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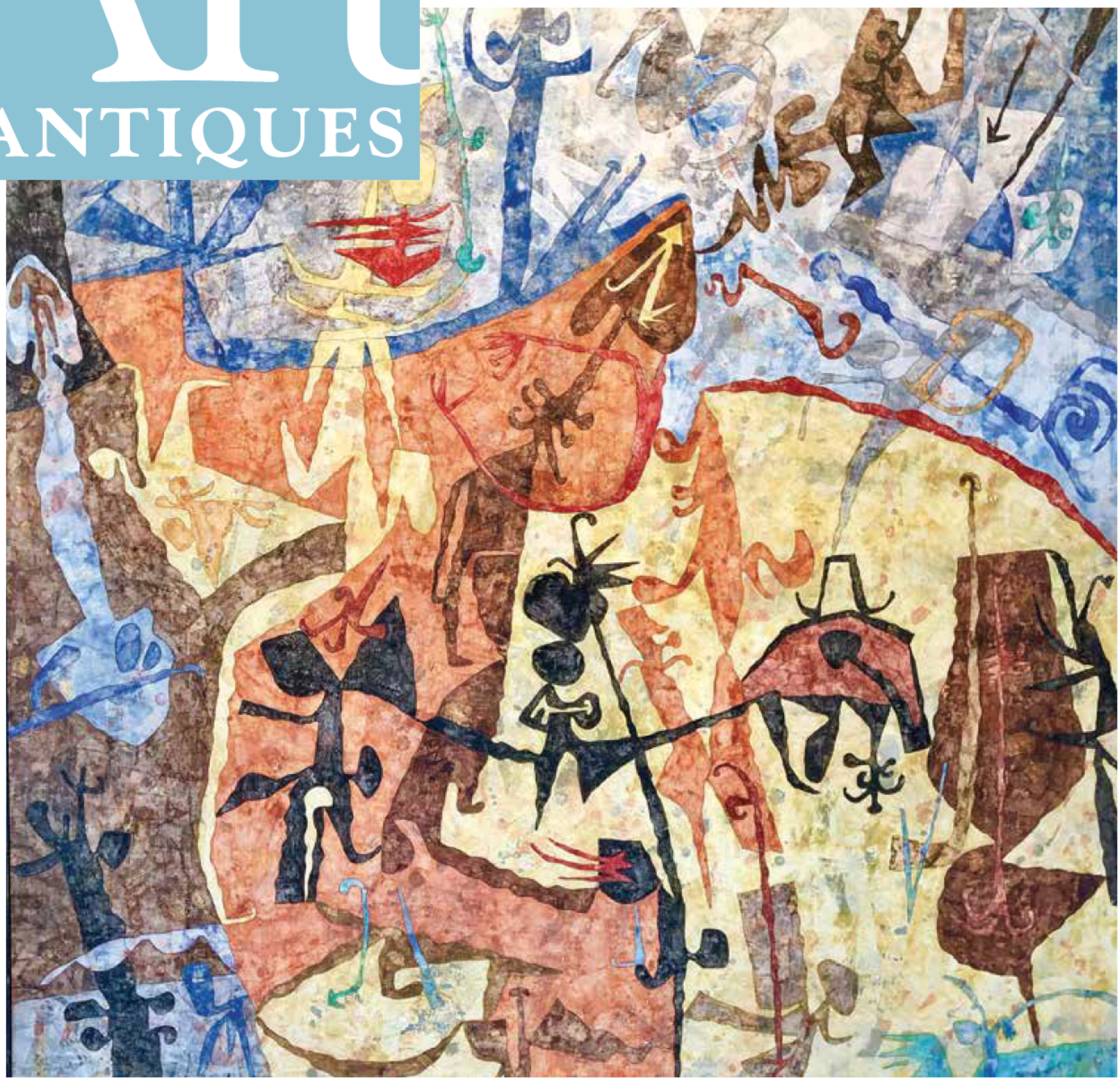

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LEONARD EDMONDSON

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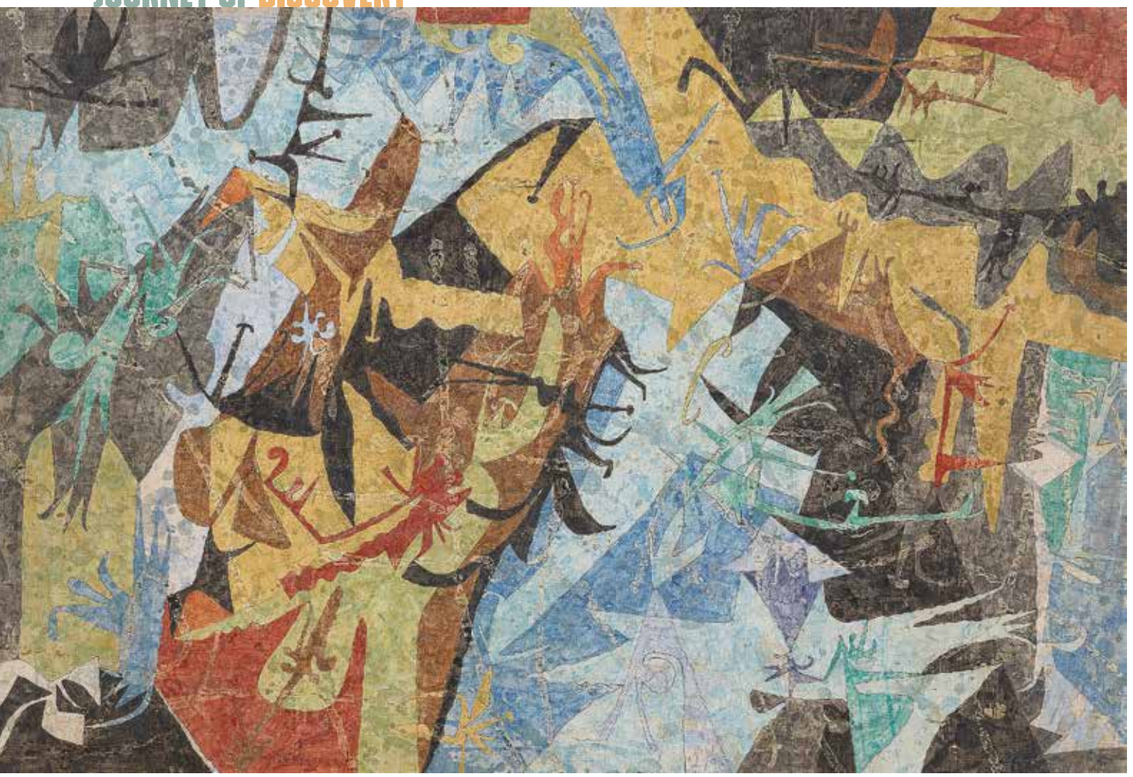
JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

As painter, printmaker, and teacher, **Leonard Edmondson** cultivated the possibilities of abstract modernism.

By John Dorfman

"My painting is not art of rebellion but one of discovery and sharing. I have found satisfaction in the spontaneous, often compulsive, act of drawing and painting." This personal statement by Leonard Edmondson manages, with extreme concision, to encapsulate the main themes and traits of a life spent making and teaching art. Edmondson (1916–2002), who spent his career in and around Los Angeles, was equally adept at painting and printmaking, in both of which he pursued a style of abstraction that was rooted in Cubism and Surrealism. He never became an Abstract Expressionist, remaining loyal to his own vision. That, combined with a reluctance to self-promote, contributed to a certain lack of recognition in the art market, although he won many prizes and had many works enter prominent museum collections. Today, renewed attention is due to Edmondson's work for its inherent value and to his life for its relevance to the development of abstract art and the vocation of the artist in America.

Born in Sacramento and raised both there and in L.A., Edmondson was part of the generation of American artists who were formed by the experience of World War II. Unlike those who discovered art through the G.I. Bill, though, he actually began his art education well before the war, at Los Angeles City College in 1935. During his time there, he had the opportunity to absorb works by Kandinsky, Klee, Mondrian, and Miró in L.A. museums. He also won the respect of several professors who were alumni of the University of California at Berkeley, and they recommended him for graduate studies there. Berkeley proved to be seminal for Edmondson's



Previous spread, from left: Leonard Edmondson, ***An Occasion for Surprise***, circa 1955, oil on canvas, 28 x 38 in.; ***Untitled #28***, circa 1950, oil on canvas, 24 x 32 in. This page, from top: ***Untitled I***, circa 1952, oil on panel, 24 x 36 in.; ***Spark***, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 in.

education and future career. There he came under the tutelage of Erle Loran, who espoused theories of composition founded on the work of Cézanne. Years later, in 1952, Loran would write of his former pupil's work in the pages of *Art News*: "[Edmondson] is aware of the paramount necessity of making positive and negative equal, interchanging and interlocking in the process of creating space that is not static, but continually alive." Other teachers included Margaret Peterson, who emphasized Cubism and European modernism in general, and Chiuro Obata, who taught calligraphy and ink drawing and gave Edmondson Japanese paper. It was at Berkeley that Edmondson became friends with the printmaker Ynez Johnston, a fellow student with whom he would remain close for the rest of his life. Richard Diebenkorn and Elmer Bischoff were also fellow students and had some influence on Edmondson's direction.

As soon as he graduated from Berkeley in 1942, Edmondson was drafted into the army. After some specialized training, he was assigned to a French-language interrogation unit and in 1944 sent overseas. His service consisted of intelligence and administrative work rather than combat, but he was in the European theater and saw the devastation of the war. On the other hand, the war also gave him opportunities to enlarge his cultural and specifically artistic horizons. While in Paris, he was able to take trips

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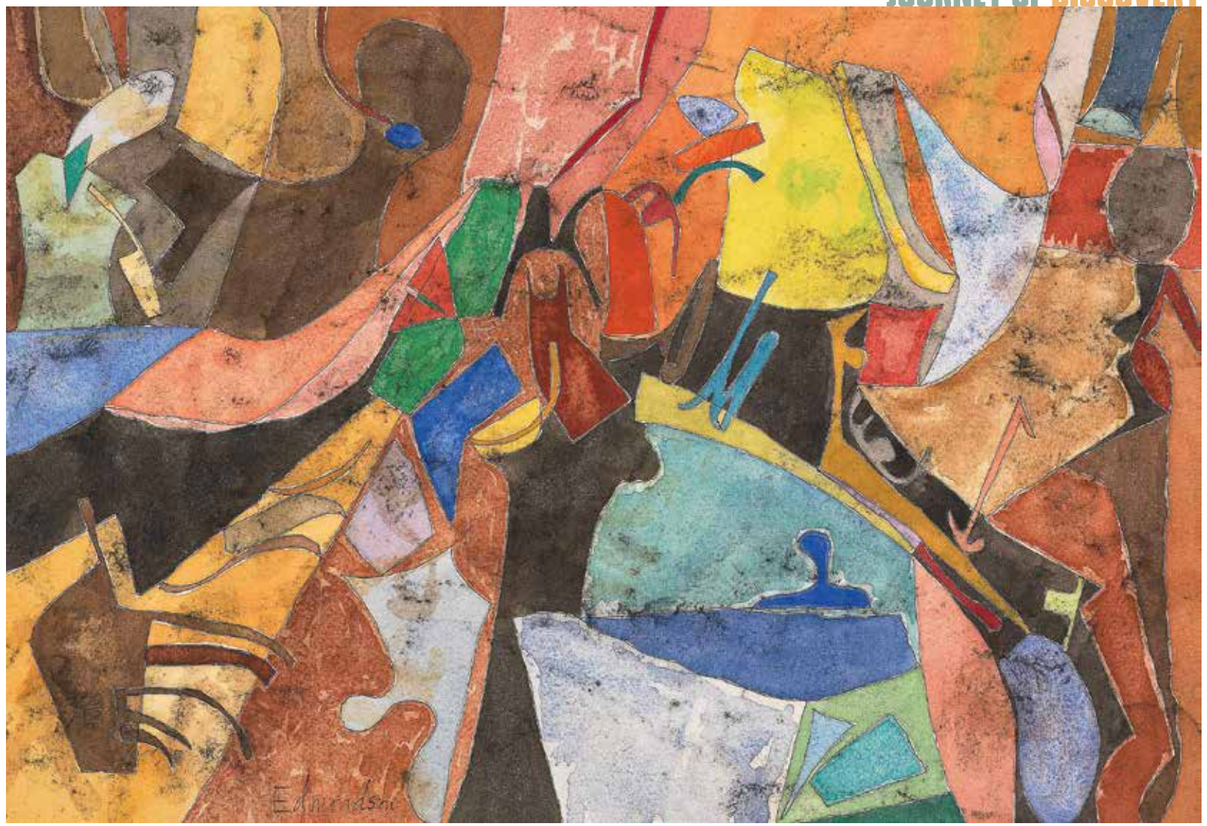
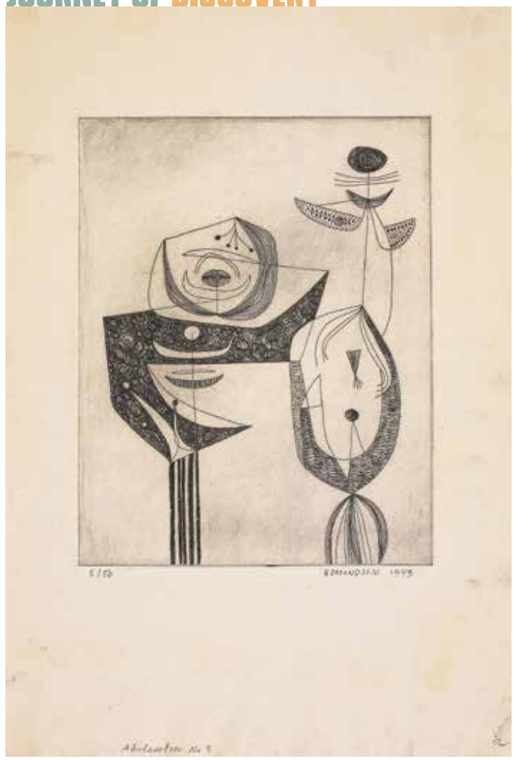


From top: ***Salon***, circa 1950s, gouache and ink, 13 x 19 in.; ***Harvest No. 3***, 1963, oil on canvas, 36 x 46

outside the city; at a museum in Switzerland, he saw a large quantity of Paul Klee's work and gained a much deeper appreciation of the Swiss artist's work than he had been able to in L.A. Klee was profoundly formative for Edmondson; in all of his later work one can see something of the graphic density and cryptic personal symbolism of Klee's approach. Edmondson was filled with such enthusiasm for life in Europe that he seriously considered staying there after the war. However, he had gotten married to his first wife, Grace Waegell Tiessen, just before being drafted, so he returned home to Los Angeles and the next phase of his career.

In 1947 he got a position at Pasadena City College. Henceforth he would make his living from teaching rather than from sales of his works; nonetheless, his years at PCC were very creatively fruitful and led to his first exhibitions and positive critical notices. For Edmondson, teaching—informed always by the theoretical writings of Kandinsky and Klee—in no way conflicted with making work, and he never lacked for



time and energy to do both to the best of his ability. In 1950 he started showing at the well-known Felix Landau Gallery in L.A. In 1952 and 1955, he won Louis Comfort Tiffany grants in support of his work, and during that period he had several museum shows, at the de Young Museum in San Francisco, the Pasadena Museum of Art, and the Santa Barbara Museum of Art.

In 1954 the influential California Scene painter, teacher, and arts administrator Millard Sheets noticed Edmondson's talents and invited him to be the chair of the design department at the Otis Art Institute (later renamed the Otis College of Art and Design). That same year he had work in the exhibition "Young American Painters" at the Guggenheim in New York, and he got further national exposure from being included in a show at the Whitney in 1956. After several years at Otis, during which he became close friends with the Japanese-born abstractionist Shiro Ikegawa and the ceramics pioneer Peter Voulkos (there are observable resonances between Voulkos' sculpture and some of Edmondson's prints), Edmondson returned to PCC, where he stayed until 1964, teaching painting, printmaking, ceramics, and life drawing, among other things. That year he was appointed chair of the art department at Cal State Los Angeles, a position he held until his retirement in 1986. As a teacher, Edmondson was a beloved figure to generations of students. He always encouraged openness and sharing in his classes and fostered a fun-loving environment full of enthusiasm and a sense of adventure.

Edmondson had a long-term, deep involvement with printmaking that began in the early 1950s, when he took a course

Clockwise from top left: ***Abstraction #3***, 1949, etching on paper, 10 x 7 ½ in., Edition 5/50; ***Untitled***, 1950s, oil on Masonite, 37 x 37 in.; ***Untitled 21***, 1959, oil on board, 17 x 36 in.

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JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

From top: ***Refuge from Fancy***, 1953, etching on paper, 5 x 11 ½ in.; ***Untitled***, 1950s, watercolor, 15 x 21 in.

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Clockwise from top left: *Untitled*, 1956, watercolor and ink, 26 x 20 ½ in.; *Untitled*, 1944, gouache on paper, 14 ¾ x 18 ¾ in.; *Blue Circle*, 1951, gouache on paper laid on cardboard, 9 ¾ x 13 in.; *Untitled XIII*, 1955, watercolor on paper, 16 x 9 in.

with Ernest Freed at the University of Southern California and learned a variety of intaglio techniques. Freed was in the lineage of the English Surrealist and printmaking pioneer Stanley William Hayter, whose Atelier 17 was the epicenter of a movement in which artists took ownership of of every aspect of the printmaking process rather than submitting designs to printmakers to be rendered as printable plates. Ultimately Edmondson settled on etching and aquatint as his preferred print media, evincing just as much creativity there as in his oils, watercolors, gouaches, and collages. One of his distinctive traits as a printmaker is his penchant for cutting the printing plate itself into various shapes other than the rectangular, so that the frame itself constitutes an abstract formal statement extending that of the print itself. In 1963 he helped found the Los Angeles Printmaking Society. In 1973, he published *Etching*, a detailed guidebook to the techniques that remains important to this day.

After a brief period of representational work in the 1940s, Edmondson remained a dedicated abstractionist for his whole career (with one brief return to figuration around 1960). In whichever medium he worked in, he favored a dense style in which the interlocking of diverse forms and colors creates a dynamic tension. In the complex space of an Edmondson painting or etching, some shapes emerge that seem to hint at representation or at least reappear often enough to seem like figures in their own right. Edmondson referred to these as "a pictographic vocabulary I invented," and this set of personal hieroglyphs puts him squarely in the tradition of his master Klee. He explained, "The language of my art is a subjective vocabulary of signs and symbols that invoke dreams of 'almost remembered' forms, feelings, and spaces." This "almost remembered" quality is part of Surrealism, a movement for which Edmondson, like many of the postwar abstractionists including Pollock and Rothko, had strong feelings of sympathy if not actual affiliation.

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JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

From top: *Images*, 1954, oil on canvas, 34 x 47 in.; *Pierced and Impaled*, circa 1960, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 38 in.

The excavation of the unconscious and dreams that the Surrealists advocated proved to be very fertile for both figurative and non-figurative work, though perhaps even more for the latter. Edmondson definitely saw himself as an "Abstract Surrealist" and also as a "Romantic," which makes sense because in many ways, Surrealism is in the Romantic tradition. "I sometimes think of my painting as Romantic," he wrote in 1957, "in the sense that these paintings are a search for a truth not found in ordinary circumstances or established customs but discovered only out of a personal resolution." Edmondson's use of the word "personal" does not mean that the work is only comprehensible to the one who made it, or that its horizons are limited to the artist's own circumstances. On the contrary; the discovery of the deepest level of the personal leads to an expansion of its meaning, so that the personal ends up encompassing that which is beyond it. As Edmondson wrote on another occasion, "I feel that my value as a painter lies in revealing a personal world which in turn becomes, when it is complete, a universal world." A