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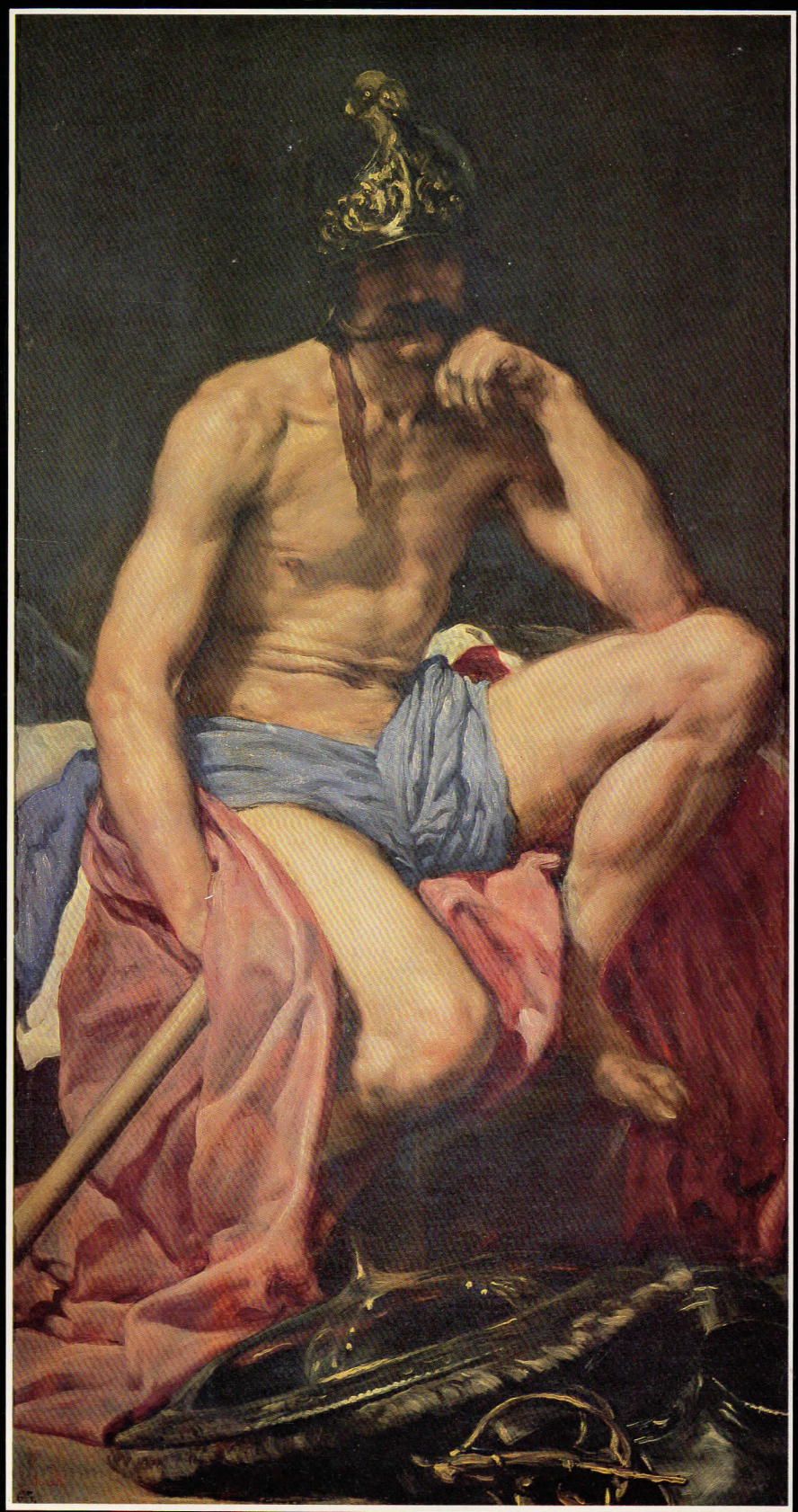

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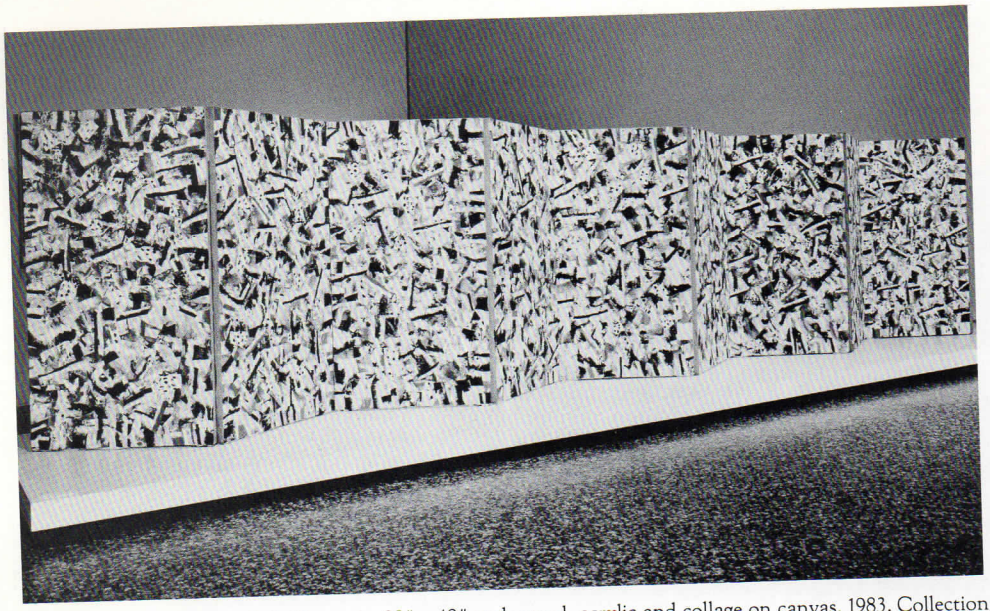

Joseph Glasco, *Screen*, 2-sided, 10 panels, 88″ × 48″ each panel, acrylic and collage on canvas, 1983. Collection Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. photo: Paul Hester.

was more than ever aware that we all must bring personal histories to our meetings with art. These histories provide us with starting points. They also limit the directions our responses can take. To make sense of what follows, bear in mind that the Manhattan art world serves as the daily backdrop to my thoughts about painting.

I don't propose to spend much time on the question of whether there is or is not a Houston School. I'm not convinced, even, that it helps much to talk of a New York School. The phrase is convenient but it encourages us to overlook profound differences between, say, Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, or Pollock and Barnett Newman. I don't see any convenience in grouping Houston painters under a Houston-School label, but then I'm not from Houston. It's enough for me to say that, from the perspective imposed by New York, the label is of no use.

Questions remain. Might a different grouping of Houston painters justify talking of a Houston School? Is there a school of Houston painters lurking out of sight, obscured by the inclusiveness of the "Fresh Paint" exhibition? Maybe. Maybe not. From my point of view, these questions have no interest. A New Yorker takes a national, sometimes an international, view of art. As a New Yorker who looks for contemporary painting's place in a centuries-old tradition, I don't care whether there is a Houston School. I don't care if there is a New York School. In our time, painters of note grapple with their medium and its history as individuals. Ultimately, squabbles about regional groupings are just regional squabbles.

"The Houston School" serves this show as a sub-title. The main title, "Fresh Paint," is clever and unfortunate. It implies that the Museum's exhibition stands opposed to *stale* paint—all the painting that is dull, superannuated, out-of-it. That sort of phrase-making promotes the present at the expense of the past. It encourages the shallow hope that we don't really need to bring an understanding of history to the experience of contemporary art. But no painting that counts as a painting exists only in the present. History saturates the medium. A serious painter works not with fresh, innocent paint (only graffiti writers do that), nor with stale paint, but—to speak metaphorically—with paint seasoned by a deep immersion in the past.

One of "Fresh Paint's" strongest works is Joseph Glasco's *Screen* (1983). Each side of its ten sections presents an allover field, an expanse of pictorial energy bounded only in a contingent way by the edges of the panel flooded by that energy. One side of every panel is dark: the night side. The other side belongs to a bright, even a harsh day, a realm of shard reds, yellows, and blues. Glasco's *Screen* confronts us with twenty allover fields, yet there's no need to focus on that precise sum—as there would be if this were a hard-edged, serial painting from the 1960s. Each of these fields flows into the next. *Screen* is a single field, its night and its day inflections of one another.

This painting is a brilliant variant on the allover field that appeared first in Jackson Pollock's drip paintings of 1947. Moving to Manhattan not long after that, Glasco made first-hand contact with what came to be known as the New York School. The point, I think, doesn't concern these "schools." It concerns the singular use Glasco makes of a possibility devised in post-war America and now legible throughout Western culture. Glasco's *Screen* has a quality rare in allover images. It is monumental.

Dick Wray also belongs to a New York School tradition we would do better to see as a national tradition. Wray is an Action Painter, like Willem de Kooning or Franz Kline. Like theirs, his sweeping gestures unsettle the structures of traditional composition without permitting them to collapse. An Action Painter comments on pictorial architecture by applying pressure to it. Wray applies those pressures with swashbuckling finesse. By the mid-1950s Action Painting's claims to large-scale emotions had inspired a degree of skepticism in Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and others. They—Johns, in particular—cooled off t Action Painter's gesture, and confined th imagery within tight boundaries. The iron of Pop Art followed, then the monochro canvases of the Minimalists.

Minimalism often meant impersonal smoo ness. Nonetheless, painterly texture survi in much monochrome painting, bringing a charge of emotions to a style routinely missed as overly cerebral. And representatio possibilities always hover nearby. I see C Stack's subtleties—some figurative, some no as her way of insisting that the slightest rip of texture has significance and sometimes power to generate a figure that stands a from the textural ground.

In Ron Hoover's paintings, fields of tex must coalesce to produce figures. In James tison's, figures invade the field. These pain all struggle to find coherence in the absenc traditional composition—the pictorial ch and balances that continue to give order t much contemporary work, including man the pictures in this exhibition. Allover provides a symbolic equivalent of a pecul American openness. The use a painter m of this openness suggests, again symbolica vision of the world and its possibilities. M artists in "Fresh Paint" turn the allover into a pulsating thicket of brushwork, a swa labyrinth filled with creatures difficult to tinguish from the field itself.

Whether birds or mammals or reptiles animals in John Alexander's paintings ar gular, like the marks the artist makes. Som those marks build figures, others establis ground, still others belong to figure and gr at once. Alexander's high-speed finesse (w recalls the jagged Action Painting of Mitchell) encourages an extended medit on contingency: in his art, a form's me depends on the focus it receives at thi ment; the next, the eye's focus may changed, causing meaning to shift along it. Alexander builds startling depths in fields. Kelly Alison makes hers flatter, ar creatures inhabiting them look less sp than Alexander's, more ferocious. The against the fields containing them, the of shallow space whose structure meshe their own.

Chuck Dugan sends centrifugal force ing through his fields of paint. The fo his *Sea Wolf*, a work included in "Fresh careen at high speed toward the edges canvas. The currents flowing through Lesser's *Crawfishermen in Battle* are less but insistent nonetheless. As figures t provisional shape or dissolve back in swirl of paint, Lesser questions his m workings. He charges the paint-fiel doubts, proposals, assertions. Even Poag's paintings, which define urban with a degree of certainty, the lively, l tangle of the field generates ambiguitie and far, solid and void, even natural natural impinge on one another. Eve these pictorial opposites pose allegorica tions about good and bad; or, as one titles puts it, *Fumes*; *Friends*, industri sions on one hand, and on the other of the air.