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9 WASHINGTON ARTISTS

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THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART
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INTRODUCTION

It has been consistently and repeatedly stated that the 1970's, unlike the 1950's and 1960's, was a period devoid of overriding art movements. Instead, during this era of restlessness and cultivation, artists have experimented with the various aesthetics developed over the previous two decades and incorporated this immense vocabulary into intensely personal statements. Artists have sifted and culled from Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Minimal Art and Photo Realism certain other styles which they have then applied to their own interpretive visions. The nine artists represented in this exhibition are not exceptions to this tendency.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the exploration in this decade is the resurgence of representational art. The Washington art community has always had a strong tradition of representational art, even though it was pushed aside and nearly forgotten in the 1960's with the domination of abstract art in general and the Washington Color School in particular. In the fifties and sixties, such masters as Sarah Baker, Peter De-Anna, Robert Gates, Jacob Kainen, Pietro Lazzari and Ben Summerford were in the forefront. Their academic training and approach had and still has a growing and pervasive influence on the work of realist artists of the local area.

Extremely divergent styles and subject matter have evolved from this solid foundation. These range from psychologically derived and whimsical forms reminiscent of Surrealism and resulting from hallucinogenic and subconsciously evoked images; works which border on the abstract in their simplified and precise formats; energetic, expressive reactions to the contemporary social and political scene; and, of course, the slightly more academic and traditional prototypes.

Images of the 70's: 9 Washington Artists reflects both the wide variety of approaches to realism and the considerable talent and high quality in the Washington region today.

It is this innovative and versatile second generation, the offshoot of the above-mentioned "academic realists," that I have chosen to highlight in this survey of the last ten years. I believe that all of these artists attained their mature style during the past decade as they updated and personalized the representational mode to suit their needs. Rather than reinterpret their interests and temperaments in an introductory statement, I have conducted extensive interviews with them to show how their life experiences have affected their art.

In selecting the artists, I tried to assemble the highest quality in as great a range as possible—be it in age group, intention, format, medium, technique, subject matter. Of course, the list of artists working with realist imagery is virtually endless; I have limited the exhibition to only nine in order to present as thorough a look as possible into each individual's interpretation and history.

It is instructive and perhaps surprising to observe how many different styles can be grouped under one generalized heading. Such presentation in a group context should not, however, diminish the significant individual contributions of each artist. I also do not wish to propose that representational art was the major or dominant movement in Washington during the 1970's; it was merely one of several modes. In fact, one cannot yet target the impact on the eighties of these lingering and tantalizing perceptions.

Clair List

MICHAEL CLARK



Born Denver, Colorado, November 20, 1946.
Moved to Washington, D.C., 1959.
Studied Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York, 1965-1966.
Returned to Washington, D.C., 1966.
Studied Corcoran School of Art, 1967-1968.
Received Ford Foundation Grant, 1968-1969.

SELECTED INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

Washington, D.C., Jefferson Place Gallery, 1968.
Washington, D.C., ACE Company, 1970.
Washington, D.C., Corcoran Gallery of Art, April 30-June 6, 1971.
Washington, D.C., Pyramid Galleries Ltd., 1971.
Washington, D.C., Lunn Gallery/Graphics International Ltd., February 3-March 7, 1973.
Syracuse, New York, Everson Museum of Art, December 15, 1973-January 13, 1974.
New York City, Andrew Crispo Gallery, January 16-February 2, 1974.
Washington, D.C., Lunn Gallery/Graphics International Ltd., February 3-February 28, 1975.
New York City, Andrew Crispo Gallery, February 10-March 2, 1977.
Washington, D.C., Lunn Gallery/Graphics International Ltd., November 5-December 3, 1977.
Corpus Christi, Texas, Art Museum of South Texas, June 1-July 4, 1978.
Dallas, Texas, Delahunty Gallery, April 11-May 4, 1979.
Washington, D.C., Lunn Gallery/Graphics International Ltd., May 24-June 29, 1979.
Washington, D.C., The Dimock Gallery, George Washington University, May 24-June 29, 1979.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Washington, D.C., Jewish Community Center, "Eight Young Washington Painters," 1967.
Washington, D.C., Corcoran Gallery of Art, "18th Area Exhibition," November 18-December 31, 1967.
Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution, "The Art of Organic Forms," June 15-July 31, 1968.
Washington, D.C., Corcoran Gallery of Art, "Washington 1968, New Painting: Structure," September 27-November 3, 1968.
Sarasota, Florida, Ringling Museum of Art, "Washington Painters," December 1-December 28, 1969. Traveled to: Jacksonville, Florida, Museum of Art.
Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, "New York Drawing Society Show," 1970. Traveled to: Washington, D.C., Corcoran Gallery of Art, "The Drawing Society National Exhibition," September 25-November 1, 1970.

Edmonton, Canada, Edmonton Art Gallery, "Ten Washington Artists: 1950-1970," February 5-March 8, 1970.
Baltimore, Maryland, The Baltimore Museum of Art, "Washington: Twenty Years," May 12-June 21, 1970.
Washington, D.C., Corcoran Gallery of Art, "Seven Washington Artists," July-August 1971.
Guatemala City, Guatemala, Instituto Guatemalteco Americano, "Dibujos, Washington: 1972," July 6-August 31, 1972.
Washington, D.C., Corcoran Gallery of Art, "Seven Young Artists: Works On Paper," August 1-September 15, 1972.
Washington, D.C., Pyramid Galleries Ltd., "Realists," November 1972.
New York City, Andrew Crispo Gallery, "Twentieth Century Americans," January 16-February 2, 1973.
Potsdam, New York, Brainerd Hall, State University College, at Potsdam, "The Presence and Absence in Realism," March 26-April 30, 1976.
Washington, D.C., The Dimock Gallery, George Washington University, "George Washington—Big Man on Campus," June 15-July 15, 1976.
New York City, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, "Rooms P.S.1," 1976.
Bridgeport, Connecticut, Carlson Gallery, University of Bridgeport, "A View: The Figure in Drawing 1970's," January 13-February 15, 1977.
Washington, D.C., Corcoran Gallery of Art, "35th Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting," February 26-April 3, 1977.
Ann Arbor, Michigan, University of Michigan Museum of Art, "Works from the Collection of Dorothy and Herbert Vogel," November 11, 1977-January 1, 1978.
Utica, New York, Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, "Critics' Choice," January 8-January 29, 1978.
Miami, Florida, Miami-Dade Community College, "Five Washington Artists," February 13-March 2, 1978.
St. Petersburg, Florida, Museum of Fine Arts, "Five Washington Artists," May 27-June 25, 1978.
Washington, D.C., Museum of Temporary Art, "36 Hours," December 7-December 22, 1978.
New York City, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, "Postcard Art," 1978.
Washington, D.C. Corcoran Gallery of Art, "Washington Art on Paper: 1962-1978," January 23-March 18, 1979.

CLAIR LIST: When did you become interested in art?

MICHAEL CLARK: I started my art career in 1953 in Houston at the age of seven. There was a creative streak in the family as my father was a photographer.

CL: Did he teach you how to use the camera?

MC: I was his gofer so I learned by watching him. He began as an Air Force photographer and then worked for the government as an agricultural photographer. I remember that once he sent for a book on how to be an artist—he took the course for a year or two and just quit. He gave the book to my brother, Mark, and me, and we began to copy out of it. Also, when I was about six, and Mark was five, we would go out to the back yard in Texas and draw all day long. We eventually accumulated a large stack of pictures, and we decided to go door-to-door and sell them. We made a nice sum of money. So as far back as I can remember, art—painting and drawing—has been a way of life with me.

CL: As a child, did you move from city to city with your parents?

MC: Yes, from Houston we moved around the state of Texas and then on to Honolulu. We finally settled in Corpus Christi, Texas, which is on the ocean. That city has had a great influence on my work as I constantly revert back to it for subject matter. In fact, I often use my childhood memories as an impetus for my imagery.

CL: Did your years in Corpus Christi suggest your recent seascape theme?

MC: Yes, the city and my time there inspired those canvases. I like Corpus Christi because of its romantic aura. Sunsets, palm trees and a sensuous rich surface are devices I use in order to convey this feeling to the viewer. These canvases, as with my others, recount my lingering memories of certain times and places.

CL: They seem to be happy memories; they are very pleasant paintings.

MC: Yes, they are happy memories. Even the cars revert back to my childhood—the first car that my family owned, when we lived in Honolulu, was quite similar to my painting, *1938 Chevrolet*.

CL: Did you paint the canvas from a photograph

of your car that perhaps your father had taken?

MC: No, I didn't. One day I was walking down a street in Georgetown, and I saw that car; the angle and the light were just perfect. The scene reminded me of something from my youth in the early fifties and I knew I had to capture it on canvas. I simply lined up the camera and took several photographs. In a way, I almost do my paintings in the camera; I can edit all of the elements in my mind. I only use the photograph in order to get all of the lines in the right place.

CL: Do you take a photograph for each canvas?

MC: I take several slides, photographs of the site, and I use my mind to put them together for the actual canvas. Yet, I do not consider myself a Photo Realist because I add a dramatic and often a romantic element. I also eliminate any of the irrelevant images.

CL: What's romantic about George Washington?

MC: That theme goes back to when I was a kid in school. Teachers were always threatening to flunk me because I either daydreamed in class or I just drew all day long. Before lunchtime I would do drawings of George Washington that I copied from the dollar bill. In the early 1970's, people were pushing me towards portraiture, yet I was unsure of the technique. I decided to practice by copying George Washington's face—an honest face, a man of integrity. I decided that no matter who else posed for me I could always reflect a truthfulness, a forthrightness in them.

CL: How did you begin painting George?

MC: I started them in Washington, D.C., in the early 1970's. I began the George Washington series by painting on museum postcards of his various portraits. I got very tired of that as I was painting on so many of them so I decided to go down to the National Gallery and copy from the original portraits. I then had my own postcards made.

CL: Were you influenced by Pop Art in any way?

MC: No, this is totally different from Pop Art.

CL: In what way?

MC: The paintings took a lot of time and effort to do, and I consider them propaganda paintings.

Unlike Pop Art, they were never meant to be sarcastic, ironic or humorous. They do not make fun of anyone or anything. Instead, they are to be taken quite seriously.

- CL: In what way are they serious paintings?
- MC: On two levels—I was inspired to do them by the Vietnam War. I wanted to portray a war hero, a man of integrity—and I settled on George Washington. He is still considered our greatest President, and he is a classic subject. Secondly, I wanted to convey various moods and expressions using the same form and image over and over. Many of my close friends have always thought that they were sublimated self-portraits, that the expressions were those I tend to assume. I have never done any self-portraits so I don't know if I accept that.
- CL: When did you move to Washington?
- MC: About 1960 when my father was offered a job with the Department of Agriculture. Right after we moved, I found the National Gallery, and I began to spend hours there copying works—Piero della Francesca to the Impressionists to Cezanne, Seurat and Picasso. I have always flipped over Picasso—especially his later work. I tried to copy him, but it became almost impossible; the works are so personal, they are like a signature, and everything was lost in translation.
- CL: Did you borrow the technique of dots of color from the Pointillist, Georges Seurat?
- MC: Perhaps subconsciously, but I feel the dots surfaced naturally.
- CL: What do you mean?
- MC: Of all the different modes of painting that I studied, the dots felt the best, they felt right to me. But my paintings go beyond the dots—I use them only as a printing technique. I feel my canvases are more similar to Oriental art in my concentration on flat planes and formality. It is a totally idealized rendition. I feel Oriental art has more to do with perfection than anything else.
- CL: When did you begin to paint abstractly?
- MC: I spent one year in New York in 1965-66, and I was on the fringes of many different scenes. I never joined any group as I am a loner; I

merely observed all that was happening. Then I returned to Washington, and I took a class at the Corcoran School with William Woodward. I didn't accomplish very much in the class, but I felt Woodward was a real inspiration.

- CL: What do you mean?
- MC: His philosophy was that you ought to paint no matter what was on your mind; you should just go through the gesture. So I kept going.
- CL: Aside from the artists you were copying at the National Gallery, were there others who were influential?
- MC: The Washington Color School—in particular, Tom Downing, Gene Davis, Morris Louis—had a great influence on my artistic development in the 1960's. I also always liked those early shaped Richard Smiths and, of course, Frank Stella's work. I liked the way he cut out the unnecessary and threw it away. During the late 1960's, I pursued abstract shaped canvases, and my shapes were round; it was something I figured out by myself. Even Tom Downing wasn't doing shaped paintings at that time, and he was really curious. He came over and saw my work once and couldn't believe what I was actually doing. It was no big deal—anybody could have made them, yet I couldn't understand why Downing hadn't figured out this concept. Gradually, I grew tired and bored with the Washington Color School; it became dull and uninteresting, as it began to lose its meaning for me. I was worried about getting stuck in an already established groove—so I whipped right through it.
- CL: What type of work were you next interested in trying?
- MC: I stopped the shaped abstracts, and I began to concentrate on architectural motifs. When I was younger, I constantly drew houses, office buildings, windows—a whole range. I have always loved depicting architecture because it stands still, it is a permanent model, yet it is a complex subject because you have to deal with light, weather conditions and the human element—types and positions of shades, curtains, etc. I returned to the window motifs in 1967. In my many window categories, I am

searching for the perfect form and a perfect vehicle for my color. This is quite similar to Morris Louis' and Kenneth Noland's technique in that it is very difficult for someone else to emulate. All of this took years to evolve.

- CL: How did you decide to turn to a representational subject matter?
- MC: As I said, I became restless with the abstract. At that time, I was in touch with Jacob Kainen—his studio was next to mine in the Le Droit building. Kainen was just finishing his figurative period and our talks led me to try it. I decided to explore the possibilities of this new motif. Also, I saw all of the Kenneth Clark *Civilization* films at the National Gallery, and the humanistic nature of both Clark and Kainen really appealed to me at that moment.
- CL: Will you continue with the windows? Would it be difficult for you not to paint them?
- MC: Yes, it would. I keep drawing and painting them; I can't stop.
- CL: Do you feel that same passion for the seascapes?
- MC: Yes, the same. Actually they're all the same motivation.
- CL: Do you have the desire to paint another George Washington at this point?
- MC: Let me be honest—there is always the temptation.
- CL: So at the same time that you're searching for new forms, you are constantly going back to the old ones and experimenting?
- MC: Yes. My newest attempt is still life; I have borrowed many of the images from Picasso.
- CL: Tell me about *Blue Nude*.
- MC: What happened with the nudes is that when I studied anatomy by myself I used to sit around with the book and copy from it. I drew all the muscles, all the bones, etc. and, even when I was doing the abstract paintings, I always continued my anatomy drawings. I'd often trace faces out of *Vogue* magazine, then I'd throw them away. I was always interested in the nudes due to their round shapes; that's also what attracted me to cars. I slightly exaggerated the forms of the *Blue Nude*, but that's on purpose. I can draw with my eyes closed; it has

always been easy for me to do figures—I like doing them. One of the problems with this painting is that I started it a couple of years ago, and never finished it. I didn't have the technique to really do what I wanted with it—I wanted to get more sensuousness into the paint.

CL: When you were working in Washington, did you ever seriously study work being done by Robert Gates, Ben Summerford, Peter DeAnna, etc.?

MC: I knew Gates a little bit, and I had seen Summerford's work at the Jefferson Place Gallery. But it was very difficult to get close to them. I always felt very sorry for them because they got shot down. If you weren't staining or using some type of masking tape or large rollers, the sentiment was—get out of town by sunset. I hate doctrines that state there is only one way to paint.

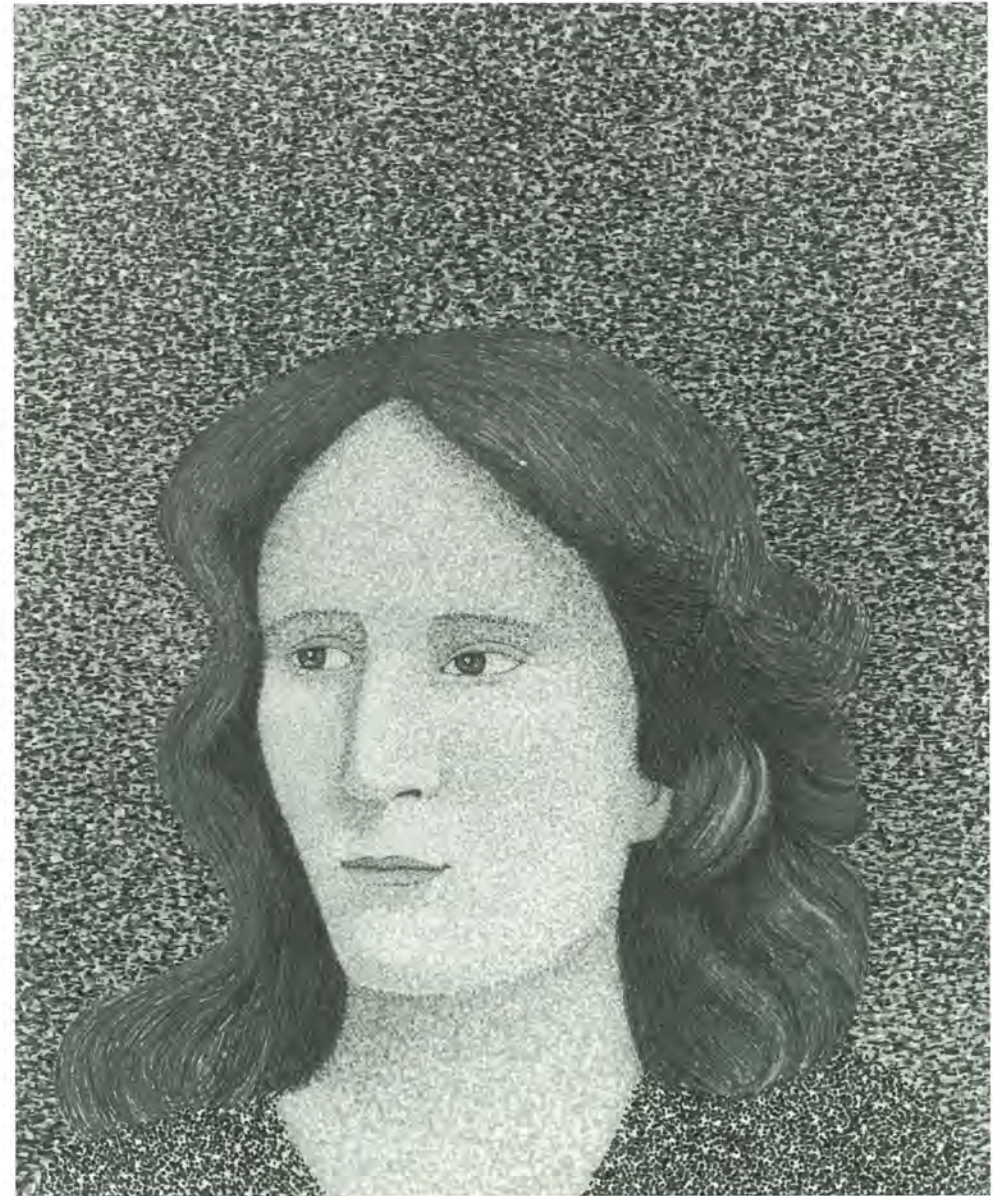
CL: Did these figurative painters ever give you the incentive to continue your work?

MC: No, not those painters. However, as I already stated, Jacob Kainen did. They had been worked over mercilessly by the press in Washington; they were considered totally out of it. Gates is a particularly sad case because he was really good, and he was scorned. Mitchell Jamieson was another much abused artist. He had a great show at The Dimock Gallery, George Washington University, that received a fairly good review. The works were composed of the atrocities of the Vietnam War; they were extremely powerful yet everybody thought he was crazy. If it wasn't a color painting, nobody wanted to see it. I went and saw the show and thought it was terrific. What a waste!

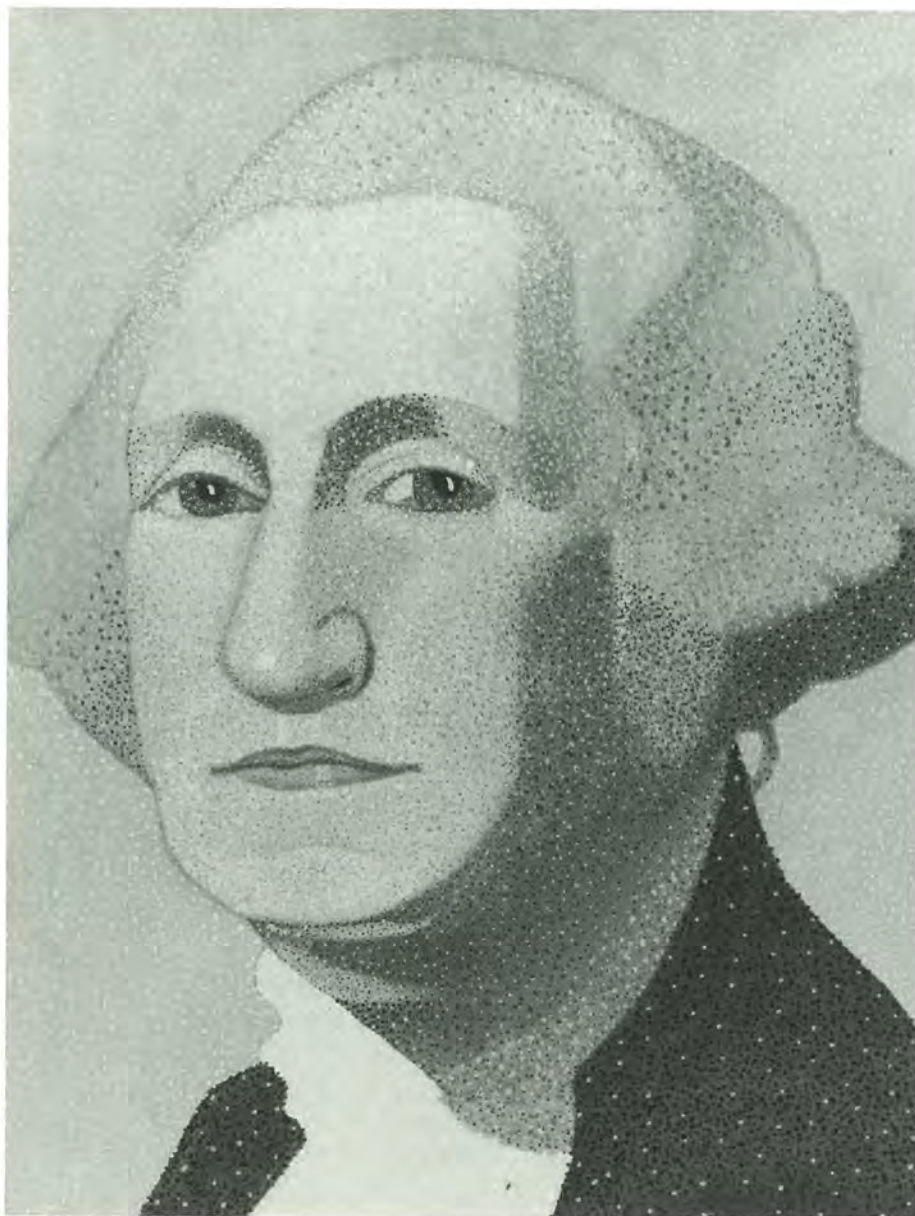
CL: Do you work on one piece, study it for a while and then begin something else?

MC: Yes. I can't see doing assembly line work. Some of the painterly effects that I want to convey can't be attained without spending a couple of months working on them. It is very rare that I can quickly finish a piece and be happy with it.

CL: Do you always make small sketches for your larger canvases?



3. Michael Clark
Lila. 1973
Collection Mary Swift



5. Michael Clark
Light Blue George Washington. 1974
Collection the artist

MC: I used to quite often, but not so much any more. Now I just start the painting process at once. If I'm doing a portrait I'll carry a photograph of that individual with me, and I'll hang around with him, study him, etc. Actually, I go through the same procedure with most of my paintings, that is, I'll carry a photograph of the seascape, automobile, etc., around with me. I'll take it out at times and just stare at it.

CL: Do you first draw an outline of the image on the canvas with pencil, or do you just start painting?

MC: No, I have to get the lines and form correctly, so first I grid the canvas. I've always struggled with the concept of where the form begins and the color leaves off or vice versa. I tend to take the form for granted, and that's why I don't just sketch it out, why I use a photograph. To me the color is the most important aspect of the painting.

CL: When you switched from abstraction to the figurative work, what were your friends saying? What were the other artists you were associating with saying to you?

MC: No one has ever had too much of an influence as far as my own artistic development has gone. I always take criticism or applause lightly because I can never figure out whether critics and viewers actually understand what I am doing.

CL: Do you need reinforcement?

MC: Well, it is good for sales; you have to get great reviews in Washington to make sales. Washington is a peculiar phenomenon. A lot of people criticize me for talking about the art market—there's always this holier than thou attitude. But I have always looked at Washington as being similar to Milan; New York being like Rome; Chicago could be Florence; and Los Angeles could be Genoa. As was true in the Renaissance in Italy, there are different art centers and different styles and languages. You have to think in terms of the market and what it desires, and try to make a living. Most people say, "How can you talk about the money?" but I've got to eat, too. Since I want to spend all my time working on artistic pursuits, I want a situation in which I can survive. When I left Washington,

I left not so much for financial reasons but because the city was all tied up in a provincial atmosphere. One example—before Mitchell Jamieson committed suicide, I was in a project in which he also participated. I wanted to go and talk to him, yet I didn't even get an introduction; we were in the same room, and I couldn't meet him. He didn't want to know anybody from the new school because he'd been overlooked. He had so much to offer us, and I couldn't even meet him. So I thought I would go to New York and see if I could earn a little respect through living there.

CL: Do you mean with the idea that eventually you would return to Washington?

MC: Yes, definitely. I feel I am a Washingtonian—my situation is similar to a Senator or Representative. They live in Washington yet they consider themselves citizens of their own states. Washington has always been my real home.

CL: Do you feel that you're working in isolation in New York?

MC: I work practically in total isolation there. I have a few people that I talk to, but I get hostility wherever I go. My colleagues give me a hard time because of my stands on art.

CL: Why are you living in New York, Michael, if it's such a hostile environment? Why aren't you in Washington where your work is accepted?

MC: I spend a lot of time on the road. I used to go to California every year. Now I go to France every year, and I go to Texas every year. I break it down like this: I spend about three to four weeks in Paris, a month to a month and a half in Texas, a month and a half to two months in Washington, and the rest of the year I spend in New York.

CL: Do you work when you travel?

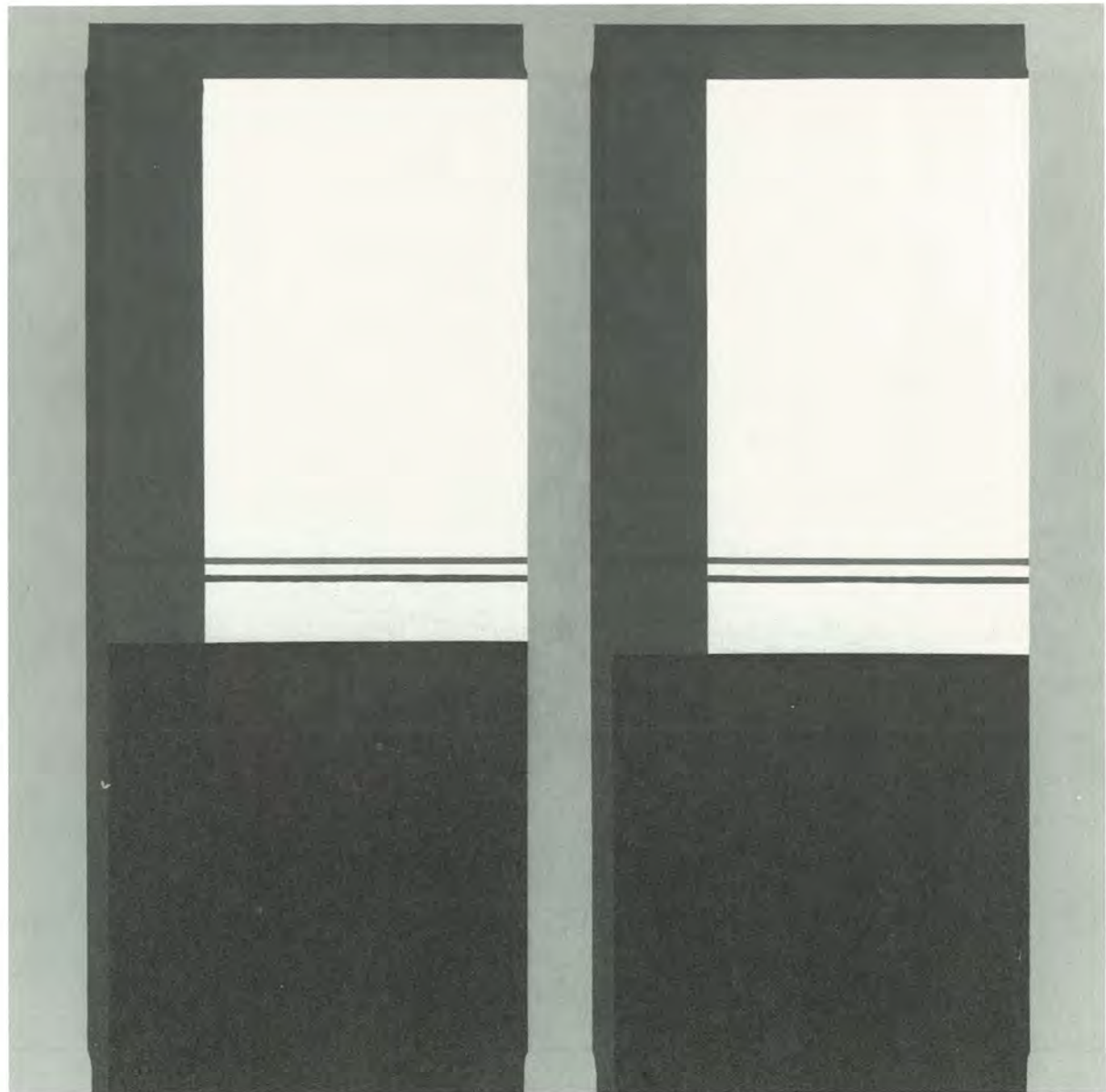
MC: Yes, I paint and draw everywhere.

CL: How many pieces do you work on at a time?

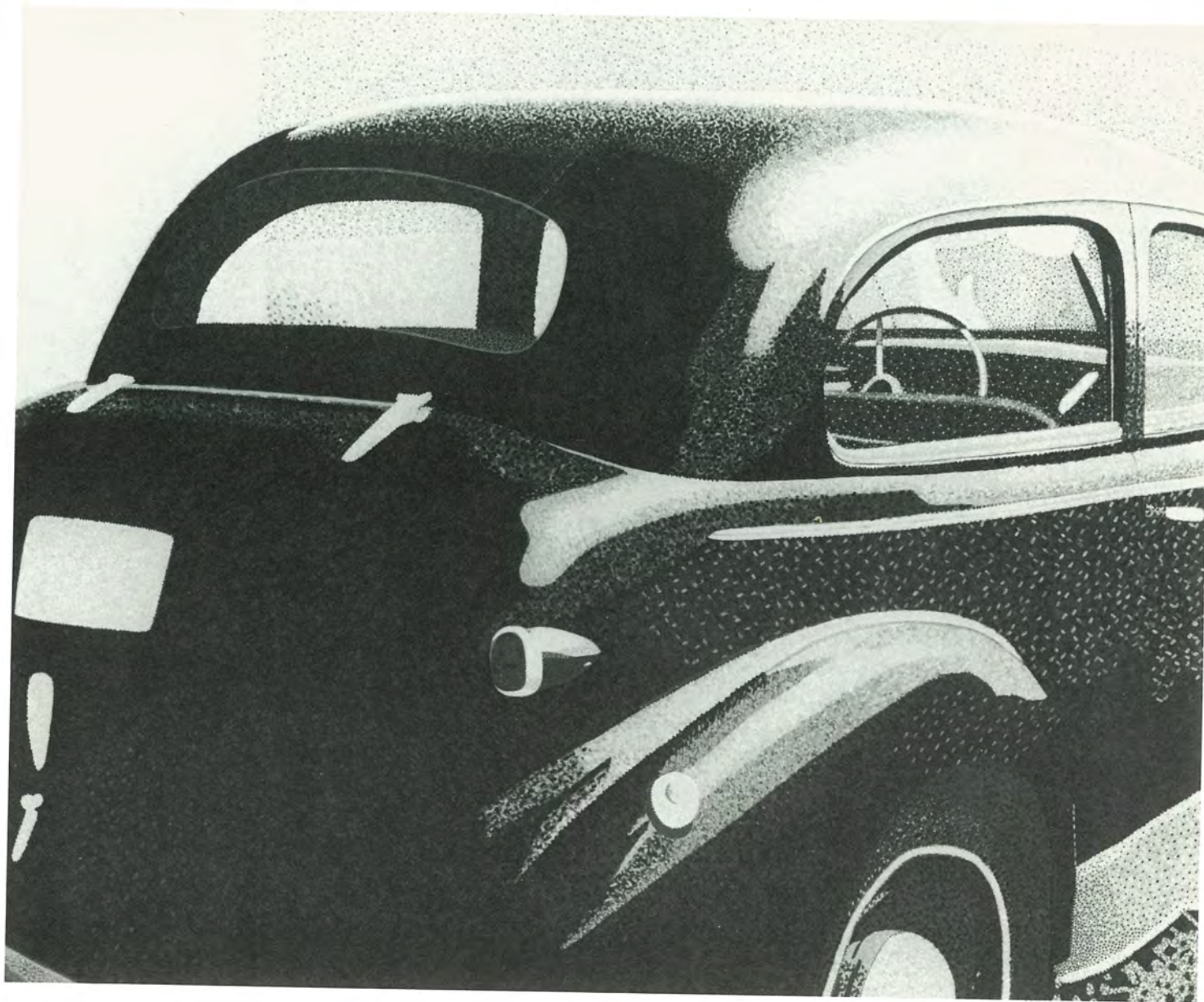
MC: Sometimes up to ten works.

CL: Michael, for whom do you paint?

MC: I have to admit that I paint for a public; I love to show my work. I'm not stupid enough to really believe the argument that you just paint for yourself. Most critics refer to my work as either Pop or Photo Realist—it isn't. They have



7. Michael Clark
Los Angeles Window without Curtains. 1976
Private collection



10. Michael Clark
1938 Chevrolet. 1977-1978
Collection the artist

never grasped the time and effort that goes into a canvas. I don't know, I just think you have to do your own thing and whether or not the people go for it, you have to roll with the punches. I could make a lot of easier paintings of which people would say, "That would go right in the dining room," and I could rip them off. But in Washington it takes Harry Lunn sometimes three or four years to sell some of my pictures because they're just not that easy. Perhaps if I added more rose or pastel color or something like that I could sell many, but they're too tough for most people. They can't relate to them; yet I stick to my guns.

CL: How do you feel about the Washington art scene?

MC: I don't think you can turn your back on New York the way a lot of people in Washington have. It's a foolish thing because New York is still where it's happening. The resources are in New York; Washington still has this Southern cow-town atmosphere. All of the collectors are so conservative; they poo-poo everything. The art scene in a way is just one big cocktail party, and that bothers me a lot. I mean it's the same faces in the last ten years, and the same people jockeying for the same few spots. In a way New York has its drawbacks because it's so high-pressured. Unless you have the critics and the museums and some big dealers behind you, you are going to be living an isolated life. And until you realize all of that, you're going to have a tough time.

CL: Are you frustrated?

MC: No, I'm not wringing my hands because I don't have the critics beating down my door. I have missed out on many museum exhibitions, but when it comes down to the bottom line, that doesn't bother me. I think I have been lucky enough—I can support myself, I'm getting by, and all my time is my time. I'm free to go to the museums, galleries, whenever I wish and to paint whenever I want. What more could you ask for?