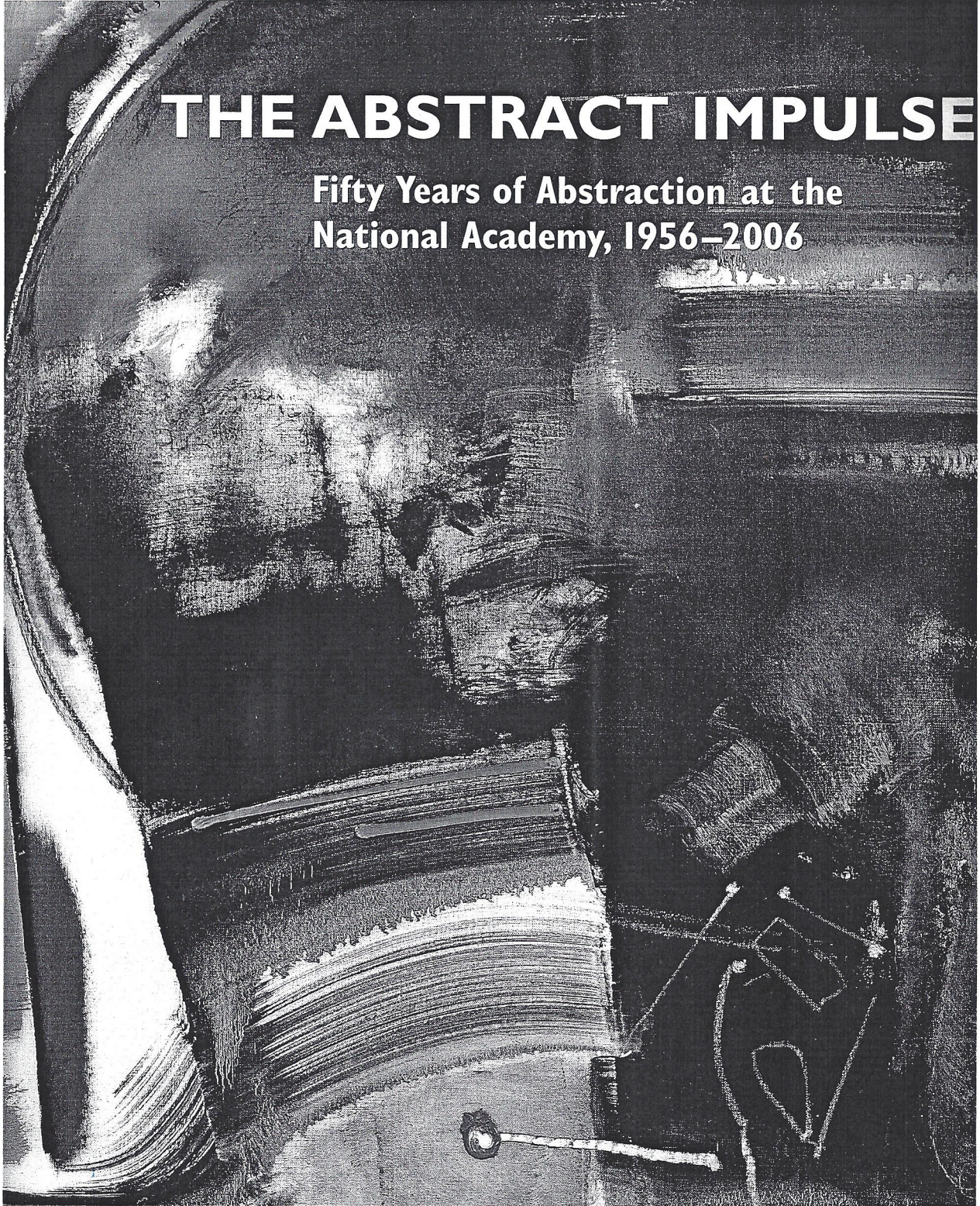


THE ABSTRACT IMPULSE

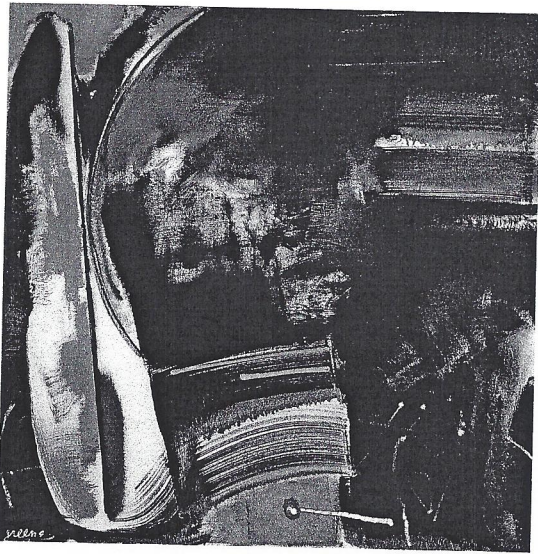
Fifty Years of Abstraction at the
National Academy, 1956–2006



STEPHEN GREENE

(1917–1999)

ANA 1980; NA 1982



Night, 1982

Oil on canvas

30 1/8 x 30 1/8 inches

NA diploma presentation, 1983

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Stephen Greene came to abstraction only after an extended period as a representational painter. His early painting was influenced by classical antiquity, late Gothic, Northern European painters, and those of the early Sienese Renaissance. These figurative works were filled with emotion and existential anxiety and sought to convey a universal sense of tragedy, a characteristic that the artist would carry through to his later abstractions.¹ As the artist has stated: "The most important aspect of Greek art to my work has not been sculpture and drawings, the classical iconography, but what appears in Greek drama: the tragic sense."² Greene was born in New York and studied initially at the National Academy of Design and the Art Students League before enrolling at the University of Iowa under Grant Wood. Wood died in 1941 while Greene was a student there, and Philip Guston, ANA elect, was hired to replace him. As H. W. Janson has pointed out, Guston "impressed Stephen Greene more with his searching attitude than with the authority of his style."³

By the early 1960s Greene had abandoned representation in favor of a distinctive lyrical abstraction that synthesized a number of post-war abstract styles.⁴ He eschewed many of his earlier influences in favor of something inherently self-referential: "At one point, I had to do away with any formal references to Renaissance painting in my work. I began to want the painting to refer back to itself, to its own space."⁵ However, even by the middle of the 1970s, Greene's paintings retained the emotional content of his earlier figurative works, now articulated in an abstract mode.⁶ One major distinction between Greene and many of his contemporary abstract colleagues is that while Greene abandoned the figure in his

work, he never relinquished the importance of narrative.⁷ The artist would continue to refine this type of abstraction until the end of his life.

Greene first exhibited at the National Academy in 1971 as part of a distinguished list of invited artists. He was also one of a large group of abstract painters elected to the Academy in the watershed year of 1980. He would continue to be a regular contributor to the Academy's Annuals until his death and in 1981 he won the Paul Puzinas Memorial Award for *Solus #7*. *Night* is a typical work by Greene from the 1980s. Its neutral ground is punctuated by slashing strokes of bright orange, red, and blue, while at the same time interspersed with broad washes of yellow, pink, orange, and blue. The painting received the Saltus Gold Medal when it was shown at the Academy's 158th Annual, and along with the painting by Esteban Vicente, NA, was highlighted in a review as some of the best work in the show: "the context [of the exhibition] makes good work stand out even more . . . like chocolate chips in a large, bland cookie."⁸

—MNP

1. H. W. Janson, "Stephen Greene," *Magazine of Art* 41 (April 1948): 129.

2. Stephen Greene, "The Tragic Sense in Modern Art," undated, Stephen Greene Papers, reel N70-37, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

3. Janson, "Stephen Greene," 129.

4. Roberta Smith, "Stephen Greene, 82, Painter With Distinctive Abstract Style," *New York Times*, 29 November 1999, A23.

5. Stephen Greene, "Artist in America: A Case in Point," *Artist in America* 49 (1961): 84–85.

6. Martica Sawin, "Stephen Greene's Recent Paintings," *Arts Magazine* (September 1975): 83.

7. Debra Bricker Balken, *Stephen Greene: Painter and Mentor*, exh. cat. (Andover, MA: Addison Gallery of American Art, 2003), 4.

8. Grace Glueck, "In the Arts: Critics' Choices," *New York Times*, 17 April 1983, 104.