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Beyond the Surface:
Themes and Variations in the Abstractions of
WILL HENRY STEVENS





Will Henry Stevens
(1881-1949)

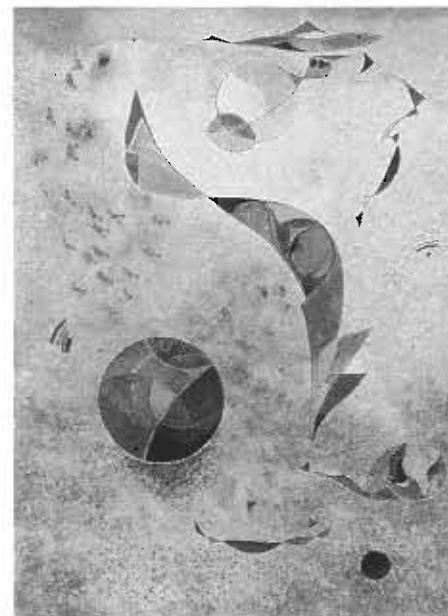
In the spring of 1945 Will Henry Stevens, a sixty-three year old professor of painting in New Orleans, wrote to New York gallery owner Curt Valentin, "I am only just beginning to feel whatever power I may have and believe I am at present just getting into my stride."¹ Stevens was aware that his career was an anomaly for he did not achieve mastery of a personal aesthetic vision until he was past middle age, yet his late works include some of the strongest and most lyrical abstractions produced in America during the late 1930s and early 1940s.

In the last ten years of his life, Stevens progressed from painting topographic landscapes and genre scenes to nature generated abstractions based on many of the themes that had occupied him in his realist painting, yet in a less explicit and more poetic manner. He integrated basic shapes derived from landscape and still life into floating microcosms of a complex imaginary cosmos. In them he emphasized the delicate beauties of nature's smallest components, the mathematical underpinnings of the universe, and a unity among living things; and he represented air, earth and water as transparent interpenetrating realms of intricate interconnected forms describing cycles of growth and decay. Intellectually he conceived of his abstractions as two distinct types of paintings which he referred to as abstractions and non-objectives. The abstractions are compilations of biomorphic shapes based on familiar natural forms such as flowers, leaves, trees, waves, birds, fish or rocks arranged in undulating patterns. The non-objectives are hard-edged geometric shapes that suggest scientific models for atoms, spheres or planetary orbits.

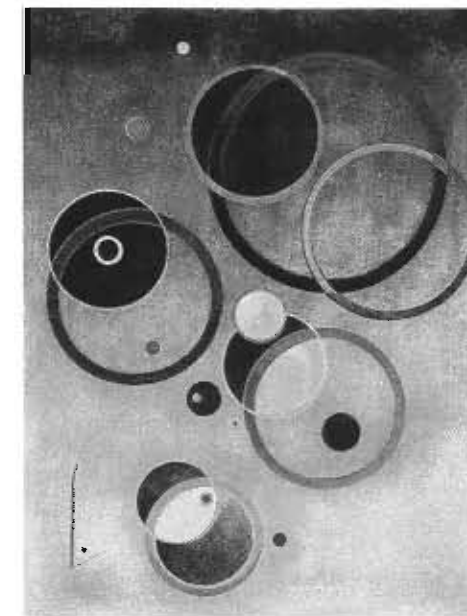
Although few of Stevens' abstractions had names inscribed on them, it is clear from his records that he referred to them with specific titles. A list of works sent to the Kleeman Galleries in New York for exhibition in 1940 has evocative titles such as: *Afloat*, *Submerged*, *Interwoven*, *Variations*, *Awakening*, *Overlapping* and *Fantasy*.² These designations indicate concerns for space, time and psychological states that are prevalent in Stevens' abstract images. Although the gallery did not continue to handle Stevens' works after 1943, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts acknowledged the importance of his work by purchasing two abstractions, *Winged Form* and *Pinnacles*, from an exhibition in 1941.³

In 1944 when Stevens had a one-man exhibition at progressive Black Mountain College in North Carolina, Bauhaus expatriate Josef Albers expressed enthusiasm about Stevens' abstractions and encouraged him to align himself with the Abstract American Artists group, the leading crusaders for abstraction in the country.⁴ Stevens never followed this advice even though his non-objectives were stylistically similar to paintings by these better-known New York artists from whom he might have received support and encouragement. Albers' own work, moreover, shares correspondences with Stevens' geometric compositions in his later exhaustive examination of the square.

Stevens' late abstractions demonstrate his energetic experimentation with unusual color and spatial combinations. His fertile imagination also explored a complicated range of materials including a melange of oils, inks, watercolors, glazes and pastels on paper, linen, canvas and board. The son of



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a chemist, Stevens was so fascinated with paint chemistry that he created his own clay-based, non-smudging pastels that account for his lively palette and link his material to the earthy themes of the works. The intermingling of materials allowed Stevens a wide range of textures and in 1946 he experimented with the addition of sand and low relief contour to the largest painting of his career. His experimentation with dramatically enlarged pictorial supports, contrasting with the intimacy of his initial abstractions, indicated a prescient intimation of the monumental floating compositions that would dominate American art for the decades following his death.

Stevens' abstractions are characterized by a repetition of basic motifs that lend a serial quality to the imagery. Careful observation reveals similar themes and refrains that reappear in different guises. Triangles float as planes in space, simulate mountains or suggest the mystery of the pyramids. Circles suggest balls, seeds, planetary spheres, or eyes of imperceptible creatures. Shapes of birds, animals, fish and human faces are frequently camouflaged in the matrix of compositions so that they can only be discerned by perceptive viewers. The interlocking shapes of the uncharacteristically brooding *Lurking Menace* coalesce to suggest a dangerous crustacean. As a metaphor for our deepest fears, the painting eerily prefigured Stevens' death from leukemia, and his last painting of a tiny orb suspended in an empty expanse of gray is a premonition of his imminent departure into an uncharted realm.

In 1948 during his only year of retirement, Stevens wrote to his former dean at Newcomb College, "In fact I am anticipating greater creative activity than I have had in recent years."⁵ This speculation proved to be a false hope, for Stevens' creativity abruptly ended with his death in 1949, coinciding with the explosive arrival of Abstract Expressionism in New York. Stevens' late work, however, prefigured the cosmic consciousness and quest for meaning in the vast empty space of the universe that informed this first internationally recognized school of American abstract artists. Similar to their heralded paintings, Will Henry Stevens' abstractions invite us to explore beyond the surface of appearances, to acknowledge the incomprehensible complexity of the universe and to embrace its mystery.

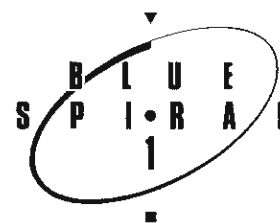
Percy North
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Montgomery College

NOTES

Will Henry Stevens' papers are on microfilm roll #4704 in the Archives of American Art (AAA).

1. Letter from W.H. Stevens to Curt Valentin, April 26, 1945, AAA 4704, frame #314.
2. AAA 4704, frame #3834
3. Letter from W.H. Stevens to the curator of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, May 7, 1941, AAA 4704, frame #307.
4. Letter from Josef Albers to W.H. Stevens, February 16, 1944, AAA 4704, frame #313.
5. Letter from W.H. Stevens to Dean Logan Wilson, January 6, 1948, AAA 4704, frame #317.

1. Untitled, Oil & mixed media
37-1/4" x 48"
Signed "Stevens" lower right
2. Untitled, Oil
26" x 21-3/4"
Signed "Stevens" lower right
3. Untitled, Mixed media
16" x 12"
Signed "W.H.S. '40"
lower left
4. "Circles", Oil
28" x 22"
Signed "Stevens" lower right
5. Untitled, Oil
25-1/2" x 29-1/2"
Signed "Stevens" lower right
6. Untitled, Oil
32" x 34-1/2"
Signed "Stevens '48"
lower left
7. Untitled, Mixed media
12" x 16"
Signed "Stevens '49"
lower left near center
8. Untitled, Mixed media
14 x 16
Signed "Stevens '42"
lower right



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