

ANNE TABACHNICK

Painting about Paintings



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Essay by April Kingsley

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### ANNE TABACHNICK: Learning from the Past

*I follow this example of El Greco which I have pinned to my wall, where he paints several nudes and unites them with nature. I am carrying this concept further in my own way. I am fusing the figure with the landscape. That is what I mean by my Human Horde paintings. I want to show the animal in mankind, how he is truly nature and therefore an integral part of the cosmos. - Anne Tabachnick <sup>1</sup>*

One of Anne Tabachnick's favorite artists, Henri Matisse, painted a copy of Jan Davidsz de Heem's *La Dessert* in 1893 when he was 23 and learning from it he painted the 17th century Dutch still life again in 1915 when he was 46, but this time he taught it the lessons he had learned from Cézanne and Cubism in the intervening years, and he made the painting his own.<sup>2</sup> Anne worked from many artists, learning from them in some instances, making them her own in others. This exhibition is largely focused on this more art historical aspect of Tabachnick's work in order to expand the appreciation of her accomplishment. While her love of Matisse's work may be easy to see, these other sources of inspiration are not so readily discernible.

Most artists have reproductions of art that has special meaning for them tacked somewhere on their studio walls.<sup>3</sup> But the number of artists who actually do work after other artists' work is a great deal smaller, being primarily confined to painters who love paint and painting (not all do) and conceptualists who love to quote other people's ideas. And doing so when you start out as an artist is far more common than doing it late in one's career, the way Anne did. Hans Hofmann, with whom she studied, taught her to revere the Cubists and the Fauves, and once she became part of the exciting world of Tenth Street New York in the 1950s, she embarked on a search for her (painting) self in the work of these modern masters and many older ones. By the mid-1960s she took Matisse head on, revising his *Red Studio* by putting herself, her paintings (and those of friends like Bob Thompson) on the walls, her worktable, and her model posed like his sculpture in his red room.<sup>4</sup> *Studio with Artist and Sitter* is homage as challenge.

In the 1960s, Byzantine Madonnas, Sienese Crucifixions and Renaissance altarpieces were treated to Cubist restructuring. Minimalist geometries, and loose expressionistic paint handling.<sup>5</sup> Anne learned about hierarchy, glazing and color luminosity from these forays into the past. *Blue Heaven*, a huge, nearly 13-foot painting from 1966, is a summational account of her pictorial journey through Byzantium, and perhaps the non-Christian mid-East as well. The empty squares here, and in *Madonna and Crucifixion*, 1965, may hint at the prohibition against graven images in other religions of the region, as may the spray painted "graffiti" which covers some of the iconic imagery. Both the crucified Christ and the Madonna are faceless as well. The tumbling angels and general disorder of the painting, with areas left unfilled or unclear and no hierarchical structure, do not indicate Christian sovereignty and control, but rather speak of modern life in all of its inchoate complexity.

As the daughter of a Yiddish poet who had been a Russian revolutionary before emigrating to America, Tabachnick's attitude toward religion was surely not a simple one. In 1975, she painted a version of El Greco's *Purification*





*El Greco in the Garage*, 1975  
Collection of Adele La Barre

of the Temple, c. 1574-75, titled *El Greco in the Garage*, in which she treated the El Greco like an altarpiece, setting a vase of flowers on a table before it,<sup>6</sup> but cutting off the top. The painting concerns Christ driving the Jewish moneylenders out of temple in an effort to purify religious observance, but Anne was probably more concerned with the El Greco's pictorial dynamics than his subject.

Toward the end of the 1980s she began to investigate the way El Greco integrated the figure with landscape, perhaps in response to what had become annual mid-winter trips to the beaches of Negril, Jamaica. She found something basic, animal, and profound about humans poised at the edge of the sea, and tried to express it in her *Human Horde* series. In *Edge of the City: Laocoön*, 1989-1990, she picks up on the way El Greco makes earth and sky writhe

in rhythm to the movements of the serpents and their victims to integrate the entire scene. She had long been aware of "Cezanne's interweaving of the human body and nature,"<sup>7</sup> but turned to him again for these *Human Horde* paintings. The 1995 painting from that series in the exhibition shows this clearly, especially in the seated figure, but El Greco can be felt in the stately flanking figure at left and Matisse in the abstracted one at right.

But if we pull back to get the full picture of Anne Tabachnick's artistic endeavor, at least two other factors have to be taken into account: the influence of her peers, and of the book she called her bible, Mai-Mai Sze's 17<sup>th</sup> century *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting (The Tao of Painting: Its Ideas and Technique)*, which was published in New York in 1959. At 16, before she even got to Hofmann, she found her way to Nell Blaine's studio. Through Blaine, a gently expressive representational painter, she met Leland Bell and his wife Louisa Matthiasdottir, and Robert De Niro (the father of the actor), all of whom were blending the real world into abstraction in one way or another. Both De Niro and Bell brushed lines over their painted surfaces in the finishing process to complicate their compositional dynamics, but without illusionism. They were exposing modernist (ie. Cubist) painting's basis in drawing. Other ex-Hofmann students, such as Robert Beauchamp and George McNeil, and friends like Jay Milder, kept the imagery recognizable while going with the painterly flow of Abstract Expressionism in spirit, and caught her up in it. Another friend, abstractionist Ray Parker, helped her keep her color pure. In the heyday of "AbEx" artists had The Club and the Cedar Tavern as places to talk, but even since then, New York painters have done a great deal of studio visit interchanging, even group "crits" of each other's work on a regular basis.



Surely artists talked about the publication of the *Tao of Painting*. Around the time of its publication many Zen art lectures and demonstrations were going on in New York, at the Club and elsewhere. One of the frequently mentioned technical hints given in the manual is to use charcoal to establish the form and its placement followed by light washes of color or ink and to move slowly into darker tones. That was exactly Anne's painting process, except that she spoke of glazes rather than washes. She drew and redrew the image until it was right, in shape and location, then fixed the charcoal with a chemical spray<sup>8</sup> and covered it with white acrylic and layers of glazing with thinned paint. New charcoal-drawn elements would be added, erased, redrawn, fixed, and repeatedly glazed over many times before the painting was finished. Anne's paintings retained their just-dashed-on look of freshness, even if it took her a year to finish them, because she worked fast and spontaneously. "I love the Chinese landscapes," she said. "With a few strokes a tree or a person is created."<sup>9</sup> She practiced the manual's brushstrokes, and she studied the "western translation" of them which she said Bonnard and Matisse made "more available"<sup>10</sup> to her, but no traces are left of any of these in a beautiful painting such as *Pink and Green Screen Door*, 1988. It is typical of her light, air-filled canvases. Each stroke has the linear vitality the Chinese prized, what they termed "a living idea," but it is not Asian, not Matisse or El Greco or anyone else. It's pure Anne Tabachnick.

April Kingsley  
August 2000

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Palmer Poroner, *ARTspeak* (December 1992): 18.

<sup>2</sup> The painting hangs in The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

<sup>3</sup> As an art writer, one learns quickly that these images provide ways into the work being made in the studio.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Rothko was also obsessed with that particular Matisse, going to the Modern often to stare into its deep red light, which he managed to transport into his own paintings.

<sup>5</sup> In 1967, probably at the suggestion of Willem de Kooning who had learned so much from him, she tried her hand at Arshile Gorky, but with less success.

<sup>6</sup> The garage was her studio that year she taught at Louisiana State University.

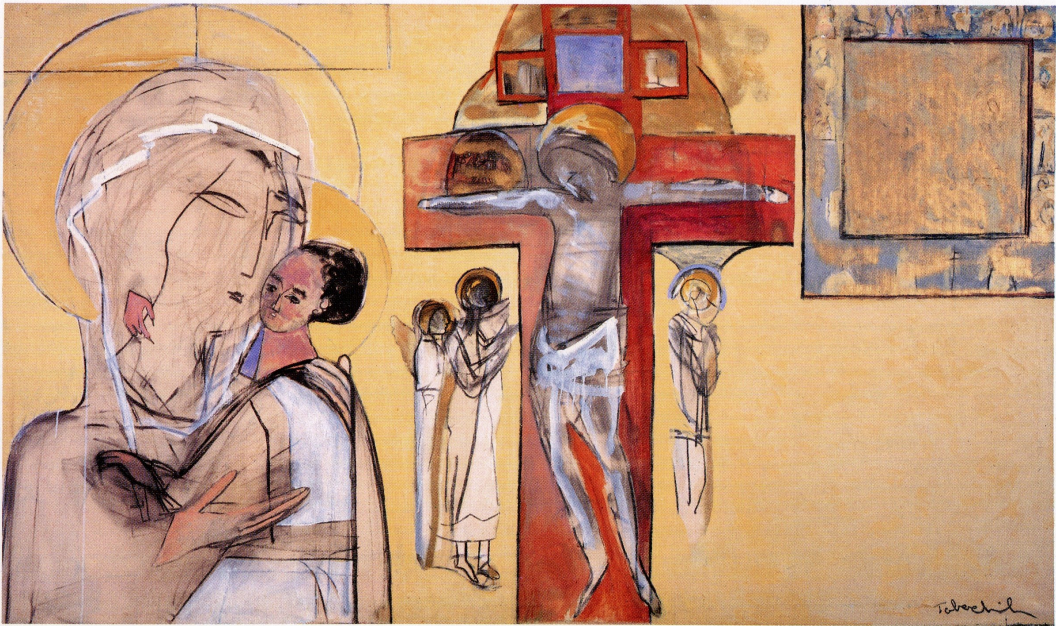
<sup>7</sup> Martica Sawin, *Anne Tabachnick (1927-1995): A Memorial Exhibition* (New York: Snyder Fine Art and Fayetteville Arkansas: Walton Arts Center, 1996): 23.

<sup>8</sup> The fixatives she used so liberally because they were essential to her painting process probably caused her death from pancreatic cancer.

<sup>9</sup> Diane Cochrane, "Anne Tabachnick: Lyrical Expressionism in Acrylics," *American Artist* (June 1974): 72.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*







◀  
*Madonna and Crucifixion*  
c. 1960-65  
acrylic on canvas  
48 x 84 inches

*I don't mind being called derivative. I derive most of what I do from the past.  
We should absorb 2,000 years of Western Art to go on to something new.*

- A. T.

*Studio with Artist and Sitter*  
c. 1965  
acrylic on canvas  
49 x 79 inches







◀  
*Blue Heaven*  
1966  
acrylic and spray paint on canvas  
72 x 154 inches

*Bloody as it is, we must respect the past. The important things from it must be preserved and restated. But when a shell forms over them, art becomes academic. Sometimes you have to tear off the shell to get to the heart.*

- A. T.

*Gorky with Crucifixion*  
1967  
acrylic on canvas  
52.5 x 41.5 inches



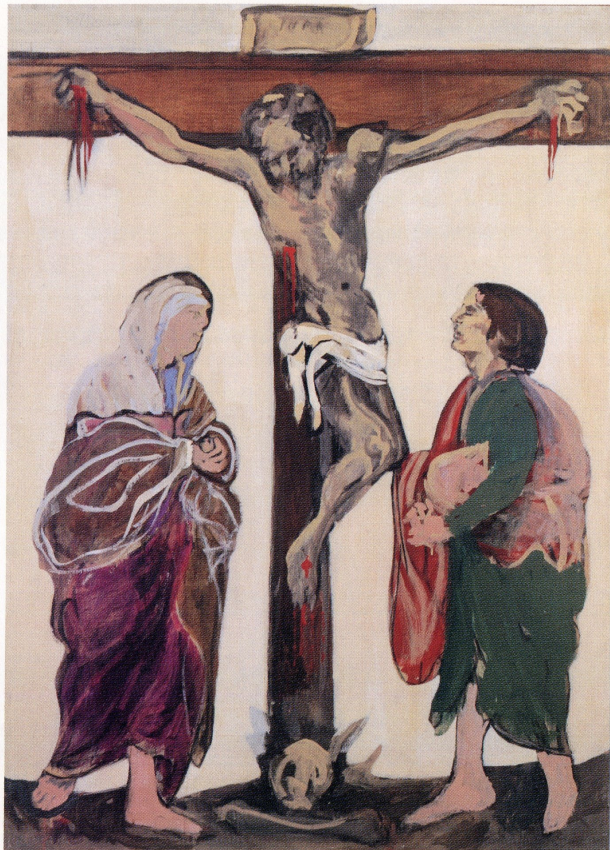


*Painters are the people who have been taught to see by painters and paintings.  
So it is the history of painting we are shuffling with our perceptions of nature.  
Painters are the people who know how to construct, from the many varying  
shifts of focus with which the eye sees, a picture which is something new and  
informed by art.*

- A.T.

*Crucifixion*  
c. 1970  
acrylic on canvas  
48 x 35 inches





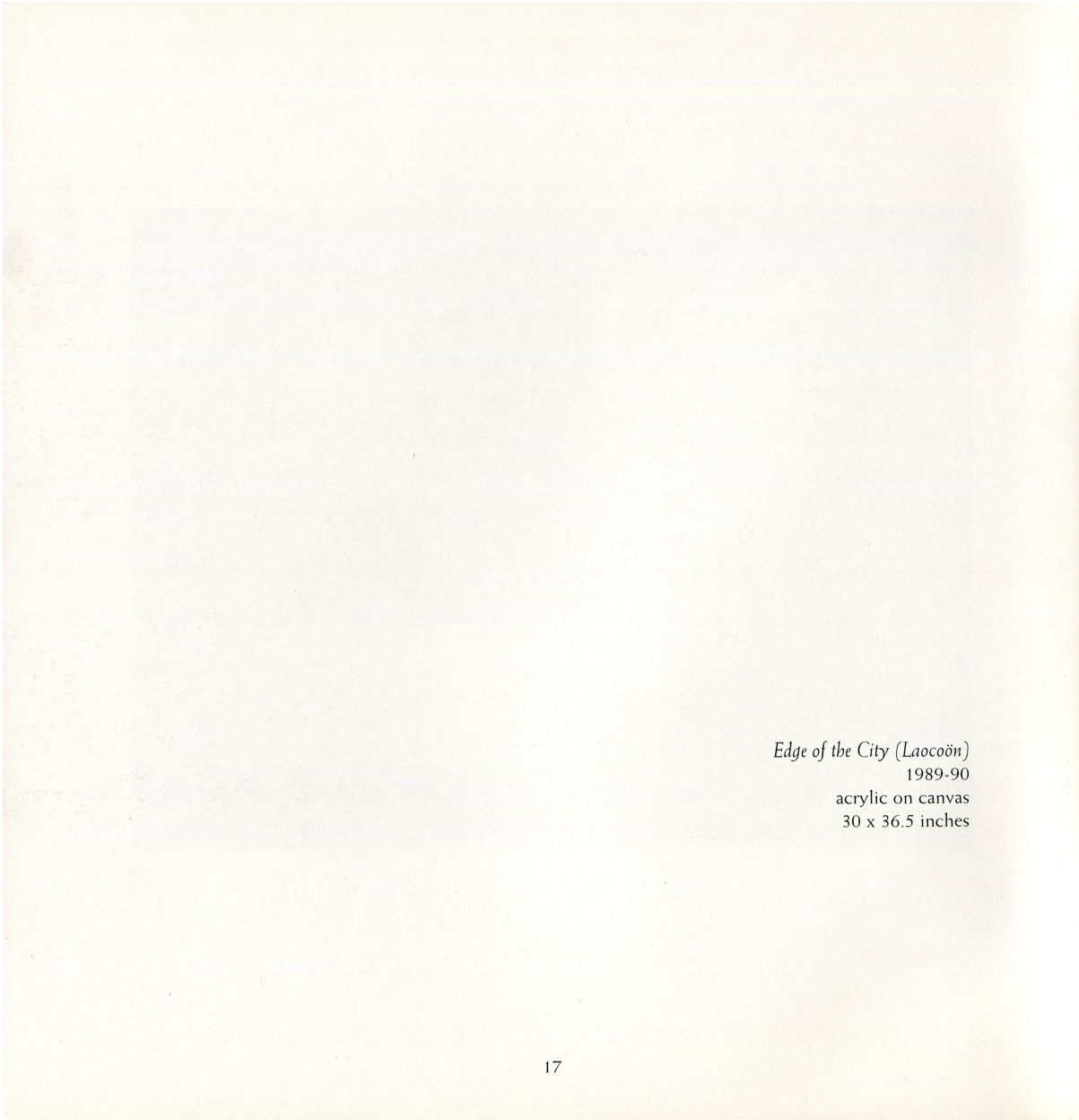
*My basic preoccupation as an artist has been an apparently formal concern with painting as painting, per se. Yet I am simultaneously guided by the notion of the mystical presence of art that made me fall in love with painting in the first place. I could be called a Second Generation New York School painter, an identity which places me in an artistic, ideological and temporal milieu but does not begin to characterize my work. I have called my work 'lyrical expressionism' hinting at its evocative nature. My pictures are figurative - always insisting on some reference to natural visual phenomena - but are expressive through abstract means.*

- A. T.

*Pink and Green Screen Door*  
1988  
acrylic on canvas  
30 x 36.5 inches

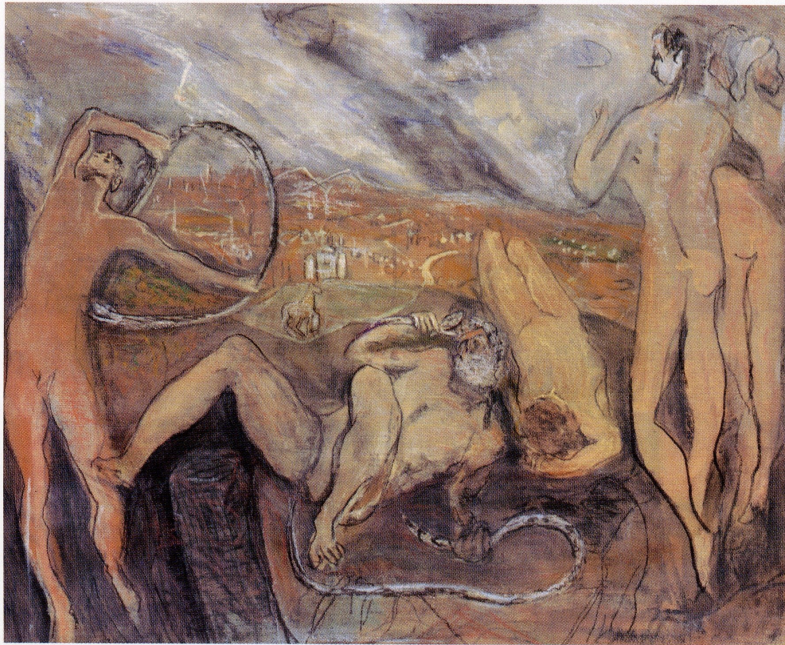






*Edge of the City (Laocoön)*  
1989-90  
acrylic on canvas  
30 x 36.5 inches





*When I was about thirteen, I saw two Botticellis (a visiting exhibit) and some Picassos at the Museum of Modern Art. These paintings appeared to me as concrete presences with the power to finally distract me from the long interior monologue of my childhood. This feeling of 'realness' is something which art has always had the power to evoke in me, and its presence or absence is a guide to me in judging the validity of my work in the studio.*

- A. T.

*Untitled (Human Horde)*  
c. 1995  
acrylic on canvas  
54.75 x 80 inches







## Anne Tabachnick

[1927-1995]

### ONE PERSON EXHIBITIONS

- 2001 Marywood University, Scranton, PA
- 2000 Lori Bookstein Fine Art, New York City
- 1998 Lori Bookstein Fine Art, New York City
- 1996 Schick Gallery, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY
- 1996 Walton Art Center, Fayetteville, Arkansas
- 1996 Snyder Fine Art, New York City
- 1995 Eleonore Austerer Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 1994 M Museum, New York City
- 1989 Erica Meyerovich Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- Seraphim Gallery, Englewood, NJ
- 1990 M Museum, New York City
- 1989 Ingber Gallery, New York City
- 1988 Ingber Gallery, New York City
- 1987 Erica Meyerovich Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- Benton Gallery, Southampton, NY
- Wheaton College, Boston, MA (retrospective)
- 1986 Ingber Gallery, New York City
- 1984 Ingber Gallery, New York City
- 1982 Ingber Gallery, New York City
- 1981 Louisiana State University, Union Gallery, Baton Rouge, LA
- Ingber Gallery, New York City
- 1980 Ingber Gallery, New York City
- 1978 Ingber Gallery, New York City
- 1977 Louisiana State University, Union Gallery, Baton Rouge, LA
- 1976 Aaron Berman Gallery, New York City
- Hyde Collection, Glen Falls, NY
- 1975 Roko Gallery, New York City
- Louisiana State University, Union Gallery, Baton Rouge, LA
- 1973 Civic Fine Arts, Sioux Falls, SD
- Martin Gallery, Minneapolis, MN
- 1972 Roko Gallery, New York City
- 1971 Westbeth Galleries, New York City
- 1969 YMCA, Boston, MA
- 1968 Colby Junior College, New Hampshire
- Bunting Institute, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA
- 1962 Waverly Gallery, New York City
- 1961 Smolen Gallery, New York City
- 1953 Nonegon Gallery, New York City
- Peretz Johannes Gallery, New York City
- 1951 Circle in the Square Gallery, New York City



### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1995 *New Art/ Artists/ Estate*, Snyder Fine Art, New York City
- 1995 *Face to Face. Artists on Artists*, Gallery Swan, New York City
- 1994 *Landscape Works by Women Artists. Selections from the William & Uytendale Scott Memorial Study Collection, Part Three*, Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, PA
- 1992 *Color as Subject*, The Artist Museum, New York City
- 1986 *Juried Show*, National Academy of Design, New York City
- 1985 *East Side Artists*, Kenkeleba Gallery, New York City
- 1965 Group exhibition of portraiture, Zabriskie Gallery, New York City
- Dayton Art Institute, Dayton, OH
- East Hampton Gallery, New York
- 1963 *Hans Hoffman and his Students*, Museum of Modern Art, NY
- East Hampton Gallery, New York
- Monede Gallery, New York City

### HONORS AND AWARDS

- 1991 John Solomon Guggenheim Foundation
- 1989 National Endowment for the Arts Grant
- Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation
- 1985 Altos de Chavon Residency
- 1983 John Solomon Guggenheim Fellowship
- 1982 Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Fellowship
- 1975-78 CAPS Grants from the New York State Council on the Arts
- 1967-69 Grants from the Bunting Institute, Harvard University
- 1960 Longview Foundation Award (first woman recipient)
- Residencies at Yaddo and MacDowell Colonies



#### SELECTED REFERENCES

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 Hansen, Ellen. *The Christian Science Monitor*, "The Soft Edges of Childhood Friendship", June 17, 1992.  
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 Poroner, Palmer. *Artspeak*, "Anne Tabachnick Attains a Universal Unity" (interview), December 1992.  
 Poroner, Palmer. *Artspeak* (obituary), November 1995.  
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 Preston, George Nelson. *Arts Magazine*, "Anne Tabachnick's African Queen on the Banks of the Hudson," November 1982.  
 Roman, Cynthia. The Watson Gallery, Wheaton College, "Anne Tabachnick: Paintings" (exhibition catalogue essay), February 4- March 15, 1987.  
 Russell, John. *The New York Times* (review), February 23, 1979.  
 Russell, John. *The New York Times* (review), November 2, 1984.  
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 Taylor, Robert. *The Boston Globe* (review), February 19, 1987.  
 Tully, Judd. *Artworld* (review), May 21- June 18, 1980.  
 Wallach, Arnei. *New York Newsday* (review), December 16 1981.

#### TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- 1987-89 Vermont Studio School, Teacher of Painting  
 1987 Parsons Graduate School of Painting, Teacher of Painting  
 1984 Montclair Museum, Montclair, NJ, Instructor of Watercolor and Drawing  
 1982-83 Summer Session, New York Studio School, New York City  
 1982 Visiting Critic, Boston University Graduate School of Painting  
 1981 Ford Foundation Visiting Critic, University of Washington  
 Artist in Residence, Parsons Graduate School, NY  
 1980 Visiting Critic, Tale Summer School of Painting  
 Graduate Faculty, Goddard Painting Program  
 1978-80 Three Semesters as Visiting Artists with rank of Assistant Professor  
 1975 Professor at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA  
 1970-79 Maryland Institute, College of Art, Baltimore, MD,  
 Instructor of Painting, Drawing, and Design  
 1969-79 Harvard University, Cambridge, MA,  
 Instructor of Drawing and Painting  
 1967 Loft School for Art, New York City  
 1965-66 Dayton Art Institute, Instructor of Drawing and Painting

#### SELECTED PUBLIC AND PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

- Centennial Campus Art Gallery, Bryn Mawr College, PA  
 Dayton Art Institute, Dayton, OH  
 The Hyde Collection, Glens Falls, NY  
 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC  
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY  
 Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, NC  
 The Museum of Modern Art, NY  
 The Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, NJ  
 Neuberger Museum of Art, State University of New York,  
 Purchase, NY  
 University Art Museum, Berkeley, CA  
 Wright State University Art Galleries, Dayton, OH

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