

# Richard Carlyon: A Life in Art

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<sup>1</sup> See Ed Slipek, Jr., “Contrast, Context, and Continuity,” *Style Weekly*, (30 April 1996), p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> World War II ended in 1945, and the Cold War began on 24 June 1948 when the Soviets blockaded the city of Berlin. The blockade, which lasted until 11 May 1949, was eventually broken as the Allies airlifted supplies into the beleaguered city. The Korean War began on 25 June 1950, when North Korea invaded the South; the conflict ended three years later.

<sup>3</sup> Carlyon Archive folder titled “Gallery Talks ‘Sightings’ (Bio. Notes).”

<sup>4</sup> Ed Slipek, Jr., p. 22. Susana Tejada, Head of Research Resources at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, found no paintings in the museum collection that fit this description, though there is a similar painting by Miró titled *Harlequin’s Carnival* (1924–35); it entered the collection in 1940. Carlyon did have a catalogue in his library from a 1965 Tate Gallery exhibition of the work of Soutine that illustrates a painting titled *Man Praying*; this painting, which fits exactly his description, was borrowed by the Tate from the Perls Gallery in New York for the exhibition.

At one time, becoming an artist meant engaging in a cultural dialogue with tradition while confronting a continuously unfolding present. Engaging in such a dialogue was no easy matter for it meant venturing into uncharted territory that often was inhospitable as well as unrewarding in a material sense. This is the life that Richard Carlyon chose when he became an artist.

Richard Carlyon was born on 1 October 1930 in Dunkirk, New York, a small fishing and steel town in Chautauqua County on Lake Erie. He was the second of three children and the only son. His father ran a heating and plumbing business, while his mother ran the household. She was an accomplished musician and professional pianist who frequently played the family piano for her children, even encouraging them to learn to play. It may have been her interest in music that helped cultivate her son’s interest in the arts — something his father remained skeptical of throughout his life, even after his son had established himself as a successful artist.

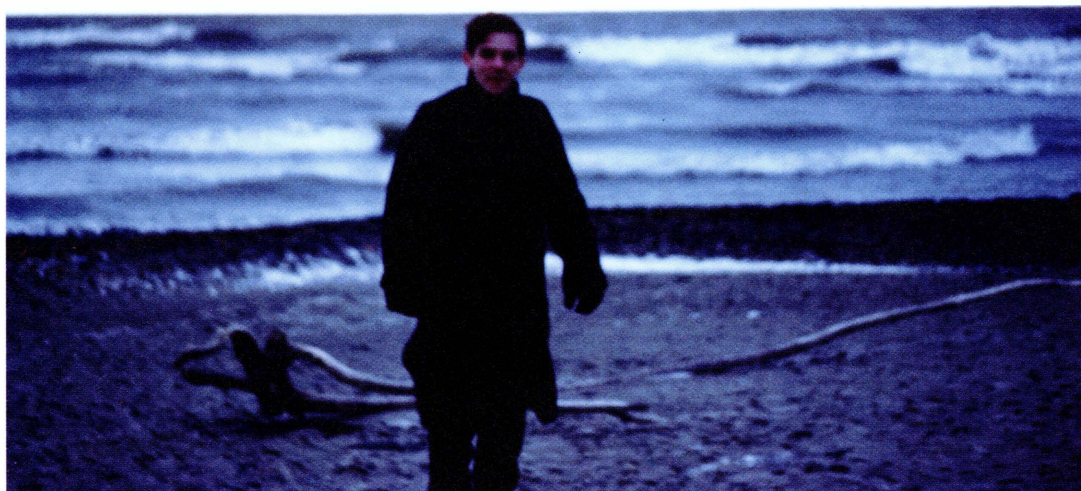
Looking back, this may not seem like a very enlightened attitude on the part of Carlyon’s father, but theirs was not an age of affluence like ours; money was short and times were desperate. Carlyon, it should be remembered, was born one year after the terrible stock-market crash of 1929, and his early years growing up were during the heart of the Great Depression of the 1930s — he would recall many years later how his mother fed meals to the hungry on their back porch.<sup>1</sup> The decades that followed the Depression were not much better as the crisis of World War II was soon followed by that of the Berlin Blockade, which signaled the beginning of the Cold War, and the Korean War. In such an environment, the arts, which were not as celebrated as they are today, must have seemed a risky and inconsequential endeavor at best.<sup>2</sup>

In the fall of 1948, the year the blockade began, Carlyon entered the University of Buffalo where he stayed until May 1950. The University of Buffalo was a logical choice; it was in-state and literally up the road a piece, about an hour from Dunkirk. As Carlyon recalled, at the time he was 18 years old and didn’t know what he wanted to do. Most of his classmates at the university were male and WWII veterans who had experienced combat; they were, he remembered, very serious about their studies, asked hard questions, and were skeptical, if not outright cynical.<sup>3</sup>

One day during the two years he spent at the university as a Liberal Arts major in the College of Arts and Sciences, he had what amounted to an epiphany and decided to become an artist. There are various versions of how this happened. In one version, as told in a 1996 interview, it occurred when he happened upon two paintings in the Buffalo Museum — a Chaim Soutine and a Joan Miró:

I kept looking at those paintings and thinking about the experience that the artists must have had — the image and handling of the material was very complicated.... The Soutine had a man with his hand against his head. It looked like the paint had pressed the head against the hand. On another wall, the Miró was little squiggles of no determined space with cerulean blue. The figure of the ringmaster was reduced to a line that went into a huge boot. There was humor in it. Here were these two opposite works, but they knocked me out. It’s still vivid to this day.<sup>4</sup>

In another version, it was while he was taking an art history class. He found the course’s textbook dull, but he liked the professor who, he felt, made the material come alive by relating the past to the present. Students were assigned to go to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, choose three twentieth-century works, and write a term paper about them. The three works Carlyon chose were by artists who could not have been more different: Miró, Soutine, and Piet Mondrian. The professor’s reaction to his paper was to say, “Your naiveté is appalling but your... enthusiasm, and curiosity are commendable.” Regardless of which version of the story is more accurate, it is at this time that Carlyon began thinking about becoming an artist.<sup>5</sup>



The professor who inspired Carlyon was William Seitz, who later became a curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Seitz was a native of Buffalo and began studying fine art at the Albright Art School in Buffalo. In 1948, he received his BFA degree in painting from the University of Buffalo and began teaching there. He remained until 1949, the year Carlyon must have been in his art history survey class. What should be noted about Seitz is that, because he was an artist, he brought both an interest in modernism and a painter's knowledge to the teaching of art history — something that was to characterize Carlyon's own approach to art making and to the teaching of art history.<sup>6</sup>

During the summer of 1949, Carlyon attended Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh where he studied art in the College of Fine Arts. But Carnegie Institute was very expensive, so he returned to the University of Buffalo for the next academic year (September 1949–May 1950), after which he went home to Dunkirk for the summer. Around this time, he happened upon a catalogue for Richmond Professional Institute (RPI); he liked the simplicity of its program and courses, so he decided to enroll to study art. His father, who did not approve of his son studying art, agreed to support him financially by paying tuition. One reason he may have agreed is that RPI was so inexpensive, especially compared to Carnegie Institute.

<sup>5</sup> Carlyon Archive folder titled "Gallery Talks 'Sightings' (Bio. Notes)." The Mondrian in question probably was *Composition No. 11, 1940–42–London, with Blue, Red, and Yellow*; it entered the Albright-Knox collection in 1944.

<sup>6</sup> In 1950–51, Seitz entered the MFA program at Princeton University but soon petitioned to enter the PhD program to write a dissertation on Abstract Expressionism, then a contemporary movement still in its emerging stages; no one had yet done anything like this. After consultation with Alfred Barr, MoMA Director and a Princeton alumnus, the Art Department chair allowed Seitz into the PhD program where he completed a dissertation on Abstract Expressionism in 1955. Carlyon was an excellent teacher — he was awarded the Distinguished Teaching of Art Award from the College Art Association in 1993 — because of his concern for students and his ability to infuse the history of art with an artist's knowledge of the creative and practical aspects of making art.



Top: Rome, Italy, 19 August 1954.

Bottom: Hanau, Germany, 5 July 1954.

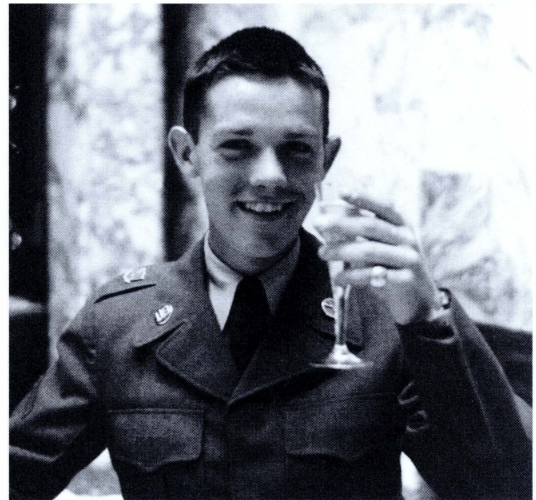
<sup>7</sup> Mary Flinn, "An Interview with Richard Carlyon," *Blackbird*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 2002), p. 2 of transcript.

<sup>8</sup> *The Common Glory* is a symphonic drama with music and dance set in Colonial times with Thomas Jefferson as a central figure. It was written by Paul Green in 1947 and, since then, has been performed annually during summers at Colonial Williamsburg.

### Richmond Professional Institute

In the fall of 1950, Carlyon moved to Richmond and began his undergraduate art studies, remaining until 1953 when he graduated with a BFA. He concentrated on both painting and dance — something he got interested in rather by accident. Physical education was required and the options included, among other things, horseback riding and modern dance taught by Martha Ganzart. He chose modern dance, thinking it was ballroom dancing of the type Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers did in the movies; to his surprise, it turned out to be modern dance in the manner of Martha Graham, which he liked and also was very good at. He soon became aware of modern movements in music as well, when he came across the work of John Cage at McCorley's, a music shop on West Grace Street near the RPI campus. Looking through the bins of on-sale records, he discovered *John Cage Prepared Piano*, a two LP recording of Cage's *Music for Prepared Piano*, which he purchased for 50¢.<sup>7</sup> During the summers, he earned money dancing in the symphonic pageant *The Common Glory* in historic Colonial Williamsburg, which is located near Richmond.<sup>8</sup>

Among the faculty he studied with at RPI were Theresa Pollak, Maurice Bonds, and German-American artist Wolfgang Biehl, who was noted for his drawing classes. Carlyon's student work from these years shows their varied influences, including the patterning of Matisse, an expressionist color palette, and a firm sense of compositional structure. An interesting example is *Interior* (1951); while clearly a student work, it shows an uncanny ability to simplify form and manipulate space through the use of color. Two especially noteworthy and more precocious paintings from this period are *Tree* (April 1952, p. 80) and *Still Life No. 2* (February–April 1953). *Tree* features an "all over" compositional field, a German Expressionist palette with color laid down in patches, and the complicated, angular rhythm of a leafless tree, all folded into the ground of the canvas to create a highly individualistic and flattened spatial field reminiscent of late Cubism. Though *Still Life No. 2* has a less complicated compositional structure, it still relates to late Cubist ideas; moreover, its color scheme and tonal shifts manipulate space in a subtle manner reminiscent of Matisse.



While concentrating on painting, Carlyon also was very active in modern dance and choreography. In fact, his heavily impastoed painting, *Night Journey* (1952–53), is titled after a Martha Graham dance piece. As a result of his ability as a dancer, he received a fellowship for the fall of 1953 to study at the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance in New York City.

### Military Service and New York

After graduating from RPI in May of 1953, and before going to New York to study dance with Martha Graham, Carlyon spent the summer at his parents' home in Dunkirk. Unfortunately, he was never able to study with Graham because in August he was drafted into the U.S. military and sent to Fort Dix and then to Camp Kilmer, both in New Jersey. While this gave him the opportunity to visit museums and galleries in nearby New York City, the Korean conflict was still smoldering, and he was sure he would be sent there even though an armistice had been signed between North and South Korea on 27 July 1953. Instead, he was sent to Germany as part of the Allied Occupying Forces in Europe.<sup>9</sup> He made very little art during these years, having been deeply depressed by the devastations that he saw in Germany, which included concentration camps and a roofless Cologne Cathedral.<sup>10</sup> Near the end of his tour of duty, he used his accumulated leave to go on a two-week grand tour to Venice and France; he visited the French Mediterranean coast where he saw Matisse's Chapel in Vence near Nice, and he also went to Paris. When he returned to Germany, he began to think about art and culture again and used his weekends to visit Mozart's and Wagner's haunts.<sup>11</sup>

Apparently this tour also revived his spirits, and perhaps even his faith in humanity, for sometime in 1954, he wrote to Hans Hofmann inquiring about admission to The Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts in New York City after his discharge from the military. A handwritten letter from Hofmann, dated 14 November 1954, states in a somewhat broken English, that "we regrette [sic] to inform you that our school handels [sic] never GI students. Sincerely, Hans Hofmann."<sup>12</sup> Carlyon had been sent to Fort Dix to await his military discharge, and it may have been from there that he wrote the letter to Hofmann. Whatever the case, while at Fort Dix he again visited New York City — this time to see how much things had changed during his two-year absence.

When his discharge finally came through on 7 June 1955, he returned to Colonial Williamsburg to once again dance in the pageant *The Common Glory*. After the summer, he probably went to his parents' home in Dunkirk with the intention of attending the graduate program at Hunter College in New York City. Somewhere around this time, he applied to Hunter and was accepted, though it is not known exactly when he sent in his application. Unfortunately, graduate studies at Hunter College didn't work out — this time for financial reasons. As he wrote in a letter from 1958, "... I didn't have \$150.00 down payment on tuition; it is needed in order to enroll."<sup>13</sup> He did, however, do some painting and printmaking after his discharge. An untitled oil painting (December 1955) shows the influence of Arshile Gorky's work from the late 1930s and early 40s in its severe color scheme and in the way the original ground has been over-painted in white, leaving visible a stark black armature.

### Richmond Again

In late December 1955, Carlyon traveled to Richmond to attend a friend's wedding. While he was on campus waiting for a ride back to Dunkirk, Dr. Henry Hibbs, who was head of RPI and still remembered a dance Carlyon had choreographed as an undergraduate student, offered him a part-time position as an adjunct instructor teaching dance and choreography in the Department of Physical Education for the 1956 spring term.<sup>14</sup> Carlyon took the position and moved back to Richmond, where he lived on West Grace Street near campus.

His stay in Richmond, though for only one semester, proved very fruitful for his work. He not only had money to buy materials but also time to paint. He completed at least 16 major oil paintings during this period that included a group of landscapes and the start of a series called Kali. This title refers to the Hindu deity associated with death and destruction, who is also the goddess of time and change and the consort of Shiva. The physical format of *Kali No. 2* (May 1956, p. 42), an oil on canvas with collage elements, reflects the viewer's body in its vertical orientation — something that Carlyon would remain attuned to even in his later abstractions. The collage elements in Kali are strips of canvas that suggest body parts — a thigh, a breast — as do gestural brushstrokes in red and black. Whites, yellows, and oranges dominate the painting, and the overall effect is of a fire-storm of swirling energy. One can't help but wonder if the artist's choice of subject, his color scheme, and his manner of execution, which is somewhat reminiscent of Willem DeKooning's paintings from the same period, were inspired by the devastation he saw while stationed in Germany. One even wonders if this series has something to do with the German city of Dresden, which had been fire-bombed by the Allies during the war.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> At Fort Dix, Carlyon spent eight weeks in basic training, followed by eight weeks of radio school. He was sent to Camp Kilmer before embarking for Germany, where he was stationed at Hanau, a town in the Main-Kinzig-Kreis area in Hesse, about 11 miles from the city of Frankfurt am Main. The military base at Hanau was closed on 30 September 2008.

<sup>10</sup> In 1983, he did a series of five mixed-media collages with red drops on white that are named after the concentration camps at Treblinka, Dachau, Belzec, Buchenwald, and Auschwitz.

<sup>11</sup> Ed Slipek Jr., "Contrast, Context, & Continuity," p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Hofmann letter in the Carlyon Archive folder titled "Bang Arts Festival." Hofmann was a very highly regarded teacher by faculty at RPI, especially by Theresa Pollak. In 1943, she encouraged her student Nell Blaine to go to New York and study with Hofmann; she studied with Hofmann in Provincetown during the summer of 1958.

<sup>13</sup> Letter of 14 January 1958 to Judith (Judy) Joy, one of his undergraduate classmates from RPI with whom he kept up a correspondence for many years until he returned to Richmond. All letters are in the Carlyon Archive folder titled "letters."

<sup>14</sup> Carlyon Archive folder titled "Gallery talk: 'Sightings.'"

<sup>15</sup> Examples of DeKooning paintings that are similar include *Woman and Bicycle* (1952–53), *Gotham News*, and *Easter Monday* (both 1955–56).



<sup>16</sup> In a typed letter of 8–28–56, James Gahagan, Registrar of The Hofmann School, which was located on 52 West 8th Street, informed Carlyon that the school was closing “this coming year 1956–57. This will not affect the summer session of 1957 which will open as usual in Provincetown, Mass.” The address on the letter indicates that Carlyon was living at 925 West Grace Street in Richmond. Carlyon Archive folder titled “Bang Arts Festival.”

<sup>17</sup> Letter to Judy (Judith) Joy, 30 Sept 1956; Joy and James Bumgardner, who would eventually marry, were fellow undergraduate art students with Carlyon at RPI.

<sup>18</sup> Letter to Judy Joy, 1 November 1956 (underline is Carlyon’s). The opening at Knoedler’s was on October 30.

<sup>19</sup> The first letter seems to be dated 3 November 1956, while the second is dated 26 November 1956; both are to Judy Joy in Richmond.

<sup>20</sup> See Pete Humes, “Leader of the Pack,” *Richmond Times Dispatch*, Arts & Entertainment, section H (Sunday, December 18, 2005), p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> The postcard is dated 31 January 1957; Chaim Fleischman and his wife Mary owned and ran the gallery located at 227 East Tenth Street in New York. Carlyon Archive folder titled “letters from the Fleischman Gallery.”

Carlyon’s Kali Series and his landscapes seem to develop out of several earlier works that are related in their linear compositional structure and their shallow, late Cubist space. An untitled abstract oil (March 1956), painted primarily in black, olive green, and white, relates most clearly to late Cubism. Developmentally, it seems to be followed by another untitled canvas (April 1956) that perhaps depicts an abstracted interior scene, painted predominantly in yellow, black, green, and red; and by a pair of red paintings, *All Red No. 1* and *All Red No. 2* (both April 1956). These latter two paintings are the least Cubist in their structure and flattened space, and the most original.

The landscapes, which generally have a vertical orientation, begin at least as early as May 1956 with *Summer Foliage* and extend through July and August with *Field No. 6 (Summer River)*, *Field No. 2 (Summer Night)*, *Field No. 4 (Noon Rain)*, and *Landscape: Night Rain*. These works begin to show Carlyon’s sensitivities as a colorist; they characteristically have a high horizon and brushwork that is less aggressive than in his earlier paintings, with softer edges that tend to dissolve form into an atmospheric haze.

### New York City

What is significant about the time Carlyon spent in Richmond teaching dance is that, by the end of the summer of 1956, he could be considered no longer a student but an artist. This is certainly evident from the quality of the paintings he produced in a mere seven-month period. However, either the teaching position was only for one semester, or he was still determined to go to New York to continue his studies, for sometime during that semester he applied once again to the Hofmann School. This time he was informed by the registrar that the school was closing.<sup>16</sup> He stayed in Richmond for the summer, probably because he had a studio, but by mid-September he was in New York and living at 523 Hudson Street, in apartment #5RS. His finances remained precarious — a consistent theme in his letters to his close friends back in Richmond. In a letter dated September 30, he wrote that he had very little money left, about \$14.00.<sup>17</sup>

Despite continuing financial difficulties, he spent his time working, painting, and going to exhibitions. In a letter to Judy Joy written at the beginning of November, he described going to an opening of Rufino Tamayo’s work at the “posh-posh chic-chic” Knoedler Gallery. He was not impressed with the work or with Tamayo, who attended his opening looking “way too elegant for words.” Also at the opening were the Japanese-American artists Isamu Naguchi and Kenzo Okada and Okada’s wife. Carlyon and the Okadas, who also didn’t like the show, went out to dinner afterwards, and Carlyon was impressed with Okada. In his letter, he wrote, “Now he is a real painter and a fine, honest, warm person.” Carlyon goes on to write that he was laid off from his job after one week and must pay the landlord \$63.00 but has only \$4.10 to his name. “I’m afraid I’ll have to hock my beautiful new typewriter in order to settle the debt. I haven’t any paint or canvas.... I hate to say it but I don’t know just how much longer I can hold out....” He felt desperate and totally unprepared for the struggle of New York, and wondered if he shouldn’t have stayed in Richmond.<sup>18</sup> However, he wrote two more letters in November to Joy, one of which enthusiastically describes all the shows he has seen and includes mention of works by DeKooning, Jackson Pollock, Larry Rivers, Marca-Relli, Bernard Buffet, and Hofmann. In the second letter, because of financial difficulties, he wrote that he probably will leave “New York lock, stock, and barrel by this week sat. nite.”<sup>19</sup>

Clearly, these were financially desperate times for Carlyon. He was living in an \$18-a-month apartment but still was often unable to find work and pay the rent as he struggled to eke out an existence as an artist. On the other hand, he was learning from his experiences. Many years later in an interview, he recalled being fired from his job on the first day because he was late: the traffic in Columbus Circle was jammed as an enormous dead whale on a flat-bed truck was being taken downtown. He was oblivious to this incredible spectacle, however, as he rushed to get to work on time. This experience, he concluded, was a lesson on paying attention to things around you.<sup>20</sup> Paying attention to the overlooked became an increasingly important motivation in his work beginning in the 1980s, and remained so until the end of his life.

By the end of January 1957, perhaps due to financial difficulties, Carlyon had moved from Hudson Street to apartment #7 at 407 East 5th Street. As he settled into this new apartment, where he would live for the next year, things did begin to look up. He received a postcard from Chaim Fleischman of the Fleischman Gallery inviting him to be in a group show in March. Moreover, from the tone and familiarity of Fleischman's postcard, which was addressed to "Dic Carlyon" and began "Dear Dic," it is clear that Carlyon had been to the gallery before and Fleischman, the director, liked him and was impressed with his work.<sup>21</sup>

Carlyon continued to work in the studio and to keep in contact with friends in Richmond through Judy Joy who, like himself, was having trouble convincing her family that a life in art was something worth pursuing. In May, he wrote to her wishing that "your parents could see the 'light' so you could spend at least part of the summer in Provincetown [at Hofmann's summer school]. (I wish mine could too!)...." He goes on to say, "I think Rothko is 'out of my system.' I'm sort of glad.... I love Rothko's painting but my name is Carlyon. You know what I mean." And, as he often did, he recounted the shows he had seen: "The Motherwell show is very handsome. Paintings and collages — mostly black, ochre, and white... they recall some of those magnificent Matisse paintings when he was 'touched' by Cubism." At the end of the letter, he mentioned that he is thinking of going to Dunkirk for the summer (July to September) to paint out of doors.<sup>22</sup>

Carlyon continued the Kali Series that he had begun in Richmond and, at the same time, initiated a new series of important works that feature birds, in particular owls, as in an untitled canvas from October 1957 (p. 44). These works, done with paint that is thinned so it readily drips, have something of the mystery of Morris Graves' bird paintings about them, especially with their large, staring eyes. Carlyon's birds, however, are presented frontally in a formal manner so they loom large and are more totemic, somewhat in the manner of Northwest Coast Native American art. Moreover, because the birds are rendered as little more than sketches, quickly drawn with the brush in dark colors over a brighter yellow-orange ground, the paintings appear backlit, and the birds look like apparitional figures coalescing out of a dark brooding field.<sup>23</sup>

In July 1957, Carlyon had a solo exhibition of drawings and collages from the Kali Series and the Bird Series at the University of Rochester Fine Arts Gallery. For his career as an artist, this event marked an important milestone. He felt that the gallery respected him as a genuine artist; they matted and framed every piece and hung the show beautifully. By August, 11 of the 21 works were sold. The gallery brochure noted that Carlyon had previously had one-man exhibitions at the Steinberg Gallery in Richmond and the Fleischman Gallery in New York City; it also noted that he was represented in more than 35 private collections.<sup>24</sup>

During the late summer and fall of 1957, a steady stream of correspondence flowed to Richmond in which Carlyon recounted his activities in New York. On October 16, he wrote, "Sure did like your friend Eleanor Rufti [sic] — really a beautiful girl. Is she attached to Charlie S.? I was sorta [sic] high and hope I didn't offend her as [or ?] Charles." On November 4, he mentioned a German Expressionist show, a Mondrian Retrospective, a Pollock drawing show, and the Whitney Annual. On December 31, he wrote, "The Gorky show was a stunner! Ditto for Piet's stuff! L. Rivers' show was just downright baffling! ...This tonite's new year's eve will be spent quietly in the apt. No dough or desire to tear my insides to pieces, (Did a fine job of that in Peyton Place — oops! — I mean Dunkirk)." In an undated letter, possibly from mid-December, he wrote that he was "heading for the tundras about Dunkirk on Dec. 17th and visit through Christmas. Will be good to get away from NY for a little while. Dunkirk's a drag but I do love Lake Erie and the surrounding landscape — especially in the winter. Will probably get back to NY on the 28th...."<sup>25</sup>

By January 1958, financial troubles were once again looming large in Carlyon's life. In fact, they had reached a critical stage. In a letter written to Judy Joy, he lamented, "Austere times have set in again (when did they ever stop?). I'm down to exactly 2¢ (which a "Reader's Digest" advertisement sent me) and am besieged [sic] by a pile of yellowing bills. The cupboard is bare (even the roaches are beginning to bitch) and the stretch in my credit has finally worn out. Tra! La! La!" His solution to this financial crisis was to write to Maurice Bonds, chair of Fine Arts at RPI, asking if he could begin MFA work there in February. His intention was to use his G.I. Bill, which would

<sup>22</sup> Letter to Judy Joy, 18 May 1957 (underline is Carlyon's). Joy was living at the Ritter-Hickok Dormitory on the RPI campus. In view of Carlyon's comments about Rothko, it is interesting to note that at least two of his untitled paintings from the next year are painted on the back of paintings he did in the manner of Mark Rothko; they are *Untitled* (June 1958) and *Interior Landscape No. 1* (July 1958).

<sup>23</sup> Carlyon probably saw Graves' work at the Whitney Museum of American Art, where the "Morris Graves Retrospective Exhibition" was on view from 28 February to 28 April 1957. For this and other information on Graves, see Ray Kass, *Morris Graves: Vision of the Inner Eye* (New York and Washington, DC: George Braziller, Inc. and the Phillips Collection, 1983), p. 165.

<sup>24</sup> His comments about the show are in a letter to Judy Joy of 5 August 1957. A copy of the University of Rochester Fine Arts Gallery brochure for Carlyon's exhibition is in the Carlyon Archive folder titled "letters."

<sup>25</sup> All three letters are to Judy Joy. I have tentatively dated one letter to mid-December of 1957 because it appears to be on the same inexpensive, yellowing paper as the letter dated 31 December 1957. The Rufti meeting occurred when Jewett Campbell, a painting professor at RPI, took a group of students to New York City; they visited Carlyon's apartment-studio, which was a one-room, cold-water flat with a toilet down the



hall; the defunct bathtub in the middle of the apartment had been made into a drawing table. Afterwards, they went to the renowned Five Spot bar where jazz pianist Thelonious Monk was performing. Personal conversation with Eleanor Rufty, 8 February 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Letter to Judy Joy, dated 14 January 1958, New York City.

<sup>27</sup> Personal conversations with Eleanor Rufty, 26 January and 1 February 2009.

<sup>28</sup> The exhibition was called *Virginia Artists, 1959* and was on display from March 13 to April 19; jurors were painter-illustrator Bernard Perlin, sculptor-furniture designer Harry Bertoia, and Cleveland Museum Director Sherman E. Lee. *Pink Olympia* was painted on the back of one of Carlyon's earlier "Bird" paintings.

pay him \$110 per month for school. He resented the idea of having to become a student again but, as he continued in his letter, "It was a humiliating request to be sure but one cannot be proud when it comes to the responsibilities that go hand-in-glove when one had maintained that painting comes first above all else... no matter the price that must be paid."

Carlyon's belief in the importance of art is indicative of several generations of mid-century American modernists. They looked upon art not as some romantic adventure represented in Hollywood movies like *Lust for Life* or *The Agony and the Ecstasy*; nor did they imagine themselves becoming celebrities, feted by opulent galleries and expensive biennials in an ever-expanding world of contemporary art. To them, art was a calling that was almost religious in nature, for which real-world hardships, deprivations, and even humiliations were to be endured. Consequently, as humiliating as it was to return to RPI as a student, in his determination to continue his pursuit of art, Carlyon saw no other alternative. He was so desperate financially that his G.I. Bill, which would soon lapse if he did not use it, was his only way out, though even this wasn't easy.<sup>26</sup> There was some question about his admittance to RPI because it was not clear if the school would accept his G.I. Bill. Bonds evidently got RPI to agree (unlike the Hofmann School), and Carlyon returned to Richmond to become a special graduate student in art at RPI — the only graduate student in a newly begun program. He did, however, keep his New York apartment for some time afterwards.

Before he left for Richmond, Carlyon completed a beautiful painting of flowers that continues something of the mood and character of his bird paintings. This untitled oil (January 1958, p. 45) has the same dusty, subdued palette as the owl paintings, though it is perhaps not as nocturnal in feeling. In its center, a large bouquet of flowers in a coffee or paint can seems to float, locked into the painting's field. The flowers themselves, executed in a calligraphic technique of quick deft brushstrokes, are a delicate swirl of energy, far removed from the thick paint he used in his Kali Series and his landscapes. Nonetheless, the mood is somber and dark with little hint of the joys of spring flowers suggested by its subject matter.

## Graduate School at RPI

To be considered a mere student again, despite the fact that by this time Carlyon was already a recognized artist who had exhibited in New York and elsewhere, must have made his return to RPI humiliating. Nonetheless, in February 1958, he began the graduate program at RPI, concentrating on painting. He didn't resume studying dance because his military service had taken two years away from these studies, and he now felt that he was too old to pursue dance in a serious, professional way.<sup>27</sup> However, his interest in dance never disappeared; instead it resurfaced as a sense of movement, and rhythm became a feature of many of his later works, especially beginning in the mid-1980s.

In Richmond, Carlyon quickly renewed his acquaintance with his former classmates and with Eleanor Rufty, who posed for the paintings *Eleanor 1* (p. 46) and *Eleanor 2* (both 1958). Artistically, this was the beginning of a very productive period. By the end of the year, he had produced over twenty paintings of significant size, including a so-called Garden Series and a series that revolves around the darker themes of death and religion. The paintings of the Garden Series are generally large and characterized by a brighter palette than Carlyon had used in New York, with more intense colors befitting their subject matter; brushwork is more painterly and less calligraphic than in the bird paintings, and there is little modeling of forms in space. In *Family in a Yellow Wind* (July 1958), a group of seven figures in white stand silhouetted in a field of bright yellow grass that sways gently in the breeze; the high horizon line is punctuated by two trees painted green with traces of vermillion. The whole image is animated not by calligraphic brushwork, but by short, straight strokes that resemble a print-maker's method of cross-hatching. In *Summer Garden: Garden No. 1* (August 1958), the figures in the landscape are prominently depicted; while the overall palette is cool (mostly blue), Carlyon uses a wider range of hues laid down in sections, thereby compartmentalizing the compositional space. He goes on to do a very large, ambitious painting after Edouard Manet's *Olympia* of 1863 that he titles *Pink Olympia*, rendering the almost life-sized female figure in a shocking bubble-gum pink. The painting was included in an exhibition at the Virginia Museum of Fine Art the following year.<sup>28</sup>

Top: Richard Carlyon and Eleanor Ruffy with his painting, *Guardians of the Hedge*, 1959.  
Left: Their wedding, 3 June 1961.  
Right: With son Jason, September 1974.





The death of Pope Pius XII on 9 October 1958 affected Carlyon, who was raised Roman Catholic but would probably be considered in the “lapsed” category. He did a series of figural works exploring the related themes of religion and death that include *Requiem for Pope Pius XII*, *Cardinal*, *Tomb of Angels*, *Night Sentinels*, and *Chamber of Poets* (p. 43). They were painted on cardboard and incorporated collage elements because, at this point, Carlyon was so poor he couldn’t afford to buy canvas.<sup>29</sup> He continued these themes into the winter and spring of the following year with paintings on canvas such as *Guardians of the Tomb*, *Crypt of Angels*, *Sentinels*, and *Guardians of the Hedge*. All of the collage-paintings from 1958 and the paintings on canvas from 1959 are darker in mood than the previous landscapes. They also reveal Carlyon’s broad knowledge of the history of art and his belief that the past can be used to inform the present for these works suggest the influence of Late Roman and Early Christian tomb sculpture and Byzantine mosaics; the figures are always frontal, placed close to the picture plane, and generally cropped at the upper torso. Also, some of the figures in *Sentinels* and *Crypt of Angels* are upside-down; it is as if they are peering down on the viewer from above, a clear indication that Carlyon was studying Early Christian and Byzantine ceiling mosaics as well. This helps explain the eerie, otherworldly light glowing in these two works and the subtly disorientating sensation felt by the viewer. With upside-down figures and no horizon line, either depicted or implied, these paintings would be much more comfortably viewed if they were hung overhead. But because that are intended to be hung on a wall and viewed frontally rather than from below, the viewer’s relative position in space remains unsettled, and an optimum viewing position is difficult to locate. This is not something that happens by accident. Carlyon was always sensitive to how his work related to the viewer, both physically and psychically. To these ends, the size and the internal elements of his work were carefully gauged in relation to the viewer’s body and position in space, to how the work would be seen by the viewer as both an object and an image. Clearly, the configuration of elements and the upside-down figures were intentionally arranged by Carlyon to try to make physically palpable something of the psychic space existing between the living and the dead.

Carlyon’s personal life took on a new dimension around 1960. He had completed his course work by then and was employed full-time as an adjunct instructor in the Department of Commercial Art. This provided some financial security and, in 1961, he and Eleanor Ruffy — that “really beautiful girl” from RPI he first met in New York in 1957 — were married in Richmond’s Sacred Heart Cathedral. Ruffy, an undergraduate student from North Carolina who had come to RPI to study painting, would go on to establish a career of her own as an artist.

Carlyon did numerous drawings during these years, including some that suggest figural studies for class assignments. Doing such class assignments must have been especially demeaning for someone at his stage in his artistic career. After all, he had been exhibiting with the Fleischman Gallery in New York City for several years and had received some critical recognition in the New York art world. In an undated letter from this period, Chaim Fleischman not only mentions Carlyon’s upcoming show scheduled for spring 1960; he also notes that he has been showing Carlyon’s *Bird on the Edge of a Maze* to gallery visitors and that art critic Dore Ashton, who was an advocate of the New York School, liked it when she saw it in a group show at the gallery in December. Ashton wrote about this work in *The New York Times* in December 1957. His solo show that year had already been reviewed in two major art publications, *Arts Magazine* and *ARTnews*.<sup>30</sup>

During these years, Carlyon continued to study both old and new masters, including Piero della Francesca, Motherwell, Matisse, and Picasso. Several of his works from 1959 show the influence of Motherwell’s collages from the early 1940s — especially *Poncho Villa*, *Dead and Alive* (1943) — and his paintings from the series *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*, with their black-and-white color scheme and large ovals suspended between vertical bars. Motherwell’s influence is also evident in an interesting untitled abstract collage (1963) made with oil and pasted paper on cardboard, and in a black-and-white collage with ink titled *Portrait* (1962). Carlyon also did many drawing studies during these years of nudes from paintings by various modern artists including Matisse (*The Dance*, 1909–10, and *Music*, 1910), Cézanne (*The Large Bathers*, 1906), Amedeo Modigliani (*Crouching Female Nude*, 1917), and Picasso (*La Vie*, 1903).



### On the Faculty at RPI

Though Carlyon had been teaching at RPI since 1960, he didn't officially complete his degree requirements and receive his MFA until 1963, when he finished his thesis, "The Philosophical Implications of Surrealism."<sup>31</sup> During this time, he began a major series of works based on male mannequins dressed in jackets and hats that show his awareness of the work of painters John Graham, Arshile Gorky, and Marsden Hartley. The rigid, angular figural poses Hartley used in his fishermen paintings done in Nova Scotia in the early 1940s seem like an especially important influence on Carlyon's figural types. Graham's influence surfaces most clearly in a delicate ink-and-pencil drawing that Carlyon did of his wife Eleanor; in this drawing, she is depicted with transfixed or crossed eyes in the manner of Graham's figures. While working on the mannequins, Carlyon also began a series of collages that are very reductive, featuring two or three simple geometric forms in each; it is a kind of theme-and-variation approach that will be repeated again and again in his work.

For the next couple of years, the Mannequin Series and the Geometric Collage Series not only continued but also began to influence each other in a kind of cross-fertilization process. *Window View No. 1* (p. 83), a collage done in ink on pasted color paper, and two untitled charcoal and ink drawings are examples. All three works, dating from 1965, offer reductive visions of hats and jacket sleeves seen in profile, arranged so they appear to be stand-ins for mannequins. In many of these works, Carlyon seems to be deconstructing the jackets, tearing them apart like dress-maker's patterns and isolating the pieces so that lapels read as both lapels and simple geometric shapes against a plain ground; the same is true of sleeves and vests. He also went on to do several large paintings on the mannequin theme in the synthetic, garish colors associated with Pop Art. Two striking examples include an untitled painting (p. 48), which he worked on from July 1964 to 21 February 1965, and *Nursery Rhyme*, which he worked on from September 1964 to August 1965. The untitled painting is a large oil on canvas with charcoal that

<sup>29</sup> Personal conversation with Eleanor Ruffy, 1 February 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Fleischman Gallery correspondence, Carlyon Archive folder titled "Letters from Chaim Fleischman." Dore Ashton was a critic who chronicled the Abstract Expressionists in her book *The New York School* (New York: Viking Press, 1973); for reviews of Carlyon's exhibition, see Ashton, "Art: Mutual Assistance," *The New York Times* (11 December 1957); James Mellow, "Richard Carlyon," *Arts Magazine* (April 1957); and Herbert D. Hale, "Richard Carlyon," *ARTnews* (April 1957), p. 59.

<sup>31</sup> Carlyon was promoted to Instructor in 1960 and to Assistant Professor in 1966.



<sup>32</sup> That Carlyon was aware of Lindner's work is evident from a collage he did in 2000 that pairs a reproduction of one of Lindner's paintings with an image that appeared in *Artforum* magazine in 1974 of sculptor Robert Morris dressed in sadomasochistic Nazi drag. The collage in question is *Collage No. 11*, part of an eleven-part ensemble, each 11 x 14 inches.

<sup>33</sup> Various details about the festival's organization came from Bernard Martin, in an interview with the author on 30 January 2009. For festival aims, see "Information sheet, Richmond Professional Institute," Carlyon Archive folder titled "Bang Arts Festival."

<sup>34</sup> Randolph Goode, "Arts Festival Ends Monday," *Proscript* (RPI Newspaper), (23 Ap, 1965), p. 1. For more on the festivals, see Carlyon Archive folder titled "Bang Arts Festivals." The festival also sponsored the Second Richmond Film Festival, which showed about 45 experimental films during the festival on April 23–24; many of these were short films. Bernard Martin, who was a member of the faculty, sponsored the Richmond Film Society, which showed about 20 experimental films during the academic year. This society organized the Film Festival during the Bang Festival. Author interview with Martin, 30 January 2009.

showcases a pair of mannequins in a kind of store-window setting. *Nursery Rhyme*, also a rather large oil on canvas with charcoal, features brightly colored vest shapes flattened and stacked vertically against a ground of geometric forms; the words "red road" are written in charcoal on the upper left. This work foreshadows Carlyon's later interest in the use of text and his eventual move to abstraction.

In the way both works treat form, fracture space, or splice spatial units together, they show strong affinities with the works of artist-illustrator Richard Lindner. Two of Lindner's works come to mind, *Ice* (1966) and *119th Division* (1963). In these works, Lindner employs words and text, flattened and compartmentalized spatial units, garish commercial color, abstract designs, and stylized figural forms to create vibrant iconic images that resemble advertisements.<sup>32</sup>

In both series, Carlyon seems to be using clothes, especially jackets, as tokens of identity ("the clothes make the man"), but also as metaphors for the individual's fragmentation and isolation in mass society — something that continued through 1972 with a series of ink drawings on the subject. At the same time, he did works that capture the atmospheric quality of Motherwell's collages and the paintings of his *Open Series* — as evident, for instance, in an untitled collage (1965, p. 87) by Carlyon, which has a large centralized black oval. Motherwell's influence is also combined with that of Matisse — especially Matisse of the cut-outs and *The Dance* mural at the Barnes Foundation. There are gently colored works by Carlyon and the more boldly colored collages, *Cut Paper Sketch for an Uncommissioned Mural – Mobile* and *Cut Paper Sketch for an Uncommissioned Mural – Gulfport*. Both are from 1966 and feature colored paper cut into erotic shapes. The *Mobile* collage has an abstracted view of a female nude's raised and spread legs, while the *Gulfport* collage repeats the mannequin format but with a pair of facing male and female nudes in a sexually excited state.



Erotic themes of an even more explicit nature increasingly become the subject matter of Carlyon's collages beginning in the 1980s. But in the 1960s, he was much subtler about how he incorporated such themes into his work. In 1967, for example, he made a series of beautiful cut-paper collages, including several with biomorphic forms that allude to the human body through the use of flesh tones against pink. He did other collages using bold, vibrant colors against black, and still others that even incorporate cancelled envelopes and other found materials. Typically, these works tend to be fairly sparse but very elegant, with a degree of French finesse that shows how much Carlyon gained from studying the work of Matisse and Motherwell, who was himself strongly influenced by French art.

### Bang, Bang, Bang Arts Festivals

In an effort to be part of the larger world of contemporary art, various faculty members at RPI, Carlyon included, decided to bring the contemporary art scene to campus. To do this, they organized a series of festivals that they called the Bang, Bang, Bang Arts Festival. These festivals occurred in the spring, beginning in 1964 and continuing through 1967. Carlyon, James Bumgardner, Jon Bowie, Bernard Martin, and Willard Pilchard, who were all in the Department of Commercial Art and Design except for Martin, were the directors and organizers. Bowie, according to Martin, was the main force behind the Bang Festivals. These events were quite daring and cutting-edge, especially for a sleepy Southern city like Richmond. They were essentially self-funded through ticket revenue and,

consequently, the RPI administration was less in control than it would otherwise have been. According to an information sheet, the aims of the festival were “to bring to Richmond contemporary music, drama, choreography, film, painting and graphics, as well as promote discussion and contact with active creative artists from outside the immediate community.”<sup>33</sup>

These festivals are worth discussing because their aims fit perfectly with Carlyon’s own views and attitudes. Carlyon was an intellectual artist: that is to say, rather than believing that art depended solely on basic, “primitive” instincts, and that the artist should ignore the wider world of current events, he was convinced that the artist must be part of the world and part of the great artistic traditions of the past. He believed that the artist should be an educated, learned individual. In view of this, it is not surprising that he was interested in a wide variety of subjects, including modern music, dance, and even the cognitive sciences.

It is difficult to imagine what an exciting place RPI must have been during the Bang Festivals and how this excitement helped shape the faculty’s and students’ attitudes toward art and the creative process. Those faculty who were the driving force behind the festivals had an acute interest in avant-garde art and culture, as well as current political issues, including the Vietnam War. All in all, these were heady days filled with a sense of possibility and promise. As Martin recalled, “We did all of these things, including going to New York to see what was going on in the art world because, simply put, ‘We were looking for the future!’” Carlyon, not surprisingly, was in the midst of these activities because of his personal interest in contemporary dance and his experiences living and exhibiting as an artist in New York City. All of these factors came together to make each festival a moment of radical, avant-garde culture in the middle of an otherwise traditional, staid Southern city that was focused more on the past than on the future.

While there is little documentation of the first Bang Arts Festival, the later festivals are well documented. The second was held in April 1965 and lasted eight days. It included symposia, music and dance concerts, a happening/performance, and the production of two one-act plays from the Theater of the Absurd, Jean Genet’s *Deathwatch* and Eugène Ionesco’s *Maid to Marry*.

The happening/performance, which Carlyon choreographed and participated in, was about the horrors of war. It involved people riding bicycles, images flashing on the gym walls, airplanes suspended from the ceiling, and an “army” of marching soldiers wearing sunglasses, white outfits, helmets, and carrying fixed bayonets; there was a mass-murder scene and a parade of coeds in swim suits. It ended with five televisions being brought in, turned on, and left in the middle of the gym floor.<sup>34</sup>

Another important event was a panel on the “Crisis in Painting Today,” with a line-up of New York art-world luminaries that included painters Larry Rivers and Roy Lichtenstein; Thomas Hess, editor of *ARTnews*; and Allen Solomon, Pop Art proponent, curator, and author of *New York: The New Art Scene*. The festival also presented a Concert of Dance featuring contemporary dancers Yvonne Rainer and Lucinda Childs and dancer/sculptor Robert Morris, with production by Jill Johnston. Carlyon had a great deal to do with this event because he, among the organizers, was the person most interested in modern dance. It took place on April 21 and included *Waterman Switch*, a dance in which Morris and Rainer, both nude and locked in a tight embrace, inched their way across two parallel beams while Childs circled the stage. Because of this dance, with its “shocking” nudity, the organizers nearly got fired by the president of RPI.<sup>35</sup>

The third festival ran from 21–25 March, 1966. The first night featured John Cage and David Tudor in concert, performing the premier of *Variations VI (six short inventions for seven instruments)*.<sup>36</sup> This event was of great significance for Carlyon, who had been familiar with Cage’s music since his undergraduate days when he had purchased an LP of Cage’s *Music for Prepared Piano*. Carlyon often described how Cage, upon entering the performance site, a former church on RPI’s campus, heard a whistling sound. When Cage finally tracked down its source, he had it amplified with a contact microphone and used it as part of the evening’s performance. His idea was that all things can be interesting if one simply paid attention. Also on the program was Cage’s (2) *Solo(s) for Voice II*. The Cage performance, as noted in the concert program, included “the basic electronic complex of tape recorders, amplifiers, transistor radios, short wave radios, photo-electric cells, mixers, microphones, speakers, etc....” An RPI crew, under Cage’s supervision, assisted in the setup of all the equipment.<sup>37</sup>

On the day following the new music concert, Carlyon was involved in a happening titled *Bird Park Lake: A Vue-Gram*. Besides Carlyon, the other performers were Bernard Martin, Bill Livingston, Willard Pilchard, Jon Bowie, and James Bumgardner. According to Alberta Lindsey of the *Richmond News Leader*, it began with “the audi-

<sup>35</sup> See Carlyon Archive folder titled “Bangs Arts Festival.” According to Martin, Dr. George J. Oliver, President of RPI, called them into his office the following day and was about to fire them (there was no such thing as tenure in those days) when Theresa Pollak, the petite gray-haired doyenne of the art school, came into the office and rhapsodized enthusiastically about how beautiful the dance was and how unfortunate that Mr. Oliver hadn’t seen it. “She saved our jobs,” Martin said in an interview with the author on 30 January 2009. Ironically, the premier of *Waterman Switch* had taken place a month earlier at the Judson Church in New York City, and its nudity almost caused the church to be rejected from the American Baptist Convention. See Sally Banes, *Democracy’s Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962–1964* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 213.

<sup>36</sup> For more on John Cage and *Variation VI*, see James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), especially p. 154.

<sup>37</sup> John Cage and David Tudor concert program notes. Carlyon Archive folder titled “Bang Arts Festival.”



<sup>38</sup> Alberta Lindsey, "It's Confused, It's Zany – It 'Happened' at RPI," *Richmond News Leader*, (23 March 1966), Area News, p. 13. Also see Tom Robbins' description of the event in "Stage," *Richmond Times Dispatch* (23 March 1966), p. 23. According to Martin, the festival organizers had access to film and processing — there was no video in those days — through William (Bill) Livingston who worked for Commonwealth Films in Richmond. For more on this, including the attitudes and aims of the participants, see the invitation packet to the event in the Carlyon Archive folder titled "Bang Arts Festival."

<sup>39</sup> See Festival Program, Carlyon Archive folder titled "Bang Arts Festival."

<sup>40</sup> Howard Smith, "Scenes," *The Village Voice* (4 May 1967), p. 18–19. Carlyon Archive folder titled "Bang Arts Festival." Smith began as a photographer before writing for *The Village Voice*; he also hosted a popular radio show on WPLJ-FM in New York, and in 1972 won an Oscar for directing *Marjoe*, a documentary film about evangelist Marjoe Gortner.

ence staring at four large white screens on stage and listening to strange noises that sounded like an amplifying system that wasn't working." The six performers, coming down the center aisle, went on stage carrying folding chairs, a fan, a vacuum cleaner, and other items. They did various antics, smoked cigarettes, disappeared and returned; then sounds like machine guns were heard. All the while their "antics," which had been previously filmed, were shown continuously on four different-sized screens. When the performers left the theater by going back down the center aisle, a man came on stage and began reading the dimensions of the theater. The lights came on, and the audience left.<sup>38</sup> In a sense, the audience was watching an event that was about its own creation. In other words, the creation of the event was the content and was happening, basically, in real time before the audience's eyes. There was a feeling that past, present, and future existed (or were existing) simultaneously. The cooperative nature of such ventures and their multi-media components foreshadow Carlyon's later work and his concern with the viewer's participation in "making" the work of art come into being through the thoughtful contemplation of it. Such contemplation was intended to be a self-reflexive act that expanded the consciousness of viewers about events happening around them.

Other events at the 1966 festival included Judith Dunn's *Ground Speed: An Evening of 'New Dance'* with musicians Bill Dixon and Alan Silva that took place on March 23. *Synthesis II: At Least the Cut Grass would Smell the Same*, a multi-level, multi-media performance conceived and performed by RPI students, occurred on the following day. And on March 25, a symposium was presented on the topic of "Art, Non-Art, Anti-Art" that was moderated by writer Tom Robbins, a former RPI student who came in from Seattle for the festival. Other panelists included art-world luminaries Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Allan Kaprow, Barnett Newman, and Ernest Trova. The event took place in the gymnasium, and Trova answered "no comment" to all queries put to him during the panel discussion. Newman's only request when invited to the festival was to be taken to visit Monticello near Charlottesville. Two one-act English comedies, *Private Ear* and *Public Eye* by playwright Peter Shaffner, also were presented that evening.<sup>39</sup>

The fourth and final festival occurred at the end of April 1967 and was, in part, a response to students' interest in fashion and "having fun." To this end, it featured a panel on April 25 called "New York Scenes." The panelists were Howard Smith, a writer from *The Village Voice*; his wife, the jewelry designer Susan Smith; Jeff Glick of the Head Shop; and Jean Mercier of Paraphernalia, a very hip clothing store in Soho. Writing later in his "Scenes" column in *The Village Voice*, Smith described the group's arrival at the Richmond

airport, where they were met by a band and several hundred costumed students with painted faces, signs, and banners chanting "Hooray for Smith" and "Up with Glick." Policemen stood by solemnly holding people back. After the group was presented with flowers and bananas, they were brought to campus in a parade of trucks and cars, with horns blaring and streamers flying. They arrived on campus just as an outdoor rock-and-roll dance began.<sup>40</sup> Events of a more serious nature included a dance performance on April 27 by Twyla Tharp and dancers Sara Rudner, Theresa Dickinson, and Marjorie Tuppling, and a new music concert on April 29 by Robert Ashley and the Sonic Arts Group from the University of Michigan. Using electronic devices, they played music by contemporary avant-garde composers Gordon Mumma, Alvin Lucier, David Behrman, and Ashley.

### RPI becomes Virginia Commonwealth University

By the time of the last festival in 1967, Carlyon had attained the rank of Assistant Professor of Art. The following year, RPI merged with The Medical College of Virginia to form Virginia Commonwealth University, and the structure of what had been RPI was re-organized into individual departments. Carlyon then became part of the newly formed Department of Painting and Printmaking where he remained until 1976, when he joined the Department of Art History.

While he continued making colored and black-and-white ink drawings featuring disembodied shirts, vests, jackets, and hats, he also began making what look like collage studies and drawings for Minimalist paintings based on simple rectangular shapes; among these works are a series of gray-toned untitled collages (1970), done in ink, pencil, and pasted paper, and the marker-and-charcoal drawing *#2 Soft* (1973). These studies led to a very productive year in which he combined minimalist formal features with the elegant color schemes of his earlier collages.

From 6 January to 6 November 1975, Carlyon completed 16 large paintings (p. 49–53) whose titles, added after their completion, make references to various subjects including literature (*Passage to India*), historical personages (*CHARLEMAGNE*), and place (*Erie Slate* and *San Francisco Exit*). Painted with acrylic rather than with oil, these works have many layers of slightly different colors — sometimes as many as 31 layers. And because he was applying paint that is translucent or transparent, the color of the final layer is a sum total of all the preceding layers. In these works, Carlyon also used masking tape to give crisp, clean edges to his forms; in some examples — mainly the earlier ones in the group — traces of taped edges from aborted forms show through the layers of over-painting, creating a kind of shadowy counter composition to the main composition. As a result of the



sparse geometrical compositional schemes found in these works, they have some semblance to classic Minimalist paintings of the 1960s and early 70s. However, there are significant differences that indicate Carlyon's ideas were far removed from those of his Minimalist counterparts.<sup>41</sup> Some of these differences are apparent in these paintings and worth enumerating. For instance:

1. These works are not intended to be read as unitary wholes.
2. Chance is accepted so compositional structures reflect imperfections in the canvas fabric.
3. Symmetrical compositions are positive critiques of asymmetrical structures.
4. Composition acknowledges the canvas stretcher but is neither centralized nor repetitive.
5. Composition is synchronized to sumptuous, but idiosyncratic color schemes.
6. Color schemes tend to be close in value, not highly contrasting.
7. Surfaces retain traces of brush work and even of masking tape.

These differences reveal something of Carlyon's intentions, not only towards these specific works, but also towards his conception of painting in general. By using asymmetrical compositional structures instead of centralized or repetitive ones, he creates an internal dialogue in the work that concentrates viewer attention. What Carlyon was doing was avoiding the "painting as object" idea so common to Minimalist painting as seen, for example, in the hands of someone like Frank Stella. An internal dialogue occurs in Carlyon's work despite the fact that his asymmetrical compositional structures echo the painting's stretcher bars, something typical of Minimalist painting. Moreover, because the brushwork is intentionally left visible, the hand-madeness of his paintings is stressed, just as the traces of masking tape underscore the intuitive nature of his working methods. Such features signify human input and human presence in the work. Carlyon's intent is to assure that the works are understood by the viewer as unique, one-of-a-kind creations that stem from the hand of the artist; there are to be no allusions to the marklessness of industrial-machine production and computer-generated imagery.<sup>42</sup> Though Minimalist in their stylistic affinities and frontal

<sup>41</sup> Some of these paintings are reminiscent of Third Style Pompeian painting found in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, especially in the way structural forms gravitate to the edges of the canvas, leaving most of the canvas a field of color.

<sup>42</sup> See Ed Slipek, Jr., "Contrast, Context, & Continuity," p. 23.



Richard Carlyon with his painting, *Marker III: Point Gratiot*, in his studio, 711-A West Broad Street, Spring 1980.





appearance, his paintings are in no way intended to be seen as gestalts. Carlyon doesn't want them to be read as unitary objects, as emblematic wholes suspended in some hermetic utopian world outside of time and space. He is insisting, however gently, that they be understood as the creations of a singular human being, anchored in a specific historical moment, and capable of communicating with other human beings similarly situated.

Carlyon wrote notes about this series in 1976 that he reiterated in a talk on the occasion of their exhibition at the Hunt Gallery of Mary Baldwin College in 1999. These notes provide additional insight into his artistic philosophy:

1. I always work against the shape of the canvas itself, because I am against the notion of the canvas as a "window" or "container" of space.
2. I do not want a referential image; I am not interested in depicting or alluding to objects, nature, or someone else's painting. I want each painting to be seen and experienced for what it is.
3. I work to establish a spatial structure that in a sense "locates" the viewer, wherein the viewer becomes a kind of "vanishing point"... the painting, if "successful," should "read as a whole, open and expanding image."
4. I work for a frontal, direct, visually austere abstract image that initially seems fixed, set, perhaps static, in appearance. Simultaneously, I also work for a structure that initiates a visual collapse or breakdown of the image causing the viewer to "relocate" his reading of the painting; the viewer is invited to pull the image back together.<sup>43</sup>

These principles lead to works with almost imperceptible changes in surface texture and subtle shifts in tonalities and hue. The result encourages the committed viewer to locate a place in front of the work that is not too close or too far away — a place that allows for both seeing the work in its entirety and carefully scrutinizing its details. As Carlyon noted in an interview, "Some artists like to get back from their work, but I like to work within my immediate field of vision.... When people see my work, it is seen the way it was actually done."<sup>44</sup> Thus, the reason for the large size of these 1975 paintings is not to overwhelm the viewer, or to allow the works to be seen from across the room; their size is scaled so that they come face-to-face with the viewer as a sentient physical body in space. To this end, and unlike certain earlier paintings with their reliance on brash Pop Art colors, such paintings as *First Song (for Eleanor)* (p. 49) and *MAGELLAN* (both 1975) reveal themselves only upon close scrutiny. *First Song*, for example, has subtle shifts in texture and barely perceptible pink-orange bands at top and bottom. Besides the orange and red-orange bands in *MAGELLAN*, there also appear to be bands that are simply the result of paint thickness and paint application methods.

### Polyptychal and Multi-Canvas Formats

In 1976, Carlyon began working with a palette limited mostly to grays, whites, and blacks; these colors, however, are organically rich in tonal subtleties, never just plain gray or simple black or stark white. He also turned to simpler compositional structures based on bars, stripes, and rectangles, often in polyptychal formats; this is something he would continue to experiment with throughout the rest of his career. *Monitor I: In Memorium, F. D. Cossitt, Jr.* (1978) is a simple diptych featuring two vertical white stripes against black.<sup>45</sup> *Marker III: Point Gratiot* (1979, p. 54) is a more complicated painting named for the Dunkirk Light, the early nineteenth-century lighthouse located at Point Gratiot on Lake Erie near Carlyon's childhood home. This triptych features a central square with smaller side panels attached in a way that suggests the painting's corners have been notched, similar in effect to Frank Stella's shaped and notched canvases from the mid-1960s. Works in the Marker Series, including *Marker I: Erie* (1979), are referred to by Carlyon as stele and dolman, after ancient markers and burials. In doing so, he suggests the idea of painting as place, as a site in relation to the viewer, as well as part of a historical tradition of artistic creation that goes back to prehistoric times. Something similar is found in *Painting in Ten Parts* (1984, p. 61), a work that has a sense of dance-like movement in the way its various combinations of vertical, horizontal, and angled black lines are set against a white ground; each part is named after a town in New York State and is meant to be hung in a double row, in a specific order.<sup>46</sup>

Polyptychs and multi-canvas works continued to occupy Carlyon at this time. Paintings in the Vox Series (1979–80), subtitled after the ranges of the human voice (soprano, contralto, tenor, baritone, and bass), follow more traditional polyptychal formats in that equal-sized panels are used. The ten works in the Signal Series (1979, 1982–83, p. 55) are much more complex. Here, Carlyon uses monochromatic panels, usually of different sizes and not always attached together, as compositional elements by arranging them choreographically on the wall — some horizontally, some vertically, and some even in triangles. This is especially evident in the last five paintings of the series, *Signals VI–X* (p. 58, 77), which are each dedicated to a modern dancer-choreographer.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Carlyon Archive folder titled "'Citings: Recent Drawings,' Gallery Talk Notes, Hunt Gallery, Mary Baldwin College."

<sup>44</sup> Ed Slipek, Jr., "Contrast, Context, & Continuity," p. 18.

<sup>45</sup> Cossitt, who died in a car accident, wrote for the *Richmond Times Dispatch* and was a supporter of contemporary art and the Bang Arts Festivals. The painting was exhibited in the *Members Exhibition* at 1708 Gallery, a non-profit artist space that Carlyon and other local artists had founded that year. Besides the memoria for Cossitt and Pope Pius XII, Carlyon did memoria for others including Adlai Stevenson, Hans Hofmann, VCU sculpture professor Jose Puig, critic Harold Rosenberg, and his grandfather, P. H. C.

<sup>46</sup> *Painting in Ten Parts* is to be hung as follows: top row, l-r: Angelica, Lackawanna, Palmyra, Henrietta, Attica; bottom row, l-r: Batavia, Elmira, Tonawanda, Ithaca, Chatauqua. Carlyon Archive folder titled "'R-notes on Paintings.'" Carlyon also did numerous "uncommissioned" mural studies that he named after cities such as Biloxi and Gulfport.

<sup>47</sup> Of the Vox Series, Carlyon wrote: the "sound of voice 'creates' space/ no center, no margins, no container." *Signals VI–X* are tributes to Lucinda Childs, Yvonne Rainer, Kenneth King, David Gordon, and Trisha Brown, some of whom Carlyon worked with years earlier during the Bang Arts Festivals.



<sup>48</sup> There are two other “mythology” series, *Pelasgian Slate* and *Orphic Slate*. According to Robert Merritt in an interview, Carlyon came upon a book on mythology and decided to organize his 15 paintings into three categories, Olympian, Pelasgian, and Orphic, and to name each painting after one of the 15 myths in the book. Robert Merritt, “Art,” *Richmond Times Dispatch*, section B-6, (January 9, 1982), p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> Carlyon Archive folder titled “Notes on Paintings.”

<sup>50</sup> For Karl Pribram, see his *Language of the Brain: Experimental Paradoxes and Principles in Neuropsychology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971); for Jaynes, see *The Origin of Consciousness in the Break-down of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1976). For “reception aesthetics” see, for example, Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetics of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) and Jane P. Tompkins, *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

<sup>51</sup> The work calls to mind Cage’s 1952 silent musical composition, 4’ 33”, in which no sounds are made by the pianist during the 4 minutes and 33 seconds duration of the work.

While Carlyon continued doing abstract paintings with a very limited color palette, not all are constructed around stark value contrasts such as black and white. Paintings in the Olympian Slate Series (1981), for instance, use solid reds, oranges, greens, and blues, but seldom in combinations as in his earlier works, like the pink and orange used in *First Song (for Eleanor)* (1975). Moreover, these new compositions feature a single central form (usually square or rectangular) in one color against a simple neutral-colored ground. After these works were finished, Carlyon titled them after various ancient Greek gods associated with creation myths — for example, Olympian Slate II: Gaea and *Olympian Slate IV-A: Briareus* (p. 57).<sup>48</sup> The size of these works and their internal elements, as already noted with many of his earlier works, are carefully scaled to the human body to encourage the attentive viewer to seek that special place in front of the work where shape and form come forward to confront the viewer in a “body-to-body” relationship. To this end, Carlyon insisted these works be hung low so that nothing would come between them and the viewer.

Carlyon did a group of paintings in 1982–83 that he titled Screen Series. These works are important for several reasons aside from their artistic merits. While their compositional elements — basically rectangular bars — tend to be simple arrangements whose formal logic relates to recent works like the Vox Series from two years earlier, chromatically they seem to look back to the color strategies he used years earlier in his 1975 abstractions, especially in the way they are painted in barely perceptible shifts in value and tonalities. This apparent anomaly is explained by the fact that these paintings, according to Carlyon, were inspired by the reflection of a rectangle of nocturnal light from a TV seen in a Fan District house in Richmond while riding his bike at night.<sup>49</sup> This explanation is significant because it indicates just how much Carlyon was responding to John Cage’s dictum about opening oneself up to the world and to chance encounters — that is to say: pay attention to the surrounding world for you just might see a whale on a flat-bed truck going down a city street. The result of Carlyon’s encounter, as in *Screen IV: for Julian Jaynes* (1983), is an acrylic painting featuring seven barely distinguishable vertical bars in a rectangular field. The idea is that these works will not give themselves up readily to the viewer. Like his works from the mid-1970s, this work and the others in the series demand careful, intense looking before the internal elements will coalesce out of the ground and reveal themselves to the viewer.

This series indicates that Carlyon had no intention of allowing his works to be taken in with a quick, fleeting glance, a strategy that Pop Art cultivated by drawing upon imagery from popular culture and that Hollywood increasingly exploited with the cinematic jump-cut in its movies. The effortlessness that epitomizes popular culture was not what Carlyon was about or interested in; his intentions were much more serious. As if to emphasize this point, works in the Screen Series are dedicated to a variety of intellectuals, including Buckminster Fuller, John Cage, Marshall McLuhan, Julian Jaynes, and Karl Pribram, in that order. McLuhan, of course, was important because he discussed the impact of the media on the recipient’s conceptions and perceptions of form and content (“the medium is the message”); the many collage works with media-derived imagery that Carlyon produced in the last two decades of his life attest to his interest in the issue. One suspects that both Pribram and Jaynes, though more obscure figures, are nonetheless important for Carlyon. Pribram was a neuroscientist who wrote about the brain and consciousness. Jaynes also wrote about consciousness, analyzing evidence of its developmental origins in works of art, music, and literature that range across the historical spectrum; to Jaynes, texts of all types harbor the keys to the origin of consciousness. These topics relate directly to Carlyon’s interest in the subject-object dynamic that occurs when viewing works of art — what today would be called “reception aesthetics.”<sup>50</sup> According to reception aesthetics, the viewer is never a passive spectator in front of the work of art; the viewer always brings his or her own personal biases, as well as cultural understandings about art, to the viewing process. Thus, viewing is an active rather than a passive process, set in motion by the artist through the work of art, something of which Carlyon was very much aware.

Looking ahead a decade or so to work Carlyon did in the 1990s, it is apparent that ideas relating to reception aesthetics and viewer consciousness were still a concern. He explored them at great length in a three-piece construction (1992–93) that features three wood panels simply painted white.<sup>51</sup> The starkness of the panels is only relieved by the pairs of chrome-plated hardware screwed to their wooden sides. The obvious strength of the hardware, bright and shiny against the bare wood of the panel sides, not only calls attention to how the works are attached to the gallery wall, but also implies serious things are afoot. However, it is the titles of the individual parts that are the most crucial elements in opening the work to the viewer and vice versa. *Utilities I: A Surface For Sounds*, *Utilities II: A Surface For Words*, and *Utilities III: A Surface For Images* inform the viewer of what is expected and how the works are to be engaged: the viewer is to project mental images, words, and sounds onto the white surfaces, thereby filling



Top: Richard Carlyon with his paintings, *UP(SIDE)DOWN*, *That*, and *Vox II: Soprano*, February 1987.  
Bottom: Installing work at 1708 East Main Gallery, December 1980.





<sup>52</sup> Carlyon Archive folder titled "Dick's Notes on Constructions."

<sup>53</sup> The others writers named in the Relic Series are Céline, Apollinaire, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Lautréamont, Camus, Zola, Rimbaud, Kafka, and Genet. Titles of works in the Easel Series reflect various Chinese concepts: *Ch'ien* (firmness); *K'un* (submission); *Shih* (multitude); *Ching* (source); *Wei Chi* (not yet accomplished).

and activating them. In doing so, viewer and object are fused together in a moment of consciousness that is neither self-centered nor self-referential, but that is focused beyond the self to the surrounding world, opening and expanding the viewer's sense of self as a member of a community.

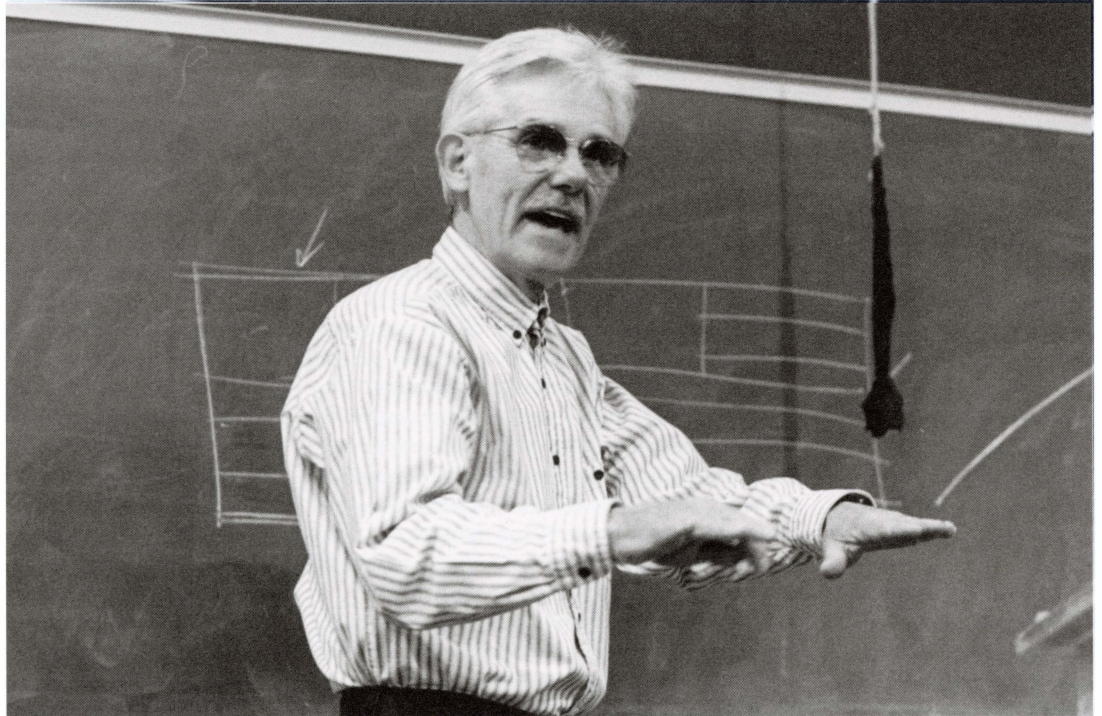
### John Cage and Chance Operations

Making works of art that encourage viewers to open themselves to that wider world outside the self places a burden of its own on the artist. For the work of art to have any validity at all in such circumstances, the artist also must be attuned to the surrounding world; the artist cannot exempt him or herself from the situation by continuing traditional studio practices. The artist is required, as an act of good faith, to re-conceptualize his or her own role in the creative process; anything less would be tantamount to a betrayal. Considering this, it is hardly surprising that Cage's ideas about experiencing the world became increasingly important to Carlyon and also changed the way he worked. Not only was Cage a topic of discussion in Carlyon's art history classes; as early as 1982, Carlyon had created a 45-minute performance with visuals and audio titled *Site Re(mov)al* that is heavily influenced by Cage's ideas. Cage, for his part, was strongly influenced by the anti-establishment antics of Dada and by Marcel Duchamp's notion of the non-aesthetic object, especially in the form of the readymade and the assisted readymade. Cage knew Duchamp personally and often spoke about the importance of allowing oneself to be open to the possibility of new, unplanned experiences through chance encounters.

To some extent, Carlyon already did this when he responded to the illumination of a TV screen while biking at night, for example, or when he allowed the imperfections in the fabric of the canvas to influence his compositional strategies. That Cage's ideas took on greater and greater significance during this period is evident in the way Carlyon's own studio practice changed as he eventually developed more systematic approaches to the use of chance as a way to move beyond established habits, and as a way of challenging all-too-neat patterns of thinking. The effect is to underscore concern with the viewer's perspective vis-à-vis the work of art by now including the artist among

the viewers, at least in the sense that the artist, by using chance procedures, has re-conceptualized the creative process as well as his own relationship with the work. Now, the artist also becomes an observer of his own work because he doesn't know what the work will be or look like until he is done making it. Until it comes into being through the chance operations used to generate it, it remains a mystery to the artist as well. In this way, the artist is as surprised by the work as the viewer. This is not to say the artist gives up control or responsibility for the work; as Cage said, "There's choice and there's chance and I choose chance." The choice of the specific chance procedure is a fundamental decision of the artist.

Carlyon began doing a series of Dada-influenced mixed-media collages and constructions using found and readymade materials, some of which came his way, appropriately enough, by chance. An intriguing example is *Wall Albums* (1982, 1984), a series of seven mixed-media constructions in which Carlyon used Polaroid photographs that he discovered purely by chance in a motel room, apparently left by a former guest. As Carlyon recounted, they were found on "September 27, 1980 in an unmarked envelope that had been placed (and forgotten?) among stationary materials in the top middle drawer of a dresser/desk located in Room #305, DOWNTOWN MOTEL, Danville, Virginia."<sup>52</sup> There are other Dada-influenced mixed-media constructions worth noting. The Relics Series (1983–84), 14 mixed-media constructions with Polaroid photographs and metal chains, are named after prominent literary figures, including Balzac, Proust, Verlaine, and Gide, among others. The Temporary Utilities Series (1982) comprises five mixed-media constructions named after the early twentieth-century Russian artists Rodchenko, Tatlin, Pevsner, Malevich, and Gabo. In Dada fashion, the titles contain instructions for the work's dismantling, hence destruction. *Temporary Utility No. I: Closet For Rodchenko* (p. 60) has the subtitle: *(To be disassembled in Leningrad, USSR on October 31, 2017)*. It is composed of nine small wooden boxes hinged to a horizontal piece of wood; at the appointed time (the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution), a screw driver chained to the work is to be used to unscrew the sealed boxes and reveal their hidden objects. Likewise, the Easels Series (1984, p. 86) features five folded-easel constructions of mixed materials that include Polaroid photographs, metal chains, and attached tools, which are apparently to be used for their destruction as well.<sup>53</sup>



Inherent in these works is the idea of grafting oneself onto the great traditions of art, literature, and culture generally — in these cases, the culturally and socially subversive traditions of Dada and Neo-Dada. For contained within these works are echoes of past works, not only in the use of chance and readymade materials, but also with regard to certain conceptual ideas. The way Carlyon collaged found images together is reminiscent of the streaming of disjunctive, non-narrative images that Robert Rauschenberg used in his Neo-Dada works from the late 1950s to signify the disconnect- edness of modern life. The idea of destruction also echoes Man Ray's *Object To Be Destroyed* (1923), which was an assisted readymade in the form of a metronome with a paper eye glued to it; according to Man Ray's instruction, at a certain moment the work was to be destroyed with a single hammer blow. The notion of tantalizingly hiding something within a visual art object so that it can't be seen echoes Duchamp's assisted readymade, *With Hidden Noise* (1916), which consists of a spool of twine bound between two metal plates held together by four long screws. Duchamp placed a secret object within the spool so it would rattle when the work was shaken; the hidden object

could be heard but not seen, hence the title. *With Hidden Noise* is of further significance because Duchamp added an inscription to both upper and lower metal plates that was, according to him, "'an exercise in comparative orthography;' the gaps in [the words] were to be replaced by letters from the other two lines. French and English are mixed, making no sense."<sup>54</sup> The idea of "making no sense" is an implicit affront to an overly rationalized and bureaucratized society that prized conformity and factual knowledge over intuitive or experiential knowledge. Carlyon would certainly have understood this since his MA thesis was on Surrealism and its philosophical implications.

By the late 1980s or early 90s, Carlyon was doing very little drawing; instead he was devoting himself mostly to book art and collages, though he did continue some painting as well. At this point in his career, even the influence of Duchampian wordplay became shaped more and more by Cagean ideas. Cage's working methods and even his *Mesostics* (an acrostic poem in which the hidden message reads vertically through the poem) loom as significant examples of what one can do with chance and with words. Carlyon became aware of this and

<sup>54</sup> See Dawn Ades, Neil Cox, David Hopkins, *Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1999), pp. 162-163. In an interview, Carlyon discussed Duchamp's aesthetic ideas and his use of chance operations in music scores and *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*. See Mary Flinn, "An Interview with Richard Carlyon," p. 3 of transcript.



<sup>55</sup> The exhibition came about when curator Julia W. Boyd mentioned an opening in the museum's schedule. I suggested exhibiting Cage's watercolors, which hadn't been shown before. *John Cage/New River Watercolors* opened on October 25 in Richmond and then traveled to Radford University, the Roanoke Museum of Fine Art, and The Phillips Collection in Washington, DC. The watercolors had been painted in April 1988 at Virginia Tech's Miles C. Horton, Sr. Research Center in Giles County, Virginia. A catalogue essay by Ray Kass describes how Kass organized the studio procedures so Cage could adopt his chance methods to painting. Chance-determined numbers were used to select correspondingly numbered brushes, rocks to paint around, colors, washes, paper sizes, and grid positions on the paper.

<sup>56</sup> Carlyon as quoted in Theresa Sauer, *Notations 21* (New York: Mark Batty Publisher, 2008), p. 297, a collection of contemporary musical scores that includes some of Carlyon's own work. See Carlyon Archive folder titled "Notations 21." For an exhibition review that includes *Flight Song*, see Paul Ryan, "Richmond," *Art Papers* (July/Aug, 2002), p. 40.

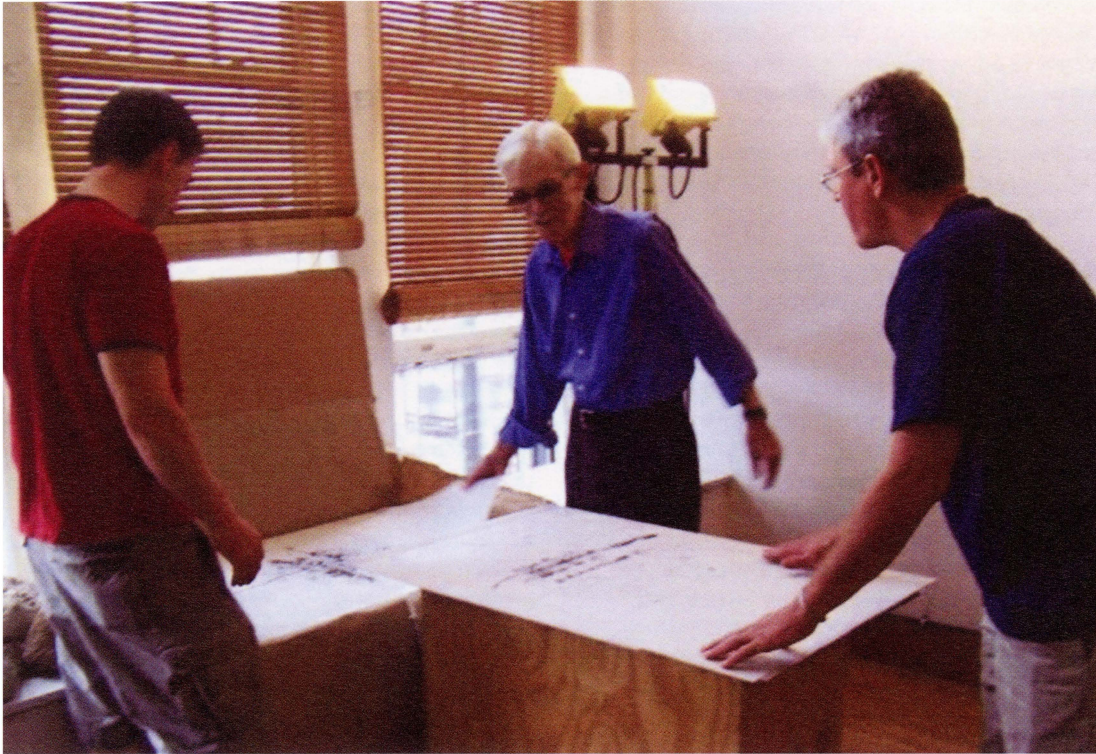
<sup>57</sup> The raw footage of *Flight Song*, which features Carlyon repeatedly walking up the stairs of the former Art Foundation Building on the VCU campus, was edited down from one-half hour to 5' 33" using chance procedures. It is exactly one minute longer than Cage's 1952 silent musical composition, 4' 33". For more specific details, see Mary Flinn, "An Interview with Richard Carlyon," pp. 1-2 of transcript.

renewed his acquaintance with Cage in 1988, when the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts presented an exhibition of 30 watercolors by Cage. The watercolors, made using chance procedures, were done earlier in the year at a Mountain Lake Workshop in southwestern Virginia. Cage came to the opening of his exhibition and did a reading from *Writing Through "Finnegan's Wake"* (1977), his mesostic on James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*.<sup>55</sup> That Carlyon had great respect for Cage is evident from *Flight Song*, a looped video he completed in 2001 as a homage to Cage, who had died in 1992. In a new book titled *Notations 21*, Carlyon is quoted in the third person acknowledging that "*Flight Song* was an homage to Cage whose work and thinking — the activities with non-intended sound and chance-determined structures particularly — were an important influence on his [my] own development as an artist, as was Cage's open, fluid approach to art and life."<sup>56</sup> Featuring repeated footage of Carlyon walking up stairs, *Flight Song* was composed and edited using a chance-determined structure based on a simple arithmetical system.<sup>57</sup> The video also recalls Cage's visit to Richmond for the Bang Arts Festival in 1966 when, as Carlyon recounted years later, Cage entered the concert site and heard a faint, but continuous whistle from air rushing through a crack. "Cage thought this a 'lovely sound' and had it amplified with a contact microphone and included in his performance. Tim Anderson from the Drama Department who was working as a technical advisor, asked: 'Is that music Mr. Cage?' Cage answered, 'There are many people who have the notion that art is an improvement on life, but I find life very interesting; it's a matter of changing one's mind.'"<sup>58</sup>

Echoing these sentiments in an interview held the same year *Flight Song* was made, Carlyon said that "emphasis is on experience as opposed to understanding, I mean, if you make a kind of distinction there. The experiencing mind, according to Cage, is the mind that is delighted and enhanced when anything comes into it that isn't within the realm of its imagination. In other words, the emphasis is upon discovery." He goes on to mention Mallarmé's influence, especially in his use of language, blank spaces, intervals, and gaps: "I mean, he's [Mallarmé's] never really describing anything. He's recording the effects that things had upon his perception...."<sup>59</sup>

There are two points that should be stressed here. First of all, though Cage's ideas were well known in the world of contemporary music, they were not widely accepted. Especially those concerning chance were regarded with a degree of skepticism because the notion of giving up control, of suppressing one's ego in favor of chance procedures, was anathema to many musicians. Secondly, in the realm of visual art, Cage's ideas were hardly known at all. If they were, they probably would have been regarded as too radical for the same reasons. That Carlyon was one of the few artists to embrace such a radical approach to making visual art comes, in part, from his interest in modern dance which, of course, has connections to modern music in a way that visual art does not.<sup>60</sup> It is also an example of his wide-ranging interests and an indication of his own radically expansive view of the art-making process.

However, it would be wrong to suggest that Carlyon's work is just a conglomeration of all these various influences. He turned Cage's ideas and numerous other influences to his own ends by combining and manipulating them through various means that are both conceptual and even mechanical, including the use of a photocopier. Carlyon's use of the photocopier may help explain why he concentrated so much on bookmaking and collages, instead of on drawing or painting, from 1989 to 1997. Whatever the case, this period was a very productive time in which he created several hundred collages and books. In many of these works, it is interesting to see how Carlyon took Mallarmé's ideas about words in principle, but not in fact. This is apparent in several of his collage series. The very title of one of the series, *Between This And That Which Is Shown* (1996), suggests that there is a space between words and images in these works that can't be seen but can be understood. In *For Piet's Sake* (1996), a series of photo-collages named after Piet Mondrian, Carlyon indicates that something more than just the word-play of his title is involved. This series is comprised of 42 parts, each featuring a single image strategically placed on a rectangular white sheet. *For Piet's Sake, No. 25* is typical: it features a photo-reproduction of two nudes making love that has been teasingly cropped into a narrow horizontal band and placed near the top margin of the sheet so that the blank paper beneath it is charged with energy as the mind's eye tries to complete the scene in the space provided below the image.<sup>61</sup>



Carlyon also began using a photocopy machine to manipulate images, sometimes using chance procedures in a very controlled way, while at other times using uncontrolled chance to discover unintended results. An example of uncontrolled chance appears on the front cover of *Untitled Book No. 26* (1992, p. 78); the faces of two cartoon characters are stretched and distorted, an effect achieved by slightly moving the original image during the photocopying process. This cover includes the words VERBI, VOICI, VISUAL, and EXPLORATIONS, stacked one above the other, while part of Marshall McLuhan's name is visible near the middle. Another method used by Carlyon produces the effect of double exposure, much like that achieved by layering two negatives in a photographic enlarger. He created this effect by running a previously copied image through the photocopier a second time so that one image is copied over another. This method of seeking unintended consequences was also used in *Untitled Book No. 2* (1992). Here, Carlyon took the title page of *The Kid Sister: The Winner*, an adult comic, and layered it onto itself while also shifting the page during the

recopying process.<sup>62</sup> The result is something akin to looking through two unaligned transparencies in which images, dialogue, and sequences of scenes are jumbled, thus interrupting the flow of time and producing a kind of visual stutter. A more controlled, systematic use of chance was employed in the Surge Series (p. 68). To create this series of drawings, Carlyon attached the seven pages of a drawing book end-to-end and then carefully pulled the pages through the photocopier at a predetermined speed regulated by the tempo set on a metronome.<sup>63</sup>

### Drawing as Graphic Notation

By 1997, Carlyon had turned his attention once again to drawing, this time mainly using pigmented ink on parchment. Words also started to take on a more central role in his work, even serving as stand-ins for visual images. In the three-part series *Souvenir* (1998), the word MOUTH, printed in capital letters in a rather shaky hand, appears in each drawing. In *Souvenir I* (p. 77), MOUTH is written backwards, with the word CREAM superimposed in the same style. In *Souvenir II*, the word PLUG is

<sup>58</sup> John Cage and David Tudor concert program notes, Carlyon Archive folder titled "Bang Festival File." Carlyon recounted this story to the author on several occasions.

<sup>59</sup> Mary Flinn, "An Interview with Richard Carlyon," pp. 3, 5.

<sup>60</sup> For the reaction of French composer Pierre Boulez to Cage's chance procedures, see Herbert Lindenberger, "Regulated Anarchy: The *Européras* and the Aesthetics of Opera," in *John Cage*, edited by Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 156-57 and 165, n. 21. For more on Cage's radicalism in art, see my review, "John Cage," *Artforum* (September 1990), pp. 163-64.

<sup>61</sup> Carlyon did several series of erotic works; some images were taken from Donald H. Gilmore, PhD, *Sex in Comics: A History of the Eight Pagers* (San Diego: Greenleaf Classics, Inc., 1971) and from various magazine sources and sex manuals.

<sup>62</sup> *The Kid Sister, The Winner* was photocopied from Donald H. Gilmore, PhD, *Sex In Comics*, p. 28.

<sup>63</sup> See Paul Ryan, "Richmond," p. 41.



<sup>64</sup> The occasion for the interview was his exhibition *Richard Carlyon: Selected Paintings and Drawings 1981–2005* at the Reynolds Gallery in Richmond. See Pete Humes, “Leader of the Pack,” p. 1. Ironically, Cage also found the chance system a time-consuming way to generate numbers, so eventually he turned to a computer-generated list of random numbers. Carlyon described these procedures as follows: “...numerical systems are used to determine in advance of actually making a drawing the size, scale, proportions, sequence, duration, and placement of each of its visual components. The chance-derived components are then plotted and drawn on a sheet of ruled graph paper which then serves as a model for the final drawing on parchment paper. In most instances, the final drawing is many times larger than the size of its working model. In addition to chance, the processes of randomness, automatism, and improvisation play an active role in the development of a drawing....” See Carlyon Archive folder titled “‘Citings: Recent Drawings,’ Gallery Talk Notes, Hunt Gallery, Mary Baldwin College,” 1999.

<sup>65</sup> *missaid #2* and *missaid #3* are reproduced in Sauer, *Notations* 21, p. 289.

<sup>66</sup> Kennedy Center Playbill, Carlyon Archive folder titled “There Then Now.” For Carlyon’s discussion of *Their Then Now*, see Mary Flinn, “An Interview with Richard Carlyon,” p. 4 of transcript.

written over MOUTH. And in *Souvenir III*, the word CREAM is written over MOUTH, but the letters R, A, and M are written upside down, making the words “hard to bite,” as graffiti artists would say, or difficult to decipher. These manipulations result in a kind of cipher that the viewer must decode as Carlyon again compels concentrated attention on the work.

Carlyon’s drawings on parchment become more elaborate with the inclusion of sign-language symbols, narratives, and appropriated imagery. In *Citing V: guilty pleasures. As shown* (1998, p. 77), not only does the title have a strange syntax, thereby calling attention to itself, but a story about having sex with a musician also unfolds rather haltingly since the letters of words are unevenly spaced, making it difficult to read the text. To complicate matters, this text is overlaid with drawings of the lower section of Duchamp’s *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*. The literary and visual puns and innuendoes evoked by the text and these details are, of course, intentional.

In a 2005 interview, Carlyon discussed the various chance procedures he used in the five drawings that comprise the series *Citing*. According to Peter Humes, who conducted the interview, “Carlyon determined each drawing’s subject matter by chance. He organized a system of 20 boxes of image clippings and [outlined] grids on each page. Both were numbered. What went where depended on a roll of three dice. ‘It takes forever to do,’ Carlyon said, ‘I have no idea how it’s going to end up.’”<sup>64</sup> What he describes is very much like the system that Ray Kass described a decade earlier in the catalogue for the Cage watercolor exhibition at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Yet Carlyon’s drawings look nothing like Cage’s watercolors. This is the beauty of the chance system when used by an intelligent, creative artist like Carlyon. When the right questions are asked of chance, the mind is opened to new possibilities that are then manifested in surprising ways in the work of art. Chance is a means of circumventing the artist’s own aesthetic predilections and biases in favor of something unexpected and previously unimagined.

Carlyon retired from Virginia Commonwealth University in 1996, becoming Professor Emeritus. However, he continued to work and to maintain a meticulous studio in which there was a place for everything — rows of brushes of various sizes neatly hung on nails, rows of scissors, tubes of paint carefully stacked in compartments, shelves with his favorite books, music, and movies. This setting was less an indication of a tidy mind than of an orderly mind prepared for the day’s work. Though the Korean War and military service had disrupted his hopes of a career as a dancer nearly fifty years earlier, Carlyon never lost his interest in dance. In 2000, he was awarded a grant from the Virginia Commission for the Arts to visit the Martha Graham Trust in New York City. His intent, realized in a series of 19 preliminary sketches titled *Followings: from above, so below, An Ensemble of Dance Maps* (p. 69), was to view rehearsal films in order to make drawings based on the choreographic moves of the dancers. In 2003, Carlyon completed a series of three drawings titled *missaid* (p. 70), in which he explored how language, sound, and movement relate to visual expression.<sup>65</sup> And on 31 March 2004, the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., presented the premiere of choreographer Laura Schandelman’s dance, *Their Then Now / Doin’ The Shorty George*, which was inspired by her uncle’s video, *Their Then Now* (2002). In the video, through his editing process, Carlyon had re-choreographed the dance scene *Doin’ the Shorty George* performed by Fred Astaire and Rita Hayworth in the film *You Were Never Lovelier* (Columbia Pictures, 1942); Schandelman based her footwork on the movement that resulted.<sup>66</sup>

Looking back over the years, one can only regret that Carlyon’s work wasn’t exhibited more often and more widely, which it certainly deserved. Hopefully, this retrospective will begin to rectify that oversight. In a sense, though, this situation is not all that surprising. Carlyon came to art at a time when artists were preoccupied more with making work than with establishing careers. This is not to suggest that he didn’t have commercial success, or that he was opposed to it; commercial success was just never a factor shaping his art or his studio practice. Carlyon was certainly aware of

Taking a bow after the performance "An Evening with Laura Schandelmeier," Kennedy Center Millennium Stage, Washington, D.C., January 2004. Left to right: Richard Carlyon, Clara Gibson Maxwell, Laura Schandelmeier, Eleanor Ruffy, and Reed Robins.



what was fashionable in the galleries, but he preferred to let his work remain in the studio rather than comply with the demands of the market. There simply was no compromising on this issue.

Such indifference may seem odd to an art world in which students are encouraged to get gallery representation even before they complete their graduate studies. Today it seems that being an artist has become another career-centered activity defined more by commercial success than by the artistic quality of the work. The notion that the artist must mature by spending time engaged with the world of real, lived experience in order to make meaningful art seems less and less relevant — even a quaint, outmoded idea in a culture preoccupied

with its own notoriety and financial success. Yet Carlyon never wavered in his commitment to art, that art came above all else, no matter what the price. His last exhibition, *Selected Paintings and Drawings, 1981–2005*, opened at the Reynolds Gallery in Richmond in November 2005 and closed in January 2006. He died shortly thereafter of cancer, concluding an extraordinary life in art. To the end, he held fast to the belief that art was of such importance that there was no substitute for trying to make the best art that he possibly could. Carlyon was sustained in this endeavor over many early years of struggle by the knowledge that art is a worthwhile endeavor of the most profound kind: able to touch something deep within the human soul, it is a reaffirmation of our basic humanity.

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