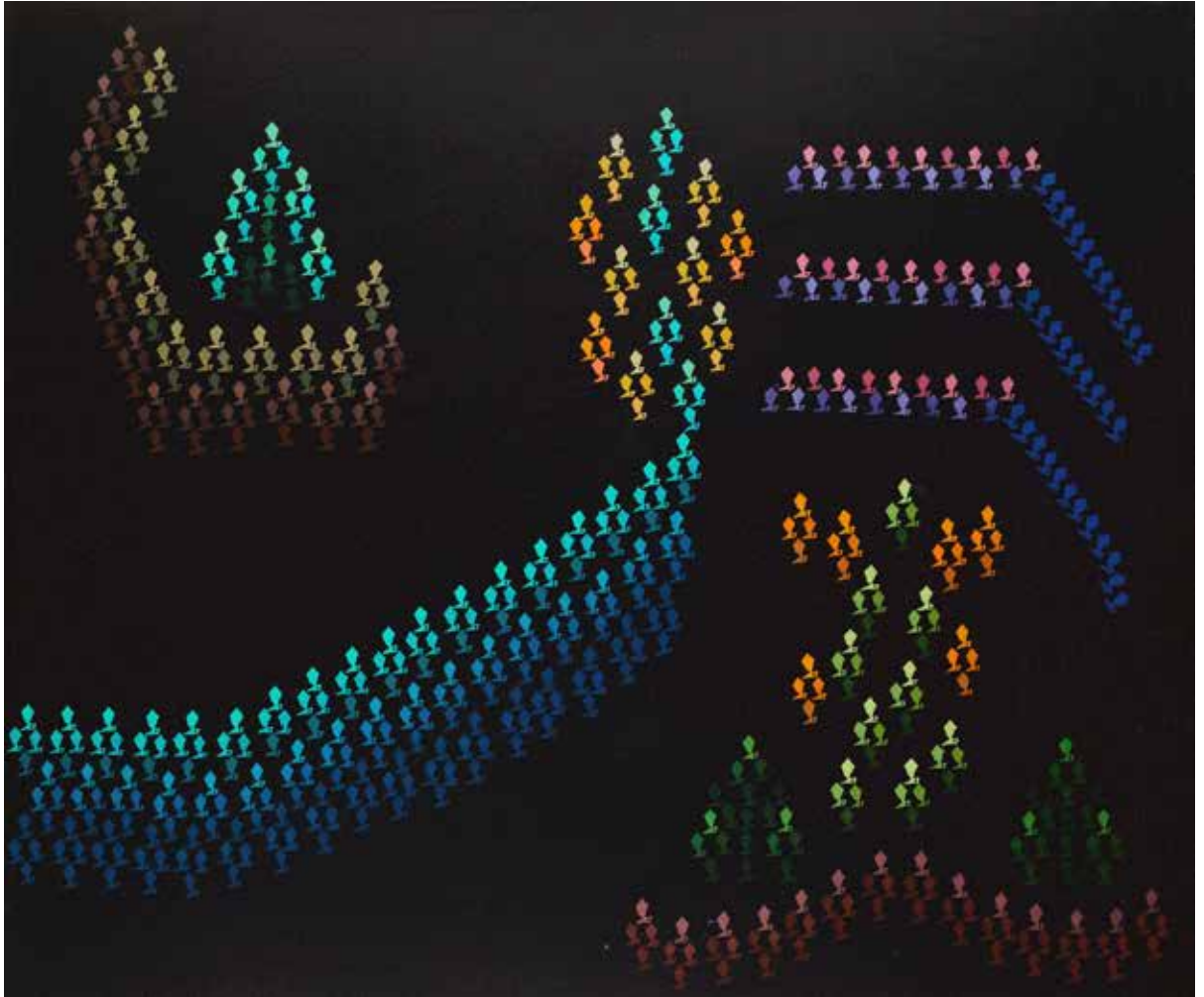
LIFE SPAN

1988 acrylic on canvas 68 x 60 inches



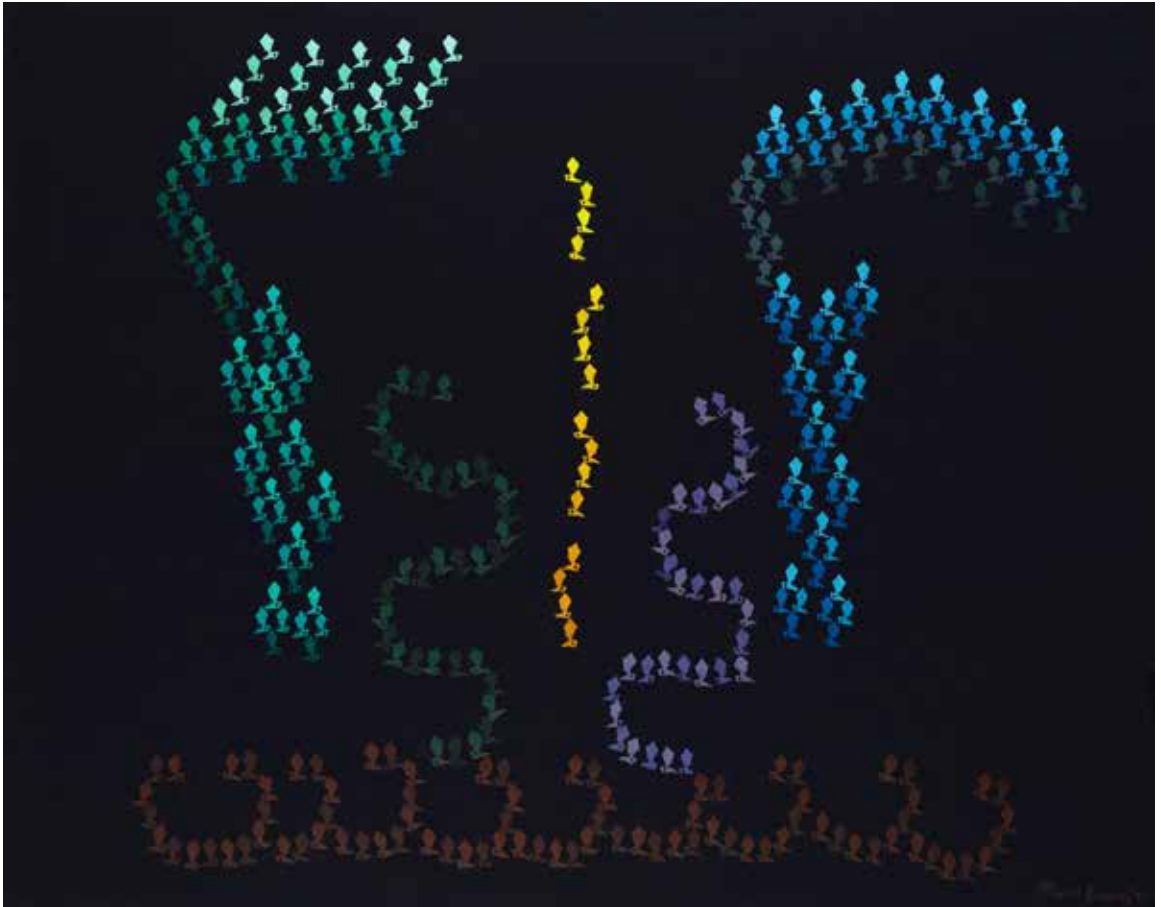
GRATITUDE

1989 acrylic on canvas 70 x 52 inches

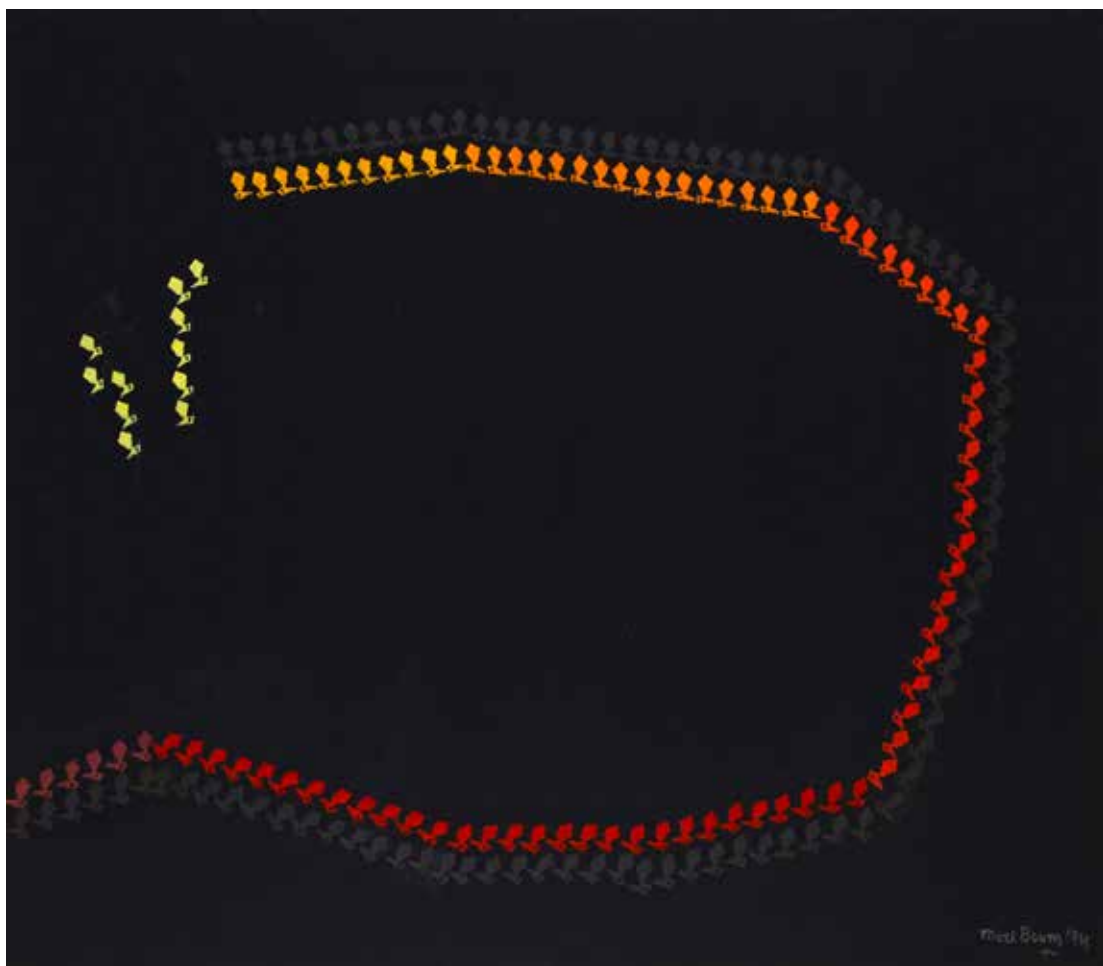


A LIFE TIME

1989 acrylic on canvas 60 x 72 inches



UNTITLED (DOUBLE ASCENSION)
1992 acrylic on canvas 52 x 66 inches



WELCOMING TRUTH
1994 acrylic on canvas 52 x 60 inches

MARK BAUM BIOGRAPHY



1903: Born Sanok, Poland (then the Austria-Hungarian Empire); moves soon after to Rzeszów
1907: Following Mark's parents' divorce, his mother emigrates to United States, leaving Mark in the care of his grandfather's household
1913: Mark enters gymnasium schools against his grandfather's wishes
1917: Works on the family farm in the summer with Bolshevik prisoners of war, which will prove to be critical to his philosophical and political outlook on life.
1919: Travels across Poland and occupied Germany to Copenhagen; emigrates to New

York City; finds a job at a furrier

Early 1920s: Decides to become an artist; attends the Academy of Design, New York

1929: First solo exhibition, at Whitney Galleries, New York; features Baum's watercolors

1930: Meets Alfred Stieglitz who encourages his art-making



1931: Exhibition at Harriman Gallery

1935: Marries; a son, Paul, is born in

1936; second son, William, born in 1939

1935–39: Works as an artist for the WPA

1941: Two-person exhibition at Perls Gallery

1947: Solo exhibition at Galerie St. Etienne, New York

1948: Solo exhibition at Laurel Gallery, New York

1948: Part of two national museum exhibitions at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and the Corcoran Gallery, Washington,

D.C. 1948 Begins to travel to Maine to live and paint there part time; uses a converted barn as his studio

1953: Solo exhibition at Salpeter Gallery, New York

1954 Appears in Life Magazine

1955: Leaves fur cutting job; included in international traveling exhibition American Primitive Paintings, sponsored by the U.S. Information Service and the Smithsonian



1958: Makes the first fully non-objective work; will never paint in a representational style again

1961 Moves to Maine to live and paint full-time

1963: Exhibition at Rose Fried Gallery, New York

1969: Exhibition at the Ogunquit Gallery of element work; one of the few public showings of his non-objective works

1973: Receives a Mark Rothko Foundation grant

1983 Early work acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

1997 Dies on February 8 in Maine

