

# AND LOVE COMES IN AT THE EYE

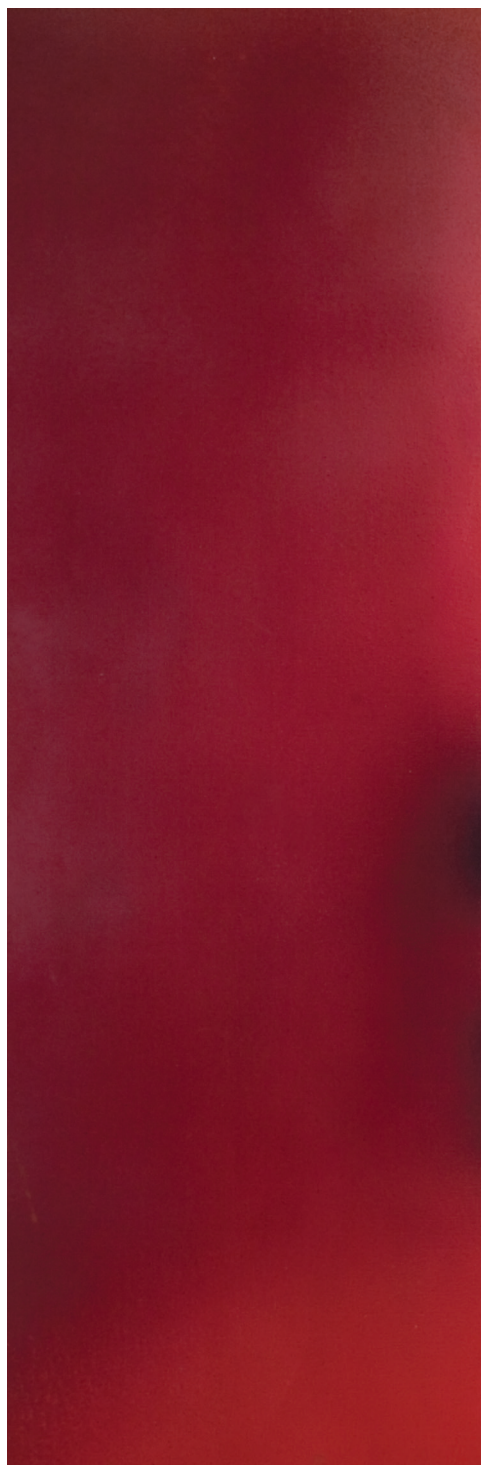
Beginning in the 1960s, a group of mostly young American painters, who included Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, and Larry Poons, made their presence felt with a new approach to abstraction, based on the primacy of color and the emotional resonance of hue. Their point of departure was the open, all-over expanse proposed by Jackson Pollock's pulsing webs, but they challenged the layered, contingent gestures and overt emotionalism associated with Abstract Expressionism. Their work – later labeled “Color Field” – was notably “cool,” in the Marshall McLuhan sense of the word: disembodied, dispassionate, and radically abstract, informed more by Henri Matisse's adventurous explorations of color than by the quest for “authenticity” of their immediate forebears among the Abstract Expressionists. Color Field painting could be frankly beautiful, designed to compel attention through purely optical means; pools and sheets of radiant chroma appeared to have somehow magically manifested themselves before us, almost without human agency, without losing the power to stir our feelings. Yet Color Field paintings not only ravish the eye, but also engage our intelligence and feelings, through the associative power of radiant hues and dramatic size, wordlessly, in the way music does.

It seems fitting that important works by two of the most daring and inventive of the painters associated with the term Color Field, Jules Olitski (1922-2007) and Larry Poons (born 1937), should have been acquired, soon after they were made, by the perceptive art historian and critic Kermit Champa. Olitski's startlingly pared-down canvases of the mid-1960s seem to test the limits of abstractness, as if posing the question, “How much can you leave out of a picture and still have something exciting to look at?” Made by spraying intermingled mists of color, rather than by sweeps of a loaded brush driven by the hand, they distill painting to its most ethereal essence. Poons's equally startling “thrown” paintings, made in the 1970s, co-opt gravity as a painting tool. Rivulets of dense pigment cascade down the canvas, fusing to create walls of inflected, complicated color that are at once declaratively physically present and as elusive as Olitski's weightless sprays.

Both Olitski's and Poons's works are deliberately devoid of allusion or narrative, yet each embodies a distinct (and very different) mood, feeling tone, and emotional temperature; each demands that we pay attention to its nuances in a different way, just as musical compositions in different keys, for different instruments, and with different time signatures do. That these enigmatic, seductive paintings should have been selected by the discerning eye of a young art historian who would be internationally known for finding correspondences between painting and music seems not only appropriate but perhaps inevitable. Professor Champa's scholarship grew focused on the persuasive parallels he drew between the art and concert music of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His perceptions were obviously just as acute and just as multivalent in relation to the painting of his own time.

---

Karen Wilkin  
New York, October 2011



# ON KERMIT CHAMPA

Equal parts dashing and brilliant, Kermit Champa inspired generations of art history students at Brown University. His arrival for lectures at the List Art Center, in his black Alfa Romeo, was eagerly anticipated. Students filled the auditorium, often spilling into the aisles. In 1975, *Esquire* magazine had named him one of the ten sexiest professors in America, but that was just the surface. Lecturing, he spoke with near-poetic cadence as he paced back and forth, his silhouette floating across a succession of slide images. What mattered to Champa was the essence of art. He had no tolerance of inauthentic thought and wanted his students to live up to their full potential. Once I chased Champa down the hall after one of his lectures. He had eloquently drawn distinctions between Picasso and Braque's Analytic Cubist works, and I wanted further clarification. I glanced at my lecture notes before posing my question, when Champa closed my notebook. "Don't look at what I said. Just use your eyes." That was Champa's dream: to train his students to become independent and to identify what was *in* the art.

Champa came from rural Pennsylvania, and although he'd been accepted to MIT in math and science, went instead to Yale in Directed Studies, graduated in three years, and earned his doctorate at Harvard, returned to Yale to teach and to curate a traveling museum exhibition of German 19<sup>th</sup> century painting, before arriving at Brown in 1970. He became a full professor in 1974. His brilliance extended beyond his field; he was equally versed in classical and early modern music, math, history, and fine wine and cuisine.

I sometimes recall Kermit's love for Manet's "Execution of Maximilian" in its multiple versions—and later how he stood his ground for planning to show D.W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation" during a time of political correctness. He never flinched, and the film was shown to Brown audiences a few years later. What stayed with me wasn't just Champa's charisma and intellect, but his friendship. He helped me land my first job at Knoedler Gallery, visited me at Jan Krugier Gallery to look at dozens of Picassos and the occasional Braque and encouraged me to start on my own business. When I had nearly completed my studies with Champa, he told me, "You ought to come over and see a few paintings. A couple of Olitski 'Sprays' from '65, and a Poons from '74. I've got one of Olitski's very first Sprays." I never took him up on the offer. The summer before his death, I told Kermit I was moving my family to Rome for a year. "You'll never come back. This is where you were headed all along" – a prophecy which, eight years later, holds true.

Last summer, his widow, Judith Tolnick Champa, told me it was time to share Kermit's paintings with the world. I went to their Providence home for the first time. It was no surprise that the Olitski Sprays and the Poons are such superb examples. In his study, Judith showed me boxes of her husband's yellow legal pads, his life's work of book manuscripts, essays and lectures written out in long hand. I felt transported back. I could hear Kermit's voice. I could see Kermit standing there, looking at the paintings, with one hand tucked in a pocket and a barely discernible smile, his eyes twinkling.

---

James D. Barron  
Rome, October 2011





# HOMAGE TO KERMIT CHAMPA

AN EXHIBITION OF COLOR FIELD PAINTINGS  
FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE LATE KERMIT CHAMPA  
AND JUDITH TOLNICK CHAMPA

“And love comes in at the eye” © Karen Wilkin  
title from William Butler Yeats “A Drinking Song”

“On Kermit Champa” © James D. Barron

ART MIAMI  
29 NOVEMBER / 4 DECEMBER 2011

## JAMES BARRON ART

James Barron Art, LLC  
P.O. Box 97  
South Kent, CT 06785  
US: 917 270 8044  
Rome: +39 348 894 5731  
[info@jamesbarronart.com](mailto:info@jamesbarronart.com)  
[www.jamesbarronart.com](http://www.jamesbarronart.com)