

Problem #1: James Brooks' paintings are obviously beautiful; they are "mood paintings." Can such pictures withstand thoroughgoing, serious critical attention? Does a great deal of surface variegation—niceties of textural, factual, coloristic, and compositional gradation—mitigate a painting's impact? How complex can a painting be and still be strong, weighty, and powerful?

Problem #2: There have been no dramatic shifts in Brooks' style since he established it in the late forties. Because the art market prefers "new" merchandise year-

nizability factor to public and critical acceptance?

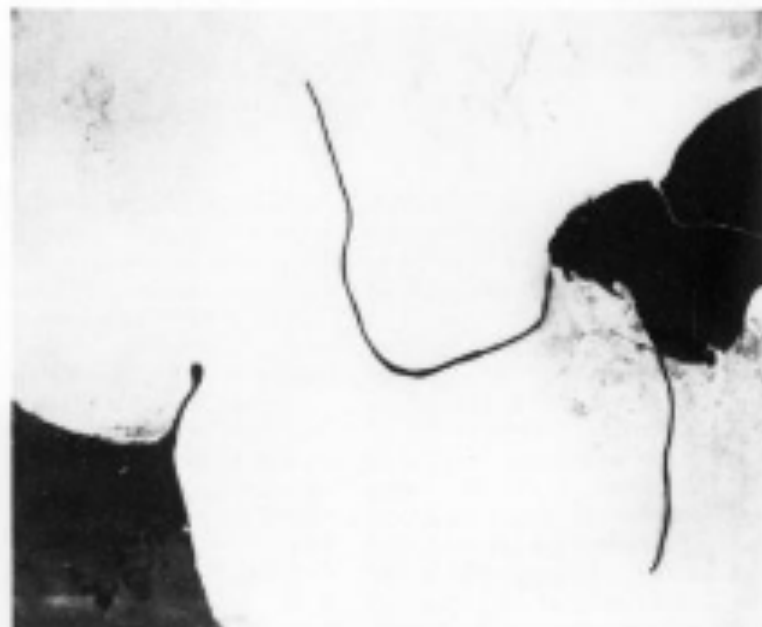
Problem #5: Brooks' open-ended methodology, held in check only by a Cubist critical approach to the results, leaves him and the viewer uneasy when making quality judgments among his works. Does his "under-controlled" technique negate precise critical evaluation?

These are some of the problems posed by James Brooks' words and work. When first confronting a group of his paintings I feel a vague sense of disquiet. I think, "They all look alike" or, conversely but simultaneously, "They all look too different

ly with an honorableness that is unquestionable. Yet, in that totality there is an unfinished element, as though there may be another painting somewhere that does it all, or better, or clearer. It is strange to feel these things about an artist's work. Disturbing.

James Brooks is a quiet, gentle man who lives with his wife, painter Charlotte Park, in the Springs, Long Island. He was born in Texas 89 years ago and lived in a number of different Western cities as a boy. He retains a deep love for the life, light, and space of the West he remembers. He moved to New York in 1926 to study at the Art Stu-

for a way back into it. The painter Wallace Harrison provided that way between 1946-47, giving Brooks a thorough grounding in Cubist composition with and against which he was able to work thereafter. That training and his close friendships with Jackson Pollock and Bradley Walker Tomlin, in particular, during these early post-war years established the basic material out of which he developed his own idiom. By 1948 his close-packed, rigidly rectilinear Cubistic abstractions gave way under the pressure of the spontaneous approach which had become rampant in the New York art world. Brooks'



James Brooks, *Otan*, 1974. Acrylic on canvas, 64 x 76". Courtesy Martha Jackson Gallery.

ly to make sales easier, should the artist suffer public or critical disfavor if he fails to provide it? Is a non-linear development necessarily good or bad?

Problem #3: Brooks' paintings in any given show seem outrageously varied. Can one work effectively in mixed image clusters instead of in series or progressively where the "improvement" potential is maximized?

Problem #4: It is hard to remember specific Brooks paintings since they lack either a unitary, holistic image or a hierarchical structure. How important is the recog-

from one another." Their otherworldly color is unsettling as is their soft texturing and deliberately awkward shaping. But as time is passed among them, a dramatic shift occurs in my feelings about them. The pictures start to speak: some whisper, others shout; one is warm and friendly, while another seems violently angry and a third so somber it is silent. Each painting has an interior mood, a time, psychology, temperature, season, and tempo independent from that of its neighbor. As a totality the group of pictures slowly comes to seem evocatively wealthy and state-

dents League. His work during the thirties was realistic, sharing some of the stylistic traits of a Social Realism, but not its political implications. As a muralist on the WPA, Federal Art Project, he combined realistic "Giottoesque" figuration with nonobjective and symbolic forms in highly complex, enormously ambitious allegories. These murals completely absorbed him until 1942 when he was drafted as a "combat artist" to serve in Egypt and the Near East.

All these years of non-easel painting left him virtually styleless in that medium. His return to New York in 1945 finally left him free to search

paintings became looser, more calligraphic, and active, though they retained a certain gentleness that seems basic to him, as it was to his friend Tomlin. In the summer of that year he accidentally discovered his own method of producing "the unexpected" which liberated him from "composing." Using black glue to affix collage elements to the canvas caused irregular, ephemeral shapes to stain through to the reverse side which he came to find more interesting and usable than the consciously chosen elements on the front. He then proceeded to work both sides of the canvas for a while before selecting the

JAMES BROOKS: CRITIQUE AND CONVERSATION

For the painter a process of "grubbing", for the critic an emotional investigation, James Brooks' work is a continuing Abstract Expressionism.

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"front," and subsequently stained directly into the front. At first he used turpentine-diluted oil paint, later acrylics. By laying the canvas on the floor and working into it from all sides without considering top-bottom orientation, he was able to maximize the fluidity of his imagery.

Since the crucial years of 1948-49 Brooks has changed slowly and barely noticeably. As a consequence of staining, his forms became more curvilinear. His line began to loop and swing across the canvas and a tremendous density often resulted which surprised him. He had always striven for a style based on large, power-

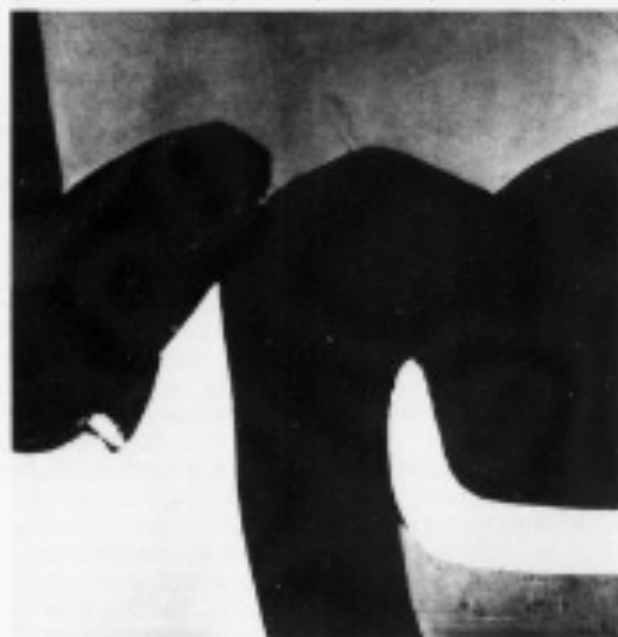
line is often used to delineate geometrical units in addition to its normal calligraphic function.

Brooks' work is not produced in series but rather in clusters of types of pictures. One type features a simple solid plane interrupted by meandering lines and nudged by shapeless forms around its periphery. *Olan* (1974) exemplifies this type which has figural connotations despite an implied landscape (here snowy) implication. *Estland II* (1963) is another of this group minus the figural reference. Its 1/3-2/3 weight distribution also overlaps with a second compositional type which

and *Fonteel* (1974) seem to be radically simplified offshoots of this all-over approach.

As well as occasionally dipping back into older ways of painting as he does with the all-over pictures, Brooks actually reworks slightly older pictures that still do not satisfy him so that he may keep a painting going for as much as three or four years. This, plus his very gradual development (if such is indeed the word for it), tends to blur compositional distinctions for the average viewer. Characteristic of almost all his work is a kind of firm politeness like that of good conversation—a continual dialogue in

ness and reminds me of Calder's gentle buffoonery. It's a risky painting partly because of the humor in it. Brooks is letting that element into his work more often now, encouraging it to break up expectancies for him. *Burkland* seems wet and splashy like brusque waves on a cool, early summer beach. A Miro-like playfulness informs *Gair*, loquacious with the sound of a summer night cocktail party at an Easthampton beach house. *Garon* is just the opposite: solid and solitary, its looming top band and flickering lights convey a depressing sensation of tragedy. One of Brooks' finest paintings, *Hur-*



James Brooks, *Casper*, 1973.
Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72". Courtesy Martha Jackson Gallery.



James Brooks, *Gair*, 1973.
Acrylic on canvas, 64 x 64". Courtesy Martha Jackson Gallery.

ful forms. Suddenly very small units in myriad profusion were emerging and he was amazed that the paintings worked so well despite their being so different from what he expected them to be. As the fifties progressed, Brooks' forms tended to enlarge and lessen in number per painting. The reliance on line gave way to an interest in shaping where line performed a more complex function. A tendency to dark, moody color chords was more and more interrupted by bursts of full chromatic intensity. In his most recent paintings large areas of unbroken color are frequent and

has an implied "T" configuration, whether the "T" is upright, on its side, or upside down. *Garon* (1974), a melancholy painting in somber greens and gray/blacks, exhibits the "T" well. *Gair* (1973), with its "T" top to the right, and *Casper* (1973) are variations on this theme. *Dazzling Fangle* (1973) epitomizes the third kind of configuration: an all-over distribution of black and white or high-key, close-valued colored forms which relates back, compositionally, to much earlier, densely pecked paintings like *R* (1953). Interlocked finger compositions like *Burkland* (1972)

which all the participants have ample opportunity to have their say. Forms pass easily above, by, below, behind, and through one another and shift in and out of visual prominence without endangering their brothers. Each area of a painting retains its independent personality in the same way that each painting retains it in relation to a whole group of paintings.

Fonteel (1974) is like a winter's day, tense and stiff with cold. It is dignified and upright like frozen branches. *Casper*, on the other hand, is noisy and aggressive. It conjures up Coney Island garish-

ness and reminds me of Calder's gentle buffoonery. It's a risky painting partly because of the humor in it. Brooks is letting that element into his work more often now, encouraging it to break up expectancies for him. *Burkland* seems wet and splashy like brusque waves on a cool, early summer beach. A Miro-like playfulness informs *Gair*, loquacious with the sound of a summer night cocktail party at an Easthampton beach house. *Garon* is just the opposite: solid and solitary, its looming top band and flickering lights convey a depressing sensation of tragedy. One of Brooks' finest paintings, *Hur-*

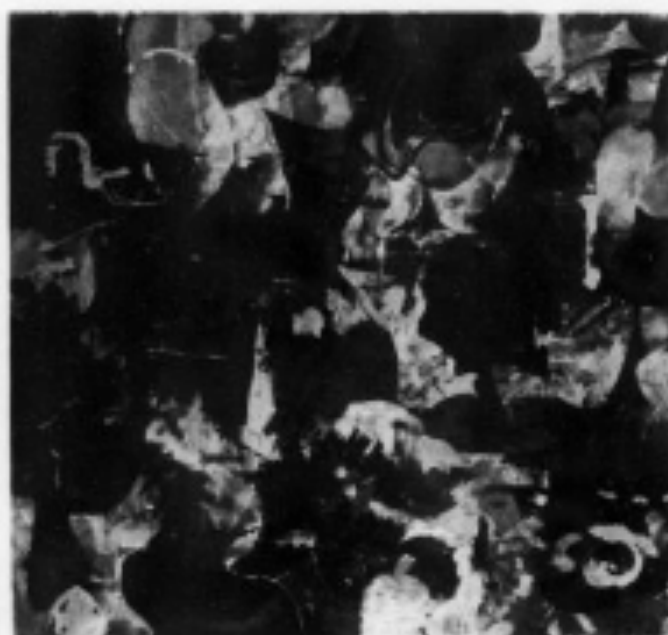
on (1974) is curiously difficult to describe. An underwater dimness pervades it and we seem to be peering through its murky green depths to a lighted surface where organic matter floats, lit from above. It is a reserved picture, like *Garon*, that reminds me of Braque and Bradley Walker Tomlin.

The basic unit of Brooks' formal vocabulary is a lower case, handwritten "e" or "l" that loops. Out of it he gets a finger-like, slightly bent, oval with or without a hole at its center that recurs with great frequency in his work, often as a very large and important

element. He finds an open, shallow "W" and "X" where the line crosses itself, and, most crucially, he uses the negative places left at either side of the "e"'s loop to get a vaguely pointed or squared-off curve that appears alone as line and as shape. Over and over, from every possible orientation, in myriad disguises and manifestations, this "e" configuration appears in every Brooks work, from the simplest doodles to the most complex paintings.

Brooks epitomizes the paradoxical situation of Everyartist, and the critical problems he presents are typically pervasive and insoluble. His form world seems sparking fresh and idiosyncratic, yet many of the threads in its weave (Calder, Miro, Giotto, Braque, etc.) are obvious. He was as much of a pioneer of Abstract Expressionism as Braque was of Cubism, yet, inexplicably, he is rarely counted among the leaders of the New American painting. He is, in essence, a painter of emotion, yet he subjects each picture to rigorous formal analysis before he declares it finished. Each painting is born under the riskiest circumstances, as much a product of unconscious uncontrol as he can muster. Despite this way of working, which should automatically bring an artist's deep, obsessional images to the canvas surface, one can never find the quintessential Brooks painting. That "ideal" painting that floats around somewhere in his unconscious is never recognizable. Every other Abstract Expressionist either has an image (Rothko, Gottlieb, Newman) or a gestural mark (Guston, de Kooning, Kline). Though Brooks has a gestural unit—which when enlarged as it was in *Narchos* (1980) does have imagistic force—one still tends to read his painting as a dialogue among individual units, and to read any group of paintings as conducting a dialogue among themselves.

Perhaps, in partial answer to the questions raised earlier, it is easier to pick up on



James Brooks, *R*, 1953.
Oil on canvas, 62" x 55". Courtesy Martha Jackson Gallery.

a painting's monologue than it is to hear its dialogue. One is so accustomed to being asked to listen to set rhetori-

cal speeches that one becomes bewildered at being asked, politely, to join the conversation.

THE CONVERSATION

AK: Could you discuss the idea of process from your point of view as one of the pioneers of Abstract Expressionism?

JB: We were all searching for, or welcoming rather, the freedom of doing something more on impulse, responsible more toward a thing that was about to occur rather than toward things that had already occurred. And so we started being irresponsible, in a sense, in our work and using the medium a new way, an accidental way if possible, which is very hard for anybody to do despite what everybody thinks. People can hardly do accidental things; they always come out the same way because our physical habits are the same. Nevertheless, the idea, with some of us anyway, was to get an irresponsible start. I was very conscious that I had to make a big challenging mess that had very strong things happening in it that I

didn't agree with but which I thought were possibly right because I didn't know what I wanted. Then I would get acquainted with that—the canvas was covered with a mélange of stuff—by trying to take from it or by trying to approach it innocently, as if I hadn't made it but it was just a thing with a personality of its own.

AK: Does that imply a corrective process at this stage?

JB: Well, it was a generating process in which, as you looked at it, you saw some part of it that you could change to make it work better formally, give it spatial movement. That started a stream of action going. You'd correct one thing, or change it, and that would immediately lead to changing another form in some other part of the canvas. Maybe right near it, which most often happened, or it could be right on the other side of the canvas. So you might almost say the

painting then was painting itself with your cooperation. AK: A completely dynamic process, then.

JB: Yes. The frustration of a form that wasn't quite right, or was very wrong, was the thing that started your work, but if you tried to force it into your preconceived idea of what a painting was, then it wouldn't get born. It wouldn't live. It had to be really a cooperative venture.

AK: Of course, you were, and are, making shapes that interact and differ greatly from one another. The classic Pollock drip is a more homogenized thing. His approach was unitary, while yours is pluralistic.

JB: I used Pollock's drip method to great advantage because it did free me from my earlier work and from being too self-conscious. Then I could start from there. Jackson's is a layered thing, spontaneous, uncorrected. I always felt when I did that, and I did try it a few times, that I was thrown out of the work too quickly, that I hadn't lived in it long enough, and that I resented being pushed out of the painting. Sometimes I like to live in a painting too long, but I do get a good deal of satisfaction out of staying in a painting, manipulating the forms, changing things, and primarily, listening to what it speaks and encouraging it. I do believe that people have to take a painting as seriously as they do a person they respect. They have to take it seriously enough to realize what it wants to say. It always has its own voices trying to get through. It's very hard to let these voices through because we've been trained to have a responsibility toward posterity, our family, and ourselves and not to be silly or absurd, but to be dignified. But it just doesn't work that way. Painting just isn't that inanimate. It's a real thing, like a strong personality, and if a painter doesn't treat it so it won't affect him or other people.

AK: I think the thing I find most startling about your work is your color which seems so

unlike any the color in any other work I know.

JB: Color is the thing I don't think of, that I can't think of and still do very well. I try to do a thing in simple color, black and white if possible, to start with, and go into more color when I'm forced to by the painting itself. Or, I may start off in the wrong color and have to change it.

AK: Would you say that you're primarily involved with drawing then?

JB: Yes, the shaping thing and drawing. I'm very interested in the way a shape will seem to recede but then, as you look at it, will seem to come forward and everything drops back around it—that continual interchange of spaces. I criticize my work that way, in terms of spaces, kind of a late Cubist way of thinking. The hardest thing in art is to get shapes that speak clearly themselves but that also let their neighbors on every side be just as strong as they are. You don't hold one area up and dim the others so that that one will have a chance. You try to make everything strong. But to do that, to hold what you call a surface and at the same time to have that paradox of space, whether its deep or shallow space, is a very important thing. It's what creates density in art—that struggle, that pull or tension that comes from trying to create both things at once.

AK: Could you describe your way of working recently?

JB: Well, it's very important to me to lay a canvas on the floor because I work largely with liquid paint, acrylics now mostly, and it's pretty thin when I start. Working this way the flow of the paint dictates a great deal of the start to me. I begin with one or two colors; I've been using black grounds lately which I like very much. With acrylics it works because I think they won't seponify, get transparent, and let the black through eventually the way they would in oil. Anyway I like to work on a colored ground and

then work with white over that, flowing it on, and then, with a piece of cardboard or something, I kind of squeegee it into irresponsible shapes without too much thinking.

Then perhaps I add another color over that, or I might decide to take off some color, blotting it with newspapers or something which also gives me unpredictable material to

work with texturally. I try to stay as far away as I can from my automatic habits, my clichés, so it looks like somebody else might have started the painting, or it looks like somebody's mistake, not particularly mine. Then it's a matter of shaping and drawing and the addition of color when it's needed, as I described before. Sometimes I may start off with a vague idea for the painting or for color areas, but it may quite suddenly switch on me and I might end up with a completely different painting than I started with.

AK: You describe such an unlimited, free painting process. It's quite at odds with the kind of preconceived, highly structured thing most so-called "process art" seems to be today.

JB: My feeling about it is that you're in a morass and you're walking through it trying to find your way. I think Stravinsky put it beautifully when he said an artist is like an animal grubbing in the earth looking for food or something, but the excitement is when he runs into something and he doesn't know what it is. Then he finds out it's food or something useful or it isn't. Painting is just that, a fooling around, a grubbing. It's a very unintelligent, or rather a wandering kind of a lost occupation actually. But that goes through all life really, the discovery of something you can eat or make something of, and the process is accidental. It has a freshness, a sense of discovery about it. I can understand the pleasure of great craftsmanship, but I think that's something else. I did lettering for quite a while, and I loved it. However, it's a thing where you know you've done a good job and people can tell you that too. But sometimes when you paint a painting it just happens for you and it seems too good for you to have done. That's a great feeling once in a while, when it does happen, when your painting is finished, or it comes near the end, and you say, "Boy, that's terrific!"



James Brooks, *Fangla*, 1973.
Acrylic on canvas, 78 x 78". Courtesy Marita Jackson Gallery.



James Brooks, *Heron*, 1974.
Acrylic on canvas, 78 x 74". Courtesy Marita Jackson Gallery.