



Ron Gorchov, Installation view, Fischbach Gallery, New York, 1975

SHAPE AND FORM IN RON GORCHOV'S PAINTING

Morris Kearse

Shape is an obvious issue in Ron Gorchov's paintings. The characteristic "saddle" form of his stretched canvases presents a surface slightly convex at top and bottom and concave at left and right. The tensions of this bowed conformation are structurally reinforced by metal rods attached to the back. The canvas is fastened to the stretcher by staples visible along the perimeter. The resulting construction is deceptively simple. Its slow-curving surface, emerging at top and bottom while retreating on both sides, sweeps into actual space, stretching the very notion of the picture "plane."

Gorchov, born in Chicago in 1930 and now living in SoHo, found himself especially attracted to such curvy forms when they appeared repeatedly in his earlier, more representational, work. Now his fascination with this shape reveals itself in the configuration of the actual canvas.

When in the 1960s the validity and future of painting were called into question, Gorchov set out to resolve the uncertainty in his own way. He made his first saddle-shaped canvas in 1967. It argues, as it were, with flatness, and when placed on an inevitably flat wall it establishes an emphatic presence. This for Gorchov has proven a vehicle with which he is both comfortable and adept.

The canvases range considerably in size. Gorchov finds them self-scaling, and determines their concavities and convexities intuitively rather than mathematically. As size increases, the accent of the curvature decreases proportionately. Larger paintings have gentler curves. If the smaller works were somehow blown up to approximate the dimensions of the bigger pieces, their curves would protrude much more deeply into the surrounding space.

Gorchov's canvases are usually covered with a white primer and two subsequent layers of paint. Through the generous use of turpentine and little binder, the first achieves a relatively smooth, serene cover. The second has much fuller bodied pigment, varyingly opaque but never completely obscuring all evidence of the layer underneath. These undercoats are an integral part of the work, the elusive source of an internal glow which gives the surface a luminous quality.

Gorchov's recurring symmetrical pairs of forms are centered in this rich field of paint, colored differently from the rest of the canvas and varying in shape from painting to painting. The artist simply calls them "marks," denying them more specific connotations. Often they are narrow vertical poles, veering left or right. Sometimes they have jagged or undulating edges. In other instances they are ovoid or almost

circular. Always they approximate mirror images of each other, each positioned the same distance from the edges of the canvas and from the center. The canvas is thereby both shaped and painted symmetrically, its imagery resembling an inkblot doubled by folding a sheet of paper in half.

Assertive as they may be as focal points, these marks are neither the subject nor object of Gorchov's painting. The surrounding field does not exist solely as a setting for their display, nor are they the index to some esoteric iconography. They are sights of reference which help provide a context for viewing the whole work. As such, they establish an influential relationship between their own color and the color field, between their own determinate forms and their nebulous environment, their own shapes and the shape of the entire surface. They interact with each other and with the perimeter of the canvas while also dividing the painting into two equal parts.

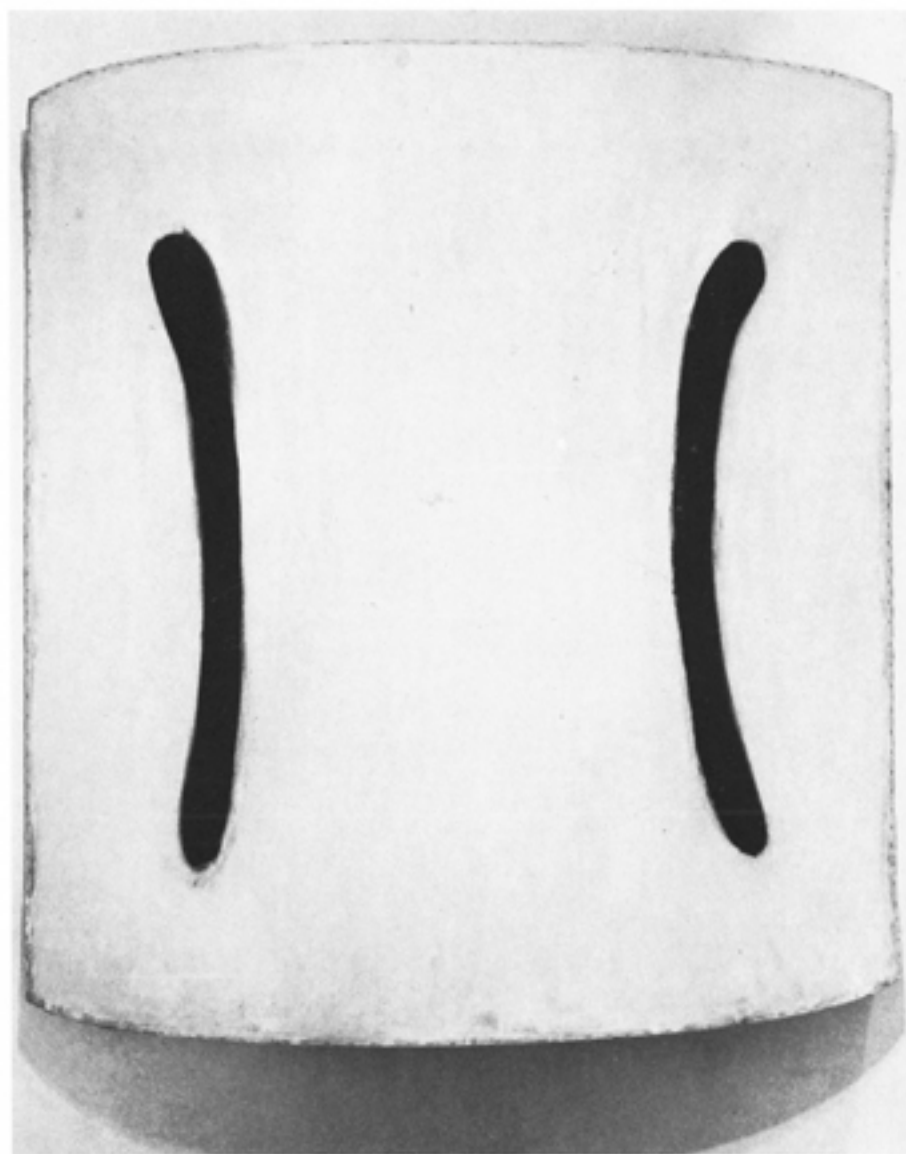
Occasionally one can spot traces of the artist's efforts to adjust the dimensions and configurations of the doubled motif. In other paintings, however, they assert themselves boldly and decisively. Usually they

are more opaque than the rest of the canvas—less penetrable, not as vulnerable, exposing and revealing less underpainting. The marks seem both to hover over and perforate the surface. The conventional tendency would be to discuss this kind of relationship in terms of figure versus ground or "positive" versus "negative" space, but these forms defy that simplification. They fluctuate between advance and retreat, emerging from and withdrawing behind the diffuse, atmospheric color field. There is no sense of solid fusion between the two, but rather a shifting disjunction which establishes a peculiar tension.

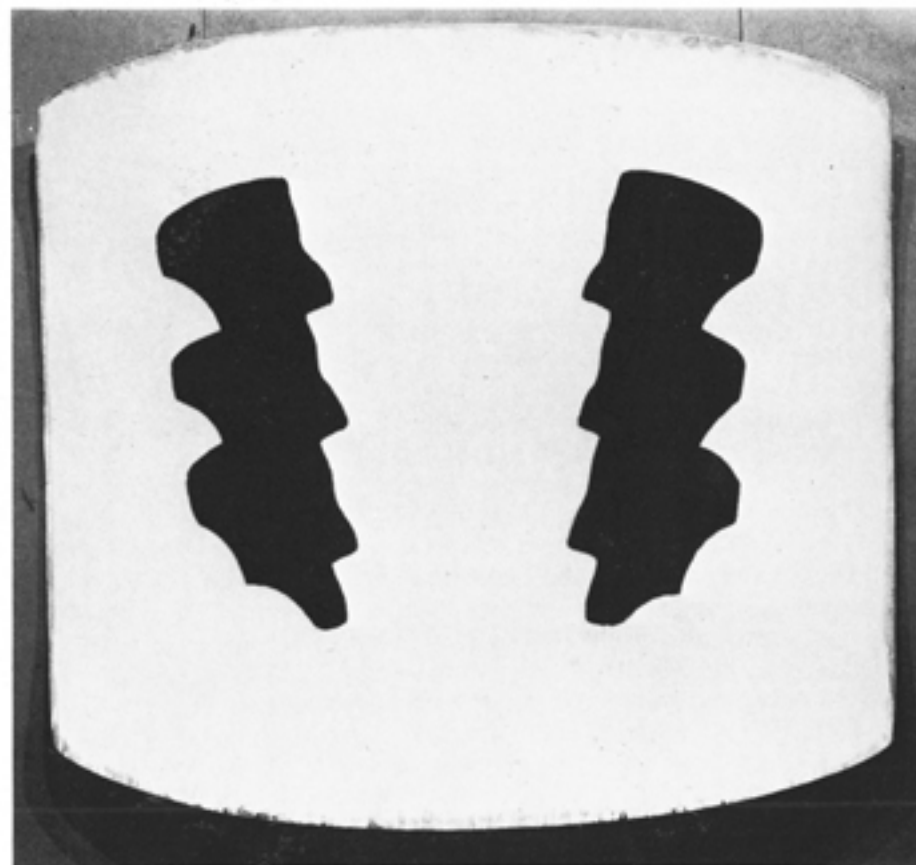
If these observations seem "anti-modernist," defying the cherished integrity of the picture surface, there is reason for that. Gorchov does not use paint as an illusionary artifice, but neither does he attempt to conceal allusions to depth implied by the multiple layers in his work. The glimmering depths which stir beneath his surfaces are the result of his unsuppressed but rich underpainting. Gorchov's works deal with *relief* on two levels: one implied by the actual layers of paint, the other encountered by the canvas itself as its curved surface protrudes into the room.

Gorchov is a painterly painter, and the texture and tactile qualities of his medium always remain at hand, never disguised or subjugated. He sticks to traditional oil exclusively, and reinforces his intimacy with the pigmental substance itself by grinding the pigments in linseed oil by hand before each use. "I don't think in terms of color," says the artist, "I think in terms of pigment."

Gorchov's handling of color reveals the pleasure he derives from the physicality of paint. Contemplation of the initially applied pigment, which may be inspired externally or emerge from his subconscious, generates one reaction which determines the next. Likewise, the marks derive their pigmentation from the context established by the colors already put down. In this way a whole painting comes into being. Gorchov has developed, established and reiterated a very strict format in his work, yet he never predetermines exactly what the finished painting will be. The appeal of his art rests partly on the combinations which unaccountably arise after his "given" and "accountable" concerns have been considered and fulfilled. The common, basic features of the human face



Ron Gorchov, *Promise*, 1972, o/c, 85 x 77" (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum).



Ron Gorchov, *Cold Passion*, 1975, o/c, 63 x 75"

exemplify how relatively subtle differences in a fundamentally symmetrical structure can supply virtually infinite possibilities for variation. Likewise, Gorchov conjures up a formidable diversity within his own established framework.

Gorchov uses a brush or spatula to apply his paint in vertical strokes, which creates minimal disturbances in their configurations. No attempt is made to conceal the obvious marks of the tool, which remain as rugged testimony to the working process and to the presence of the artist's role as brush-wielder and paint-manipulator. Certainly there are recognizable affinities with pre-'60s New York School concerns in this kind of work. But now, long after, Gorchov is able to draw on some of its discoveries without confining himself to its scope.

As our eyes move across the gentle curvature of Gorchov's surfaces we take in the color field—now lighter, now firmer; cooler here, warmer there—revealing, from time to time, glimpses of underpaint, elusive tonalities weaving in and out. While we scan the crescendos and diminuendos of light and color the uneven brushstrokes indicate their own varying pressures and vertical rhythms. This is not the vaporous color field of Olitski, nor does it radiate like Rothko's. It is contained by a much more solid and material ground, confined by the brushstrokes and substance of the paint. The undercoats usually emerge unobscured at the very edges, revealing along the perimeter what is only implied and faintly visible in the rest of the surface. This seems to serve as a reminder that "it all begins and ends here," that, in other words, there are finite limits to this object.

One realizes that this filmy field, which might first have seemed vague or very general, is filled with a variety of ephemeral maskings. It hovers between the conclusive and the inconclusive, as if dwelling in the suspenseful span between the "tick" and the "tock."

But then the actual motif "marks" intrude upon such elusive reverie. Our perception, once sensitized to the finer gradations in the amorphous field, shifts gears as it collides with the edges of these assertive shapes. Whereas the field is relatively open and diffuse, its boundaries determined only by the perimeter of the canvas, the marks are closed, complete shapes. As such they have more an "object" association that is not as readily ascribable to the field. They confront the viewer with their elementary character, as configurations, articulating focal points from which a certain energy seems to radiate. The power of these shapes derives from the direct contrast between their rudimentary but determinate form and the nebulous expanse of pigment with which they so intimately share the surface. This contrast evokes a certain tension, as well as reminiscences of counterplays and disparities found even in nature.

Gorchov's paintings easily muster primitive associations and emotional reactions. However, his work constitutes its own fact and does not seem to represent some mysterious code waiting to be deciphered, nor is it intentionally or self-consciously metaphorical. Hans Hofmann reminded us:

There are two kinds of reality: physical reality, apprehended by the senses, and spiritual reality, created emotionally and

intellectually by the conscious or subconscious powers of the mind.¹

Gorchov's art deals with both of these "realities."

Forms themselves are a natural language, inspiring intuitive responses which stem from basic feelings separate from learned associations. Inevitably they will invite multiple interpretations regardless of the artist's intention (or lack of it). According to C.J. Ducasse:

... the individual psychological constitution of persons other than the artist who may contemplate his work is one of the variables that determine whether the feelings those persons then experience are or are not the same as the feelings the artist intended the object he has created to express. Evidently the activity of the artist as artist terminates with his creation of the work of art.²

Like the bilaterally symmetrical inkblots developed by the Swiss psychiatrist Herman Rorschach around 1910, the "marks" on Gorchov's canvases are ambiguous, undeveloped forms without specified or implied intrinsic connotations. No artist, however unhappy with the thought of anti-modernist or retro-grade associations being projected upon his work, can really prevent them. Sophisticated viewers have long avoided submitting to the associative connections that abstract imagery may spontaneously summon forth. In the instance of Gorchov's paintings, however, it sometimes seems difficult to banish them. Consider Rothko's remark on the evocativeness of abstract shape:

They are organisms with volition and a passion for self-assertion. . . . They have no direct association with any particular visible experience, but in them one recognizes the principle and passion of organisms.³

Perhaps it is the forceful, primitive, organic quality of Gorchov's marks which evokes the feeling that they are autonomous entities charged with a contained energy. They confront us with their shape and pigmentation, yet are somehow inaccessible. They hover in and on the obscure depths of the field, as if to guard against the violation of its *sanctum sanctorum*, while they offer the viewer rather monastic possibilities of escape. We may submit ourselves before these "unknowns" in an attitude of contemplation. Gorchov's crude imagery does indicate a certain kind of feeling without defining imaginary worlds. He never goes so far as to suggest the "hybrid" qualities of some of Gorky's forms. Nevertheless, because of the elementary nature of their form his motifs do seem to elicit unprompted biomorphic associations.

These marks (as well as the shape of the canvas itself) seem to relate to nature, in part because they are unconfined by the hard-edged rules of Euclidean geometry imposed on most manmade objects. Like amoebae which have just become twins through fission, they reflect each other with the same imperfect symmetry evidenced in the two sides of the human body. And like human features, Gorchov's forms derive their complementary balance naturally and intuitively, not through calculated measuring. Considered broadly, this peculiar equilibrium applies to the balancing of the physical and psychological tensions at work in these paintings.

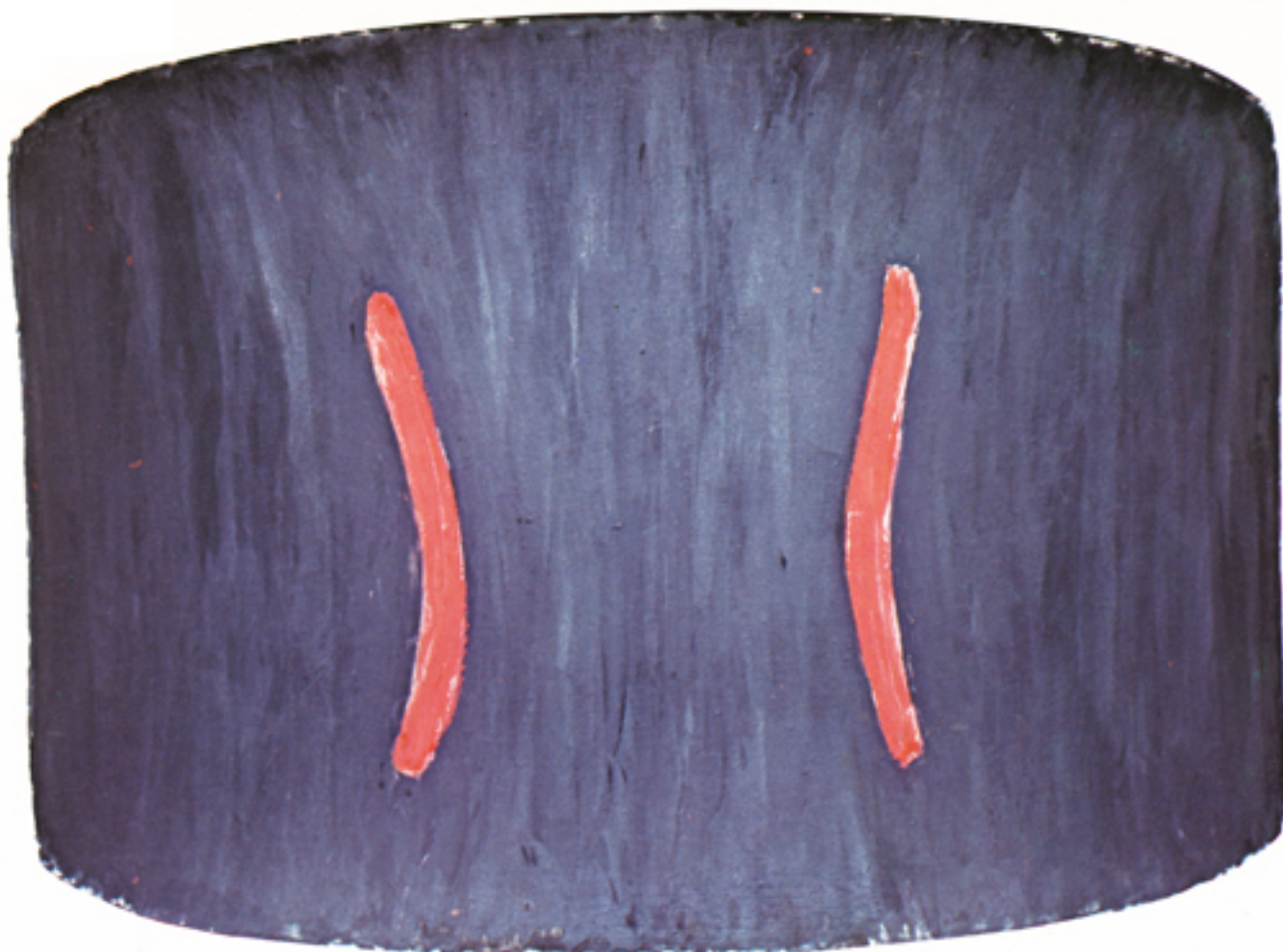
It should be noted that Gorchov frequently paints the left side of the canvas with his left hand and the right side with his right hand, although he is not otherwise ambidextrous. This practice is not employed for fetishistic reasons or to stress a particular point. Instead it constitutes a resort to a natural human symmetry which happens conveniently to respond to the symmetry of the canvas and its imagery.

Almost as readily as the marks evoke associations to amoebae, eyes, kidneys or other organic shapes, Gorchov's canvases themselves are often compared with primitive tribal art and artifacts, particularly shields and masks. Perhaps their forbidding, transcendent, ritualistic qualities inspire this comparison. The color field stirs from its depths, implying hidden levels, while his marks confront us boldly. There is a tense fluctuation between cryptic introversion and a defensive assertion. Moreover, masks and shields, besides sharing obvious affinities of shape with Gorchov's works, also connote other similarities. Shields are defensive, protective structures. As a verb, "to shield" means "to cut off from observation, hide, forbid, defend." Likewise, masks are covers which conceal or disguise, obscuring features and discouraging ready access to the wearer's identity, often implying some magical or religious significance as well. Comparably, Gorchov's paintings are in many ways protected environments, private and spiritual in their emotional and intellectual syntheses of relationships evident also in nature. However, they are not self-consciously mysterious, for their "primitivism" is neither affected nor superficial.

The shape of the canvas itself reinforces the sense of a kinship with nature, speaking more proximately of a natural architecture than of the rectilinear edges of the standard "picture plane." The studio in which an artist paints, the galleries and museums which may exhibit his work, even the bed in which he was conceived and the coffin in which he may be buried are all most likely rectangular in form. Ironically, the trees, unrefined metals and other raw materials from which these structures are fashioned are never rectangular in origin. The box is not a shape found in nature, but it proliferates almost everywhere that human civilization has left its mark.

As homo sapiens we stand approximately perpendicular to the ground, our bodies forming a 90-degree angle to the earth. Our skeletal structure and its reaction to gravity may help explain this fixation with forms created by right angles. Perhaps we unconsciously seek to refashion our own peculiar relationship to the earth because it is a juxtaposition we so readily understand through the inherent nature of our very beings. But Gorchov has pursued forms which imply a different kind of correspondence with the creative order. He speaks of the "pain" which exists for him in the corners of a rectangle and declares, "Corners are hard, harsh and difficult. It's hard to make anything as dramatic as a 90-degree angle. It is a severe reaction to gravity, and there are other ways to react to it." The saddle-shape is his solution: its corners are softer and more graceful.

One wants to see these paintings outside the typical sterile environment of the gallery or museum (which invariably exhibit them on flat, white walls in an

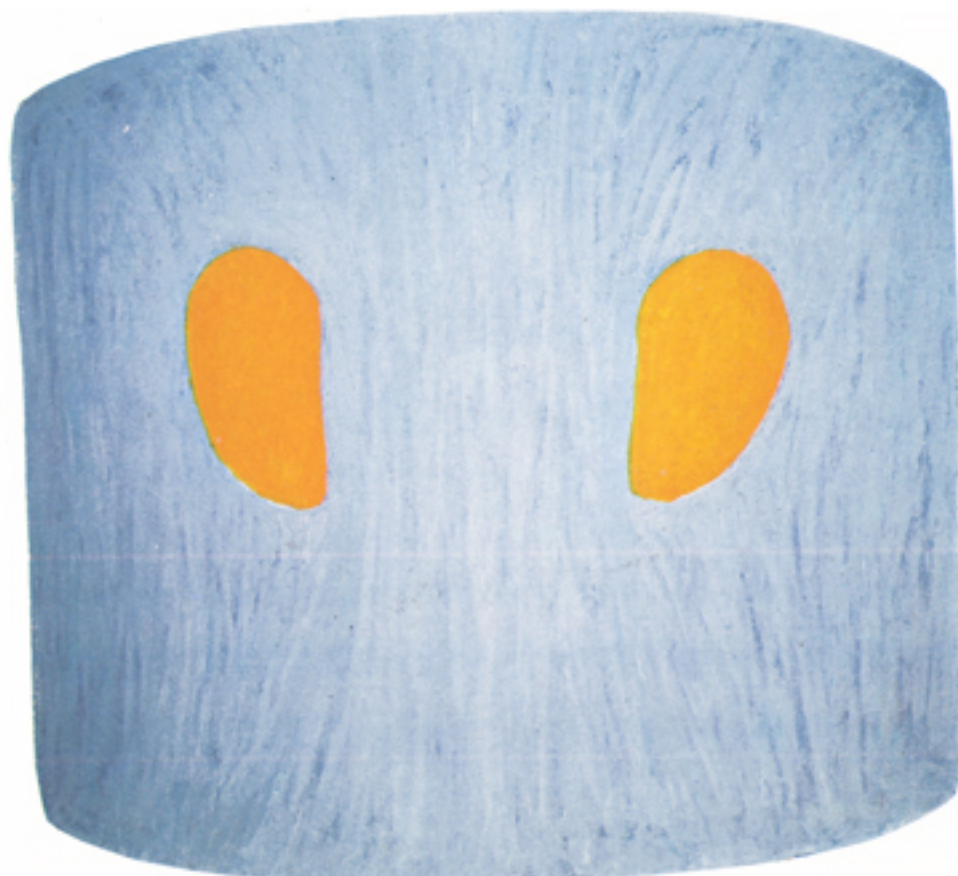


Ron Gorchov, *Spice of Life*, 1975, o/c, 51 x 76"

artificially even light), where perhaps their drama would seem much less contradictory. On the other hand, contradictions are an essential part of the art itself.

The history of painting is closely intertwined with the way painters have chosen to deal with depth and relief. Gorchov has discarded the shallow rectangular plane and Euclidian format which confined painting for centuries and has only fairly recently been reconsidered. With his compound curves the surface of the canvas itself moves beyond two dimensions, involving actual depth and relief. Yet one need only look at Gorchov's rich pigments and textures to be assured that his art is first and foremost *painting*.

His work serves as a reminder that painting and sculpture are among the last handmade objects in our culture. His execution is never too meticulous, the design never too sophisticated, the tonalities never too even. His use of paint is sensual and colorful, yet he is not content to nourish the viewer solely by exploiting the "delicious" physical attributes of the medium. Gorchov's is an original statement, and one which has the power to provoke torment and delight. ■



Ron Gorchov, *Comedy*, 1975, o/c, 63 x 75"

1. Hans Hofmann, *Search for the Real and Other Essays*, ed. S.T. Weeks and B.H. Hayes, Jr., trans. by Glenn Wessels, Andover, Mass., 1948.
2. Curt John Ducasse, "Art and the Language of the Emotions," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XXIII, p. 109.
3. Mark Rothko, "My Painting," *Possibilities I*, New York, Winter 1947-48, p. 84.