AN **ACTIVE** VOID

Don't publish it—"you're going to regret it," the artist Cleve Gray was warned by his wife, the soon-to-be *New Yorker* writer Francine du Plessix Gray, and his father-in-law, Alexander Liberman, the editorial director of Condé Nast magazines. The ***it*** was his essay savaging Abstract Expressionism. Despite their concerns, he did publish *Narcissus in Chaos: Contemporary American Art* in the *American Scholar* in 1959.

The art of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and other Abstract Expressionists, Gray wrote, was too sensational, too egotistical and lacking in order and aesthetics. Their focus on "their inner responses," he went on, was "presumptuous" because it "assumes that his own ego and unconscious are worth contemplating, are more worthy of contemplation than the objective world." It was a decade after Pollock had made his first drip paintings in 1947. Abstract Expressionism already led the art world. But Gray charged, "Although the best work of the contemporary non-objective painters, such as Pollock's, may be agreeably decorative, it is nothing more." Then a curious thing happened. Before the end of that year, Gray began moving away from the Cubist- and Cézanne-inspired paintings he'd been making for more than a decade, and began painting non-objective abstractions himself.

"Years ago I would see something beautiful, and I would make a drawing of it," the late painter told art historian Nicholas Fox Weber for the 1998 Abrams monograph *Cleve Gray*. "Then I would bring it to the studio and tack it to the wall and make a larger painting from it. Now I am dealing more with abstract thoughts and abstract emotions. It's more challenging."

In April 2012, Diane Rosenstein Fine Art in Los Angeles exhibited Gray paintings from 1963, which it called "his breakthrough into color-based gestural expressionism. During this period Gray developed a lasting friendship with the Abstract Expressionist painter Barnett Newman and experienced a metamorphosis, dissolving earlier Cubist compositions in a sea of distilled color." At an auction at Sotheby's New York in June, two Gray Abstract Expressionist-style paintings from the 1970s sold for $7,500 and $25,000 respectively. "The market's picking up for Cleve," says William Morrison of Morrison Gallery in Kent, Conn., which has scheduled a Gray exhibit for the fall of 2014. "He's getting recognized again, which is great."

The Neuberger Museum of Art at the State University of New York's Purchase College will once again exhibit Gray's epic, room-filling, 1973 suite of 14 20-foot-square abstract paintings, *Threnody* from January 12 to April 6 to mark the 40th anniversary of its debut.

In a brochure written for an exhibit of Gray's paintings from the 1970s at Loretta Howard Gallery in New York last fall, the critic Carter Ratcliff wrote that Gray "resisted the currents of Abstract Expressionism when they surged through the American art world. He is an abstractionist, yes, but his gestures in color—at once serene and intense—are not expressive in the manner that so quickly became clichéd in the work of his contemporaries. ... His brushy gestures are the sudden culminations of long reflections on himself and his way of being in the world."

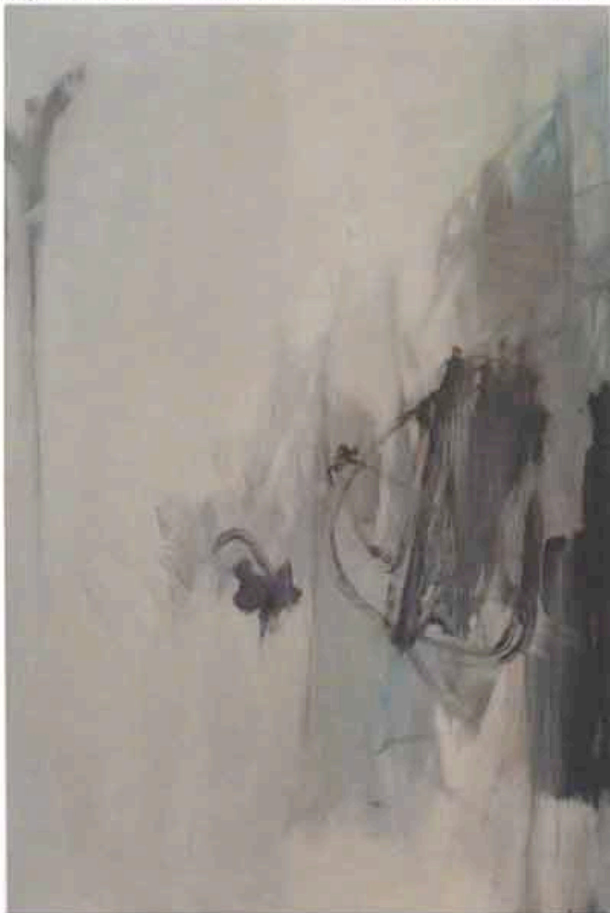
Cleve Ginsberg (the family later changed it to Gray) was born September 22, 1918, in New York, to a Jewish banker father and a song-writing mother. He frequently recounted two childhood memories. At one point his father bought a silk manufacturing company for Gray's uncles, and the boy "thrilled" to see the colored ribbons his dad brought home to their two-floor apartment on Manhattan's upper West Side. Then one day at school, he entered the art room and smeared paints across his abdomen—"a highly sensual experience, I was in love with paint," he recalled to Weber.

In college at Princeton, he developed a lifelong fascination with Chinese and Japanese painting and philosophy, writing his thesis on Yuan Dynasty landscape painting. He was also inspired by Paul Cézanne, Lyonel Feininger and John Marin, whom he met when the American modernist paid a visit to Princeton. "It was really Marin who gave him that sense of using line as a vital line," says

Whisper, 1967, aluminum paint, acrylic on linen, 110 x 80 inches

George Lechner, an art history professor at the University of Hartford who served as Gray's archivist and assistant during the artist's last nine years.

After the United States entered World War II, Gray enlisted in the Army in 1942. The French he'd learned from a childhood governess came in handy as he worked nights decoding messages out of French and German, says his widow, Francine Gray. This left his days free. In London in 1943, he sketched buildings bombed by Germans. Arriving in Paris shortly after it was liberated in 1944, he was said to be the first American G.I. to pay visits to Pablo Picasso and Gertrude Stein. But the life-changing experience for Gray was meeting the Cubist painter Jacques Villon, Marcel Duchamp's brother.



Ceres 16, 1967, acrylic on duck, 81.75 x 80 inches.

Gray spent nearly every weekend with Villon while stationed in Paris. They were both gentle, reclusive, cultured men. "He was very much a father figure to him," Francine says. Gray imbibed the French painter's "intense" sense of color. Back in New York after the war, he painted the London ruins he'd seen in 1943 with sunny yellows, pinks and greens as part-Cubist, part-realist depictions of the shattered buildings. And he painted vultures hovering over piles of Holocaust victims in works he titled *Refuse* and *Carrion*.

After a stint in Arizona, staying with an heiress with whom he'd sojourned before the war, and a trip to Paris and Italy that she funded, his parents bought him a 135-acre farm with a 1799 fieldstone house and several barns in Warren, Conn., for his 30th birthday. There he raised cattle for eight years in the 1950s and painted Cubist-inspired portraits (Mahler, Bartók), figures (Gandhi), and landscapes. "The main goal of my work at that point was to try to reconcile Western with Oriental art," Gray said.

Gray told Weber that he "never regretted" publishing *Narcissus in Chaos*. "I have changed my mind, but I would hate to feel I've never changed my mind." Weber says, "It was the narcissism in expressionism that threw him off. Like many great artists, he was between abstraction and representation. He was always pushing forward; he was always experimenting; he was always going in new directions."

Gray thinned his oil paints (in 1967 he switched to acrylics) with turpentine to create washes and clouds of pigment, with colors underneath glowing up through to the surface. On top, he splashed and scrawled stripes and tangles of lines. "The background of these paintings vibrates with energies set up by the brushwork and the underpainting," Gray said. "My void always has to be an active void, so that you have a background of space, not of flatness." His abstractions recall paintings of Adolph Gottlieb, Hans Hofmann and Gray's friend Robert Motherwell.

He also acknowledged the influence of Japanese scroll painting. His compositions sometimes suggest Zen gardens, like those he visited at Kyoto, Japan, in 1982. His abstract shapes could be rocks or other features isolated asymmetrically in open expanses. "The sensation you have as you meditated on these objects," Gray said of the gardens, "contains the sensation of the void between them, a kind of transparency."

In 1962, Barnett Newman was visiting Gray's cramped garage studio. "This is a rotten place to work in," Francine recalls Newman saying. "You're looking out on nature! Nature is any artist's worst enemy. You've got big, big paintings inside you, and they'll never break out if you remain in this poky French place." Newman promptly went into Gray's house and called architect and minimalist sculptor Tony Smith to design a renovation of the old hay barn. It ended up being 2,000 square feet with windows along one side. Gray often painted on the floor or on canvases stapled directly to the wall. There was a sound system to listen to Bartók, Mahler, Bruckner. He'd turn on fans and open up doors and then perhaps grab lunch as he waited for layers to dry so he could begin to paint atop them.

Francine recalls that she and Gray would often pass at breakfast each morning, then spend the day working separately, he painting in the new studio, she writing in his old studio, before meeting up for dinner. Occasionally he'd ask her advice on a troublesome painting. "He in turn was my first editor," Francine says. "Anything I wrote, before I sent it out, I'd give it to him to read."

In paintings of the 1960s, Gray thought for a while of

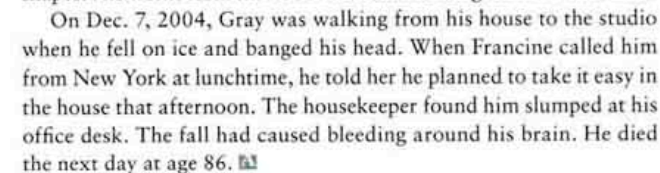
galaxies and "the void." He told Weber, "I've always wanted to make images that would help to move the spectator into a world of contemplation, so that they could relate themselves, almost physically, to the work." In the '70s, Gray painted stripes, then scrawled tumbleweeds over open expanses. "Really the central issue in his art was nature," Lechner says, "and the human relationship to nature."

Gray had begun a series of nine-foot-square paintings, each dominated by a single large calligraphic vertical mark, when Bryan Robertson, the founding director of the Neuberger Museum, visited his studio and in 1972 invited Gray to make paintings to fill a whole museum gallery. Gray worked on site, mixing paint in children's plastic swimming pools and applying it with janitors' push brooms. The 14 finished 20-foot-square paintings encircle you. Giant verticals of blue and black and ochre and red—for blood and life—dance across humming fields of color.

"It was a goddess, it was a tree—which comes right out of Greek myth, right?—but I also thought of them as pillars in a cathedral, which hold up the vault and give it its presence," Gray told Weber. "But it was also and especially a dance of death." Francine says ,"When he was offered to do that big room in Purchase, he decided to do it as a kind of tribute to the men who had been lost on both sides" of the Vietnam War. "I'm sure he came under some accusations because there were some right-wing people at Purchase. They once found a sign saying, 'Go home, you Commie.' Because they didn't like the idea that he was mourning the loss of life on both sides. But that was very much Cleve."

Gray had touched on the growing American engagement in Vietnam with his 1963 abstraction *Reverend Quan Duc*, named for the Vietnamese monk who famously burned himself to death in 1963. He co-founded a northwest Connecticut chapter of Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam and was twice jailed for protesting the war at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. "I know perfectly well art does not move the world; it doesn't change society," Gray said. "But it can help to elevate the human spirit."

Critical reception for Gray's art was often mixed, hampered in part by his arriving at his version of Abstract Expressionism a decade late. Hilton Kramer panned *Threnody* in The New York Times, calling it "little more than a decorative parody of the Abstract Expressionist style." Those words continued to sting for years despite accolades from elsewhere. In the *New York Post*, Emily Genauer said the paintings "constitute the most moving and beautiful mural project in the country." In *New York* magazine, Gray's friend Thomas B. Hess, the former editor of *Artnews*, described it as "the largest suite of abstract paintings designed for a public, architectural role ever created" and "as moving as the famous murals Mark Rothko painted for his chapel in Houston."



As he moved into the 1980s, Gray painted abstracted tombstones and bodies as the contemplated the Jewish cemetery in Prague and the Holocaust. The next decade found him thrusting single big brushstrokes horizontally across canvases, and then painting big floating shapes. His works from the 2000s were kinetic tangles of oil-stick lines.

On Dec. 7, 2004, Gray was walking from his house to the studio when he fell on ice and banged his head. When Francine called him from New York at lunchtime, he told her he planned to take it easy in the house that afternoon. The housekeeper found him slumped at his office desk. The fall had caused bleeding around his brain. He died the next day at age 86.

From top: *IOS #2*, 1964, oil on linen, 24 x 18 inches;
Considering All Possible Worlds #4, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 70 inches.