

An abstract painting featuring thick, expressive brushstrokes in various shades of blue and green. The colors are layered and blended, creating a sense of depth and movement. The background is a deep, dark blue, with lighter blue and green strokes sweeping across it. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and organic form.

# CLEVE GRAY

A PAINTER OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS



# CLEVE GRAY

A PAINTER OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS

Summer 2020

LORETTA HOWARD  
GALLERY

525 WEST 26TH ST NEW YORK NY 10001 212.695.0164 LORETTAHOWARD.COM



## WORLDS UPON WORLDS: GRAY'S AUTONOMY

Cleve Gray (1918–2004) was a painter of understated lavishness and preternatural sensitivity, what the French might call *sensible*. An abstractionist and instinctive colorist, he was known for large-scale canvases, often made in series, that displayed material voluptuousness and aplomb. One of his most celebrated works is *Threnody* (1972-73), a commanding anti-war painting of 14 panels, each a whopping 20 x 20 feet, commissioned by the Neuberger Museum of Art and compared by some to the Rothko Chapel in Houston. Gray was a student of Chinese landscape painting, with an emphasis on that of the Yuan dynasty (the Mongol dynasty), characterized by innovative brushwork that was rowdier, more gestural, more immediate than classical Chinese painting with its canonical imperatives, representational inclinations and prescribed refinements. His Cubist endeavors while in Paris, under the tutelage of André Lhote and Jacques Villon, yielded to Abstract Expressionism upon his return to the United States, to be counterpointed by what would prove to be a lifelong love of Eastern art that included calligraphy. Falling under the spell of American artists such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, Helen Frankenthaler, Robert Motherwell, Adolph Gottlieb and others, Gray fashioned out of mid-century modernism's common language his own singular, cosmopolitan vision, one poised thrillingly on the cusp of materiality and the ineffable.

All the works in this exhibition were made in the early 1990s, except for *Reach*, dated from 1981-1995. A triptych of polished elegance, it begins with a subtly modulated grey panel that warms up, successively, into coral, then deepens into vermilion. Each could be a luminous, stand-alone monochrome in its own right. But Gray introduces a cloud of dense black, patched with white, grey, and other tones, into the lower half of the third canvas. Of note is that he does so from the right side, encouraging us to read the painting from right to left, a direction that is more Asian than Western, at least in terms of the written character, before globalization and the internet upended millennia of engrained cultural precedents. That inky emanation migrates into the middle panel, its edges blurred, wisped, the solidity of the form deliquescing, rendered more buoyant, unfixd. A small blob, like an exploratory vessel launched from a mothership, paused for the moment, might be attempting to “reach” the first panel, leading our eye there, which in turn inspires further narratives, formal and otherwise.

The verticality of the panels is more or less reversed by the triptych format that turns the painting into a horizontal, an orientation corresponding to the other works in this show, shifting them toward landscape. It’s a notational concept of landscape, the surface acting as the ground, the space indeterminate—a Cubist legacy via Ab Ex via Color Field and the meditative art of Zen--and all the more potent for its economy of representation (if such vibrant, rich colors and animated brushwork can be considered anything but sumptuous, maximal).

In most of the other paintings on view, a sinewy calligraphic line dominates the foreground. Here, the traditional art historical rivalry between line and color is mooted, since the line—or more accurately, the string of brushstrokes—is as much voluptuous color as it is cerebral line.

Ma Yuan,  
*Walking on a Mountain  
Path in Spring*,  
c. Song Dynasty,  
ink on silk, China.



That color/line seems fluid at first, riverine, but upon closer scrutiny, its breakages are evident. It might not be too much to call it a metaphor, the emblematic unfurling of a life's progress.

There is a mountain-valley configuration that this line assumes and is repeated in a number of the works. For instance, in *Golden Thrust* (1993), a semblance of a lower case "m" appears in the middle where the burnt-orange gestures meet in a kind of handshake, a touching of paint tips, recalling, perhaps, the essential gesture of God reaching out toward Adam in the Sistine Chapel, the ghosts of other colors and forms gathered behind it. That motif appears in an uppercase mode in *Considering all Possible Worlds #4* (1991), from a series that is one of the highlights of his oeuvre. It boasts linked turquoise green strokes that skim through a luxuriantly brushed wilderness of blue, each color impacting the other, the line becoming more intensely green, the ground more reverberantly blue, the visual interactions in constant flux, oceanic, depending upon the light and other ambient circumstances. Its rhythm is not lyrical but full



Michelangelo,  
*Creation of Adam*,  
c. 1508-1521, fresco  
painting, Sistine Chapel,  
Vatican City, Rome, Italy.

of abrupt stops and starts, a curve countered by an angle, say, a choppiness that is characteristic of the agile, dissonant syncopations of the modern, from its radical beginnings to the present.

I watched a cardinal ascend the Vermont sky this past summer. It flung itself into the blue, flying swiftly, determinedly across it. Then it veered, vanishing, leaving an imagined after-trail of scarlet. I was reminded of that, looking at Cleve Gray's paintings. They linger in the eye, the mind, a flash of color, of the spirit.

Lilly Wei

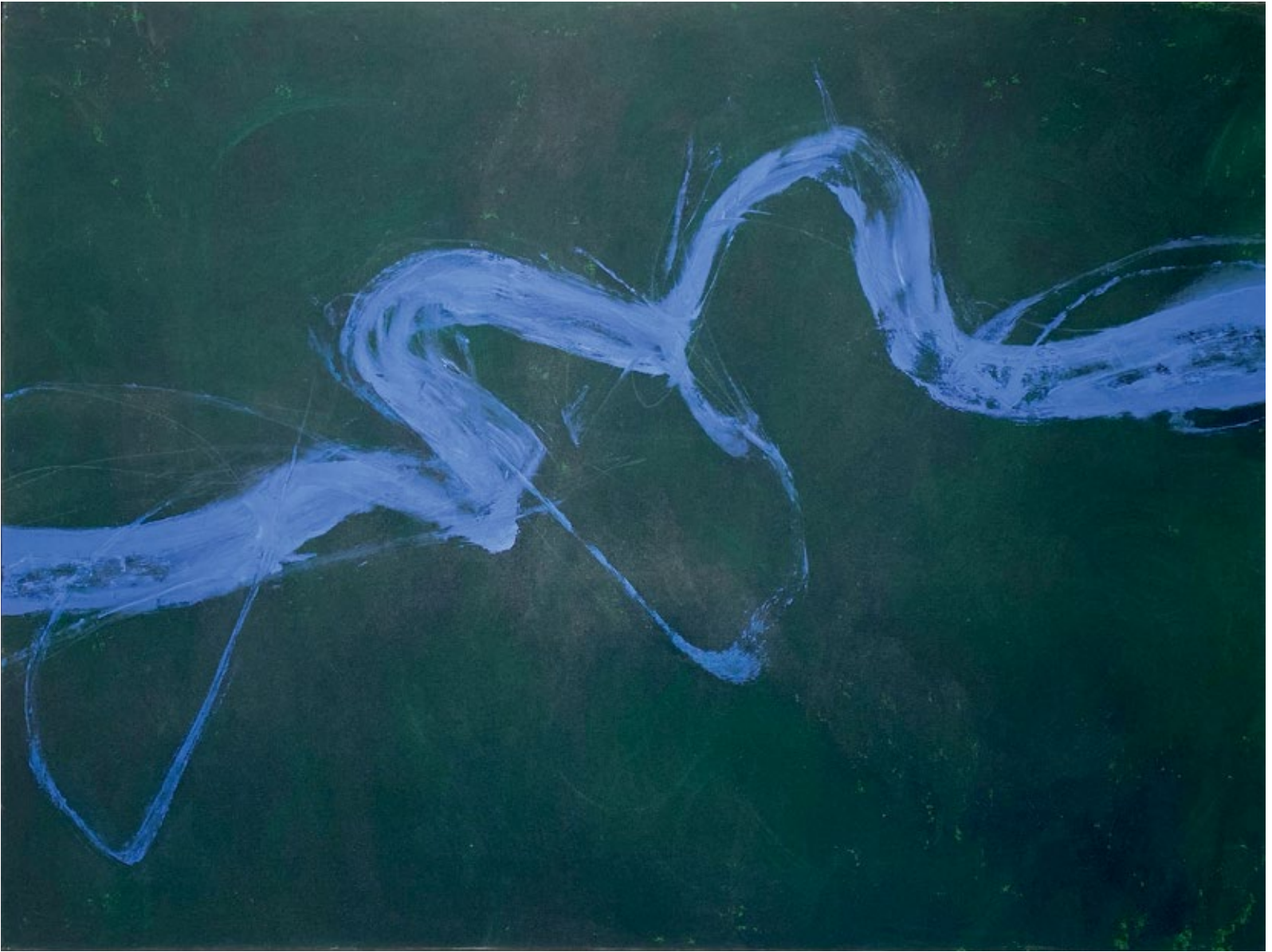
Lilly Wei is a New York-based art critic, curator and journalist.

*Golden Thrust*, 1993  
Acrylic on canvas  
40 x 65 inches









*Golden Thrust*, 1993  
Acrylic on canvas  
40 x 65 inches

*Air Things Wear That Build This World*, 1990  
Acrylic on canvas  
60 x 60 inches

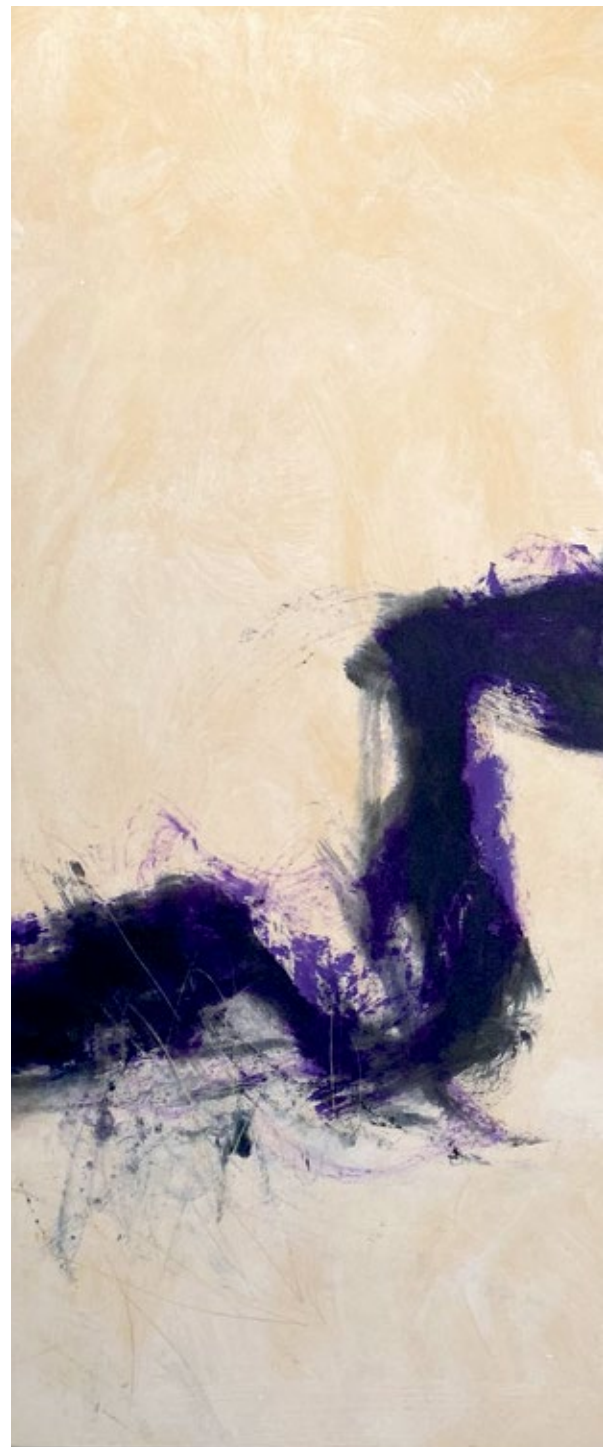


*Reach (Triptych)*, 1981-1995  
Acrylic on canvas  
72 x 108 inches





*Untitled*, ca. 1990  
Acrylic on canvas  
60 x 80 inches





*Considering All Possible Worlds #4*, 1991  
Acrylic on canvas  
50 x 70 inches

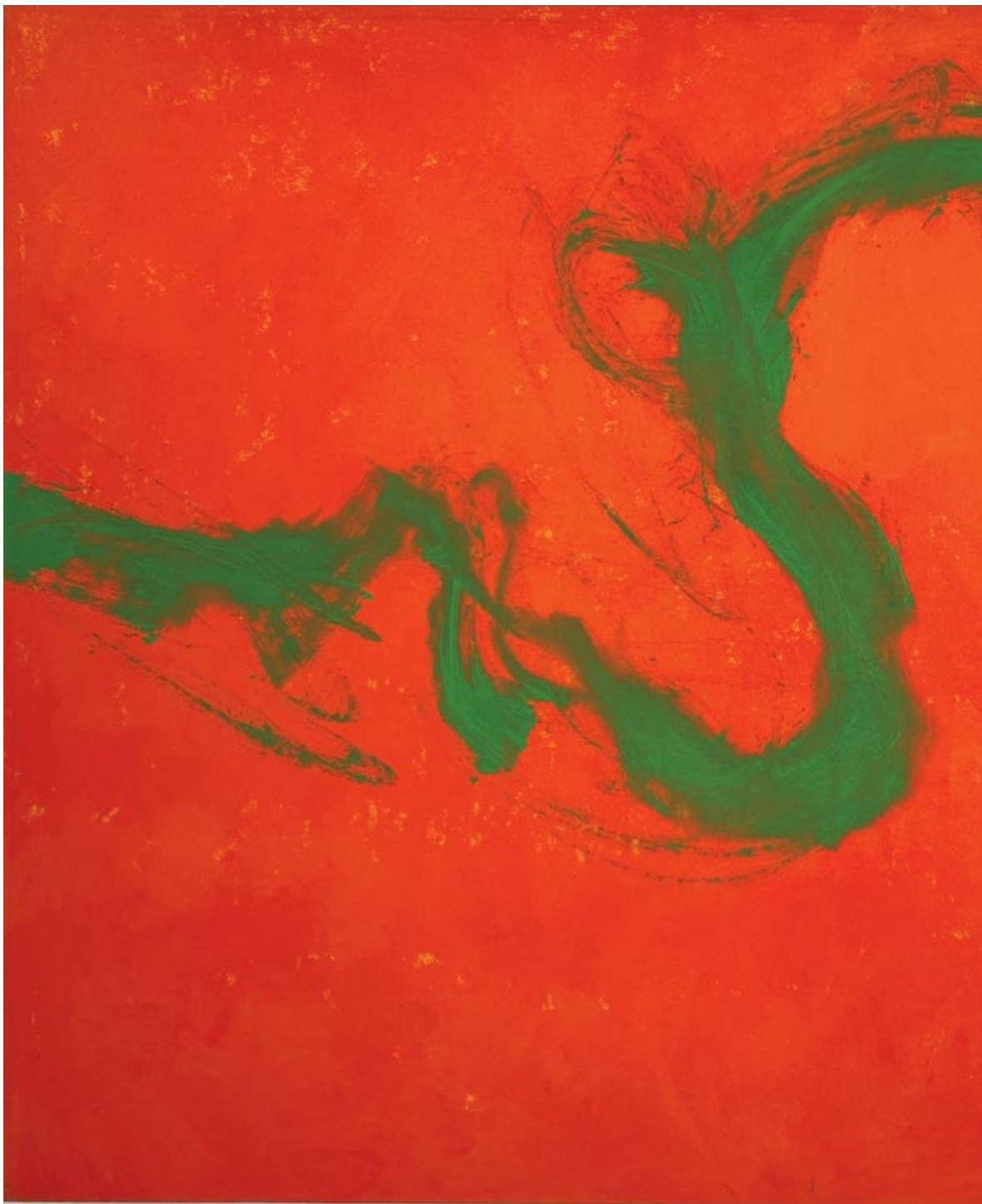












*Considering All Possible Worlds #13, 1991*  
Acrylic on canvas  
50 x 70 inches



*Considering All Possible Worlds #9*, 1991  
Acrylic on canvas  
50 x 70 Inches







*What is the Question? #6*, c.1991  
Acrylic on canvas  
40 x 70 inches





## PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

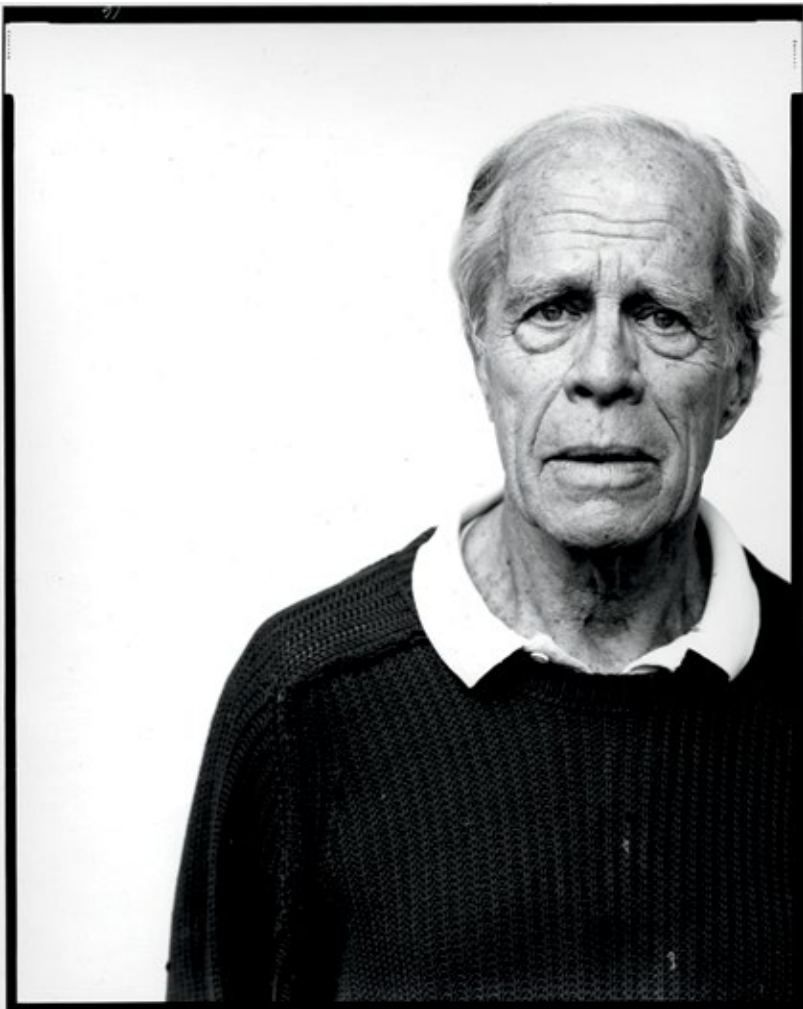
Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA  
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY  
American Academy of Arts and Letters, NY  
The Brooklyn Museum, NY  
Cathedral of Saint John the Divine Art Gallery, NY  
Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, ME  
Columbia Museum of Art, SC  
Columbia University Art Gallery, NY  
Columbus Museum of Art, OH  
The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.  
Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, NY  
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NY  
Heckscher Museum, Huntington, NY  
Honolulu Academy of the Arts, HI  
The Jewish Museum, NY  
Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, Champaign, IL  
Mattatuck Museum, Waterbury, CT  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY  
Minnesota Museum of Art, St. Paul, MN  
Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, Utica, NY  
Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA  
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX  
The Museum of Modern Art, NY  
National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.  
The Neuberger Museum, State University of New York at Purchase, NY  
New Britain Museum of American Art, CT  
The New School Art Collection, NY  
The Newark Museum, NJ  
Norton Gallery of Art, West Palm, Beach, FL  
Oklahoma City Art Center, OK  
Palmer Museum of Art, The Pennsylvania State University, PA  
The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.  
The Art Museum, Princeton University, NJ  
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA  
Shearson Lehman Hutton Collection, NY  
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE  
Shite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, IN  
The Spence School, NY  
St. Bernard's School, NY  
Tennessee Botanical Gardens and Fine Arts Center, Nashville, TN  
Tremaine Art Gallery, The Hotchkiss School, Lakeville, CT  
Union Station, Hartford, CT  
Vanderbilt Art Gallery, Nashville, TN  
The Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT  
Whitney Museum of American Art, NY  
Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA  
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT  
J. Willard Gibbs Research Laboratory, Yale University, New Haven, CT

## CLEVE GRAY

Cleve Gray (1918-2004) graduated summa cum laude from Princeton University, where he studied painting and Far Eastern Art under the acclaimed scholar George Rowley. Like many of his generation, he joined the United States Army during World War II, serving in England, France and Germany. After the war, he remained in Paris on the GI Bill, where he furthered his study of painting under the cubist Jacques Villon.

In the 1960s he formed a close friendship with Barnett Newman. It was during this time that he experienced an artistic metamorphosis, dissolving his earlier cubist compositions in a sea of distilled color. This dramatic body of work marked the beginning of an artistic meditation that would last for over 40 years. The rigors of French modernism, the ethos of Abstract Expressionism and the meditative restraint of Chinese and Japanese scroll painting commingle with astounding affect. The atmospheric, subdued tones of his 1960s paintings gradually gave way to bright, monochromatic fields of color, hazily washed onto the canvas in stain like swathes. Much of his work from the last three decades of his career features striking graphic brushwork that conjures the influence of Japanese and Chinese calligraphy. The artist lived and worked in Warren Connecticut for over half a decade with his wife, author and New Yorker staff writer, Francine Du Plessix Gray.

Gray has exhibited at a number of important institutions including the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, The Brooklyn Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art. The artist is also represented in a number of important public collections including the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, The Brooklyn Museum, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, The Smithsonian, The Jewish Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, The Museum of Modern Art, The Newark Museum, The Phillips Collection, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Yale University Art Gallery and most famously the *Threnody* mural paintings at the Neuberger Museum.



This catalogue published on the  
occasion of the exhibition

## CLEVE GRAY

A PAINTER OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS

Summer 2020

Loretta Howard Gallery  
521 West 26th Street  
New York NY 10001  
212.695.0164  
[www.lorettahoward.com](http://www.lorettahoward.com)

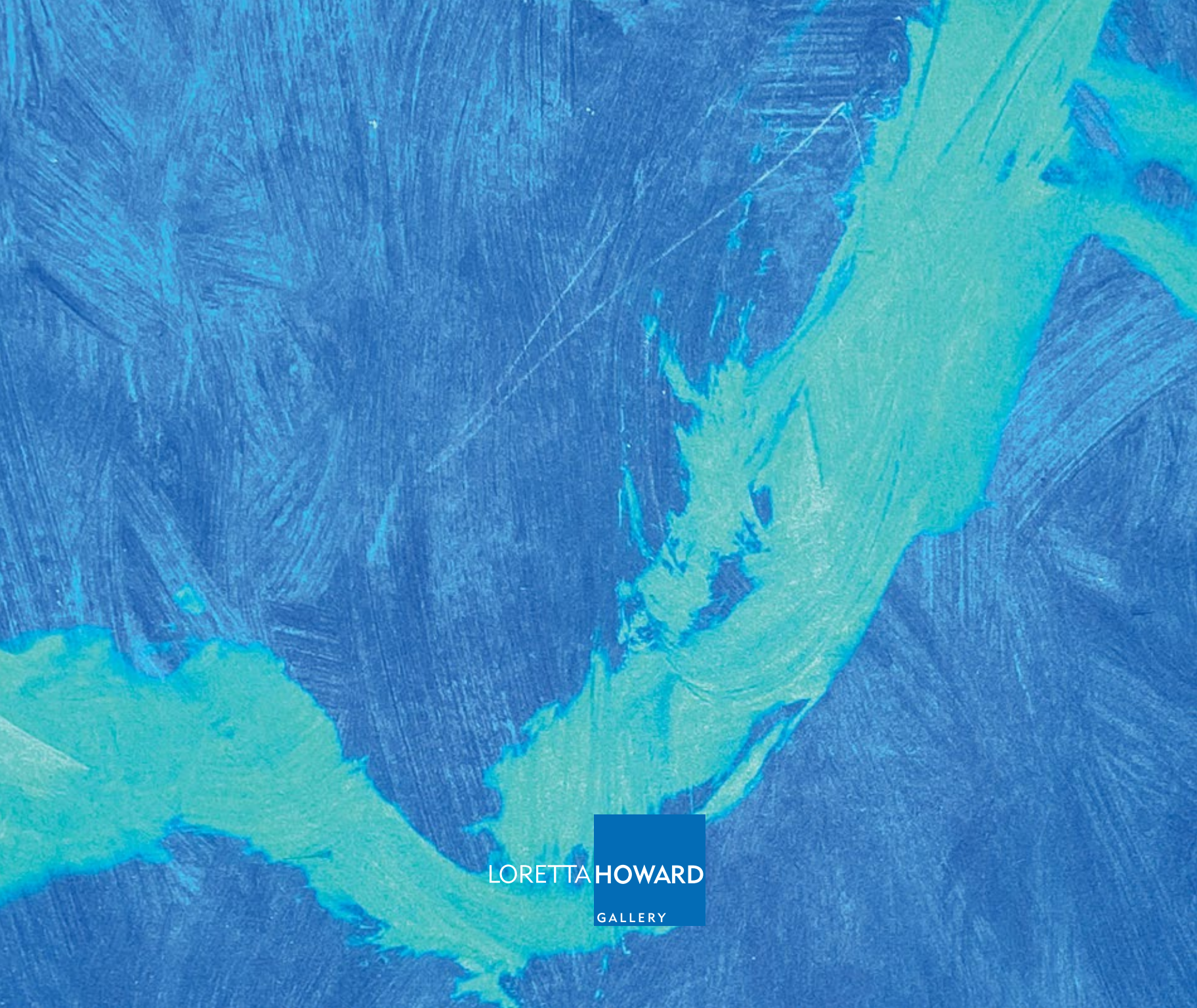
All works photographed by Anthony Torrano  
Design: HHA design

ISBN: 978-1-7341104-3-2

Cover: *Considering All Possible Worlds #4*, 1991, (detail)  
reproduced on page 14-15

Cleve Gray, artist Warren Connecticut. July 13 2001  
Photograph by Richard Avedon. Courtesy  
The Richard Avedon Foundation  
© 2020 The Richard Avedon Foundation





LORETTA HOWARD

GALLERY