

Kenworth Moffett, *Kenneth Noland*. New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1977. 240 pp., illus., \$52.00

Ken Carpenter

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eral key works beyond those mentioned in his general analysis, in order to relate their histories on both the physical and philosophical levels, and to demonstrate their attributes and failings. Ultimately, Van der Marck convincingly illustrates that Segal is above all a formalist, via the painting tradition of Mondrian to Hofmann, and the sculptural theory of the Minimalists.

To complete this extremely readable and scholarly text, a detailed biography, a listing of exhibitions, and a selected bibliography are included. Although this study was long overdue, the wait has been well worthwhile. As we approach the 'eighties, the 'sixties – with their apparent flood of innovative artistic directions – must undoubtedly be re-evaluated. In this regard, Jan van der Marck can be credited with having taken one of the first serious initiatives.

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KENWORTH MOFFETT *Kenneth Noland*. New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1977. 240 pp., illus., \$52.00.

Kenneth Noland, the forty-sixth in Abrams's series of books on contemporary artists, is in many ways one of their best. The artist concerned is of much greater artistic and historical importance than many others in the series – Christo, Jenkins, Rivers, and Samaras, for instance – and the text, running to almost 35,000 words, is much more thorough than has sometimes been the case.

The author, Kenworth Moffett, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, belongs to the same 'modernist' tradition as does his subject. Moffett's art history is deeply rooted in art criticism, and he is acutely aware of the work of art as a pattern of resolved stresses.

The opening chapter traces Noland's development up to 1958,

when he began his mature work. Noland's experience at Black Mountain College, starting in 1946, was clearly crucial. His training there, under Albers and Bolotowski, was in abstract art from the first. Like the mature Noland, both teachers worked with a 'conflict between the motility of color and the rigidities of geometric design,' and both were less ideological than such founders of abstraction as Kandinsky and Mondrian. At Black Mountain, Noland also became interested in Klee as a more expressive and spontaneous alternative to geometric art and he met Clement Greenberg, who encouraged an interest in Jackson Pollock rather than in the more fashionable De Kooning.

Moffett's second chapter is devoted to the development of the 'pure color picture' since Impressionism. He takes it that 'the flattened and often contradictory space of the modern abstract picture demands . . . simplification.' Since the most purely 'optical' property of painting is colour, the development of modernist painting can easily be explained as a 'drive toward color.' Furthermore, 'flatness and alloverness . . . have . . . been as if hidden objectives in the development of modernist painting.' It might be thought that Moffett is assuming that 'alloverness or at least its effects' are not just 'imperatives of abstract painting' but also artistic values. I do not believe that such a charge would be at all correct, but it is surely a measure of the degree to which Moffett has narrowed Clement Greenberg's concept of modernist painting that his emphasis should rest quite so much on apparent historical inevitability and on artistic problem-solving.

The third chapter is an interesting revision of Noland's public image. Rather than a calculated and ascetic artist, Noland is presented as one who was stimulated by Pollock's unconventional materials and paint handling to reject all preconceptions about how paintings are to be made and who would therefore 'follow up the lead the *materials*

presented,' as he did in 'jam painting' with Morris Louis, the two of them working on the same canvas. Indeed, his whole procedure is based on challenging his own taste, temporarily suspending it during the making of the work. He is remarkably free, too, to crop his pictures, turn them upside down, not treating them at all preciously. Preliminary sketches are rare; his use of staining inhibits reworking, and he continually forces himself to improvise and invent. This emphasis on Noland's spontaneity is a welcome antidote to simplistic deductions from the mere fact of 'hard-edged' painting that such work must be limited, but I think it would be wrong to conclude that Noland's lesser work never seems protected or constrained.

Having laid this groundwork, Moffett then analyzes Noland's great mature work of 1958 to 1970, the targets, chevrons (Fig. 1), horizontal-band pictures, and diamonds. In doing so, he traces over some familiar ground: Noland's preference for 'self-cancelling' structures outside the realm of traditional composition, the particular ability of stained painting to simultaneously open up the picture plane and assert the surface, the resulting tension between the literal and the ethereal, and the various relations between the elements and the perimeter with which Noland has been so

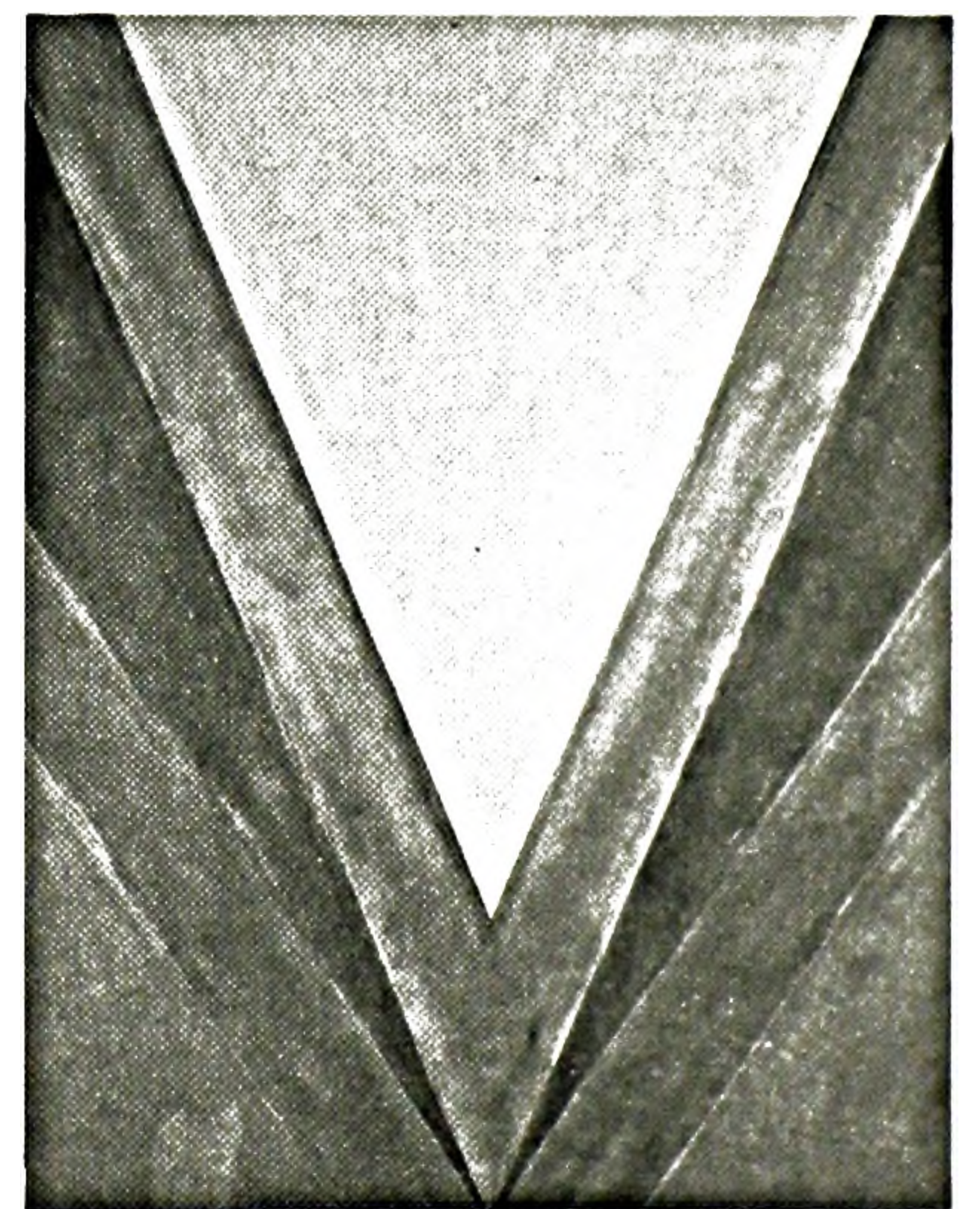


FIGURE 1. Noland, *Dusk*. From Moffett.

inventive. Here Moffett is noteworthy for how he consistently ties his formal observations to matters not only of syntax but also of the personal sensibility of the artist. That is, he only occasionally falls prey to the chief occupational hazard of immanent analysis, 'mere' description.

Moffett's fifth chapter covers Noland's work of the 1970s, the 'plaids' and the shaped canvases. As good as the plaids can sometimes be, Moffett quite rightly finds them often looking boxed in and too ordered. The shaped canvases are another matter. Unlike Frank Stella, who has been 'insensitive to the necessity of creating a vital tension between the whole shape of the painting and the pictorial illusion, between the inside and the outside,' Noland works for an achieved rather than a predetermined balance. The implicit aesthetic theory here is surely superior to that in those accounts which would have Stella as fine an artist as Noland because of Stella's high degree of order. Thus Moffett shows his merit, offering sound aesthetic judgments, cogently argued, that go against the prevailing wisdom.

Moffett's last and shortest chapter takes up the issue of content in Noland's art. As always, he is an acute observer of tensions within the work, 'between splendor of color and its taut control, between clarity and immediacy of presentation and pictorial indeterminacy,' and so on. Further than this he does not go, apparently for two reasons. One would seem to be his stand that Noland's later work is 'more . . . self-referential, i.e. abstract, than any pictures before,' and another is Suzanne Langer's observation that abstract painting 'is not language because it has no vocabulary.' This is sound enough, but Moffett nonetheless inevitably draws attention to the limits of purely immanent analysis: it always operates at a full remove from the felt content of art. Furthermore, when Moffett argues that Noland 'has gained conscious control of all the co-ordinates of painting,' he seems not only to be denying those

limits but also to be contradicting much of his previous argument.

In sum, this is a fine book on an artist that Moffett and many others regard as 'one of the most inventive colorists in all of modern art.'

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ASCANIO CONDIVI *The Life of Michelangelo*. Trans. by Alice Sedgwick Wohl, ed. by Hellmut Wohl. Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1976. 156 pp., 62 illus., \$15.00.

Since primary sources for the lives of many Renaissance artists are limited, we are fortunate in possessing significant documentation, both biographical and autobiographical, for Michelangelo (Fig. 1). The artist's letters and poems, the two editions of Vasari's *Vite*, and the text reviewed here, Ascanio Condivi's *Life of Michelangelo*, are all major sources for the master's life.

Ascanio Condivi, a student of Michelangelo, wrote his biography in 1553, eleven years before Michelangelo's death at nearly eighty-nine in 1564. In a prefatory statement to the reader, Condivi points out several important fea-



FIGURE 1. Daniele da Volterra, *Michelangelo*. Condivi, frontispiece.

tures of his *Life (Vita)*. After expressing his desire to record and commemorate the life of this 'unique painter and sculptor,' he notes the need to correct information found in earlier accounts of his subject's life and stresses his personal connection with Michelangelo. Indeed, it is commonly accepted among Michelangelo scholars that the aging artist dictated the viewpoint and much of the contents of Condivi's work. This quasi-autobiographical dimension of the *Vita* is strongly argued by Hellmut Wohl in his introduction to a new English translation of the text: 'In spite of Condivi's insignificance in his own right, or perhaps because of it — because he was able to a remarkable degree to be the voice of his master — his biography of Michelangelo is, next to the artist's letters and poems, our strongest source for Michelangelo's life.' Wohl adds later: 'In effect, and by the testimony of Condivi in further passages throughout his text, the work that he composed is Michelangelo's autobiography — the first by a major Italian artist since Lorenzo Ghiberti's second *Commentario* a century earlier.'

While there are good modern editions of Condivi's *Vita* in Italian, it has long been difficult to obtain in English translation. This new version, the first in over seventy years, is a welcome addition to Michelangelo bibliography. Alice Sedgwick Wohl's translation is readable and accurate, and considerable effort has been made to ensure both clarity and fidelity to Condivi's tone. Detailed notes and copious illustrations complement the text, and a good survey of relevant literature is included in a bibliographical note. Other material useful in reading the text is found in a glossary of Italian terms and in two appendices on the genealogy of the Medici family and the history of the tomb of Pope Julius II.

In his introduction to Condivi's text, Hellmut Wohl discusses the earlier editions of the work and aptly analyses the strengths and weaknesses of the biography. Con-