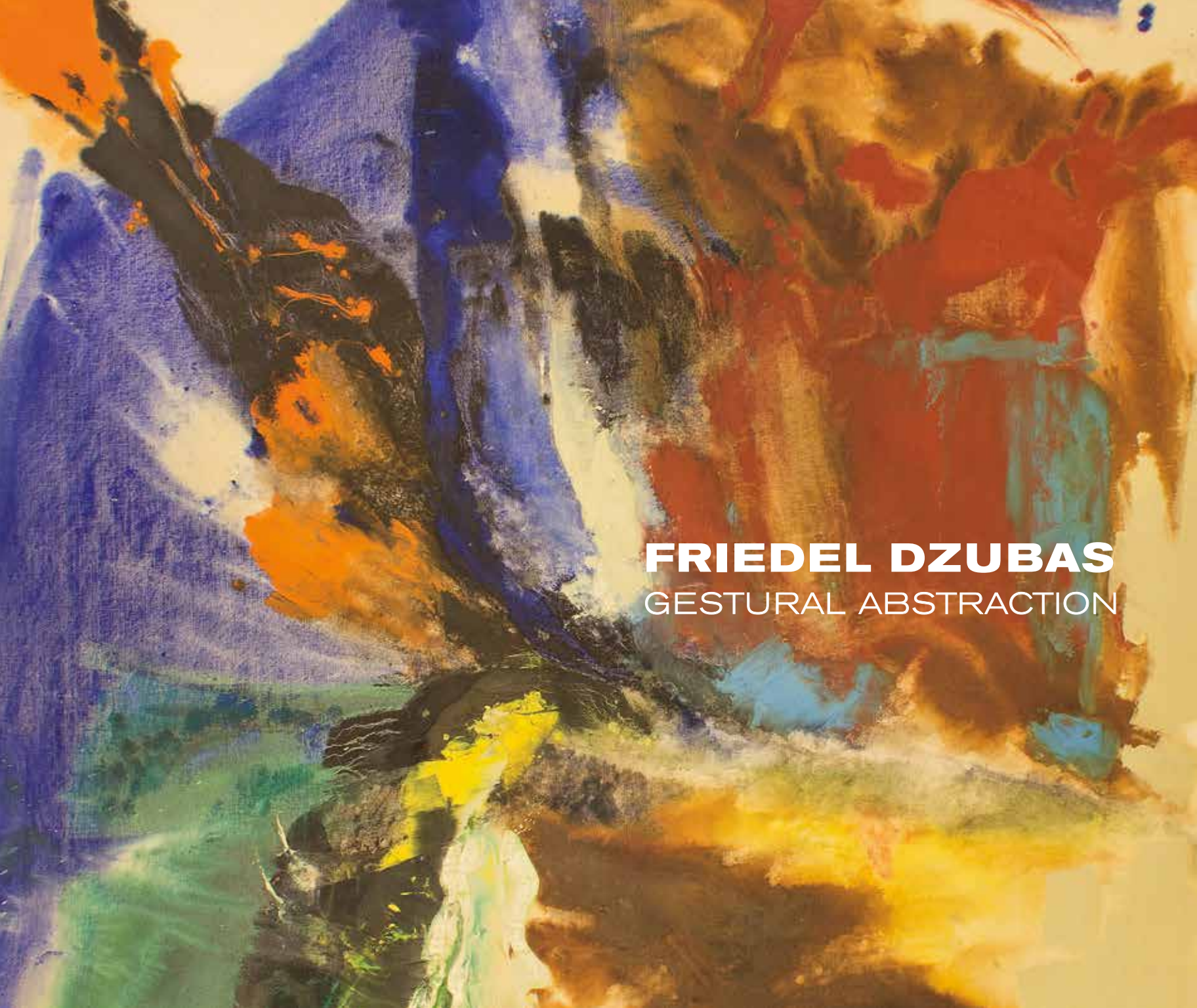
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LORETTA HOWARD GALLERY

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FRIEDEL DZUBAS: GESTURAL ABSTRACTION

Patricia L Lewy

Friedel Dzubas: Gestural Abstraction presents several works that date from Dzubas's return to painting after a four-year absence. His successful first one-person exhibition in New York at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in 1952 coincided with a moment of personal and artistic crisis. Four years later, Dzubas returned to the studio full-time, resolved to pursue his artistic goals. Armed with renewed physical and psychic energy, these canvases bristle with a resurgence of the painterly mark that would come to define his entire oeuvre. His burgeoning visual imagination in evidence in the works on view had gestated over a period of two decades, during which Dzubas had absorbed the influence of modernist abstract art in America. His early artistic training in Germany had been limited to three years as an apprentice at a wall-decorations firm, due to the restrictions set by Nazi racial laws that prevented Dzubas from attending the Prussian Academy of Art in Berlin. As he wryly put it, "It was the only way to get close to a pot of paint."[1] Dzubas arrived in New York in 1939 as a young man of ambition. At age twenty-four, he was determined to become an "American" artist, with all the forceful individualism that was the birthright of many of his artist colleagues. Through a chance job opportunity leading a team of graphic designers for the publishing company ZiffDavis in Chicago, he visited galleries such as the Katherine Kuh Gallery, where artists such as Klee, Miro, Ansel Adams, Picasso, and Kandinsky were shown—artists who were also on view at the nearby Chicago Art Institute. Returning

Friedel Dzubas in his 62 West 9th Street Studio, 1959,
Image Courtesy of the Friedel Dzubas Estate Archives

to New York in 1945, Dzubas took on free-lance design work for the Philosophical Library publishing company, among others. Three years later, he met the eminent critic Clement Greenberg, at the time a contributor to *Partisan Review*, after seeing an ad seeking summer housing that Greenberg had placed in its pages. Dzubas immediately went to the journal's offices and the two met. They liked each other, and so the critic and his son joined Dzubas at his summer sublet in Bethel, Connecticut for several weeks. A deep and long-lasting if somewhat fraught relationship grew between the two men, from which each benefited in his own way, but which materially redounded to Dzubas. The collector and benefactress Katherine S. Dwyer, a neighbor in Connecticut, also played a role in promoting Dzubas's career at the time through acquisitions of Dzubas's work for her Société Anonyme, curated by Dwyer and Marcel Duchamp. Greenberg introduced Dzubas to the extraordinary group of artists who were painting in a new abstract mode, among them Jackson Pollock, whose freedom of approach to the canvas would stimulate Dzubas's visual imagination for his entire career. Dzubas adopted Pollock's manner of placing a canvas on the floor and air-dropping on it nearly continuous skeins of paint (fig.1), which in some instances one can perceive in Dzubas's work ten years afterward, for example,

fig.1
Jackson Pollock
Composition with Pouring II, 1943
Oil on canvas
25 1/8 × 22 1/8 inches (63.9 × 56.3 cm)
Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC,
Photography by Lee Stalsworth

in *Northdrift*, 1959. "I was catching up with ten years before, so to speak. Evidently there was something in my system—it has happened a number of times in my life that it took ten years to germinate really before it really sort of plopped to the surface."[2]

fig.2
Willem de Kooning
Merritt Parkway, 1959, Oil on canvas
80 x 70 1/ inches (203.2 x 179.1 cm)
The Detroit Institute of Arts.
Bequest of W. Hawkins Ferry
Image Courtesy of Bridgeman Images/ © 2018 The Willem de Kooning Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Willem de Kooning was also a strong if oblique influence on Dzubas, which was inevitable, given Dzubas's proximity to the New York scene at the time and the adulation in which de Kooning was then held: John Elderfield called him "the uncontested idol of the New York School,"[3] which was true particularly after Pollock's death in 1956. In that sense, de Kooning's style of thickened impasto and rapid, broad swipes of the brush (nearly the reach of arm strokes), held sway. Examples are ubiquitous, but those from his "Abstract Parkway Landscape" series, 1957 to 1959 (fig.2), would have influenced all painters in the downtown scene. Dzubas averred that he had "learned from Bill [de Kooning] and I benefited by Jackson [Pollock]."[4] Furthermore, Dzubas, who had shared a studio with Helen Frankenthaler for more than a year, enjoyed an artistic reciprocity with that young, brilliant painter from Bennington College, who was seriously involved with Clement Greenberg at the time. Her staining technique—the way in which colors naturally pooled or were eased and pushed over the

surface by various painting tools—together with the areas of open, unmarked canvas in her works would not be lost on Dzubas.

How Dzubas processed these major influences can be understood from the array of his seminal works that span the late 1950s and early 1960s. By the time Dzubas returned to painting around 1956, he had melded these varying approaches, as the works on view here demonstrate.

Northdrift, 1959, takes from Pollock the splatter and drip effects for which the latter artist was so well known (see fig.1). This is coupled with contrasting broad areas of blue poured over white, only to have a darkened green blot out its gently broadening expanse. Such layering on of swaths of paint is also evident in de Kooning's multidirectional pictorial elements, anchored by a strong vertical central mark (fig.2). *Northdrift* also features a strong nearly vertical yellow, which is then pooled and smeared across this exquisite canvas. However, Dzubas, in contrast to these painters, shaded back his colors, for they are mixed rather than prismatic. Dzubas's tonal coloration is a trait Greenberg particularly admired in Dzubas's early watercolors and which Dzubas continued into his oil paintings (fig.2.5).

fig. 2.5
Friedel Dzubas
Untitled, 1939,
Watercolor on paper
15 1/2 x 19 1/4 inches
39.37 x 48.89 cm

Over the Hill, ca. 1956–57, is landscape painting at its most fascinating. If de Kooning's *Merrit Parkway* suggests a landscape seen from a moving car, Dzubas's *Over the Hill* seems to be an aerial view. Sumptuous blues demarcate lakes of different depths, while the mountainscape is rendered in earthen reds and blacks. Wonderful to see are Dzubas's responses to Frankenthaler's staining, except that in his work, Dzubas rubbed and smeared his pigment into a canvas primed and covered in gesso, a technique that separated him from Frankenthaler, who at the time, had turned primarily toward the effects that came from painting on raw unprimed canvas, soaking paint into the warp and weft of the weave by means of capillary action. Dzubas, in contrast, was a brush painter, as can be seen in *Over the Hill* and later works, insisting throughout his career that paint stand up on primed and gessoed supports. A closer look at *Over the Hill* reveals what look like pictographs–a zigzag in black, a triad and ovoid in blue, one in sienna and a central black horizontal from which two vertical "legs" are pendant. Early works by Pollock and Adolf Gottlieb come to mind. A figure at center left in this canvas can almost be taken as the prototype for a series of works that follow, ones that carry mythological import. (fig.3)

fig. 3
Friedel Dzubas
Over the Hill (detail), 1957
Oil on canvas
69 5/8 x 106 1/4 inches
162 x 270 cm

The vigorous, vertical strokes that contract into splatters and daubs is featured in one of a small series of works in which Dzubas explored pagan and mythological themes. The morphological relationship between *Over the Hill* and *Moonhunt*, in an

eight-foot-high vertical format, is uncanny. Earthen-toned vertical striations dangle from the hovering ovoid image, nearly obliterating a blazing yellowish sunlike shape created by circular markings above. A forest, a grouping of indigenous hunters poised before some sort of water formation? The mind reels at associations cued by Dzubas's title. Fascinating is the black zigzag or squiggle made with the tip of a brush handle or paint stick at the lower left, another pictograph-style marking that also appeared in *Over the Hill*. Note the area of empty space that seems to weight the paint-image downward. Empty space below pushes back and holds the image in place.

The impulse against filling the canvas with pictorial incident can be seen in works also dating from this period. When he began painting again in earnest, Dzubas laid down transparent areas of color, whose brushed attenuations were worked into his support. Thinning his pigments, Dzubas had told Max Kozloff in 1965 that both he and Frankenthaler "were truer to [Pollock's] idea just by the very fact that we painted thin."

> You know, from the beginning, I painted thinly, in physical property—a turpentine painter. I felt that the thinner I paint, the less I can lie, so to speak, the less I can qualify. If I qualify spontaneous action, I must lie. Either they deceived themselves, or they misused an illusion they didn't quite understand. That's why many of the people, as the fifties progressed, produced such empty-looking canvases. There was a lot of motion, but that motion seemed to be empty and without meaning. You cannot mechanically materialize spontaneity.[5]

Dzubas had given Kozloff a window into how his technique furthered his aesthetic goals. To achieve an immediacy and directness through the traces of his hand, his gestural marks run the gamut from rubbing with a rag to loading his brush, from diluting his oils with turpentine, to stippling and incising with the paintbrush's handle. His interwoven and elongated, sharply turned and curved color bands in muted coloration such as the blacks, blues, greens, and bluish purple in *Untitled*, ca. 1956-57, create a dazzling display of Dzubas's explorations and invention.

Beyond Dzubas's extensive repertoire of expressive marks, certain spiritual aspects are apparent in his work by the late 1950s. Drawing with color at high speed, he entered symbolic figuration into three masterful paintings in this exhibition. The resurgence of his artistic drive intersected at the time with an event that shocked the art world—the death of Jackson Pollock in a car crash in 1956. Pollock was Dzubas's friend as well as an artistic inspiration. *Road Cross*, a magnificent work painted soon after Pollock's death, carries an oblique reference to that tragedy. Dzubas's growing commitment to Catholicism during this decade is hinted at by the cruciform motif that appears in *Road Cross*, *Untitled*, 1956-57, and *Untitled*, 1957. Other works of spiritual import contain sparer but more explicitly symbolic images, such as *Lazarus*, which mirrors the pictorial structure of Jesus's raising of Lazarus from the grave. Such allegorical figuration coincides with a process of synthesis in Dzubas's art, drawing from his early representational work and integrating that impulse with his gestural touch.

In 1959, after a twenty-year absence from Germany, Dzubas reunited with his family in Berlin. His relatives had suffered extreme humiliation and physical abuse during World

War II but had survived. He spent ten months there, visiting friends and family, and touring Germany and Austria, and then returned to America to work out in paint his experiences of emotional and psychic reconciliation to his past. His first works upon his return were a series of twenty-two "oil drawings," as he called them, titled with religious references such as *Monk, Temptation,* and *Last Station*. He sought to place them "in a little chapel just whitewashed inside" and "would cover this whole Baroque architecture with those black drawings."[6]

Friedel Dzubas
Monk, c. 1960
Oil on canvas
93 1/2 x 72 1/2 inches
237.49 x 184.15 cm

Shortly afterward, Dzubas returned to color painting, employing the gestural abstraction that he was on the verge of abandoning. The latter can be sensed in the extent of open areas lightly washed in white in *Sacrifice*, 1961. This reduction of pictorial incident was a move toward what he came to call the "cleaned out" canvas that characterized his work from the early to late 1960s. The title *Sacrifice* is evoked by the soft green horizontal cross, run through with a vibrant vertical orange along the bottom and the right edge. This rectilinear form is balanced on the left side of the canvas with a radiant, cyan blue square below the "cross" and a series of circular motifs above. Equilibrium is achieved by his use of complementary colors and shapes, the cross anchoring the work centrally. As he stated, "In [this and other] works, the viewer is "confronted with a somewhat emptied-out canvas and a few large color

movements gently butting each other. … A lot of the calligraphy … the motion, the writing … of abstract expressionism has gone out of the picture."[7] Yet not entirely, nor would "the motion, the writing," ever be totally expunged.

These works from the 1950s, in which Dzubas released his virtuosity in overt gestural abstraction, extended into his future production. The dramatic gestural expression through which he activated his painted surfaces over the next several decades begins with this masterful group of paintings. Dzubas would never completely eliminate such bravura brushwork, which would come to define his future paintings to extraordinary effect. Here, Dzubas's exemplary emphasis on motility, on activation achieved by means of his painterly touch—"the *malerisch* deep inside him,"[8] in the words of Clement Greenberg—is everywhere apparent. ■

(Endnotes)

1. Unedited, unpaginated transcript of Charles Millard's interview with Friedel Dzubas, August 2 and 17, 1982, on the occasion of Dzubas's retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., June 16–August 14, 1983. (hereafter cited as Millard-Dzubas interview, 1982. The transcript is now housed in the Friedel Dzubas Estate Archives, New York.
2. Ibid.
3. John Elderfield, *Willem de Kooning: A Retrospective* (New York: Museum of Modern Art), p. 317.
4. Five-page typescript titled "Conversation 1957," April 26, 1957, p. 4, Friedel Dzubas Estate Archives.
5. Max Kozloff, "An Interview with Friedel Dzubas," *Artforum* IV, no. 1 (September 1965): 52.
6. Millard-Dzubas interview, 1982, n.p.
7. Friedel Dzubas, audio-recorded slide lecture, Emma Lake Workshop, 1979.
8. Clement Greenberg, "Friedel Dzubas," *Friedel Dzubas Gemälde*, Kunsthalle Bielefeld, December 18, 1977–January 15, 1978 (Bielefeld-Senne, Germany: Busch, 1977), 8.

Patricia L Lewy, author and editor of the Friedel Dzubas monograph from Skira Editore, Milan 2018, received her PhD in art history from the University of Essex under Dawn Ades. Lewy also holds a PhD in historical musicology from the University of California, Berkeley.

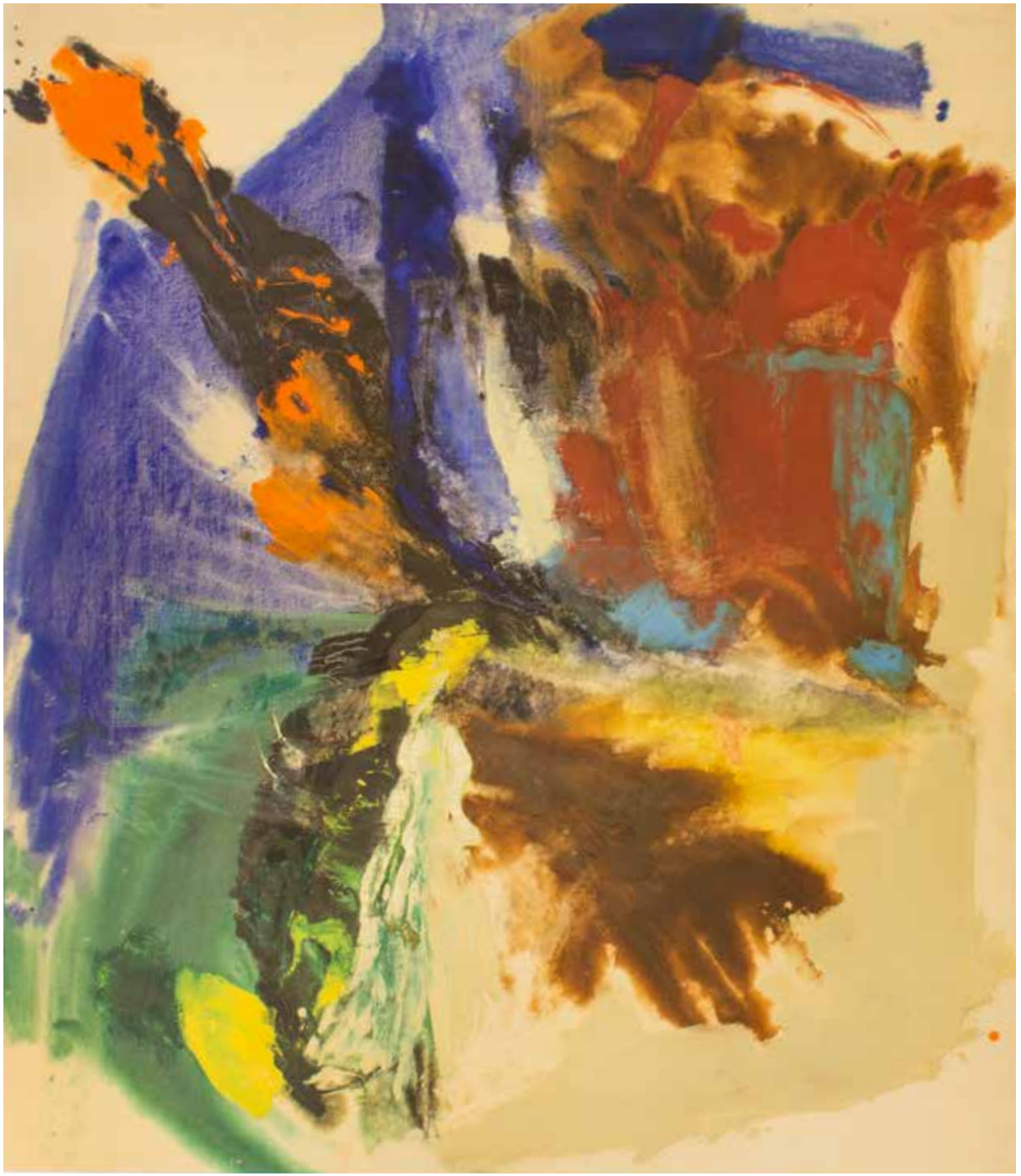
Untitled, 1956
Oil on canvas
39 1/4 x 54 7/8 inches
100 x 140 cm

opposite page
Over the Hill, c.1957
Oil on canvas
69 5/8 x 106 1/4 inches
162 x 270 cm

Untitled, 1957
Oil on canvas
52 x 39 inches
132 x 99 cm

Moonhunt, 1958
Oil on canvas
96 x 46 ½ inches
244 x 119 cm

Road Cross, 1958
Oil on canvas
60 x 49 ¼ inches
153 x 126 cm



Jungleskin, 1959
Oil on canvas
76 x 66 inches
193 x 168 cm

Northdrift, 1960
Oil on canvas
19 x 38 inches
48 x 97 cm

opposite page
Sacrifice, 1961
Oil on canvas
58 x 90 inches
147 x 229 cm

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Friedel Dzubas with Renewal, 1961, 147 Wooster Street Studio, 1961, Photography by Cora Ward, Image Courtesy of Maurice Baden on Behalf of the Cora Ward Estate

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