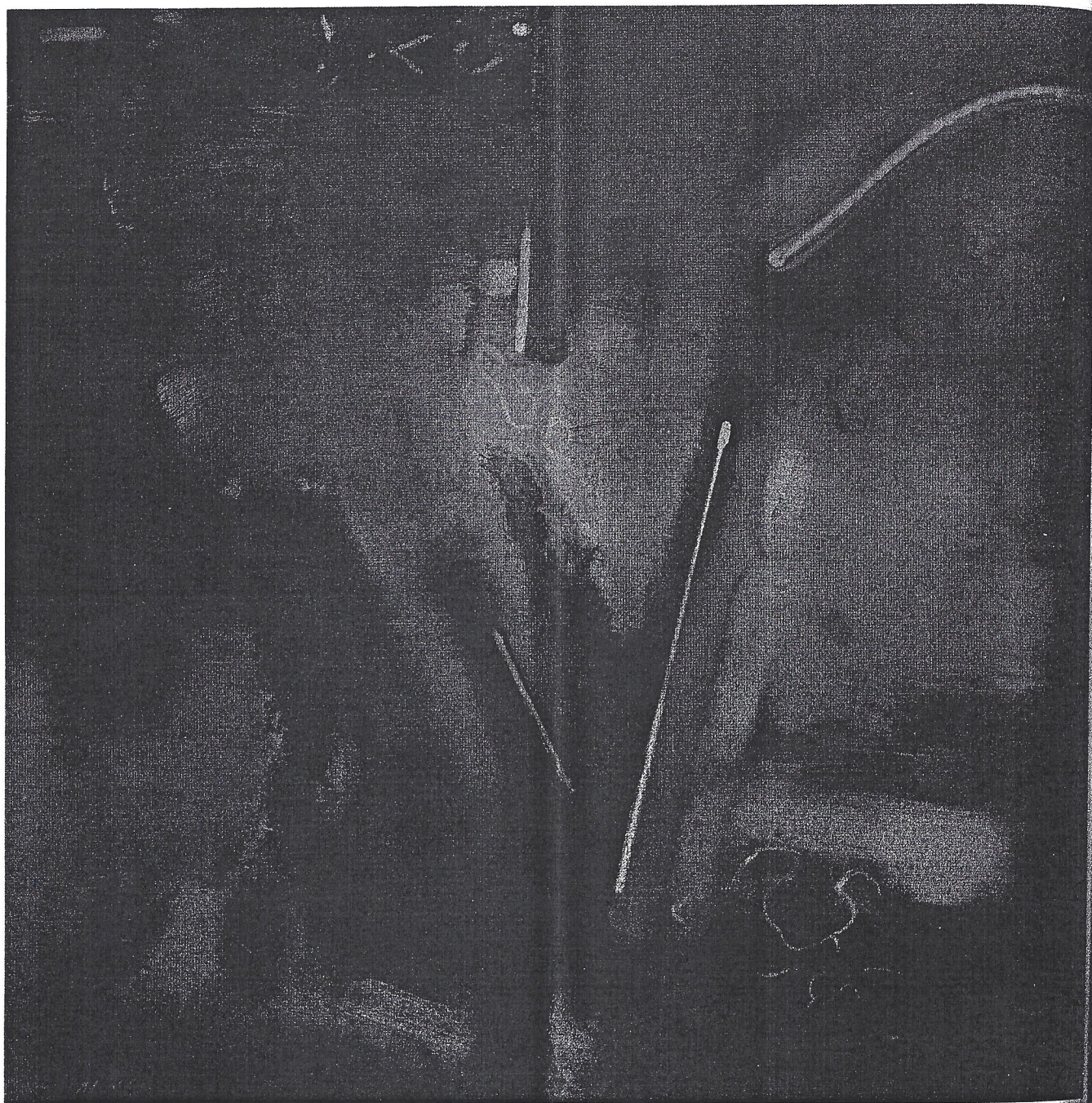


LUMINOUS SHROUDS: THE RECENT PAINTINGS OF STEPHEN GREENE

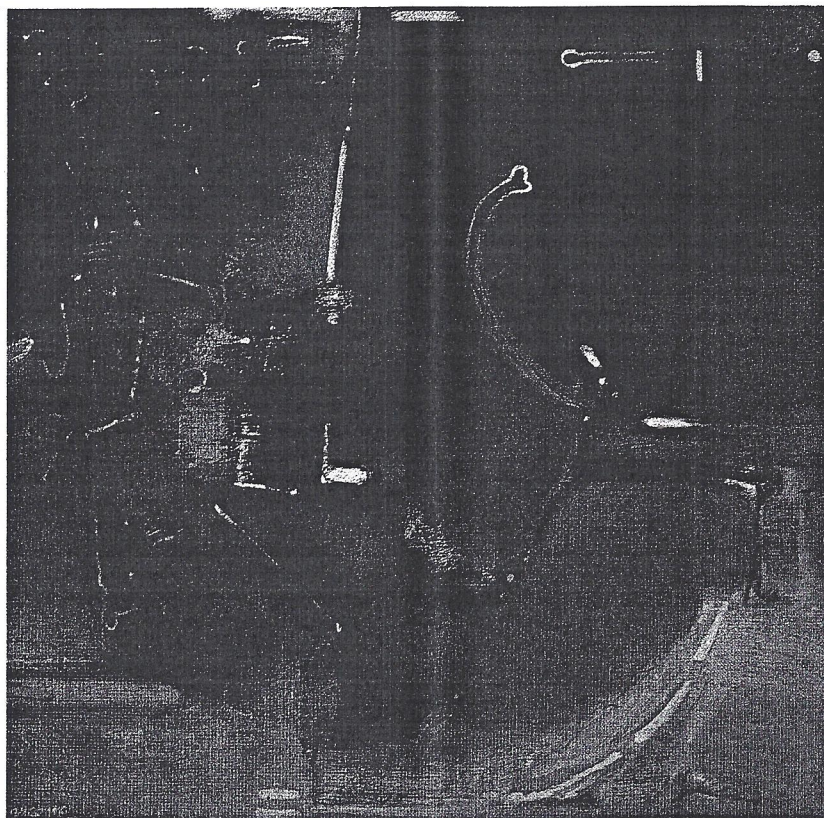
JOHN YAU

Stephen Greene's *Gardens of the Night* (1982-83) are grim and radiant.



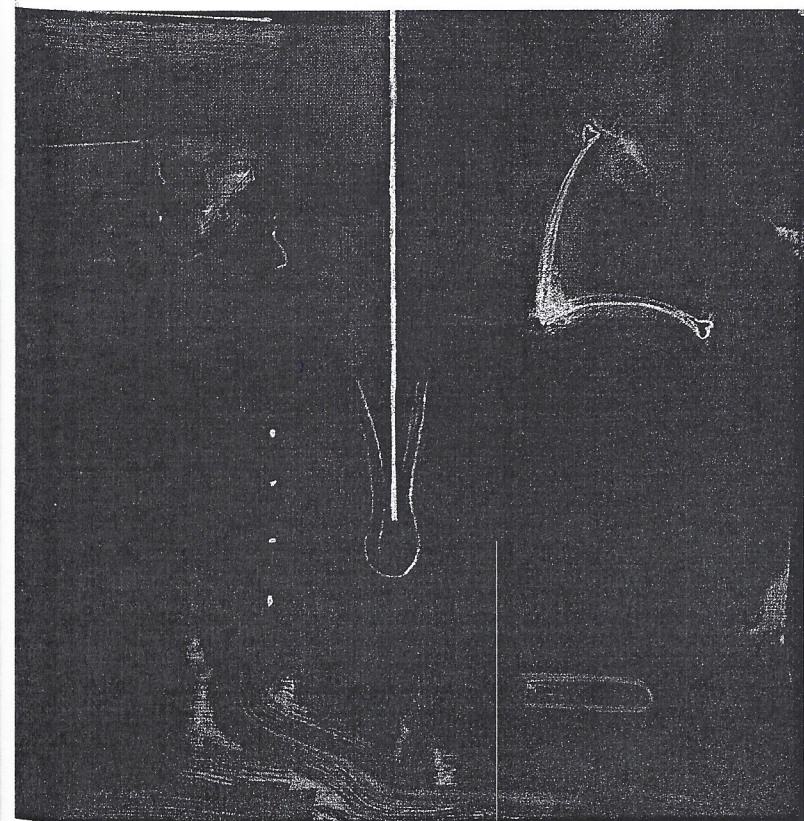
Stephen Greene, *Gardens of the Night #5*, 1982. *Oil on canvas, 30 x 30"*. Courtesy Marilyn Pearl Gallery.

Stephen Greene, Gardens of the Night #3, 1982. Oil on canvas, 30 x 30". Courtesy Marilyn Pearl Gallery.



At 65, Stephen Greene is an artist who exemplifies independence. Throughout the 36 years he has been exhibiting in New York, he has never been associated with a movement or a trend. At the same time, his paintings and drawings have been the subject of major shows at the Corcoran Gallery of Art (1963), the Edmonton Art Gallery (1972), the Akron Art Institute (1978),

and elsewhere. Like Giorgio Cavallon, the late Alfred Jensen, and Myron Stout (all members of an older generation), Greene's work has been both the subject of attention and the victim of neglect. It is a curious and even lonely position, but one wholly in keeping with his independence. Given the art world's lip service to individuality and its deeply ingrained preference for



Stephen Greene, Gardens of the Night #13, 1983. Oil on canvas, 50 x 50". Courtesy Marilyn Pearl Gallery.

trends, movements, and categorization, Greene may in fact be one of the last of his kind: someone who never tried to belong.

The paintings Greene exhibited in the late '40s and early '50s were influenced by Philip Guston (Greene was his student at Iowa and a friend throughout his life), Max Beckmann, and early Renaissance artists such as Giotto and Masaccio. At the time, Greene used very literal symbols; his paintings depict highly stylized figures within allegorical frameworks—images of crutches, crosses, ropes, and maimed figures populate the shallow space of his coldly confrontational canvases. Like Guston and Beckmann, Greene was and still is a pessimistic humanist.

What the early paintings clearly demonstrate is Greene's natural gift for drawing. In this regard, the body of drawings he has produced since the beginning of his career rank with the best done in the postwar period. When one realizes the important role drawing has always played in Greene's paintings, one senses why his abstract paintings have never received the attention they deserve. Throughout the '60s, for example, when drawing was considered a retrograde activity by many abstract artists and critics, Greene continued to have drawing play a major part in his work. His independence (it can also be read as stubbornness and integrity) may have cost him at that time of enthusiastic conformity, but I believe any proper reevaluation of the '60s will reveal Greene to be one of that period's most accomplished artists.

What mars Greene's early paintings (from the late '40s to the early '50s) is their insistence. As existential allegories they leave no room for the imagination (ours or the artist's) to enter into the painting. At the same time, this early conflict between pessimism and humanism, despair and desire is still central to Greene's approach. What have dropped away are the concrete images of suffering. In fact, it can be said of Greene that he has evolved slowly and steadily from a confrontational and insistent mode to a speculative and allusive one.

The change began to take place in 1953, while Greene was living in Italy on a Prix de Rome fellowship. Perhaps he realized his insistence and literalness circumscribed the possibility of growth. Or perhaps he began growing away from the grief and pessimism haunting many after the terrible disclosures of World War II. Whatever the reasons (and there are probably many), a change began to take place. The first signs were tentative. The evolution (which continues even now) was slow and steady.

Unlike Mark Rothko or Morris Louis, both of whom were at best pedestrian draftsmen, Greene's move into abstraction did not mean or require that he abandon drawing or his figurative inclinations. One does not feel that abstraction was a way for Greene to cover his faults. Rather, it was a way for him to release his imagination.

At first, Greene's figures lost their imprisoning outlines. Eventually they were submerged into the increasingly atmospheric grounds. By the early '60s they were presences rather than facts. Over the last decade these presences have become increasingly fragmented and far less referential. At the same time, Greene has continually developed his expressive use of color.

Sometimes, Greene applies a thin layer of oil paint over a lighter ground to suggest a radiant light emanating from behind an atmospheric veil. At other times the modulated or blended grounds have been delicately scumbled so that whatever drawing was there (image of a bone-like shape, say) has been all but effaced. Recent series of paintings such as *Gardens of the Night* have that faded yet luminous look we associate with the early Renaissance and Byzantine paintings we can see in the

Metropolitan or the National Gallery, and that Greene would have seen in his travels through Italy. Greene is not only still a pessimistic humanist, but he is also a religious artist. The visual dislocations caused by his suggestion of shifting planes, atmospheric and foreboding fields, disruptive lines, and imaginary spaces are disquieting and allusive. They suggest an irresolvable conflict without ever telling a story.

Certainly, it is clear why Greene's paintings never fit in and have often been overlooked. In the successive ages of Pop Art, Minimalism, Color Field, Pattern and Decoration, and now New Image and Neo-Expressionism, Greene's work was, and is, too introspective for those who desire(d) immediacy and entertainment. A deeply meditative artist, his allusive paintings are too difficult for generations of viewers growing up on the "quick read" and television.

The most recent group of paintings is entitled *Gardens of the Night*. While the title refers to the conjunction of dreams and landscape, irrationality and order, all the paintings are square rather than horizontal or vertical in format. By employing a square (or neutral) format, Greene subtly reinforces the fact that these are metaphysical landscapes rather than actual ones. In addition, the possibility that these paintings are some kind of fence-sitting hybrid of figuration and abstraction is also removed. At the same time, the paintings are either 30 by 30 inches or 50 by 50 inches. In other words, the paintings are not so large as to overwhelm or envelop the viewer. Greene does not resort to a theatrical scale or a more familiar format as an aid. He does not need to.

The predominant colors are various shades of red, blue, pink, white, purple, gray, and green. They are not naturalistic in their reference. The paint ranges from thin translucent layers of oil to undiluted applications of color, often on the same canvas. The surface can be scumbled to the point where it resembles an X-ray, scraped so that various layers of delicately applied color are revealed, atmospheric or thin and brushy. It is as if these paintings are palimpsests. Yet rather than building up layer after layer, they seem to have been scraped down to what is finally irremovable—an atmospheric field of ghostly images. They might look as if they have been around a long time, but they do not remind one of antiques. What is unnerving in fact is their freshness.

Most often the lines come in from the sides, pressing one might say with an emotional urgency toward the center. The viewer is made unavoidably aware of the ambiguous space suggested by the atmospheric ground located at or near the center. Other lines, usually curvilinear, are distributed across the surface. These lines are at time submerged into the grounds, seemingly buried beneath them, or firmly resting on top. An atmospheric ground of dark colors can be both activated and disrupted by a thick squiggle of bright color. In their bone-like outlines, the drawing suggests that these paintings are a reliquary.

Gardens of the Night are as mysterious, eerie, and disquieting as the Shroud of Turin. It is as if all that remains of Greene's earlier figurative allegories are these faded fields of color, these ghostly records. Their fragmented shapes, shifting planes, and smoky grounds suggest an intense, inescapable isolation. At 65, Greene is clearly producing some of the strongest paintings of his career. What they confront is Greene's own past and future. If the specter of death hangs over these paintings, then one should be reminded of the late triumphs of such independently minded artists as Philip Guston, Wallace Stegans, and Beethoven. More recently one thinks of Beckett. It is in their company that Stephen Greene belongs. Like them, his *Gardens of the Night* are grim and radiant.

