

Mark Tobey

The Inner Eye – The Painter Mark Tobey

I Mark Tobey took up his final residence in Basel. In the year 1960 the world-citizen moved into St. Alban-Vorstadt – a lane in which history has remained visible in an unpretentious way. The artist, who was born in the American Middle West (in the state of Wisconsin) in 1890 and passed his childhood on the Mississippi, thus drew personally closer to the middle-European cultural scene. To be sure, he permits himself to be aligned with that scene as little as he does with any other – not with the Pacific (although he had lived and taught in Seattle), not with that of New York (where he had settled as a portraitist in 1911 and in the 1940's experienced success), not with the English (he was attached to the Art School in Dartington Hall, Devonshire, between 1930 and 1937), also not with Tachisme or with the American Abstract Expressionism of the post-war period, in whose context he was often discussed. Mark Tobey was a loner whose openness was accompanied by a powerful identity. He exposed himself to the fascination of the ancient cultures of China and Japan, dedicated himself to Far Eastern calligraphy and brush-work without becoming a romantic Orientvoyager who wanted to still misery itself through traveling. The face of the United States seemed to him Janus-like, to look to the East and to the West. As early as 1923 the Chinese painter Teng Kuei had taught him in Seattle, before he himself spent time studying in China and Japan. Precisely there he experienced himself, acknowledging his Western foundations, their range and their limitation. "Because when I was struggling in Japan and China with Sumi-ink and the brush, trying

to understand the calligraphy of the Far East, I became aware that I would never be anything other than the Westerner that I am". The culture of Asia was to him, as to many other modern masters before him, the medium for a correction of European conventions of seeing and composing. The frequently heard interpretations of his art according to Far Eastern impulses have, thereby, their justification but their limits, as well.

Mark Tobey's world-citizenship had nothing to do with fickleness or restlessness. He seems always to have carried his world with him. It existed, to be sure, in exchange with so many other worlds that he was never isolated there. The basis of this way of life: to be as intensive with oneself as in the world – this was conveyed to him by that idea of universalism which the Persian Baha'u'llah had developed in the 19th century. In 1918 Mark Tobey joined the syncretic church of the Baha'i, which acknowledges aspects of a single nature of godly power in all religions of the world. He also cultivated therewith the characteristic religious root of his own thinking and creating. It possesses no denominationalism whatever but can rather be suggested as a form of that optimism which lives from and serves the experience that in all creative activity the incomprehensibility of God is present and supporting. This fact has been called naive, but only then with justification when one comprehends this word in its original sense, as a power effected by nature without reflection, an enabling through nature. It was part of Tobey's primary experiences to acknowledge the substance of the invisible in all visible things. He often circumscribed this basis of his experience: "The eye alone is not enough. However, many things are made just for the eye, for the moment, for an attitude of mind which has become an exclusively

materialistically orientated one". Or: "I do not work by intellectual deductions. My work is a kind of self-contained contemplation".

These allusions to his life and educational history are very much more important to the understanding of his art than attempts to derive this from arthistorical configurations. The art development of his time was certainly familiar to the worldly-wise Tobey, the teacher at art schools. Nonetheless, one may believe him when he says: "I have never tried to pursue a particular style in my work," and: "Pure abstraction would mean a type of painting completely unrelated to life, which is unacceptable for me". Observations of the progress of his painting likewise confirm this impression. He covered the entire distance from a representational and motif-orientated art to abstraction, whereby in the 1930's and 1940's he painted reductionist pictures in which both elements can be observed. Among them are the Broadway pictures, which were created in approximately those years when Mondrian formulated his fascination for the metropolis with quite different means. At that time Tobey had already discovered the strength of a free language of lines (among other things, through the Chinese-Japanese impulses) which allowed him to formulate experiences of reality by abstract means: for example, a totality of impressions in all their ungraspable dimension and vitality, as the metropolis offers them. To that purpose, he may have made use of appropriate photographs, about which various visitors report who saw such in his Basel apartment. Decisive, to be sure was that which he himself termed the "calligraphic impulse". With that he meant a line freed from outlining and representational requirements – a line that organized itself in rhythms. "Now I could paint the turmoil and tumult of the great cities, the intertwining of the lights

and the streams of people caught up in the mesh of their net". In the course of development these lines intertwine less and to representational rudiments; they twine their very selves into dense realities. The use of middlesized and small formats, combined with a subtle craft, offered the occasion for providing Tobey with the label of a "Pollock *intime*," which leads, of course, to confusion. Not only because Tobey painted such linear condensations long before Pollock, but also because they signify something entirely different. The difference could not be greater; similarity is not sameness. In Pollock's "drip paintings" the body of the painter operates directly. With unbridled vehemence, in trance and under the conditions of chance he produced "traces" that overlap and thicken until they are beyond recognition. Thereby, the painter drew the ultimate consequences from the aesthetic of Surrealism (out of which he himself had developed). He avoided setting an iconography – painted dream-pictures, imaginary figures or landscapes in the style of Tanguy, Max Ernst and others – between the generating track of the paint and the finished picture. Instead, the furore of the ecstatically moving body, of the uncontrolled and unconscious was transferred directly onto the picture. If the Surrealistic idea of an *écriture automatique* possessed any chance at all of realization in painting, Pollock perhaps came near it. The picture preserves in a direct manner a somatic reflex; it is the arena, abandoned at last by the author, in which all movements and actions are registered as they were. The canvas spread out on the ground can be understood as the unstylized diagram of bodily movement.

Such a thing was far from Tobey's mind. The renunciation of the naturalism of movement, of the expressive intensification of the creative

impulse, make accessible an entirely different reality. For that reason his linealities are not the result of gestures. They derive from another seeing and another impulse. They articulate an inner experience which the artist cultivates through a contemplative work. This turning about, which by a detour represents everything outwardly experienced via an inner vision, was compared by Tobey himself to the movement of a crab: "Perhaps, I, too, like a crab have to first take one step backwards to then to be able to go forwards at all".

This turning towards an inner seeing characterizes Tobey's art since the "white writings" (c. 1935). The realistic relicts of the transition, too, represent imagined totals and not views one could anywhere have before the eyes. Nonetheless, the inner eye that Tobey opens discloses no pure world of fantasy. His seeing is prompted by observations in reality and again serves on his part the investigation of reality, of the development and condensation of its possible essences – whereby the impulse to metaphoric work can also proceed from the banal *objet trouvé*. "In the last few years I have borrowed from Leonardo's vision of life: I feel drawn to the leprous walls, drawn to bend down and pick up tin cans from American streets, rubbish thrown away, driven over by countless motorists, motorists who had not the least idea that by simply driving over these cans that they had pressed them into new magical forms and that they had thus made their contribution to my sharing in and appreciating these objects in a new significance". Tobey works with the refuse of civilization or with the peculiarity of natural things noted by chance (e.g. on a piece of bark or the like), but not in the sense of the collage. Schwitters' picture-idea, for instance – to win the logic of chance, an astonishing beauty from trivial flot-

sam – was far from Tobey's mind. He discovers in the linear rendition, to which the impulse of some component of reality prompts him. The secret threads which bind this particle with the total context of the real. Accordingly, the titles of his pictures do not formulate individual events or location but recurrent, essential conditions in space and time – e.g.: 'Channel,' 'Between the stars,' 'Restless surfaces,' 'Changing rectangle,' 'Lighted path,' 'Between space and time,' 'Paths of nature,' 'White paths,' 'Green meadow;' or, rather, in temporal description, with a view to cyclical natural time: 'In the sign of sagittarius,' 'Rich spring,' 'Morning light;' with reference to human time: 'Progress of history,' 'Moments,' 'Coming and going;' or, finally, related to conditions that are unspecific in the sense of place as well as time: 'Old shadows,' 'Dry woods,' 'Intimate plane,' to which one can also count titles with the names of colors, like: 'Prairie red' or 'Flowing white.'

The titles, however, also make clear that Tobey does not regard reality as raw material that, at most, is filled with meaning through the ordering action of the artist, but as an authority to which he relates and subordinates himself. "Nature hunts the artist, not the other way around". What he seeks to grasp there does not lay on the surface, on the exterior of things. It has to do with their inner content. Thus the rhythm of the city or of the billowing grain can procure him access to reality. "To achieve the rhythmic impact of such I had to build the body of painting by multitudinous lines". Tobey signified his view even more clearly when he said: "When we can find the abstract in nature we find the deepest art". Reality secures this essence only with the inner eye. "That all of nature did not have to be shown as in a stuffed bird, hence there was more life for the imagination".

II

With the titles of the pictures we are also compelled, ultimately, to move into an examination of pictorial structure. To be sure, that which the author designated with language does not exhaust perception but lends suggestive points of crystallization which the viewer only then understands when he himself enters the process of perception, noting therein that the work of the eye and its experience remain remote from verbal declarativeness. This is no plea for an arbitrariness of observations which uses the pictures as a projection-screen for subjective needs of the psyche or the imagination. Tobey's paintings possess a syntax that can be fairly precisely fixed. It has to do with the calligraphic impulse or, measured by the experience that every viewer can make, with the fact that the tissue of lines is not perceived *on* the surface of the picture but makes the picture plane into a "dimensionless dimension," as John Russell has formulated it. The network of lines that begin and end like shorthand, overlay and conceal each other, set signs and eradicate signs – this network forms an imaginary room that can be perceived but nonetheless cannot be plumbed by the eye. The semi-transparent thicket contains small impulses that proceed from the linealities. Freed from all signifying or outlining tasks, the "moving line" – the moved and simultaneously moving line – develops a specific optic energy with spatial as well as temporal qualities. The observer discovers that every optical track merges into a condition of visual incomprehensibility, that each help determine this condition. How the individual sign, the jotted trace, becomes a whole – for that Tobey has no rules. Glancing around, we recognize that he finds manifold solutions. The energy of the lines can establish itself with a few strokes, it can possess an almost figurative intrinsic value, but also

reveals itself in a total structure consisting of small elements, as we can observe in numerous examples. In every case, it is the superimpositions that make the space at once deep and thick but optically inaccessible. If Tobey said it did not suffice to work solely for the eye, this claim can be redeemed in the following way: with vivid means he leads the faculty of sight to the frontier of the possibilities for differentiation and imparts an experience that exceeds its capacity. We see that the reality we observe is richer than the range of our vision. We see that the pictorial space is not ordered according to those rules that we otherwise suggest with categories like height, width and depth. Since we can make no statements about the possible limitations of this spatial situation, it becomes determined for the viewer, as well, in an inner seeing which follows the diversity of optical impulses, constructing with them the pictorial continuum as a "placeless place." Paradoxical expressions such as this (or others which we have already used) do not result from a passion for descriptive metaphors but precisely describe the course of pictorial experience itself: from the point of view of language and its possible coordinates the pictorial event is inaccessible but, at the same time, that which we see cannot be taken possession of by the eye. It does not bring what it sees into "focus" but experiences the failure of its own capacity to "identify." The dense space of 'Morning light,' 'Dry forest,' 'Channel' has no resemblance to that which we are accustomed to term space. Nor is the space *between* things – something open "in between" – the opposite of "obstructed;" nor is it a stable scenery, a view within which changes can be observed, as we watch the figure move in the street, the cloud in the landscape. When we term the space "dense," we want to make a statement about this abolition of the

difference between emptiness and object. Only a "dense" description (G. Geertz) or, rather, a "dense" perception does justice to this condition. To that perception belongs, all well, the training of a "moving focus" that here and there, never planimetrically comprehensible, never composed, succeeds in creating intensified zones that, to be sure, can never be read as fixed points of organization but as areas of heightened disorder. Their chromatic, structural and also their graphic peculiarity lifts itself out of the continuity of the picture plane without, however, interrupting it.

In the end, the constitution of the space we see is also an indication to free it both as an interior and, equally, as an exterior space. "The dimension that counts for the creative person is the Space he creates within himself. This inner space is closer to the infinite than that other, and it is the privilege of a balanced mind (...) to be as aware of inner space as he is of outer space".

All attempts to clarify Tobey's pictures with respect to their space must always employ temporal moments. It was already the energy of the individual, blurring linear impulse that lent the picture a temporal quality. Far more, a space that can be termed neither empty nor filled, must be described with categories like energy, dynamic, rhythm. Tobey's use of the line, however, includes not only the abandonment of any delimiting requirements but also those of a formal nature. Among other things, this deformation can proceed in such a way that the brief concentrated impulse mingles, trickles away in droplets, is absorbed into its painted surroundings. Such phenomena have much to do with the given technique and in that regard can be made plausible. The amorphous quality of the line detaches itself from that topology in

which it might have something to signify. This loss goes hand in hand with a new power of discovery: the line that deforms itself, fashioning with countless others a surface-filling continuum, may open up entirely new realities. From our observations we already know something of this: it is inner, felt, essential conditions, it could be imaginary spaces, topographies, and even geographies of remembrance that are first made accessible through the picture. To the noteworthy quality of Tobey's "formless form" belongs, as well, its tendency toward dematerialization, toward a vibrating rhythm, toward an oscillation of the entire picture plane.

The findings just described were also frequently the point of departure for identifying Tobey with the *art informel* of the post-war period. This label expresses very little in itself. We have long since seen Tobey's independence in the field of art-historical developments. To work that out is more fruitful than historical archiving.

When we proceed to the description of temporal aspects, we likewise cannot say that "something" in the picture is presented in a state of motion (or of rest). With the thickening of the linearities there come about, first of all temporal moments, until they come to rest within this thickening, "neutralize" (in that sense of vanishing and preserving that the German word *aufheben* tends to express).

Of this, too, every observer has a definite perception. He has, in association with these pictures, very often experienced how – through exaggerated close-up, for example – the perceivable movement of a single line alongside that of a neighboring one passes over into a condition in which all single movements converge, like the waves of the sea, to become

parts of a whole which, nevertheless, never permits itself to be examined in terms of the rank of these constituents.

Out of the succession of single perceptions there develops a simultaneous overview which permits a "temporal condition" to come about from the profusion of nondirectional single movement-impulses and time-impulses which can be read in like manner in both directions (forwards and backwards). One can also speak of this "temporal condition" only in paradoxical form: it is a time in which all distinguishable succession is annulled, but without representing repose itself. Tobey's pictures can sooner be described as stationary waves or vibrating surfaces. With respect to their temporal constitution, the term "momentality" captures it very well. It means time but it means time that is not running away, with beginning and end, flowing according to a linear pattern, but time as an overlaying texture in which individual movements yield to a total state of motion and come to rest. All the same, we do not perceive the sum of all moments in the picture as a stable duration. It is the riddle of this reality that it finally withdraws, as from our conventional notions of time. The "fullness of time", as a present moment in which the streams of time converge – such circumscriptions are, in fact, precise in terms of that which they capture in Tobey's pictures, but in terms of content one can, presumably, only contemplate them.

Tobey would not be the extraordinary painter that he is should he not communicate the profound perspective of pictorial experience through a sensuous, totally unspectacular presence of the painting. The dematerialization awakens the power of the light that one could designate as the true yield of his painterly proceedings. A light kindled from endlessly

numerous and various contrasts – minimal differences in the surface. It also lends his painting a positivism and incontestability that every viewer senses. The present which they create is at once sensuous and spiritual, variably affected but not eroded by transitoriness. For Tobey, time is not the power to make things vanish; far more, it *preserves*, "The tree is no more a solid in the earth, breaking into lesser solids bathed in chiaroscuro. There is pressure and release. Each movement, like tracks in the snow, is recorded and often loved for itself. The Great Dragon is breathing sky, thunder and shadow; wisdom and spirit vitalized". Here Tobey plays on a root of this experience of reality in Zen. More important, however, is that every viewer can follow this movement of the senses and take part in it. The gaze of the inner eye reveals the reality in Tobey's pictures as a force united and moving within itself but, with all its changeability and unfathomableness, a supportive force. His painting has the capacity to transmit this power to the one who understands how to see.

Gottfried Boehm



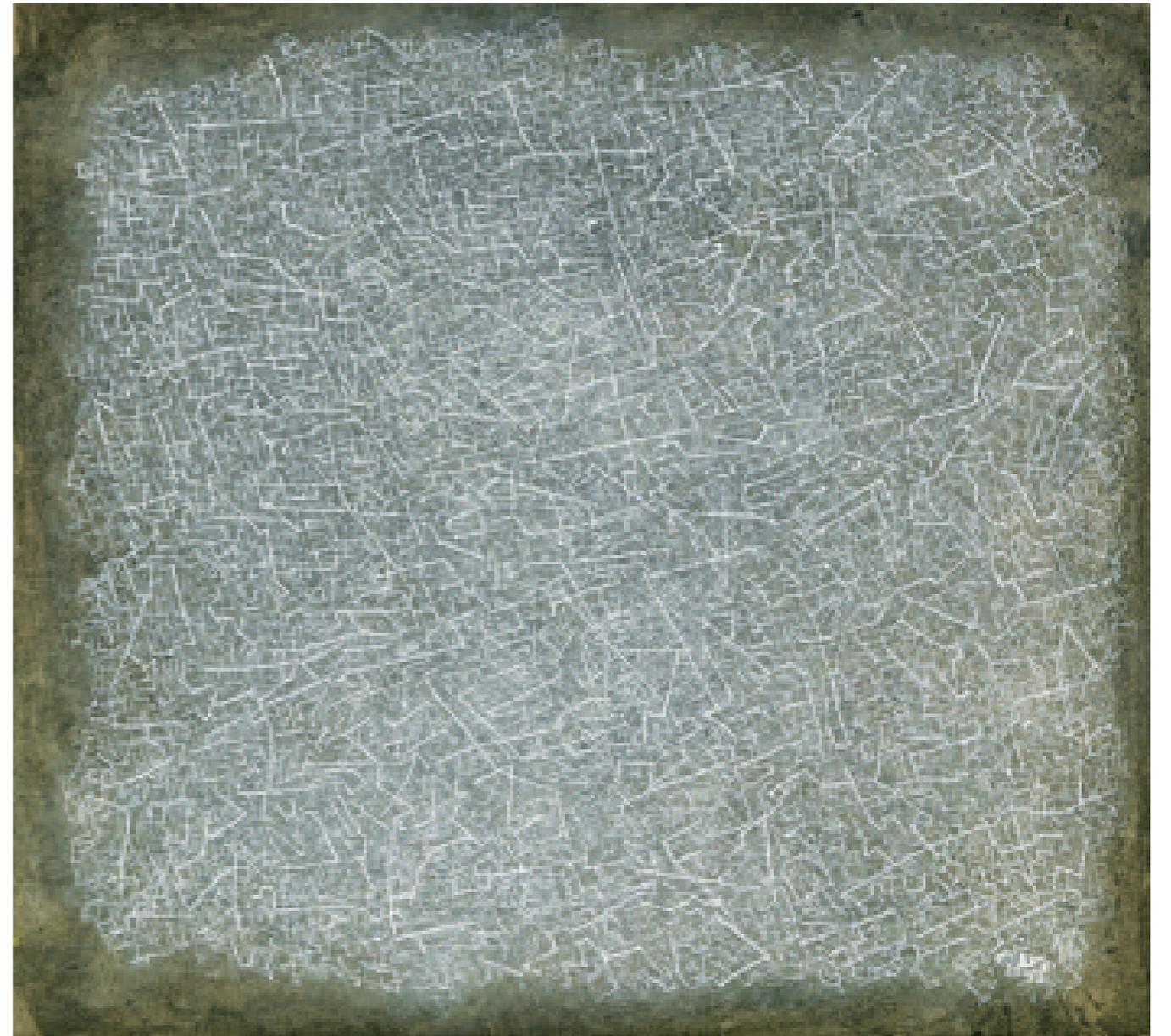
Ohne Titel, 1954
Tempera auf Karton, 49,7 x 35 cm



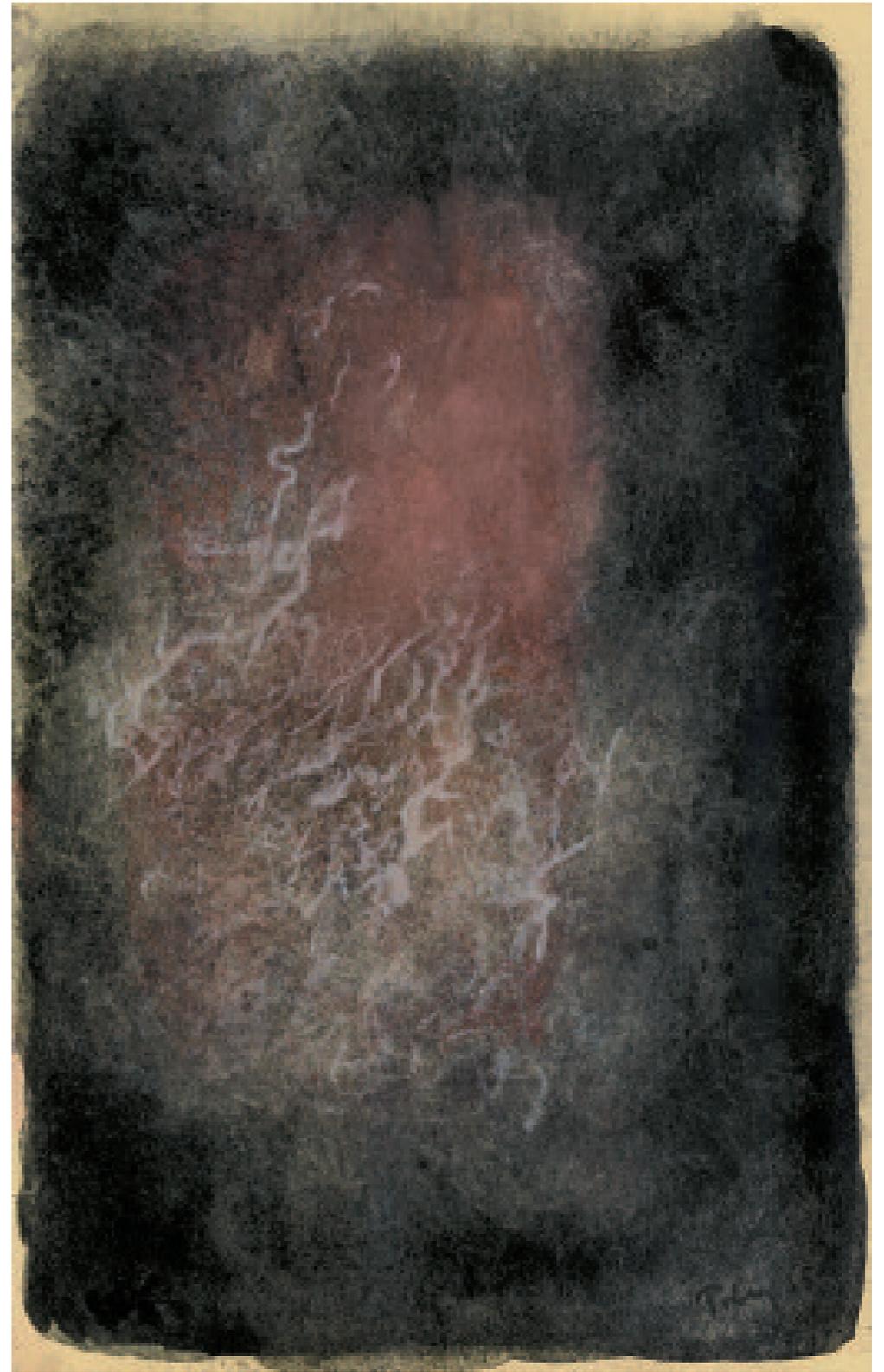
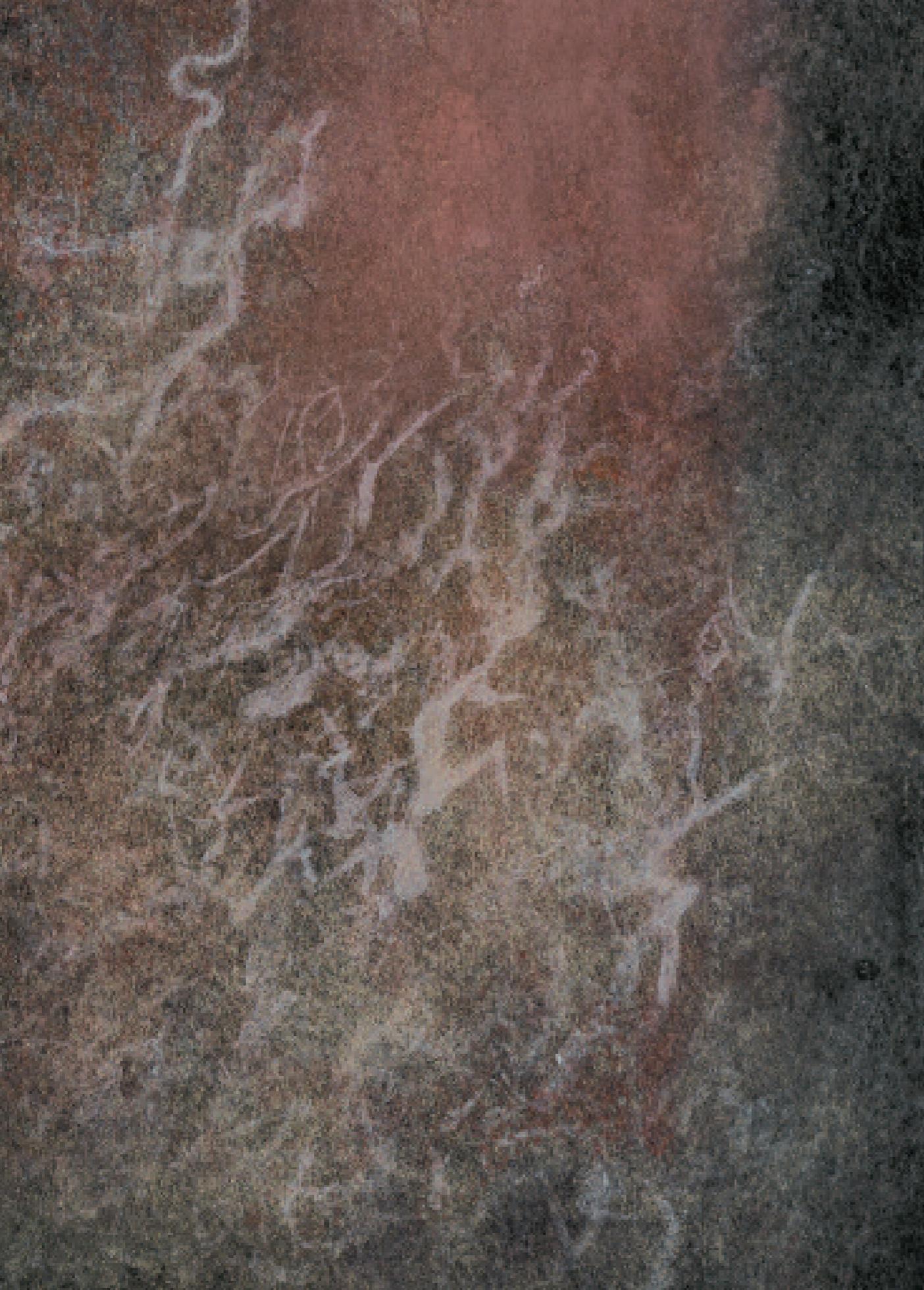
Ohne Titel, 1954
Tempera auf Papier, 41,7 x 50,5 cm



Ohne Titel, 1954
Aquarell, Deckfarben, Tusche auf Papier, 44 x 32,5 cm LM



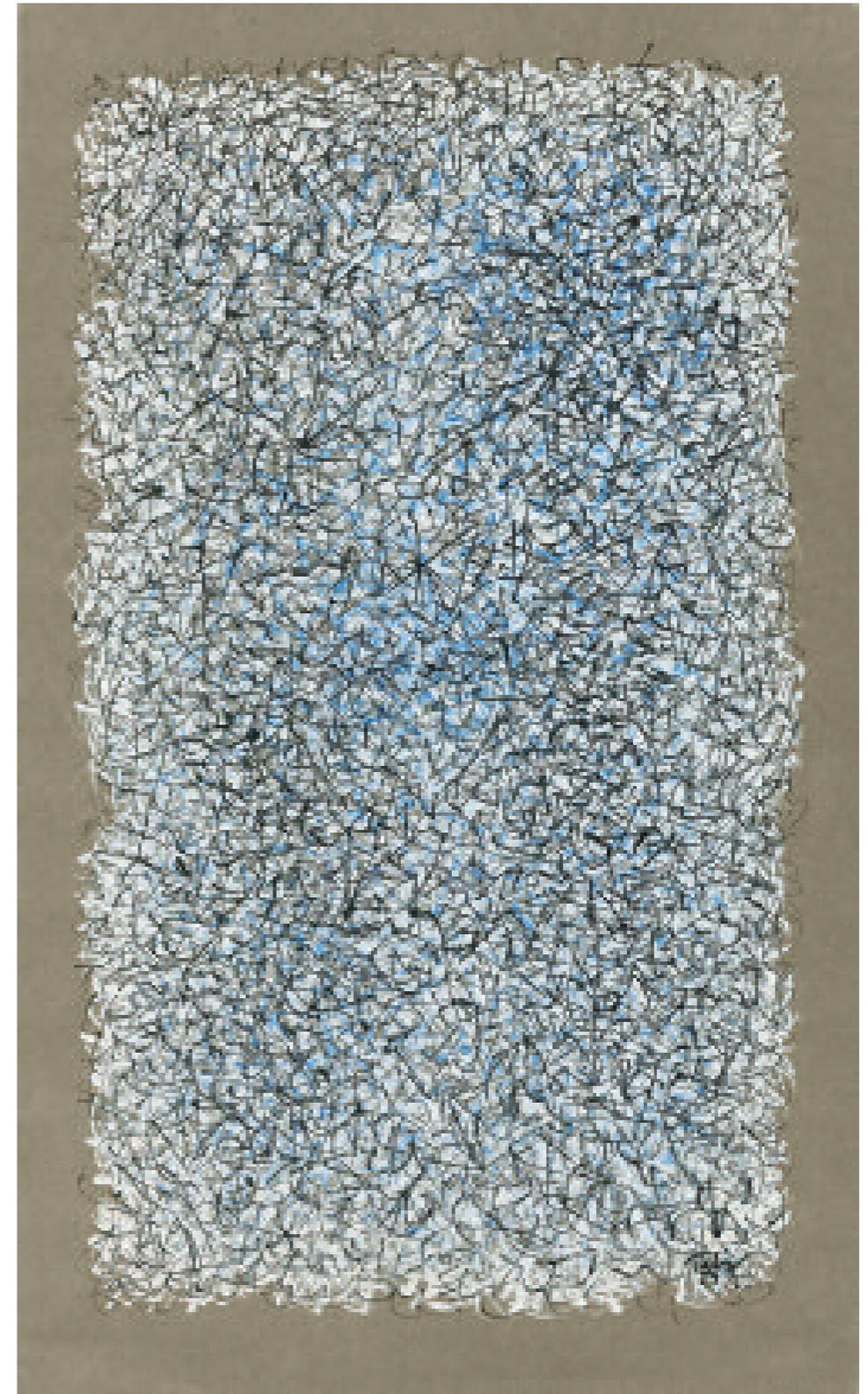
Ohne Titel, 1955
Tempera auf Karton, 34 x 37 cm



Ohne Titel, 1955
Tempera auf Papier, 33 x 20,4 cm



Ohne Titel, 1958
Tempera auf Karton, 45,8 x 35 cm



Ohne Titel, 1959
Tempera auf Papier, 35,3 x 21,2 cm



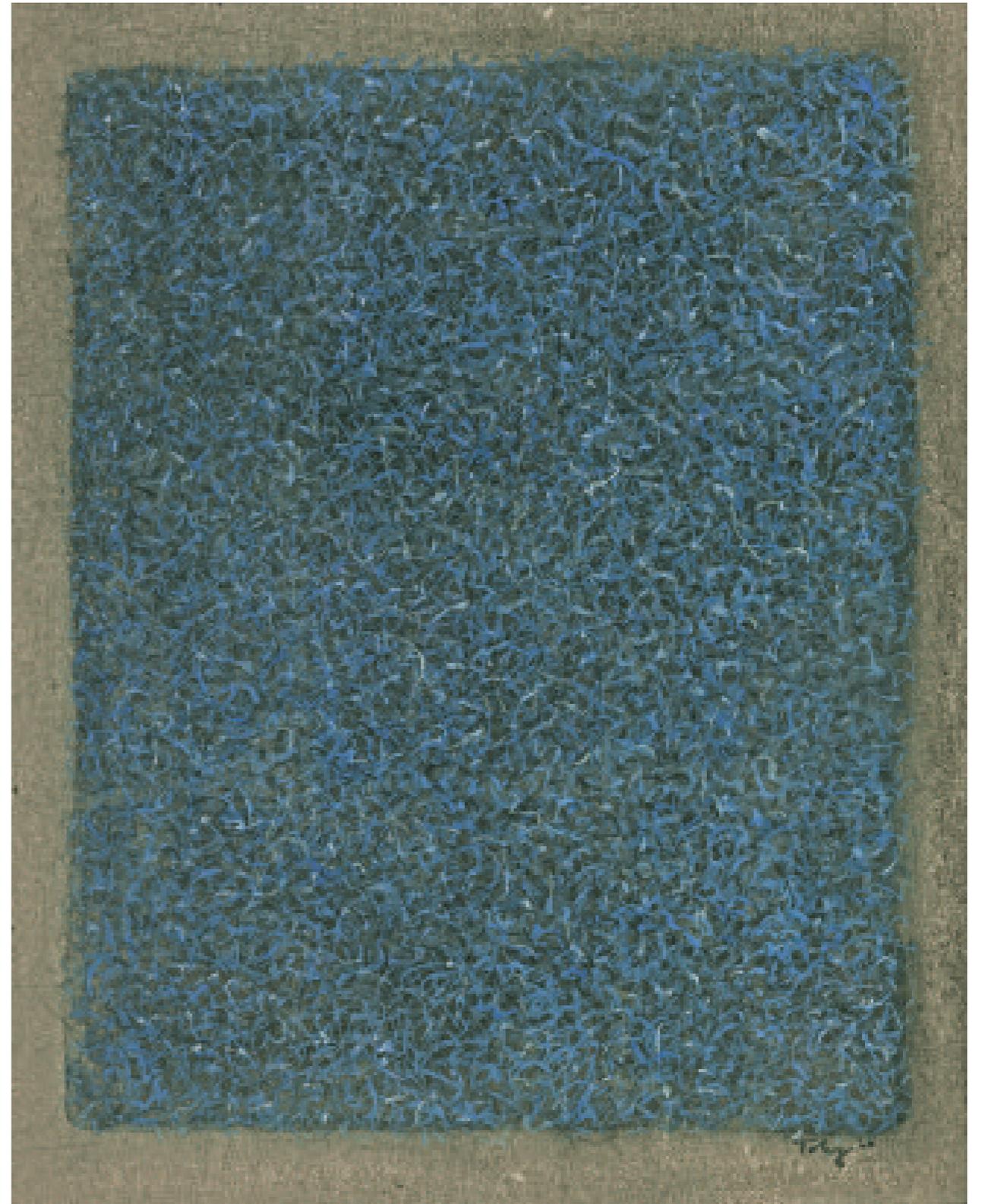
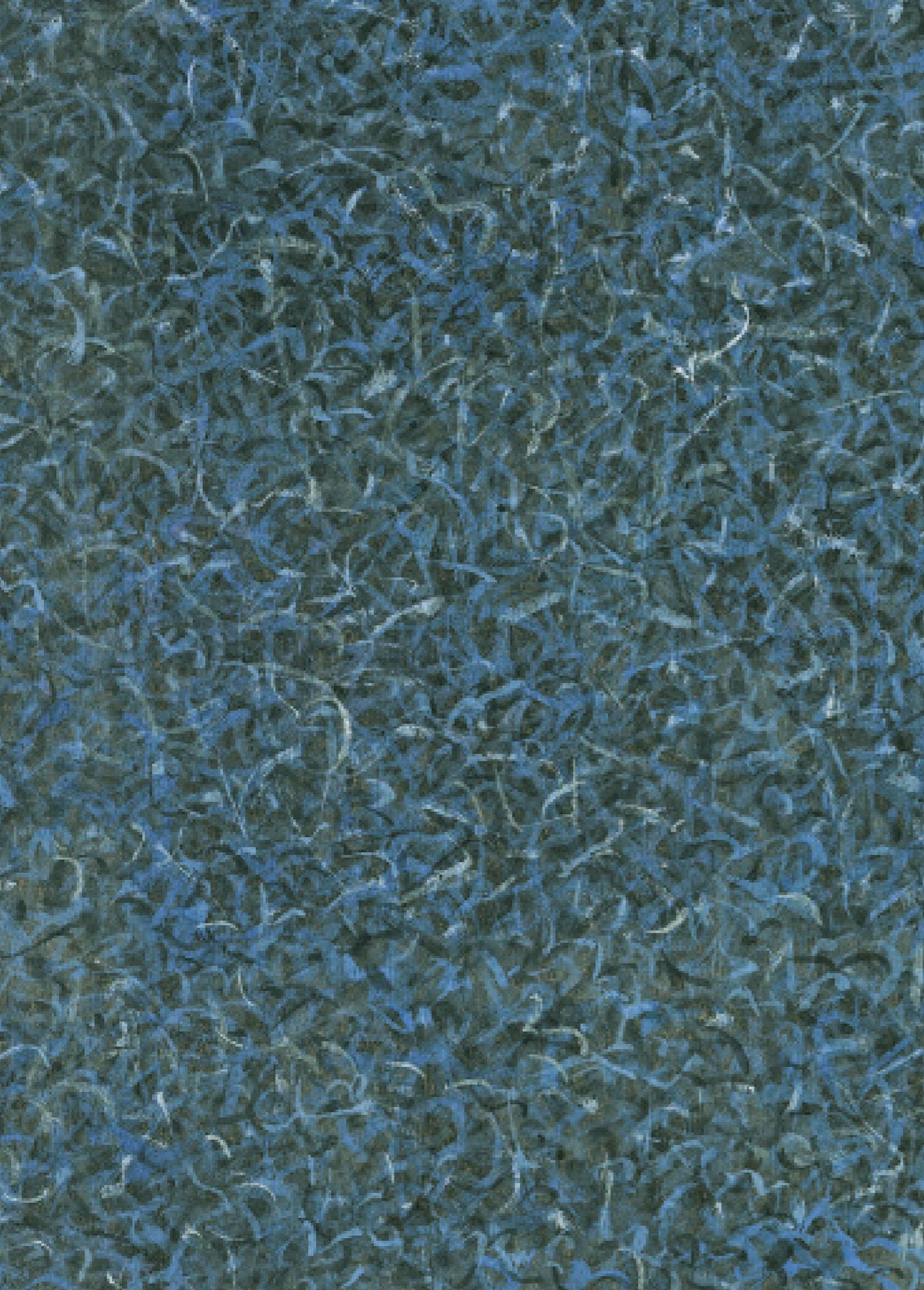
Ohne Titel, 1959
Tempera auf Papier, 36 x 13,5 cm



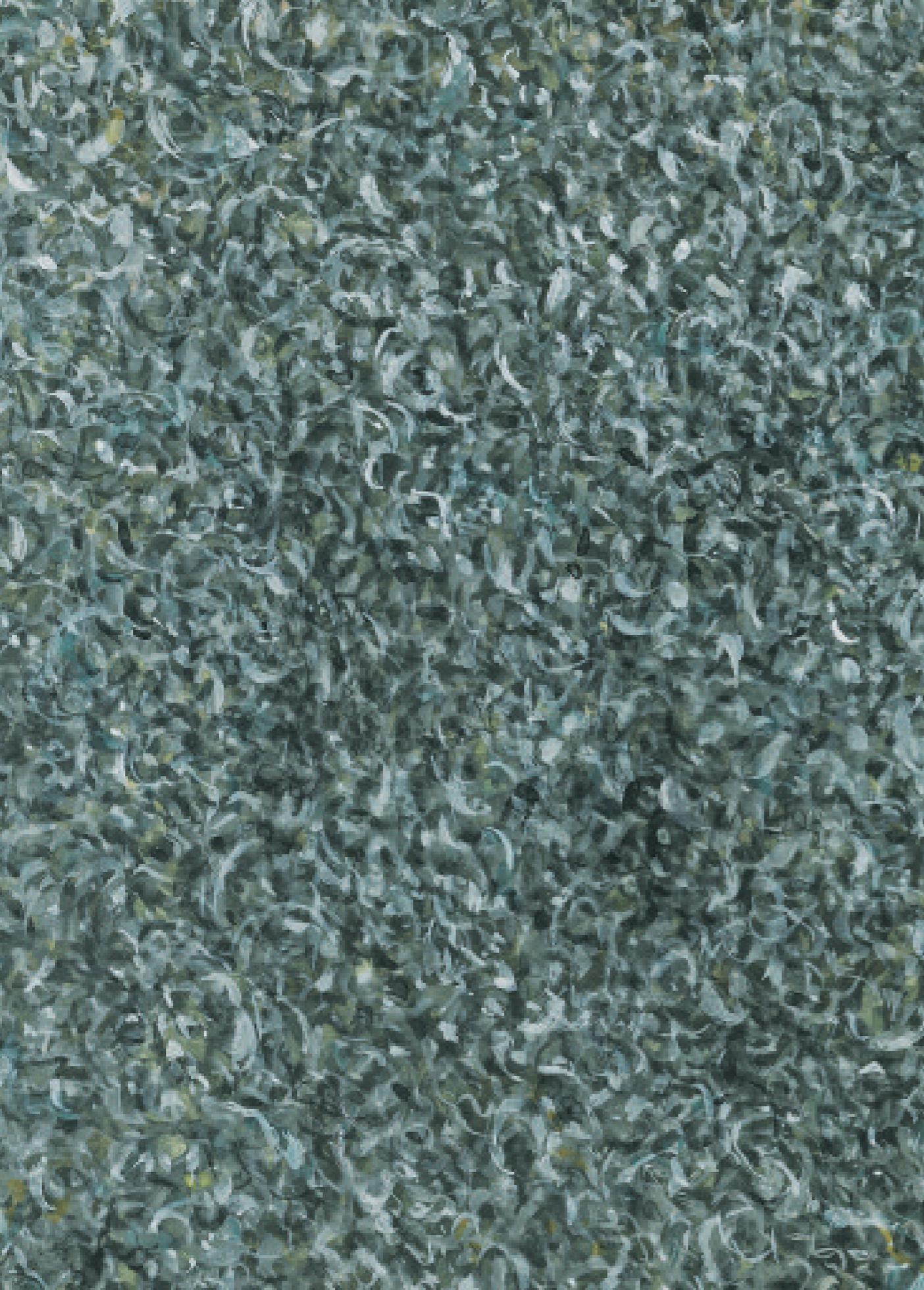
Ohne Titel, 1959
Tempera auf Halbkarton, 27 x 37 cm



Ohne Titel, 1960
Tempera auf Karton, 40,7 x 34,5 cm



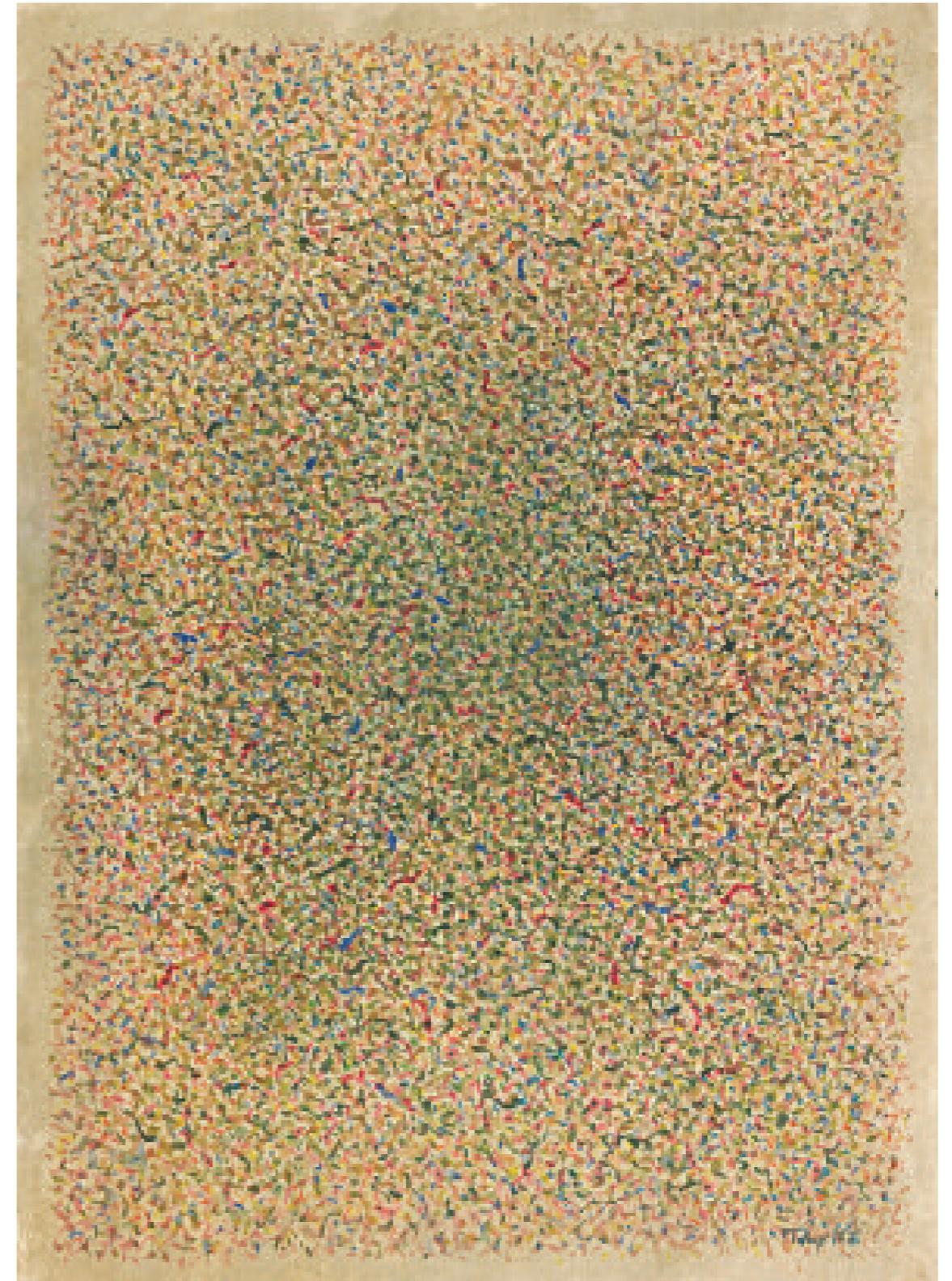
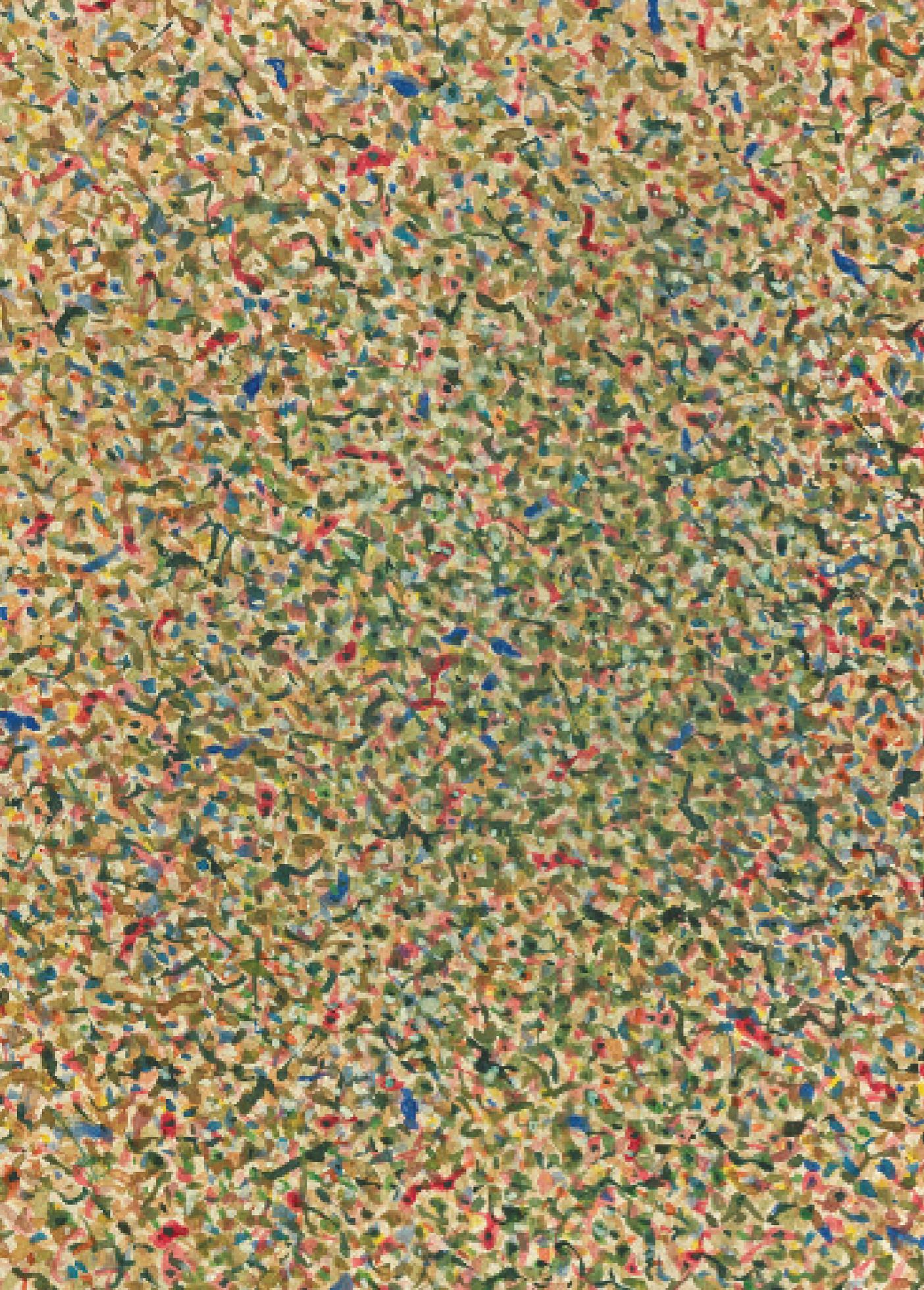
Ohne Titel, 1960
Tempera auf Karton, 30,4 x 24 cm LM



Ohne Titel, 1963
Tempera auf Halbkarton, 43,2 x 28,5 cm



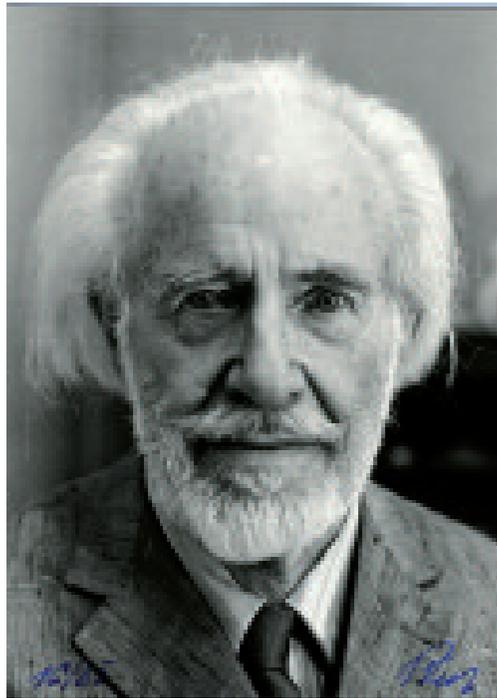
Ohne Titel, 1964
Tempera auf Papier, 36,7 x 27,5 cm



Ohne Titel, 1965
Tempera auf Halbkarton, 40,3 x 29 cm



Ohne Titel, 1966
Aquarell, Tempera auf Papier, 25 x 33 cm



Mark Tobey Biographie / Ausstellungen

1890
Mark Tobey wird am 11. Dezember in Centerville, Wisconsin geboren.

1893
Die Familie übersiedelt nach Tennessee, von 1894 bis 1906 nach Trempealeau am Mississippi und lebt schliesslich in Chicago, wo Tobey Kurse am Art Institute belegt.

1911
Zieht nach New York, wo er sich als Modezeichner durchzusetzen hofft. Gegen Ende des Jahres kehrt er nach Chicago zurück.

1913 – 1917
Lebt und arbeitet in Chicago und New York als Modezeichner. Bildet sich künstlerisch als Autodidakt weiter. Hat Erfolg als Porträtzeichner. 1917 findet die erste Tobey Ausstellung in der Galerie Knoedler in New York statt.

1918
Tritt der Baha'i-Religionsgemeinschaft bei.

1918 – 1922
Lebt und arbeitet in New York. Zieht 1922 nach Seattle, wo er an der Cornish School bis 1925 unterrichtet.

1923 – 1924
Lernt Teng Kuei, einen chinesischen Studenten der University of Washington kennen, der ihn in die Techniken der ostasiatischen Malerei (Pinselführung, Kalligraphie, kompositorische Methoden) wie auch in deren Spiritualität einführt.

1925
Reise nach Europa. Aufenthalt in Paris; verbringt den Winter in Châteaudun bei Chartres.

1926
Reist mit Freunden nach Barcelona, Athen, Istanbul und Beirut. Reise zu den heiligen Stätten der Baha'is in Haifa und Akka. Rückkehr nach Paris.

1927
Kehrt zurück nach Seattle.

1927 – 1929
Trifft Teng Kuei wieder. Gründet in Seattle zusammen mit Mrs. Edgar Ames die Free and Creative Art School. Erste Einzelausstellung im Arts Club of Chicago.

1930
Nimmt teil an der Gruppenausstellung «Painting and Sculpture by Living Americans» im Museum of Modern Art in New York (Winter 1930/31). Reist nach England, wo er an der Dartington School in Devonshire bis 1937 unterrichtet. Verbringt indes jedes Jahr längere Zeit in den USA.

1934
Reist über Paris, Rom, Neapel, Colombo und

Hong Kong nach China. Besucht in Shanghai Teng Kuei, bei dessen Familie er wohnt. Reist weiter nach Japan; verbringt einen Monat in einem Zen-Kloster in der Nähe von Kyoto; studiert die Zen-Lehre, Zen-Malerei, meditiert und beschäftigt sich mit Kalligraphie. In Japan empfängt Tobey – wie er es später selbst ausdrückt – den entscheidenden Impuls, der ihn zu den «white writings» führen wird. Rückkehr in die USA nach Seattle. Erste Museumsausstellung (Seattle Art Museum).

1935
Arbeitet in Dartington Hall; Entstehung der ersten «white writings».

1936 – 1938
Verbringt den Sommer in Tacoma und Seattle, wo er unterrichtet.

1941
Tobey, der als Autodidakt schon lange Klavier und Flöte spielt, nimmt Klavierstunden und Unterricht in Musiktheorie.

1944
Erste Einzelausstellung in der Willard Gallery, New York, die seine Werke von nun an regelmässig zeigt. Beginn der nationalen Anerkennung.

1948
Beteiligung an der Biennale von Venedig (ebenso 1956, 1958, 1964).

1951
Die Einzelausstellung im Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, die zuvor in San Francisco, Seattle und Santa Barbara gezeigt worden war, bringt den Durchbruch für Tobey's Kunst in den USA.

1955
Von Paris aus Reisen nach Basel und Bern. Erste Einzelausstellung in Europa in der Galerie Jeanne Bucher in Paris. Beginn der internationalen Anerkennung.

1956
Rückkehr nach Seattle. Nimmt an der Ausstellung «American Painting» in der Tate Gallery, London, teil, an der neben ihm Kline, de Kooning, Motherwell, Pollock und Still vertreten sind.

1957
Pfl egt enge Kontakte mit den mit ihm befreundeten japanischen Malern Horiuchi und Tsutakawa wie auch mit dem Zen-Meister Takizaki. Malt im Winter 1956/57 «Sumi» Tuschbilder.

1960
Lässt sich in Basel nieder, wo er bis zu seinem Tod 1976 lebt und arbeitet. Behält indes sein Atelier in Seattle bei, in das er regelmässig zurückkehrt.

1961
Erste Einzelausstellung in der Galerie Beyeler, Basel, mit der er von nun an regelmässig zusammenarbeitet. Retrospektive im Musée des arts décoratifs, Paris, die anschliessend in London und Brüssel gezeigt wird.

1962
Retrospektive im Museum of Modern Art, New York, die auch in Cleveland und Chicago gezeigt wird.

1966
Retrospektive im Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, die anschliessend in Hannover, Bern und Düsseldorf gezeigt wird.

1968
Wird in Paris zum «Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres» ernannt. Retrospektive im Dallas Museum of Fine Arts.

1970
Retrospektive im Seattle Art Museum; Retrospektive in der Galerie Beyeler, Basel, anlässlich seines 80. Geburtstages.

1976
Mark Tobey stirbt am 24. April in Basel.

Mark Tobey

9. Mai bis 20. Juni 2015

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