

WILLEM DE LOOPER, A TRIBUTE

“People relate to my work on a subconscious level. Often they point out that it is the color that drew them into the painting.”

—Willem de Looper, 1995

Color has always been essential to Willem de Looper’s art. In the 1960s, he poured, rolled, sprayed, and sponged paint onto unprimed canvas, creating his first substantial body of work, which led to his identification with the Washington color school.



His improvisational approach

reflected interests in other artistic pursuits including jazz, which de Looper so admired. A decade later, de Looper brought surface texture, more structure, and a larger scale to his paintings of luminous striated fields that capture the essence of an unending vista. De Looper’s passion for music, his impressions from travels, and his reflection on the history of modern art served to shape his work in the 1980s and 1990s.

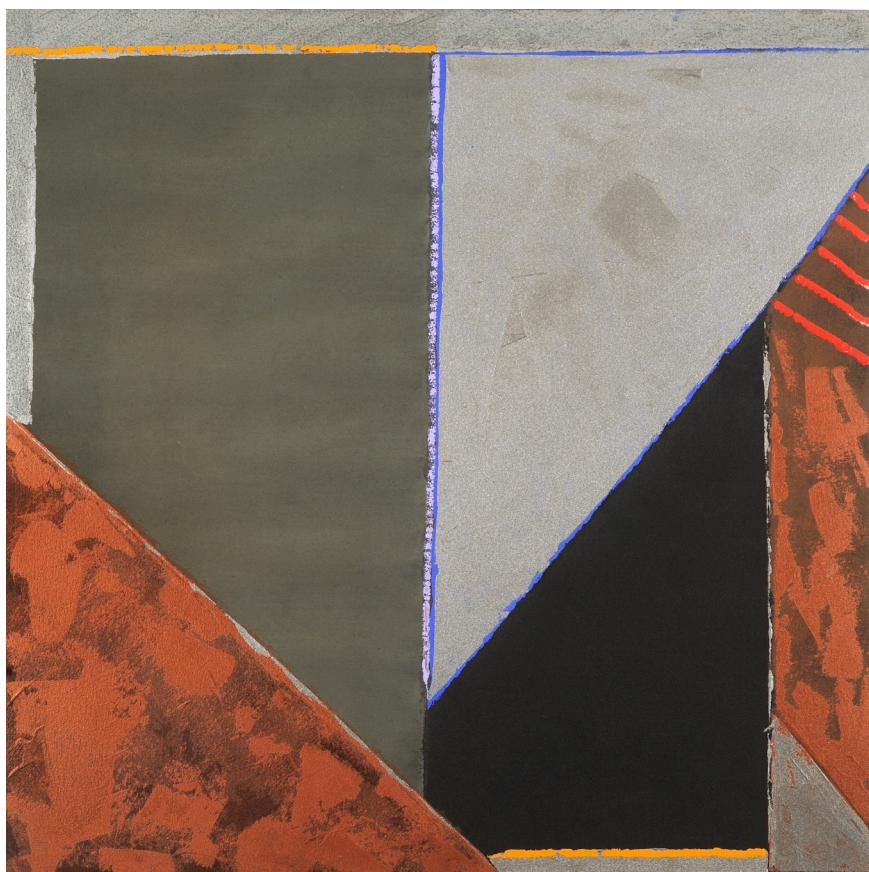
As a curator at The Phillips Collection, de Looper found constant inspiration. Works by Georges Braque, Paul Klee, Augustus Vincent Tack, and Arthur Dove, as well as Matisse and Mondrian, resonated with him as he considered his own work. Architectural references are evident in several works from the late 80s, as seen in *Mountain Lake 3* and *Mountain Lake 4* (*pages 8–9*), which feature textured and patterned rectangles adjoined to matte geometric color fields. These paintings reflect a time when de Looper experimented with a brighter palette that included metallic paint, a more varied compositional structure, and a marked freedom of brushwork.

By the 1990s, de Looper shifted and blended influences in his work. A construction of simplified geometric forms, *Untitled VI*,

1993 (*page 22*), hints to architecture observed on a trip to the Southwest. Two Untitled, 1990 pieces (*page 13*), works on paper painted in acrylic, share the same size and format and appear as a pair. Their zigzag and structured forms composed of matte, textured, and metallic surfaces frame in one version a dark, and in the other, a light geometric shape placed at center. Adding depth, this shape opens up an architectural space, which in one lets in the night, and in the other the day. This idea of pairing continues in Untitled, 1997 (*page 21*) and Untitled, 1997 (*page 20*), two later works that show the rhythmic movement of dark and light volumes, pushing in and out of pictorial space, framing an opening to the sky patterned by rain. An invitation into a sacred Kiva, an underground room used by Hopi and Pueblo people for religious ritual, left an impact on de Looper's art seen in Untitled, 1999 (*page 11*), which produces the sensation of standing in this structure looking up to the clouds. Untitled, 1993 (*page 24*) positions the viewer outside of the structure and draws attention to the inside.

Freedom and improvisation sweep through many of these works such as Untitled, 1992 (*page 18*) and Untitled, 1992 (*page 19*), which compositionally share an abundance of color, pattern, and texture. The pulsating and rhythmic shapes of Indigo, 1990, (*page 16*) evoke the great jazz standard *Mood Indigo* by D.C. native Duke Ellington. Early on, musical heroes Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonious Monk captured de Looper's imagination, coaxing him to America where he began his artistic journey. Throughout his career, de Looper listened to their music while he painted, because it offered endless inspiration and opened up experimental ways for him to approach color and format in his art.

By Renée Maurer
Assistant Curator
The Phillips Collection



"Mountain Lake #3," 1989 acrylic on canvas over board 36" x 36"



"Mountain Lake #4," 1989 acrylic on canvas over board 36" x 36"