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Celebrating 175: Kenneth Noland in Artist Files, Nakian--Noland, 1958-1967

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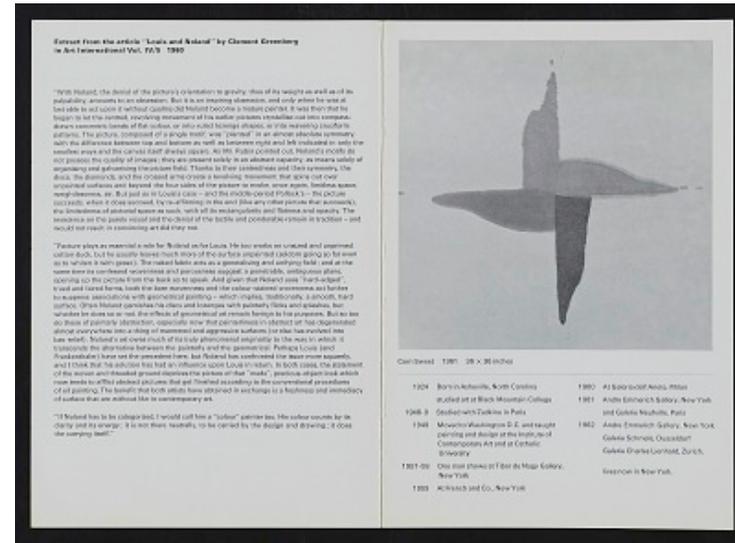
Extract from the article "Louis and Noland" by Clement Greenberg in Art International Vol. IV/5 1960

"With Noland, the denial of the picture's orientation to gravity, thus of its weight as well as of its palpability, amounts to an obsession. But it is an inspiring obsession, and only when he was at last able to act upon it without qualms did Noland become a mature painter. It was then that he began to let the centred, revolving movement of his earlier pictures crystallise out into compass-drawn concentric bands of flat colour, or into ruled lozenge shapes, or into wavering cruciform patterns. The picture, composed of a single motif, was "planted" in an almost absolute symmetry, with the difference between top and bottom as well as between right and left indicated in only the smallest ways and the canvas itself always square. As Mr. Rubin pointed out, Noland's motifs do not possess the quality of images; they are present solely in an abstract capacity, as means solely of organising and galvanising the picture field. Thanks to their centredness and their symmetry, the discs, the diamonds, and the crossed arms create a revolving movement that spins out over unpainted surfaces beyond the four sides of the picture to evoke, once again, limitless space, weightlessness, air. But just as in Louis's case - and the middle-period Pollock's - the picture succeeds, when it does not succeed, by re-affirming in the end (like any other picture that succeeds), the limitedness of pictorial space as such, with all its rectangularity and flatness and opacity. The insistence on the purely visual and the denial of the tactile and ponderable remain in tradition - and would not result in convincing art did they not.

"Facture plays as essential a role for Noland as for Louis. He too works on unsized and unprimed cotton duck, but he usually leaves much more of the surface unpainted (seldom going so far even as to whiten it with gesso). The naked fabric acts as a generalising and unifying field; and at the same time its confessed wovenness and porousness suggest a penetrable, ambiguous plane, and opening up the picture from the back so to speak. And given that Noland uses "hard-edged", trued and faired forms, both the bare wovenness and the color-stained wovenness act further to suppress associations with geometrical painting - which implies, traditionally, a smooth, hard surface. Often Noland garnishes his discs and lozenges with painterly flicks and splashes, but whether he does so or not, the effects of geometrical art remain foreign to his purposes. But so too do those of painterly abstraction, especially now that the painterliness in abstract art has degenerated almost everywhere into a thing of mannered and aggressive surfaces (or else has evolved into bas-relief). Noland's art owes much of its truly phenomenal originality to the way in which it transcends the alternative between the painterly and the geometrical. Perhaps Louis (and Frankenthaler) have set the precedent here, but Noland has confronted the issue more squarely, and I think that his solution has had an influence upon Louis in return. In both cases, the statement of the woven and threaded ground deprives the picture of that "made", precious-object look which now tends to afflict abstract pictures that get finished according to the conventional procedures of oil painting. The benefit that both artists have obtained in exchange is a freshness and immediacy of surface that are without like in contemporary art.

"If Noland has to be categorized, I would call him a "colour" painter too. His colour counts by its clarity and its energy; it is not there naturally, to be carried by the design and drawing; it does the carrying itself."

[[image]]



Corn Sweet 1961 36 x 36 inches

1924 Born in Asheville, North Carolina
studied art at Black Mountain College

1948-9 Studied with Zadkine in Paris

1949 Moved to Washington D.C. and taught painting and design at the
Institute of Contemporary Art and at Catholic University

1957-58 One man shows at Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York

1959 At French and Co., New York

1960 At Galeria dell'Areite, Milan

1961 Andre Emmerich Gallery, New York and Galerie Neufville, Paris

1962 Andre Emmerich Gallery, New York
Galerie Schmela, Dusseldorf
Galerie Charles Lienhard, Zurich.

lives now in New York

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