

# Willem de Looper

Jack Rasmussen, Director and Curator

American University Museum

Washington, D.C. 20016

April 1–May 18, 2008



Willem de Looper. *Untitled XI*, November 1965. 46 x 32 in. Acrylic on canvas.

# Introduction

Willem de Looper is one of the most important and influential artists working in Washington, D.C., over the last 50 years. He was associated with the Washington Color School, and with Color Field Painting in general, but de Looper followed his own muse throughout his artistic career.

Born in The Hague, Netherlands, in 1932, de Looper was an innovator in his handling of materials and an inventor of new techniques. His work always had a European flavor that set him apart from his American colleagues. The fact that he spent several decades working at the Phillips Collection, first as a guard, then assistant curator, and finally curator, no doubt reinforced his European outlook. And, more importantly for his art, it must have contributed to his brilliant color sense and his approach to abstraction as abstraction from nature rather than the complete non-objectivity his American cohorts were trying to achieve. These highly individual qualities were already fully developed in his work from the mid-1960s (*Untitled*, 1965, and *Untitled*, 1966).

De Looper graduated from American University's Department of Art in 1957. We are justifiably proud of his artistic achievements and honored to present this in-depth look at the outstanding career of one of our own. I am grateful for the generosity of Carleen and Nicholas Keating, who made this exhibition possible, and for the talent of Benjamin Forgey, who wrote the appreciation of Willem de Looper included in this catalogue. And I must especially acknowledge the unwavering support and inspiration Frauke Weber de Looper has provided her husband since the very beginning.

—Jack Rasmussen

# Interview

Willem de Looper  
Jack Rasmussen

Jack Rasmussen: I first came upon your work in Washington in 1973. Please tell me a little about where you came from.

Willem de Looper: I came to the United States from Holland in 1950. I was turning 18 and mostly did nothing for a couple of years until I started my undergraduate degree in art at American University. It was very convenient, as I was living very close to where the Katzen Arts Center is now located. I studied with the faculty at American University as a painter. Originally, actually, I studied business and economics. But that was not to be my future. My future was in art, obviously. When I changed my major it turned out to be an extremely good move because I had immediately found what I wanted to do. I had always painted, and I had drawn a lot. Drawing was something I was always attracted to both in a classical sense and a modern sense. At that time I was doing work that reflected popular culture. I copied things out of newspapers and magazines.

My interest in American culture had already started in Holland. I seemed to be the only person in Europe who forever looked at the *New Yorker* for inspiration of all types. It was mostly cultural inspiration that I looked for, including popular thought and culture. I was terribly interested in jazz, and it was my dream to come to the United States—not necessarily to become an artist, because that was not a dream until much later on, but to be informed about what was going on in America. I'd go from page to page of the *New Yorker* to learn about what New York really was and what was hip and what was contemporary and what might be of interest to me. It was of great interest to me.

JR: Tell me about your experience at American University.

WdL: It was a very small university at that time, and the art department was certainly not something to rave about in physical terms but the teaching is what stuck with me. I was especially interested in studying with Ben Summerford. He gave me tremendous inspiration. He was a very good spokesman for art in a sense. Interestingly enough, he also in some ways had a European background—he'd studied in France



Willem de Looper. *Untitled*, May 1966. 61 x 50 1/2 in. Acrylic on canvas.

with the GI bill and of course my background was European. At the end of the '50s, I started working at the Phillips Collection, which was the other major influence in my life, really. At AU, the teaching was relatively conservative. I imagine to a lot of people it would have been very conservative just a few years later.

JR: But in terms of Washington at that time it was really the only modern art department going. Corcoran they were drawing from casts.

WdL: That's right. No, we never did anything as silly as that. We did do a lot of drawing at AU, and I remember Sarah Baker in that respect. She is sometimes overlooked, I suppose, but she was a very good teacher. Her background was European, too, in the sense that she spent time in France. She had a great interest in drawing and encouraged it very much. She was very tough to deal with sometimes because she was very outspoken and she was not easy on the students at all. She would as soon praise you as knock you down a notch, but you learned a lot from her. (At least, that's the way I felt about that. That was in a more traditional sort of way.)

I learned a lot at AU—I learned a lot in a hurry, and I changed my mind a lot. In other words, I used my time in school wisely because I tried to learn what I could, and AU allowed me to do that. Nobody told me what to do. Everybody let me be myself and that was the wonderful thing about AU. So I needed to explore things that I wanted to explore, but these things were often in my own mind. They often had to do with European art, too, which was not really popular at all in the United States, but it was nevertheless my background. Expressionism was one area I wanted to explore: interesting color and contrast and painting with lots of impasto, which became something that American University became well-known for. I went through that myself, and that kind of painting would become hard to reconcile with what came very soon after that.

JR: Can we talk about the early flower-like painting (*Untitled XI*, 1965; see p. 2)? Is that very soon after you left AU?

WdL: Yes, it was my way to get to abstraction, which I always wanted to do from the very beginning. I wanted to be an abstract painter, a non-figurative painter. I was never interested in becoming a figurative painter despite my attempts at that. I was interested in Kandinsky and I was interested in Kupka—people like that who were again not exactly the kind of artists that most people would look at here in the United States. We were all looking in America to Abstract Expressionism, which came to me in the late '50s when I saw a very famous exhibition that the Museum of Modern Art circulated throughout Europe and that made the cover of *Time* magazine. I happened to see that exhibition in Brussels, and it made a big impression on me. It was the first time I saw people like Rothko and Still and Motherwell and Kline.

I tried to approach abstraction in terms of painting landscape-like and flower-like images. This is an example of a flower that can be read both as a flower and as a total abstraction.



Willem de Looper, *Purple Veil*, 1970. 81 1/2 x 67 in. Acrylic on canvas.

Of course, that in itself is not unique, either—there were many other painters who went that route. For me, there has to be a connection between pure abstraction and what you put on the canvas, and this was the way I did it.

In this painting there were already two things that I was very interested in. I was interested from the very beginning in staining. In the early years, I couldn't afford a lot of canvas so I painted a lot on paper, big sheets of paper. I painted with oil and with lots of turpentine. In other words, I was always trying to stain, and that had nothing to do with what they were doing at the Jefferson Place Gallery. It's just something I like to do. I like to paint very thinly and I like to overlap things. You can see that here, too (*Untitled*, May 1966; see p. 4). You can see distinct shapes. Overlapping gives you a third dimension and that was an outgrowth of the kind of painting that I learned at AU.

In another way, you see it showed what would become a very important part of my painting career. All my life from then on, I painted small paintings—5" x 7" or 8" x 10"—that were original and were never meant to be sketches for a larger project. I've never made sketches for anything, even when I did commissions later on. I've always liked to work very spontaneously and without much intellectual preparation, and that was the case with these as well.

JR: At some point you left the more defined kind of form for a more all-over or even a completely stained technique (*Purple Veil*, 1970; see p. 7).

WdL: Well, that's partly due to the fact that I developed very rapidly. I never stuck to a new style very long. There were other experiments with color—for instance, with acrylic paint, which was invented in the '50s. I came to it in the late '50s through having seen other painters use it, including Morris Louis. I try to remind people of the fact that I was pretty much starting out when Morris Louis was already almost dead. We have this busi-ness of the Washington Color School and my connections to it. The connections are there, but they are very flimsy in a way—if looked at in terms of who came along when.

JR: Do you think there even was a Washington Color School in the sense of artists working together in a similar way? I understood the school label was dreamt up and applied from the outside.

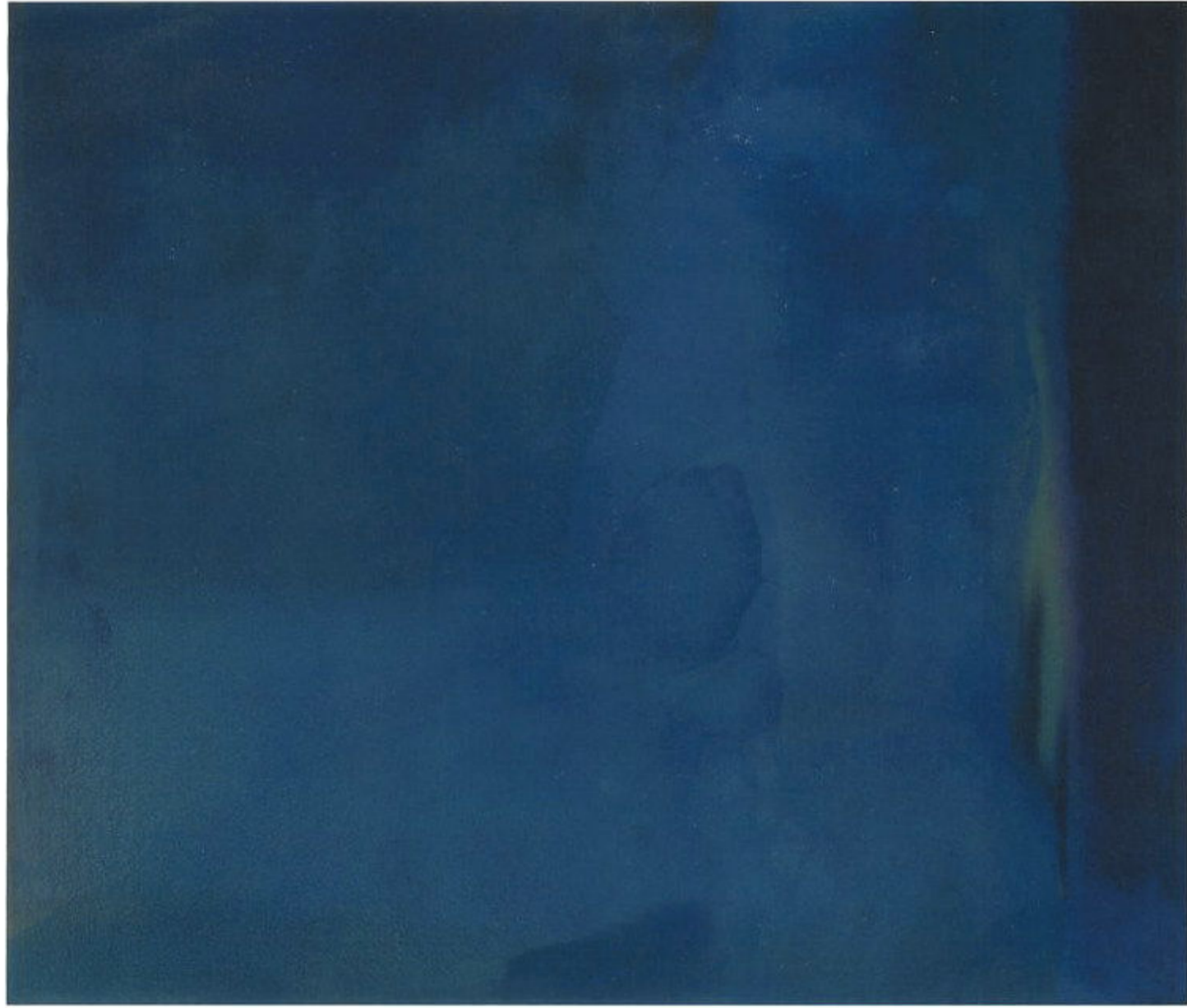
WdL: I think it was applied from the outside, and it was perpetuated by whoever was writing for the *Post* and for the *Star* and not so much by the artists. The artists were not very much influenced by each other. In fact, having been in the Jefferson Place Gallery for all those years, I never found too much of a bond between many of those painters. If anything, they had some conflicts. Certainly we had things in common and we had a general philosophy, perhaps. For instance, Tom Downing from Catholic University had an influence on certain painters as a teacher.

JR: Was he about the same age as you or a little older?

WdL: About the same, but I was like a beginner compared to Tom Downing, who was already a mature artist. Now I don't know if that's being overly modest, but I saw it that



Willem de Looper. *Untitled*, 1970. 75 1/4 x 84 in. Acrylic on canvas.



Willem de Looper. *Toujours*, 1971. 78 x 66 1/2 in. Acrylic on canvas.

way. I didn't have that with Sam Gilliam because we started with the same exhibition, in fact. The first time we ever showed was a three-person exhibition at the Jefferson Place Gallery. Sally Kearsly was the third person, who has long ago disappeared, and Sam and me. At the time of the show, Alice Denney was no longer running the Jefferson Place Gallery. It was Nesta Dorrance.

JR: Could we talk about another stained painting in the show, the red one? (*Untitled*, 1970; see p. 9).

WdL: That particular red painting was significant for me in the sense that it became an all-over painting. It has a lot of texture and it has very thick areas because the painting was a total failure and I went back into it to try and salvage it... which was against the "rules" of stained painting.

JR: Yes. Going back into it would be cheating.

WdL: That's right, exactly, you didn't do that, you see. You either did the one-shot thing or you didn't do it at all. Now I don't know if it's that daring or not, but I figure a painting is not finished until you figure it's finished, and so you work on it until it falls together, and that's what I did.

JR: So is this painting a kind of a jumping off point for your later work where you left staining?

WdL: Yes it is. The painting liberated me from the thought that either you are a color painter or you are not a color painter. You're just a painter, you see, and these things happen as you think about your painting and not the way another person thinks about it. The rules that you follow are the rules that you make for yourself, and so I decided to keep on painting. I finally tied it all together by painting it all red, despite what was underneath, you see? I don't know if that is significant to you, but to me it seemed to be very significant that I just ignored the distinction between the staining part and the textural part. I tied it all together with color. In many other paintings in the exhibition, like *Purple Veil*, 1970 (p. 7), you can see that I used color to ultimately tie the piece together and make it successful or not. It is just like an old-fashioned oil painting where you continue with the painting and don't give up on it. That was actually a rather important discovery for me. I had to ignore what other people said about staining or what other people did with their canvases. My paintings were obviously not one-shot paintings. It was a different kind of painting.

JR: Tell me about *Toujours*, 1971 (p. 10).

WdL: It is a stain painting which, in fact, has a ground. The red painting in a sense started my use of grounds. The secondary layer became the ground and that became the ground for the next layer.

JR: Ordinarily you'd think of a ground as something like gesso covering a raw canvas. Are you gessoing now or are you working with different layers of paint underneath?

WdL: Sometimes they have a gesso ground, and in some instances I used gesso not as a ground but as a color. I've never distinguished much between white paint and white gesso. I've always figured they are two whites and nobody will ever know whether you used white as a gesso or you mixed it in with your color. There is a white painting in the exhibition (*Untitled 8*, August 1974; see p. 13) in which I started using gesso as paint. There are also paintings in which I used the house paint I used to paint my apartment. They still look like they are in pretty good shape. I read that Van Gogh painted so quickly that everything sort of dried at the same time, and it all sort of meshed together, and maybe that's the case with my paintings, too.

JR: Your paintings have held together pretty well.

WdL: I never took the materials and techniques classes at AU. Bill Woodward took them from Robert Gates, another important AU art professor at the time. But, somehow, I trusted myself. I believed in improvisation.

JR: When did you start using rollers to apply your paint?

WdL: Well, I was trying to figure that out. In this painting (*Untitled*, Feb. 1974; see p. 14), there is clearly under-painting, and it probably went through a number of changes in several days. These paintings, by the way are never paintings that have been painted on for very long, even the largest ones. I used acrylic and painted in very thin layers.

JR: So in this one you are more overtly using the qualities of a roller. What brought you to do that? What was your inspiration?

WdL: I don't know. It was partly because I used the roller itself as measure in 12 inches, and I liked that you could see it as a measure against the infinity of the canvas. So I could vary its form layer to layer and give distance to these layers as well.

The roller thing actually came about almost by accident because it's Will Brunner, another painter, who gave me a roller, one of those long ones that you use for painting between radiators. I started using it and I immediately loved it because it became an extension of my arm. You could actually manipulate the paint very easily with it, at least I could, and I liked that you could paint with the edge of it, for instance, and you could make a very broad area of color.

I also used the floor. All these paintings were done on the floor (*Untitled II*, 1980; see p. 17). And I was able to make accents, also, with the tip. I've never found the roller to be anything less than very flexible, and I've painted little paintings with the roller that you wouldn't think you could do, because it's so clumsy you see this big thing on a stick, but I could manipulate it very nicely. You can make the edges harder or softer.



Willem de Looper. *Untitled 8*, August 1974. 74 x 95 in. Acrylic on canvas.

JR: How about this painting with the startling yellow in *Yellow Rectangle*, 1980 (p. 18)?

WdL: I often discovered a color by mixing things in my painting tray, you see? I would mess with it and put more white in, more yellow, more red, whatever, and in this particular case it came out to be these beige kinds of colors that have much more texture than the grays that are in the painting, but basically they are the same color except that the grays don't have the brown in them. And so, I used the beige colors as a unifying thing again.

JR: But I would say the yellow is a dis-unifying theme.

WdL: But why that became yellow I don't know. I've hardly ever used yellow. All of a sudden I used it, and I liked it and it just did something, maybe to just prove that the painting had nothing to do with Mondrian. I always had trouble explaining that to people who don't know anything about painting. They'd say, "Oh that's like a Mondrian," but it's not like a Mondrian at all.

JR: So who were your influences at this time? I know you were working at the Phillips Collection.

WdL: Well, I think in some ways I learned the most in the years that I was with Max Protech and then with Nancy Drysdale because they showed such interesting artists—real, living artists that were showing in the same gallery with me. I've always been a little confused about the influence of minimalism on my work. But I certainly became interested in Sol Lewitt and Robert Mangold because they were actually showing at Protech. And Shapiro—I had a show together with Miriam Shapiro at the Max Protech Gallery.

JR: So what happened next? (*Untitled III*, 1982-1984; see p. 21; *Tunis*, May 1983; see p. 22; and *Untitled*, 1985; see p. 23)

WdL: Well, I kept stubbornly painting. I had done enough rectangular paintings and slowly they became curves, and it's really as simple as that. And then I started squeezing paint directly from the tube onto the canvas.

JR: You have these large, flat areas and a kind of geometric background, and then you do these gestures with the paint right out of the tube?

WdL: Right. I was showing these at the Komblatt Gallery in Washington, D.C. To sort of interrupt myself, I do think there is a playfulness in my work. This is especially true of my small works, which are not really represented in this show. Like many other painters in Washington, I was a guard at the Phillips Collection. I was painting and drawing all the time on a small scale. They were not necessarily studies for the larger paintings. I used them to leap into certain directions I wanted to explore.

JR: Tell me about *The Duke*, 1989 (p. 24) and *Brooklyn Bridge*, 1990 (p. 27).



Willem de Looper. *Untitled*, February 1974. 87 x 87 in. Acrylic on canvas.



WdL: Those paintings actually came out of a trip to Japan. I had a whole show at Kornblatt of works which were predominately black with gold and silver, and that certainly came out of my experience in Japan... both from the paintings I saw there and from the architecture. These paintings were done on a board. So, instead of painting with a roller, I painted with a palette knife, or a spatula—you know, stuff that people use to spackle their ceilings. I was thinking of that the other day. It's really a house painter's tool. You can do that very well on board.

JR: There is a very nice, a very lovely kind of balance going on in this painting. It seems different from the architecture of the earlier ones.

WdL: I've always liked this particular one. It reminded me of the 1920s. It reminded me of Jean Cocteau.

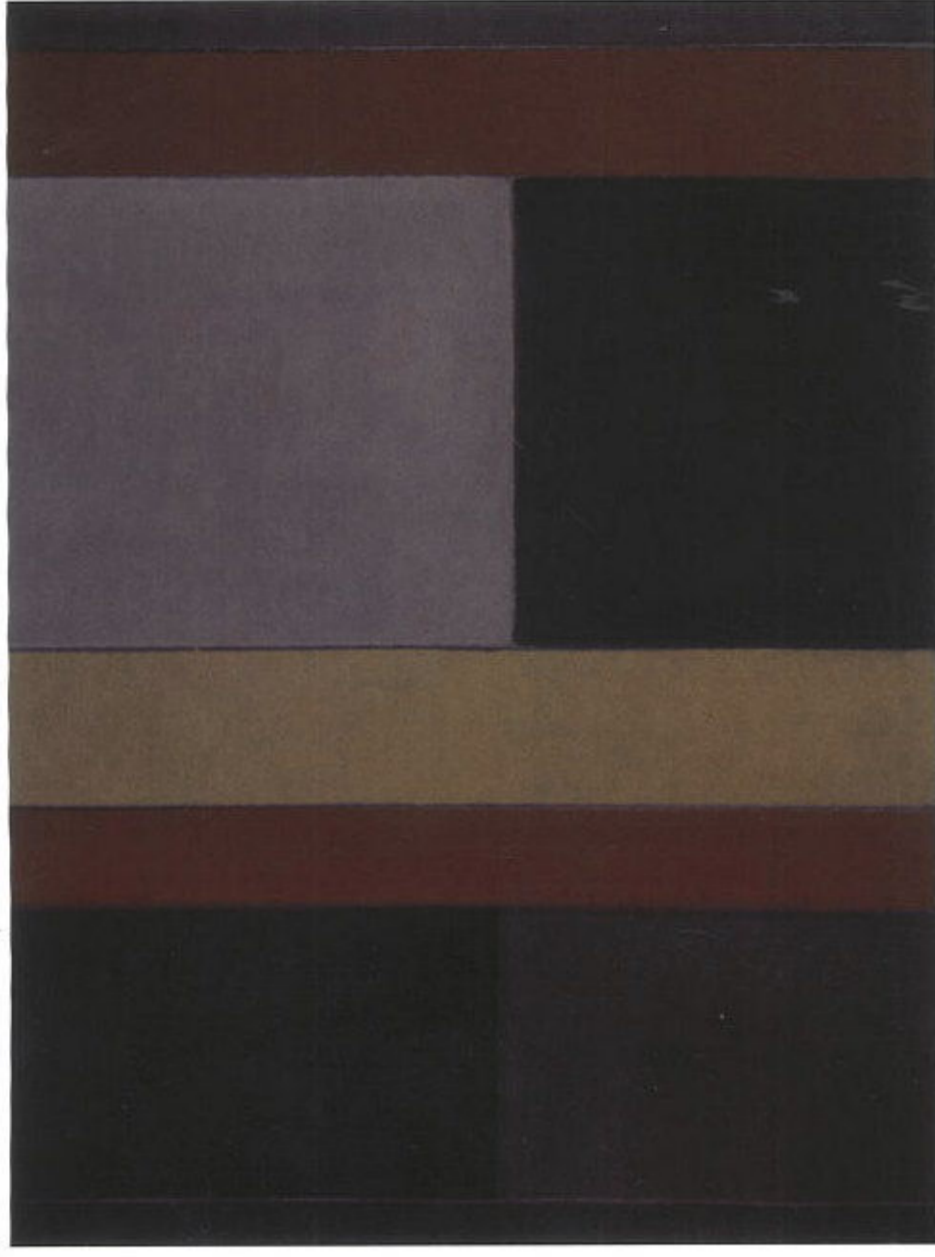
JR: Not Duke Ellington?

WdL: I think it might be obvious, but I go very much by feeling about color and about form. I have no idea how I come up with something like this, why this painting and the one before are so different in composition—that was not really my intention, but that's the way it turned out. That's the mystery of art.

JR: You went by feeling, but you also went by an incredible knowledge of art. I mean having worked at the Phillips Collection everyday surrounded by masterpieces of color and composition.

WdL: That made an enormous difference to me. I don't know of anybody who has been as influenced by a whole museum as I have been. It went into my pores from the very beginning. It's really interesting because it was never meant to be, but then how many things are meant to be?

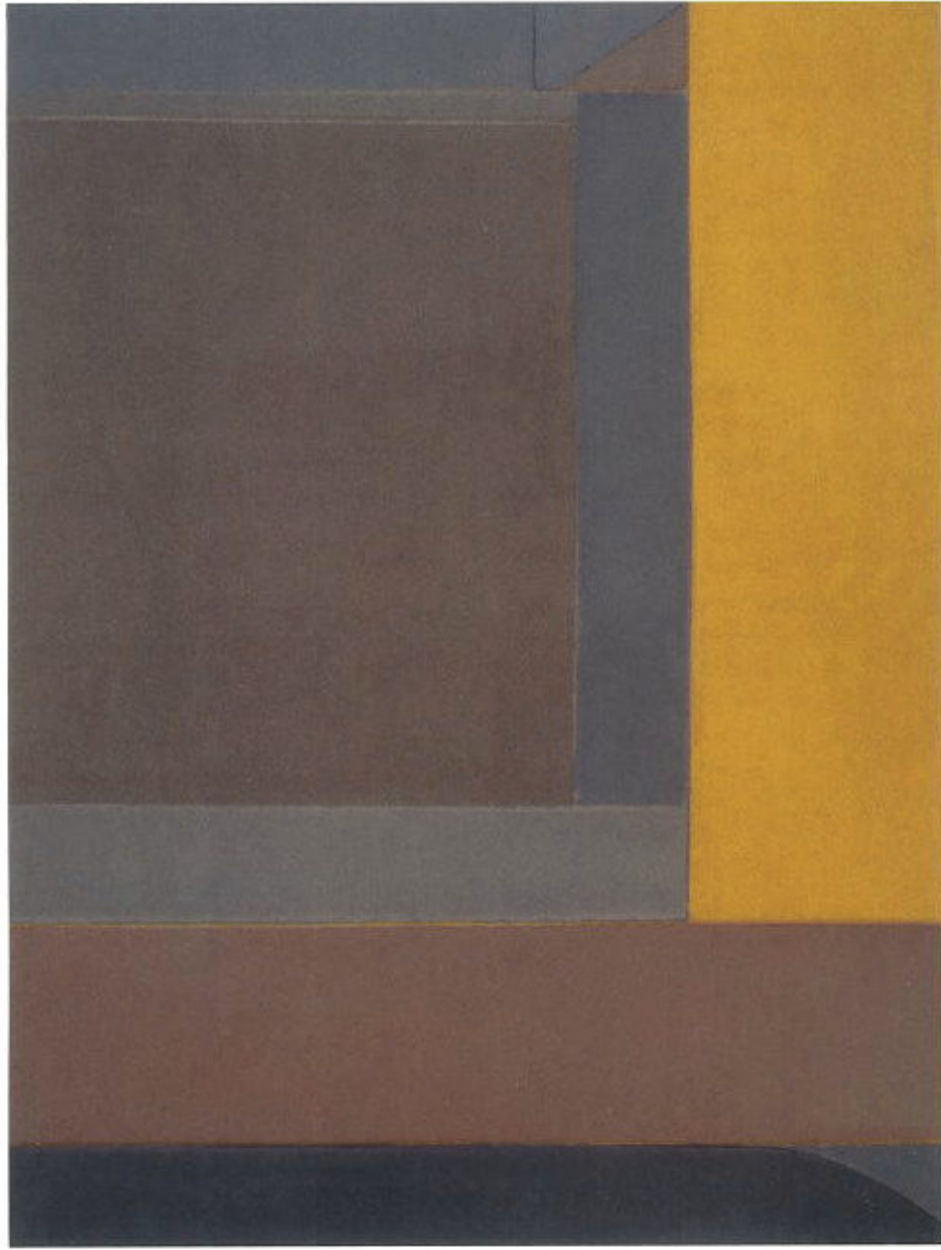
December 21, 2007  
Washington, D.C.



Willem de Looper. *Untitled II*, 1980. 72 x 96 in. Acrylic on canvas.

# A Tribute to a Painting, and a Painter

by Benjamin Forgey



Willem de Looper: *Yellow Rectangle*; 21 July 1980. 72 1/4 x 96 in. Acrylic on canvas.

A painting by Willem de Looper has been a presence in the Forgey household since 1967, enlivening dinners with friends, serving as a poignant gauge of time and times passing in dozens of family photographs, and providing countless private moments of pleasure and contemplation. The painting has, like the artist himself, become a friend, replete with idiosyncracies and surprises.

The acquisition was for us a notable event. Gabriella and I purchased it from Willem's Jefferson Place Gallery exhibition that year, to celebrate our marriage. To get this gift to ourselves from gallery to apartment wall only the best transport would do, of course, so with the help of Willem and Frauke, his wife and our friend, too, we carried it down the stairwell from Jefferson Place's second-story P Street abode and smuggled it carefully into the back seat of Frauke's open convertible. It was a short but cinematic trip around Dupont Circle to New Hampshire Avenue, with the sun shining on busy Washington all around. Definitely, we had fun.

The painting, untitled, measures nearly five feet high by about seven across, and it contains in unison many of the grace notes that were to distinguish de Looper's art, in all of its many mutations, from that time forward: sinuous line, sensuous colors in rich combination, rhythmic variations, a sense of mystery, a defiant touch of elegance, and, perhaps above all, the indelible presence of this painter's hand.

Willem at the time was decisively breaking from his American University background of tactile representation based in Abstract Expressionism and stepping into the domain of pure abstraction. Like many Washington painters of the day, de Looper was stimulated by the Color School painters who had preceded him by a few years on the Washington stage, most notably in the practice of staining acrylic paints directly into the fabric of untreated canvas. But de Looper was by no means simply a "second generation" color schooler, a label sometimes attached to his name (and many others) in the late 1960s. In that key '67 Jefferson Place show, he was simultaneously tipping his hat to and declaring his independence from these Washington progenitors by emphasizing syncopation and painterly improvisa-

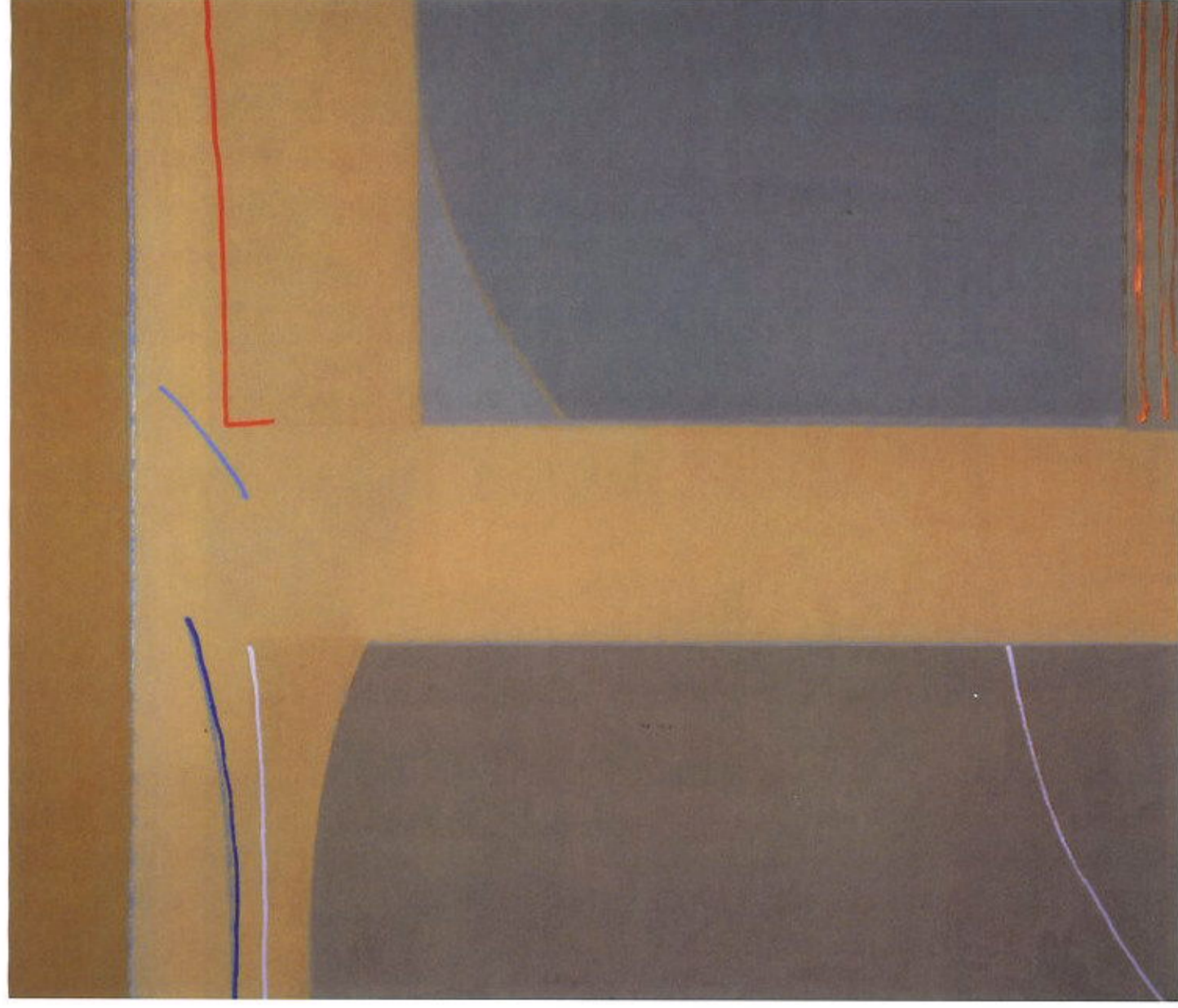
tion over geometry and system and technique. De Loopers were always de Loopers, even then.

In the mid-1970s, when the painter did turn his mind, eye, brush, and roller for an extended period to a more or less predetermined geometrical format—large horizontal canvases covered edge to edge with parallel horizontal bands—the result was a majestic series of paintings that caught the light (and the viewer's eye) with the amazing subtlety of their textures and tonalities. It would be hard to imagine geometrical paintings more different in intent and effect from, say, the horizontal stripe paintings of Kenneth Noland. De Looper's stripes were thoroughly abstract, and yet saturated with an individual sensibility. Sometimes, much to the artist's displeasure, critics likened them to landscapes. Literally, the analogy failed—clearly these are not depictions of reality. But metaphorically the suggestion makes sense. In their profound serenity, insistent horizontality, and embrace of natural light, the paintings convey an intense awareness both of pure painting and of experience of the natural world. They are the "landscapes" of an educated eye and a sophisticated mind.

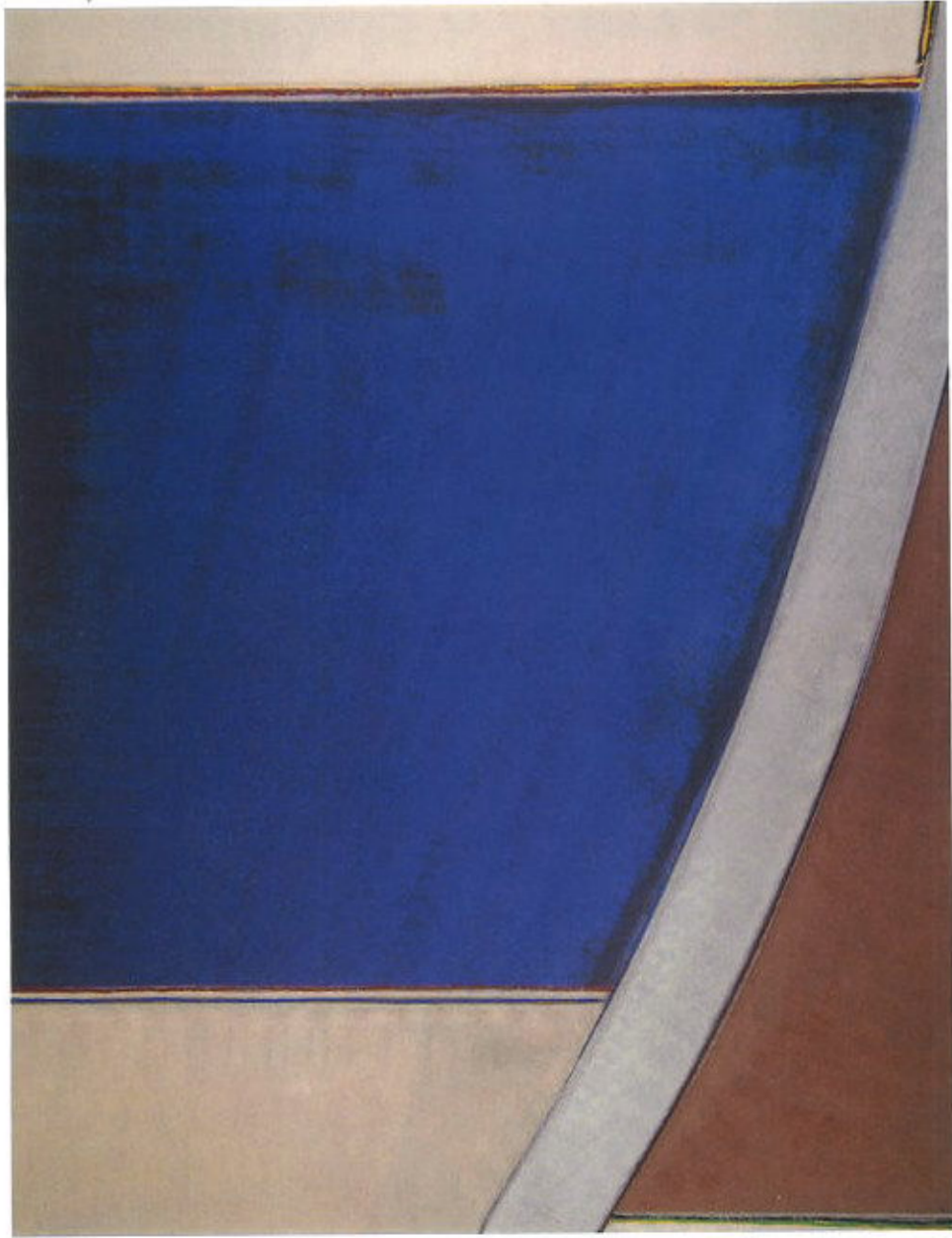
A more far-fetched analogy, to the parallel lines of a musical staff, is useful only to focus on de Looper's visual musicality, if such it can be called. Biographically, the association with music is richly documented—De Looper's vast collection of jazz 78s, LPs, and cds is legendary in the art world, and rare is the visit to his apartment/studio that is unaccompanied by a sound track personally selected by the artist. But it is in the art where the association is most profound; the highly musical characteristics of tonality, texture, contrast, movement, and pause are intrinsic to his art. All those, and, perhaps most importantly, improvisation. In the late 1970s, as de Looper freed himself from the rigors of a preset geometry, his canvases became increasingly improvisational—a process that itself is, as the artist has often pointed out, a rigorous discipline with its own high risks and demands.

A slashing line here, altering everything. A streak of red or yellow or black, unalterable. A dense clash of boulder-like shapes, resounding. A world of possibilities, of choices to be made and lived with, always informed by an inimitable painter's eye (and ear). When standing before a de Looper, it is impossible to reconstruct precisely how the choices were made, but the daringness, surehandedness, and complexity are always appreciable. Associations come to mind, extraordinarily diverse: Noland, Jackson Pollock, Arthur Dove, Robert Motherwell, Giorgio Morandi, Wassily Kandinsky, Willem de Kooning—or even Charlie Parker and Johann Sebastian Bach. Yet always one ends with the thing itself: a de Looper.

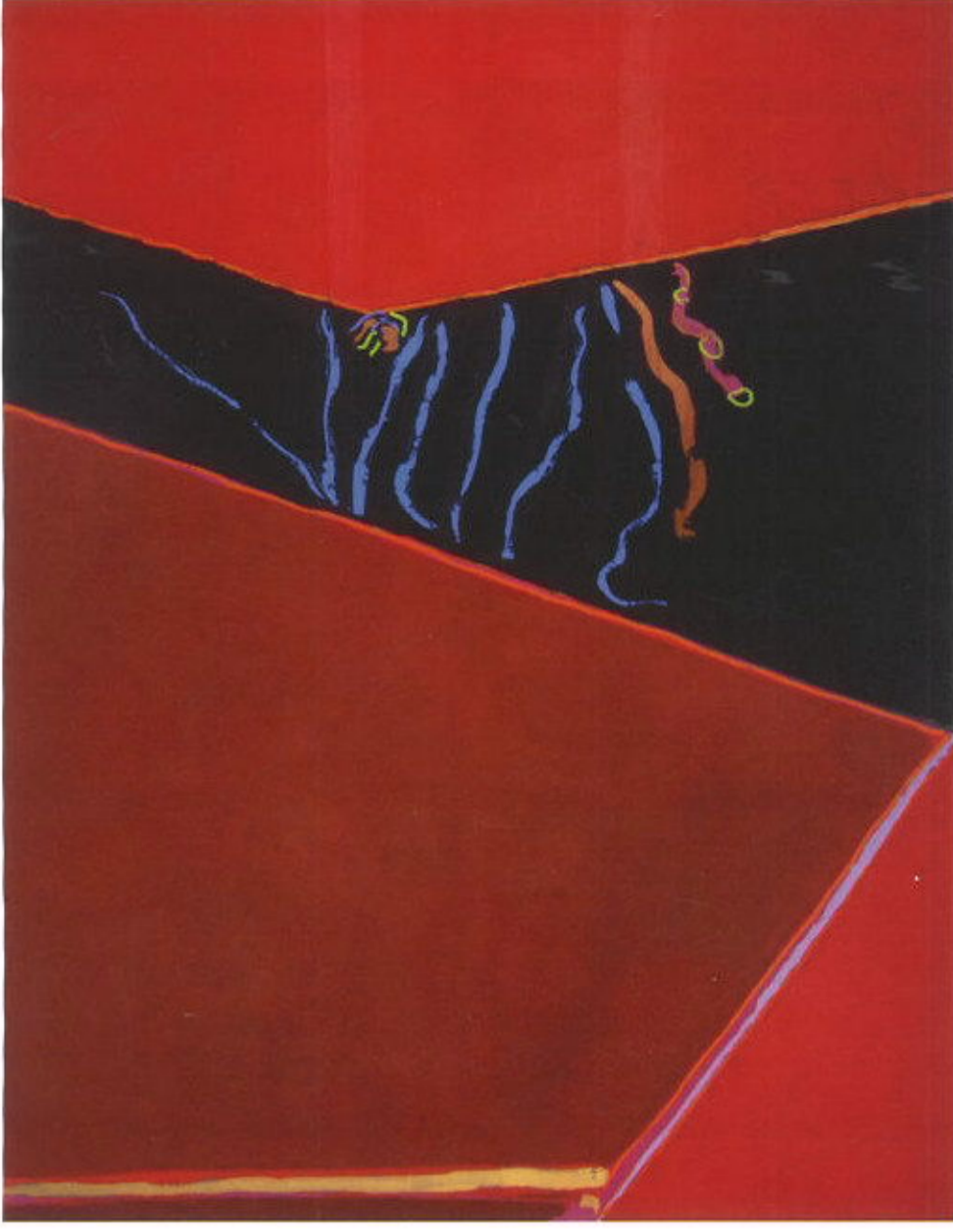
*Independent writer Benjamin Forgey was for many years an art and architecture critic for the Washington Star and Washington Post.*



Willem de Looper. *Untitled III*, 1982. 84 1/2 x 72 in. Acrylic on canvas.



Willem de Looper. *Timis, May 1983*. 78 x 96 in. Acrylic on canvas.



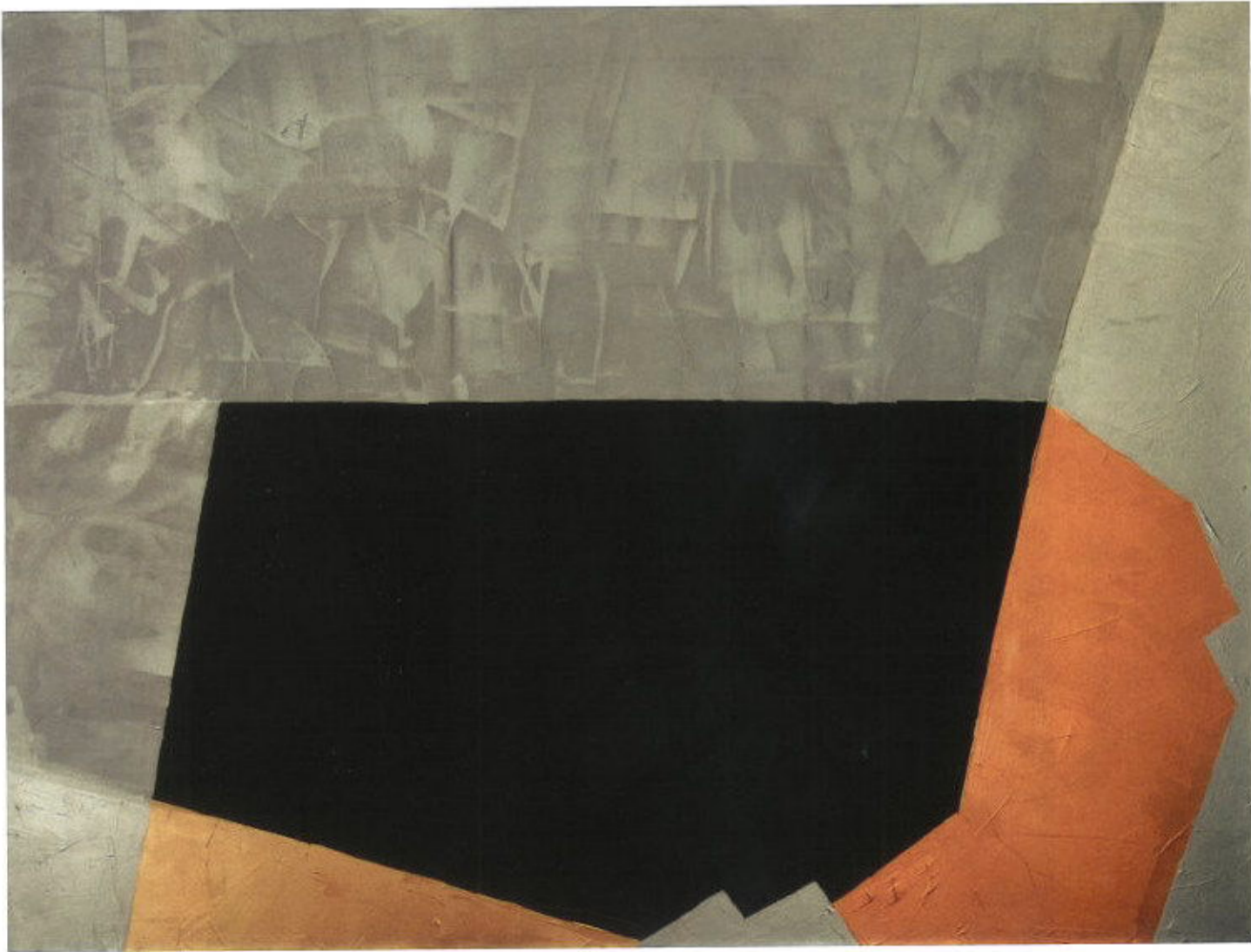
Willem de Looper. *Unritid*, 1985. 78 x 100 in. Acrylic on canvas.

# Biography

Willem de Looper  
Born in The Hague, Netherlands  
American University, BA, College of Arts and Science, 1957

## SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

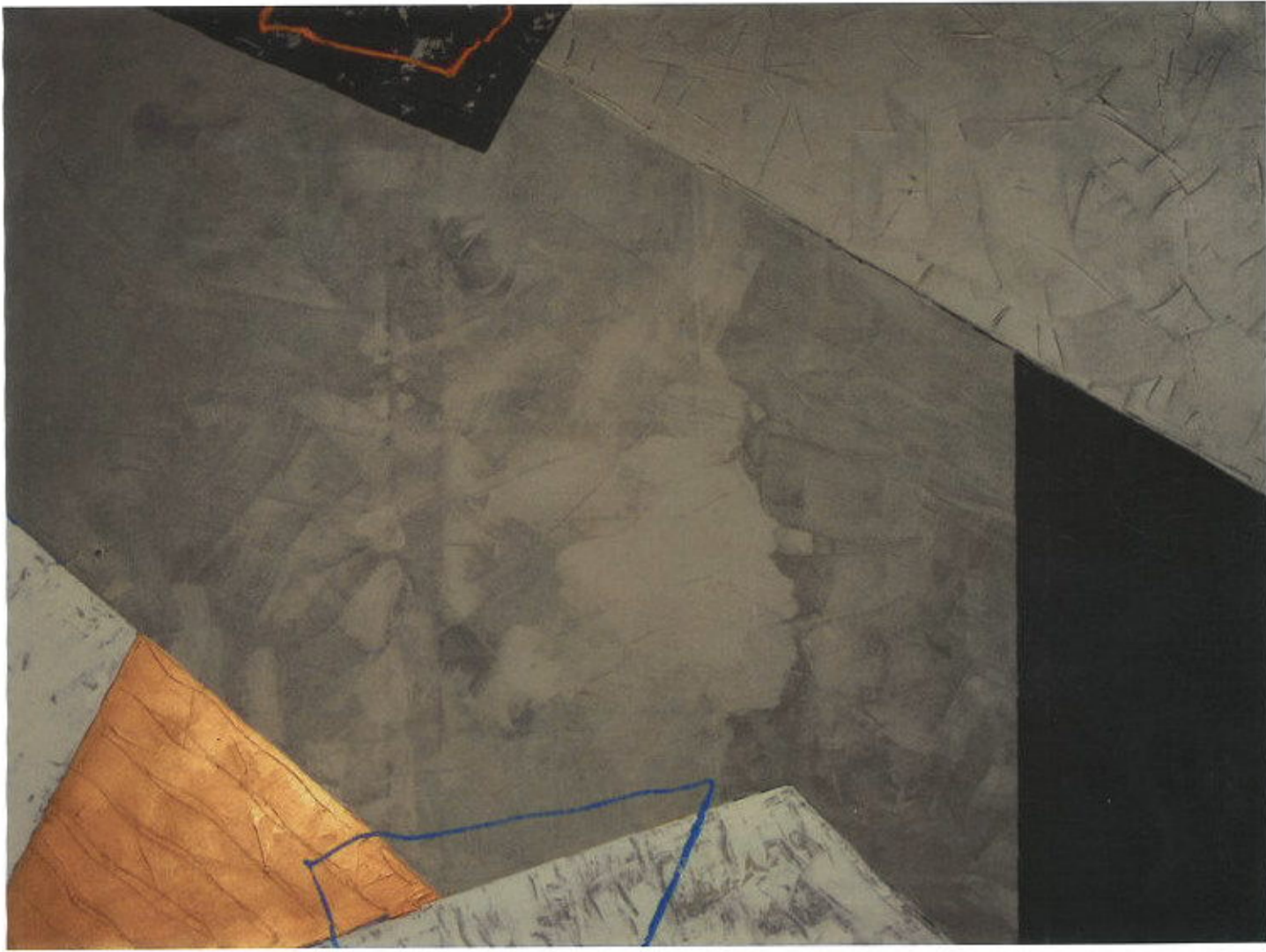
- Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.  
1965, 1967, 1976, 1980, 1985
- Jefferson Place Gallery, Washington, D.C.  
1966, 1967, 1968, 1970, 1972, 1974
- Washington Gallery of Modern Art,  
Washington, D.C.  
1968
- Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Md.  
1970
- Max Protetch Gallery, Washington, D.C.  
1975, 1976, 1977, 1978
- Northern Virginia Community College,  
Annandale, Va.  
1975
- Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.  
1975, 1995-96, 2002, 2007
- Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,  
Washington, D.C.  
1976
- Fraser's Stable Gallery, Washington, D.C.  
1977
- Jean-Marie Antone Gallery, Annapolis, Md.  
1978
- Galerie L., Hamburg, West Germany  
1979
- Sarah Y. Rentschler Gallery, New York, N.Y.  
1979
- Mcintosh/Drysdale Gallery, Washington, D.C.  
1980
- B.R. Kornblatt Gallery, Washington, D.C.  
1983, 1985, 1987, 1989
- Tilghman Gallery, Boca Raton, Fla.  
1986, 1988
- Shippee Gallery, New York, N.Y.  
1988
- Troyer Fitzpatrick Lassman Gallery,  
Washington, D.C.  
1989, 1992, 1993, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998
- Atrium Gallery, St. Louis, Mo.  
1990, 1992, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2004
- Watkins Gallery, American University,  
Washington, D.C.  
1994, 2003
- National Academy of Sciences, Washington, D.C.  
1996
- The Art Gallery at the University of Maryland,  
College Park, Md.  
1996
- PASS, Washington, D.C.  
1998
- Alex Gallery, Washington, D.C.  
2000, 2001
- Galerie Sacha Tarasoff, Paris, France  
2000
- Pass Painting and Sculpture Studio, Washington,  
D.C.  
2006
- American University Museum, Washington, D.C.  
2008



Willem de Looper. *The Duke*, 1989. 80 x 60 in. Acrylic on board.

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

- Atrium Gallery, St. Louis, Mo.  
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.  
Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C.  
Federal National Mortgage Association, Washington, D.C.  
Goldman Sachs, New York, N.Y.  
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.  
National Science Foundation, Washington, D.C.  
Phillip Morris Corporation, Richmond, Va.  
Riggs National Bank, Washington, D.C.  
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.  
The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.  
The Washington Post Company, Washington, D.C.  
The World Bank, Washington, D.C.  
Watkins Collection, American University Museum, Washington, D.C.



Willem de Looper, *Brooklyn Bridge*, 1990. 80 x 60 1/2 in. Acrylic on board.

This catalogue was published in conjunction with Willem de Looper, an exhibition organized by the American University Museum, Washington, D.C.. This exhibition was on view at the American University Museum April 1–May 18, 2008.

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Cover: Willem de Looper. *Brooklyn Bridge*, 1990. 60 1/2 x 80 in. Acrylic on board.

