



# Stephen Greene:

FRONT COVER:

*Light of Memory #7*, 1993

Oil on linen

22 x 32 in.

The Stephen Greene Foundation



# Painter and Mentor

Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts

20 September 2003 through 4 January 2004

This exhibition has been generously funded by an anonymous donor and the Winton Family Exhibition Fund.

## Remembering Stephen Greene

Throughout his long life as a painter, Stephen Greene (1917-1999) was always very much his own man—hard to classify, idiosyncratic, and (as Hans Hofmann’s wife is supposed to have described her husband) “an embodiment of contradiction.” He was a committed abstract painter who courted evocative, troubling references; a recorder of delirium worlds that flicker between concealment and revelation. A superb draughtsman, Greene could allude, in a single image, to the precision of mechanical drawing and the mystery of anatomical illustration. An eccentric colorist with a ravishing touch, he could extract the maximum expressive force from the physical character of his materials; yet he did so without ever overwhelming the power of the fragmented images that emerge, now more legibly, now less,

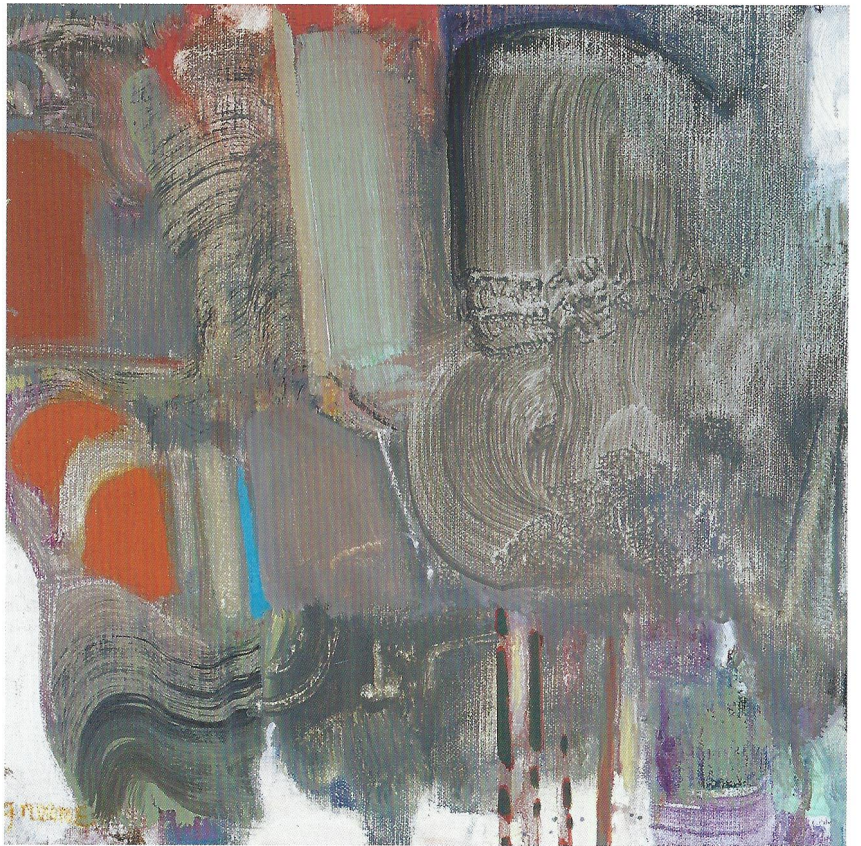
amid the seas and washes of moody paint, like not-quite conscious, brooding thoughts. There is always a sense that no matter how satisfying the picture is as an abstraction, the disturbing rituals of Greene's earliest figurative paintings – the indeterminate, claustrophobic spaces populated by ravaged, existential figures – are being reenacted on a subliminal level by his nameless sweeps and blocks of paint, his tense arcs of line and stutters of the brush. The territory Greene explored was unmapped, wholly personal, and disorienting. Meaning seems to struggle to the surface through brushy, painterly evocations of dense atmosphere, yet just when you think you have deciphered one of Greene's suggestive dramas, it slips away from you. Pictorial events are often pushed to the edges of the canvas or the sheet of paper, so that the most telling incident, the one that will make everything else intelligible, seems to occur just beyond the confines of what can be seen.

In his last decade, Greene produced two groups of works, on canvas and on paper, that seem at once to sum up the concerns of a lifetime and explore new possibilities. Beginning in 1994, he started, virtually for the first time, to paint very small canvases. These intimate pictures allowed him to exploit fully his ability to make every gesture, every touch of the brush, a carrier of intense emotion and to make modulations of tone and light into metaphors for feeling. A selection of these intense, concentrated paintings, from such series as the *Pleasure Domes*, (1994), *Moreau's Garden*, (1994 and 1996), and *3 A.M.*, (1995),

are at the core of this exhibition, along with some of the slightly larger but no less intimate works executed from 1992 on. These canvases, in turn, provide a context for Greene's last, remarkable series of works on paper. In 1999, the year of his death, the painter, for whom drawing had always been enormously important, returned to working on paper after an unusually long four-year break. The result was the sixteen *Labyrinths*, here exhibited together for the first time. In these extraordinary meditations on a lifetime of thinking and feeling deeply, and of making art, Greene brought to bear everything he knew about touch, surface, line, image, and more. He appears to have mined the furthest, most poetic, and perhaps darkest reaches of his experience.

For much of his working life, Greene's tacit assertion of the potency of narrative, however obscure or private, set him apart from the majority of his near-contemporaries, who were largely dedicated to exploring—variously—the permutations of lush, disembodied color, economical structure, dispassionate surfaces, and/or the earmarks of popular culture, without invoking psychological associations. (Greene was further set apart by his belonging to an intermediate generation; born in 1917, he was more than a decade younger than most of the Abstract Expressionists and at least five years older than most of the Color Field painters, the Minimalists, or the Pop artists; his closest contemporaries among his fellow New York painters are, interestingly enough, Robert Motherwell, born 1915, and Jacob Lawrence,

*Moreau's Garden #8*, 1994  
Oil on linen  
12 x 12 in.  
Estate of Stephen Greene





born 1917.) Today however, Greene's approach has a new context. Not only do the boundaries between abstraction and reference seem more fluid, generally, but the skulls and thigh bones, the crutches, ladders, and unwholesome flowers that haunted Greene's paintings from the 1950s on not only seem to anticipate imagery prevalent in the work of younger artists, but also offer a corrective to the often arbitrary way the younger generation makes use of such references. Greene's allusions, for all their ambiguity, are unmistakably his; they stand for deep, private feelings, not for offhand appropriation.

Yet if Greene's work seems to resonate with that of far younger painters, it is not surprising. Throughout his life, he was a valued teacher and mentor to many artists of many different generations. Some of these younger colleagues also became his close friends. Works by six of these—each of whom got to know Greene at a different time and through different circumstances—are exhibited as homage to their friend. They are: Frank Stella, who was Greene's student at Princeton in the 1950s, Cornelia Foss, who studied with him when she was a child in St. Louis, Jake Berthot, who got to know Greene as a colleague at Pratt in the early 1960s, Andy Jansons and Porfirio Di Donna, both students of his at Columbia in the mid-1960s, and Lisa Yuskavage, who encountered Greene at Tyler School of Art in the 1980s. What is notable is the sheer diversity of their approaches, from perceptual realism, to a near-fantastic, heightened naturalism, to improvisational abstraction, vivid evidence of



---

Greene's brilliance as a teacher and mentor. His own sympathy was provoked by serious, engaged aesthetic ambition, no matter what form it took, and he readily transmitted a willingness to explore even unlikely directions to many of the artists with whom he was close.

Not long ago, I was reminiscing about Steve Greene with Jake Berthot. "We used to talk about art for hours," he said. "I can't tell you what we said, but it was very important to me, to how I thought about myself as an artist, to talk with someone who was so passionate about painting." We spoke of Steve's manner, of his absorption in his work, his notable self-deprecation, his boundless generosity as a friend, his shyness. "A combination of intensity, reticence, and anxiety," I said. "That's it," Jake said. "And that could describe his work, too." I would add, as well, three more descriptive words to characterize Greene's paintings and drawings: "power, mystery, and great beauty."

Karen Wilkin

New York, August 2003