

Constructing in Color: Fritz Bultman's Collages and Walls

BY APRIL KINGSLEY

Viewing Fritz Bultman's retrospective one is inescapably impressed with his powerful, multi-dimensionality. He was an exceptional artist, able to work brilliantly in four distinct media—painting, sculpture, collage and drawing—both simultaneously and successively throughout his life. But what you cannot learn from the exhibition is how terrific Bultman was in yet another medium—stained glass. Strictly speaking Bultman was not a glass artist; he designed for it, but that is often the case. His wife Jeanne Bultman, not an artist herself, executed his designs. The "blueprints," as he called them, for the leaded glass were drawn from his collages. Initially the glass was simply the collage made transparent; later he sometimes created the collage with the design of the glass in his mind—two different processes—but either way the results are equally beautiful.

Collage came naturally to Bultman; the earliest work in the exhibition is of pasted paper. Red and yellow were the dominant colors in his collages from the outset with *Old Gold* (1938), made of found and painted papers. Formal characteristics of the collages, such as the tendency to an unorthodox symmetry, centrality, and a geometry of echoing curves, are present in his paintings as well. The primary difference between his work in the two media, besides surface texture, is the quality of the color, which is purer and more intense in his collages, then and always. Though he used some torn edges, most of Bultman's collages (before and after he was affected by Matisse's paper cutouts), were made with scissors. He used fairly heavy paper, often torn from spiral-bound pads with the perforations retained and used compositionally. The paper was coated with gouache

varied in density by his brushwork. Since cut paper is of its nature hard-edged, and since blue is more abstract when it is not handled atmospherically, blue readily found a place in his collages, even in the sixties when they were rough, jagged, and thickly overpasted.

Blue predominates in the grand free-form collages of the seventies. Here, liberated at last from the limits of the framing edge, which had crowded him from the start in all three two-dimensional media (painting, collage and drawing), Bultman fully came into his own; he was a master of the medium on the level of Matisse and Motherwell. In fact Bultman's collages were even more compositionally daring and coloristically exciting than Motherwell's. Bultman's cut color collages are made of seemingly pure, primary hues (red, yellow, blue, and white are his customary choices) which is perhaps why they lend themselves so readily to translation into light-permeable glass. Motherwell's collage colors seem more opaque, more like paint on canvas in their gravity.

Whereas Motherwell tended somewhat formulaically to stack or cluster a single group of elements in one perfectly placed spot on a field of solid color, Bultman's great collages of the seventies grew naturally outward from a starting point near the center and ended when they had to, stopping short of, or crossing out of the rectangle if necessary. In the freest of his free-wheeling collages of the seventies, ovals, "I" shapes, "Y"s and completely irregular configurations¹ resulted, yet they all have a quality of inevitability because nothing is either filled in to cover the field, or not added on if it was needed. *Mardi Gras*, an exuberant eight-by-four-foot collage of 1978, is a marvelous example of this compositional freedom. The curving, figure-like brown form on the right is similar to the one in the right hand

side of *King Zulu*, a 1960 painting titled in reference to the figures in the annual black Mardi Gras parade. Colored ocher and brown, probably because of its subject matter, this collage, and one or two in which green dominates, are coloristically unusual for Bultman. The small colored squares in his collages establish alternate linear systems within each work. Like the spiral pad perforations, they are carryovers from the dotted lines of his early paintings. From the celebratory look of these works, collage seems to be the medium in which Bultman was happiest working.

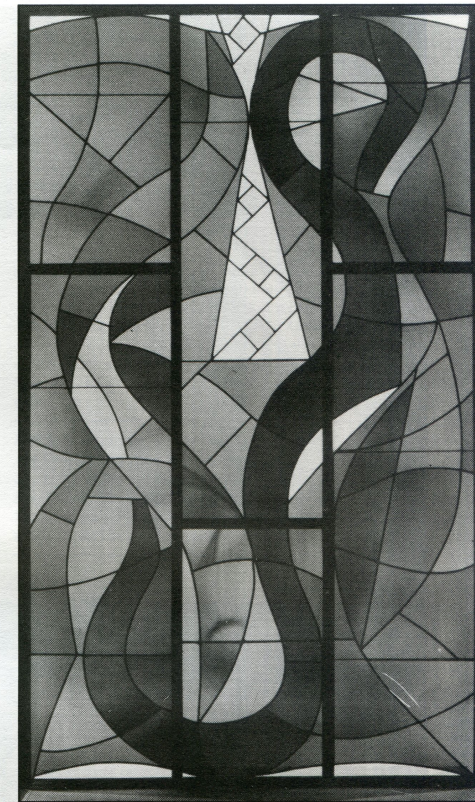
Of course, when a collage is intended for transcription into glass, a rectangle is the likely shape of the field. Sometimes a limiting problem for him in the painting medium, the rectilinear bounds of an architectural setting do not seem to have been confining to him, but rather liberating. Perhaps it was his youthful experience of growing up in a house his father was continually reconstructing around the family, perhaps it is the dimensional spatiality of color as light rather than color as pigmental substance.

Bultman created a number of two-stage, collage/stained glass works for doors, windows and for placement in front of windows, but he was commissioned to execute two such works on a much larger scale with spectacular results. The first was for the chapel in his family funeral establishment, The House of Bultman. This was in 1976 and the glass was leaded from tracings made of the collages by a New Jersey factory. When his wife Jeanne saw the simplicity of the process she exclaimed, "Why I could do that!" and proceeded to do so after taking some lessons. By the next year she was doing all of her husband's glass works. Matisse's chapel in Vence was an obvious source of inspiration for that ensemble of collages, stained glass windows and altarpieces. But works for religious settings by his contemporaries, abstract expressionists like Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, and his friend Alfonso Ossorio, might also have been in his mind. The seven-by-three-foot collages were set in niches within the chapel walls, and Bultman made a cast bronze crucifix for the altar.

The second commission, for the lobby of the Light Fine Arts Building at Kalamazoo College in Michigan, was even more extensive—vast, in fact, with seven twelve-by-seven and one-half-foot framed collage murals (totaling twelve by forty-seven feet) and by an equal number of glass panels totaling an area of ten and one-half fifty-four feet above the seven sets of double entrance doors. (Over 3,000 pieces of stained glass were used for an area 400-square feet in size.) Even though the setting is secular, the central panel contains a vaguely "crucifixional," or ecstatic, dancer-like, branching red form in a mandola of yellow and white. Darker blues dominate the flanking areas, though each side is handled radically differently than the other. Thus there is a sense of hierarchy and focus without symmetry or repetition. The artist said of its composition:

The center is important to hold a piece together, so I viewed the entire work as stretching out from a simple clear center. If the center is bright, a strong figure, then the rest should be calm in color.²

Fritz Bultman began his formal art studies in architecture, and in his last years—if these two major glass mural commissions and the minor ones bear true witness—he did some of his finest work for architectural settings. Perhaps that is because his philosophical approach to esthetics as outlined in the following statement is essentially holistic in an architectural sense:



Fritz Bultman (American, 1919-1985)
Istanbul - Nightfall Rising, 1979
Stained glass

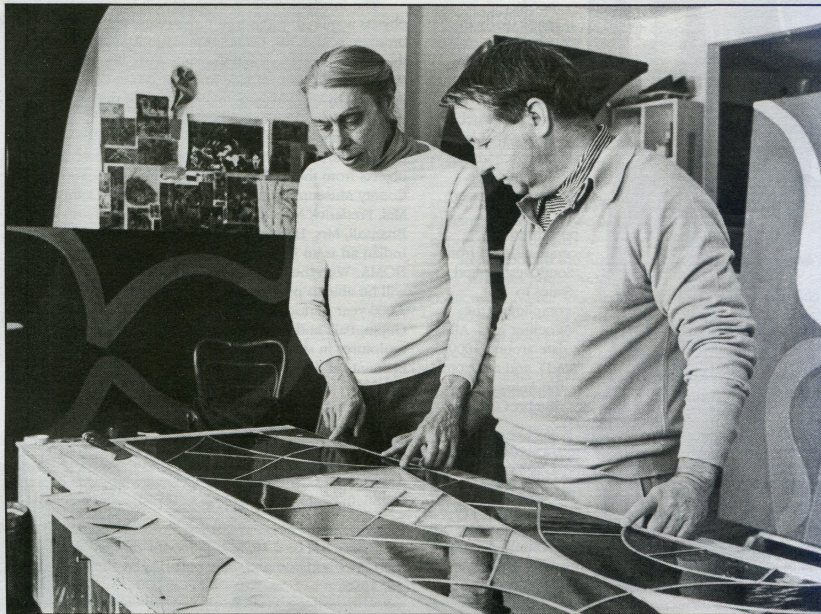
Nothing is in itself—only in relation to what surrounds it. No shape exists. No thought exists except in the active field that such an "event" brings into being. A shape is only the result of shapes, of forces both within and those from surrounding activity.³ ■

NOTES:

1. He even had them framed in these unorthodox shapes.
2. Statement in an unsigned article reprinted from *Encore, Magazine of the Arts*, March 1981, np.
3. Statement in the exhibition catalogue for *Works by Fritz Bultman*, September 15 - October 23, 1987, The Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery, Hunter College, 1.

Fritz Bultman Retrospective will be on view at NOMA from August 7 through September 26, 1993. The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue which is available in NOMA's Museum Shop.

April Kingsley is guest curator of Fritz Bultman Retrospective and curator at the American Craft Museum, New York.



Jeanne and Fritz Bultman working in New York City studio, 1979. In the background are the curved canvases of the late sixties and two paintings and one small bronze of 1977.