

CHAPTER 1

SITUATING MORRIS LOUIS 1912–1962

Although the work of the Washington-based artist Morris Louis (1912–62) is now discussed alongside some of the most well-known of the American abstract artists of the mid-twentieth century, much of Louis' mature work, and arguably his most refined, was produced outside of public knowledge. For the majority of Louis' career his work existed in relative obscurity, particularly in comparison with his contemporaries, artists such as Jackson Pollock (1912–56), Mark Rothko (1903–70) and Clyfford Still (1904–80). Being amongst the first generation of abstract artists in the United States, the newness of his abstract painting depended upon the endorsement of major critics for public appreciation.¹ The critical recognition of Louis' work emerged only with the support of Clement Greenberg in 1960, almost 30 years after he began working as an artist and only two years before his death. The timing of Greenberg's writing positioned Louis amongst a new generation of artists including Frank Stella (1936 –), Kenneth Noland (1924 –) and Jules Olitski (1922 –). Audiences were only beginning to appreciate Louis' work as he entered the last phase of his career, and as such, the representation of Louis' work only addressed a small period of his career.

The limited exposure of Louis' paintings prior to the early 1960s had major effects upon how his works were interpreted in the decades following his death. Many retrospectives and group exhibitions of Louis' work came to relate his paintings to the work of younger artists engaging with 'Colourfield' abstraction. Many framed Louis' work within this discussion, which disengaged the work of the new generation from the over-arching influence of Abstract Expressionism of the 1950s. Some critics hinted at the complexity of Louis' positioning by stating that he was situated 'at the juncture of two traditions'², specifically the 1950s and the 1960s. However, few attempted to integrate the aspects of his work that traversed these two eras. This had the effect of fragmenting Louis' body of work. The immersive or emotive nature of his large field paintings of the 1950s, which was similar to themes explored by other abstract expressionists, was rarely discussed alongside those of the 1960s. These later works were interpreted as evoking a 'disembodied' sensation, disconnected from emotional or physical engagement with the work. Some of the issues resulting from this division of Louis' work remain unresolved: If Louis' body of work relates to two vastly different periods, where can we position the artist in art history? Such

questions can only be approached by investigating the many facets of Louis' career to enable a broader understanding of Louis' work.

It was not fully recognised during Louis' career that he was a prolific painter and interested in a diverse range of styles. Following his death, the discovery of the artist's storage of paintings in his Washington D.C. home, revealed Louis' strong work ethic. This discovery gave strength to the comments made by close colleagues such as Kenneth Noland, who stated that Louis seemed to produce twenty paintings to each one of his own.³ More than 600 large-scale paintings were stored that had not been exhibited in Louis' lifetime. His sketchbooks were also located, comprising approximately 500 drawings.⁴ This was an enormous number of works compared with the 95 paintings that were actually exhibited during his lifetime. Thirteen exhibitions during Louis' lifetime, mostly during the period 1954–1960, represented works from what were considered the three major series of his career. These were the 'Veil' (1954 and 1958–59), 'Unfurled' (1960–61), and 'Stripe' (1961–62) series.⁵ From 1960–62 Louis held more exhibitions because of the increased interest in his work that came from Greenberg's support and the growth of Colourfield painting.⁶

The 'Veil' paintings of 1954 were considered Louis' first major body of work, although they were not exhibited until five years later in 1959 when they were shown together with a second group of works from the series. A striking characteristic of the early 'Veil' series was broad surfaces of stained colour, which Louis achieved by pouring paint rather than brushing. This created the effect of the pigment bleeding into the canvas weave, and many critics following the lead of Clement Greenberg, came to speak of this technique as 'staining' or 'dyeing'.⁷ Louis would pour many colours over one another, and then complete the works by pouring thin washes of dark pigment over the entire surface. William Rubin, who was at the time Chief Curator of Paintings and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, used the term 'Veil' to describe the effect created by the final washes of muted colour.⁸ The 'veil' was used to provide a coherent visual field, uniting the different colours that fluctuated beneath the surface. Louis played with the veil feature by allowing some of the colours to 'peak' through the surface, particularly along the top edge where he began each stream of pigment.

The striking effects of Louis' 'veiling' technique were complimented by, or made possible through, the large scale of his paintings. Each of the sixteen paintings of the 1954 'Veils' series was approximately 1.8 x 2.4 metres. Louis undertook an intensely physical process in making these works. He would spend long days in his studio, standing and pouring streams of pigment from the top edge of the large lengths of canvas, which were tacked to a working stretcher. Louis would then control the flow of pigment with various implements, encouraging and manipulating the flows across the surface. This was a difficult process for Louis, as his studio, converted from the dining room of his Washington D.C. home, measured only 3.6 x 4.3 metres.⁹ The limited available space meant that Louis could only work on one of his paintings at a time. He would paint, dry, roll and store each canvas after completion. Despite this laborious process, Louis expanded the scale of his works significantly during subsequent years and created many more paintings within each series. Louis' second series of 'Veils' made during 1958–59 comprised 126 paintings.¹⁰ These works were significantly larger than those from the earlier series of sixteen paintings, measuring approximately 2.4 x 3.7 metres.

Works from Louis' 'Unfurled' series of 1960 (**Image L-38**) were up to seven metres long, drastically surpassing the sizes of his 1958–59 'Veils'.¹¹ These works were also larger than Louis' entire studio space, however, he used this restriction creatively and adapted the compositional structure and technique of the 'Unfurled' paintings to the limited space. The paintings from this series feature two banks of poured streams of pigment separated to the outer corners of the canvas, leaving a large expanse of bare canvas in the centre of the works. Whereas the 'Veils' heightened the sensation of being immersed in a field of colour, the 'Unfurled' paintings drew attention to individual colours. Louis used the white space of the canvas to direct attention outwards to each coloured river of pigment and its relationship to the next. While Louis had found a way to create these enormous works in his small studio, he was unable to see the finished paintings in this space. In fact, during his lifetime, Louis did not see any of the 'Unfurled' paintings as finished works, that is, stretched and hanging in a gallery space. Only two paintings from the series were exhibited during his career at Bennington College in Vermont, and this was an exhibition the artist did not see.¹²

Due to the limited public exposure of Louis' works during his career, which was related to his private nature and secluded approach to working, many were unaware that Louis experienced a wide-ranging career that took him from Baltimore, to New York and finally to Washington D.C..¹³ Each of the places that Louis worked in influenced his style and contributed to the vast body of work he produced. He was born in 1912 in Baltimore, Maryland, to Jewish immigrant parents. He was one of four sons. Each of Louis' siblings, two of which were older than Louis, entered medical professions. Therefore, Louis' interest in becoming an artist must have raised concern for his parents. At the age of fifteen Louis was awarded a four-year scholarship to the Maryland Institute of Fine and Applied Arts, where he studied from 1927–32. The Institute taught a conservative approach to fine art. Consequently it was ignorant of the presence of the Cone Collection, one of the most progressive collections of modern art located in Baltimore.¹⁴ Sisters Claribel (1864–1929) and Etta Cone (1870–1949) collected works by leading European artists such as Matisse and Picasso, and displayed works in their home for visitors. The displays at the Baltimore Museum of Art and the Philips Collection in Washington D.C. meanwhile continued to cater for an audience largely unfamiliar with abstract art. Louis became aware of Matisse through the Cone collection, which he visited with another student from the Institute, Charles Shucker. Louis and Schucker also studied how the work of Cézanne related to Cubism, which gave more substance to their interest in abstraction.¹⁵

After Louis graduated from the Maryland Institute in 1932, he attempted to support himself as an artist, however, the financial crisis caused by the Depression made this increasingly difficult. Louis and Schucker rented a studio space in Baltimore, but could not sell enough work to support their careers. Their attempts to sell more mainstream works, such as landscapes, also failed and eventually both joined with the government's federal arts projects. In 1934 at the age of 22 Louis assisted with a project in Baltimore, and in 1936 he moved to New York to participate in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) projects, which ran from 1935 until 1943. Facilitators of the New York projects included the major Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente and David Siqueiros, who had revitalised the Italian tradition of fresco in Mexico in the 1920s and early 1930s. Siqueiros was an advocator of public art, and an avid member of the Communist party. He was part of a group of artists who called for art that revoked the elitism of easel painting. In 1922 the group

created the ‘Declaration for Social, Political and Aesthetic Principles’, which stated that ‘we repudiate so-called easel painting and every kind of art favoured by ultra-intellectual circles, because it is aristocratic, and we praise monumental art in all its forms, because it is public property.’¹⁶ Siqueiros led mural painting workshops as part of the WPA in New York during the mid-1930s, which Louis attended along with other artists such as Jackson Pollock. Louis learned about various new artistic techniques and approaches to painting through the WPA projects, including some exposure to acrylic pigment, which would later become his sole medium. Rosalind Krauss suggests that Louis’ large scale ‘Veil’ paintings owed much to his experiences of the ‘horizontal’ nature of Mexican mural painting provided through the WPA, particularly through their rejection of ‘high art’ easel-painting traditions.¹⁷

The WPA projects were held during an important period in the development of modern art in the United States. Artists were encouraged to develop new forms of artistic expression, and the workshops provided a progressive atmosphere in which to meet one another and exchange ideas. However, in some respects there was a division between the interests of the WPA, which focused primarily on social realist painting, and those of some New York artists. Abstraction was being explored by groups such as the ‘American Abstract Artists’¹⁸ and those later known as Abstract Expressionists or the ‘New York School’, in particular Hans Hofmann, Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, and Lee Krasner. Their interest in European abstraction aimed to help bridge feelings of provincialism from what they saw as an exciting artistic environment in Europe. Greenberg noted that some of these local New York artists subsequently withdrew into their own groups and did not have ‘big jobs on the Project’.¹⁹ According to Greenberg, they also scrutinised the recently opened Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), which opened in 1929. MoMA may have provided the opportunity for local artists to become familiar with the work of artists such as Picasso and Matisse, but it ‘belonged more to the “establishment” than to the avant-garde.’²⁰ For Louis, the collections at MoMA allowed him to discover the work of Miró and Klee in addition to the interest he already had in Matisse and Picasso. As employees of the WPA received free admission to MoMA, Louis’ often visited to explore the collections.

Louis' surviving works from the mid 1930s to the early 1940s show his increased understanding of early European modernism, combined with the influence of the WPA. The works are dominated by scenes of workers or the effects of poverty. *Young Man in the City* (1937) (**Image L-1**), a gouache on paper, seems to convey Louis' own feelings of isolation stemming from the difficulty of surviving in New York during the Depression. Executed in dark, muted tones, the work is occupied by the sombre expression of a young man, presumably the artist. Tall buildings behind the figure are cropped by the paper, giving more attention to the figure's expression, and drawing a direct connection between the man and his surroundings. This painting is considered the first signed by 'Morris Louis', rather than Louis' birth name of Bernstein.²¹ *Broken Bridge* (1937) (**Image L-2**), which Louis exhibited in the 1939 WPA pavilion of the World's Fair in New York, is different in atmosphere from his muted self-portrait of the same year, being much lighter and more open. It was also more abstract than previous works, representing an angular landscape separated into four distinct areas of foreground, water, mountains and sky. Aspects of Cézanne's approach to the construction of landscape painting are evident in the composition, which confounds the traditional perspective implied by the bridge and its setting through stacking the three areas up to the picture plane. The bridge no longer leads the viewer's eye into the distance of the painting, but rather suggests a more abstracted sensation. The influences of the major European modernists are evident in this work. The exposure to these artists resulted in a diverse range of styles in Louis' own paintings of the late 1930s as well as his drawings, which were more suitable to his financial situation, and would continue to be a primary means of expression into the 1940s and early 1950s.²²

During his period in New York, for a young artist in his '20s, Louis was already completely occupied by his work and had distinct goals. In a letter to his brother from 1941, Louis reflected this: 'I know that I'd have had a gallery long ago had it been in me to popularize my style. However, that is not the case, and so I have to play for big stakes in hopes that some highly reputable joint will handle the stuff one day.'²³ With this determination, his restricted income was not an obstacle. Louis still managed to paint for many hours each day with materials sent from Baltimore by his family or those he obtained from the paint manufacturer Leonard Bocour.²⁴ Bocour packaged left-over samples of his pigment to give to local artists. He was interested in

developing new acrylic pigments, which reflected a movement away from using oil paint by many New York artists at the time. Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock and Ad Reinhardt were amongst the first to use Bocour's acrylic paint, whose properties provided an easy transition from using oil paint. Louis' sole pigment from 1949 onwards was Bocour's *Magna* resin pigment, which was marketed from 1947 as 'the first new painting medium in 500 years'.²⁵ During his later career, Louis would trade paintings with Bocour for pigment until his sales were enough to buy the quantities of pigment his works required.²⁶

In the mid-1940s, following the closure of the WPA projects in New York, Louis moved back to Baltimore.²⁷ Again unable to sustain his art career, Louis took up other jobs, and relied on the support of his family. He married Marcella Siegel in 1947, and moved to Silver Spring in Maryland, Washington. His wife's employment as a school teacher enabled Louis to devote his time to painting, and while this may have seemed a luxury for an unknown artist, Louis treated his work as seriously as a paid job. He spent at least eight hours each day painting in his studio converted from the couple's dining room.²⁸ Louis also continued to exhibit his works locally, and from 1951 until about 1953, travelled back to Baltimore regularly to advise a group of artists on their work.²⁹ This enabled Louis to converse with other artists about his ideas on painting, and therefore complement the solitude that his own work required. However, while Louis was very open with his students, he would not speak about his work or allow visitors to his own studio. Helen Jacobson, one of the Baltimore artists taught by Louis, says also that 'his experience with the New York art world made him bitter and he talked much of the market-place. [...] He did not admire many...living painters exhibiting in New York, and made no effort to conceal his dislike of the abstract-expressionists.'³⁰

Some of Louis' paintings produced in the early 1950s, such as the 'Charred Journal' series (1951) (**Image L-6**), were deeply affected by the division between the central New York style and so-called Washington provincialism. The paintings explored the personal topic of Louis' Jewish identity, specifically the historical Nazi book burnings. Each of the paintings in the series featured a dark painted background of vertically striated black or grey pigment. Upon this background, Louis laid down a rough grid by dripping white and black pigment. He squeezed the *Magna* pigment

directly onto the canvas to ‘draw’ various forms, from stars and Roman numerals to semi-figurative shapes. As these forms emerge from the ground, they evoke the sense of escaping from an ashen field, with each dark background symbolising a page of a destroyed book.³¹ The technique of tracing various symbols and figures with dripped pigment connected Louis’ series with Pollock’s black Duco paintings of 1950–52 (**Image C-19**). The very fluid Duco pigment made it easier for Pollock to incorporate images that were more figurative than in his previous works from 1947–50. The black pigment seemed to be ‘stained’ into the raw canvas, soaking and spreading into the weave. Critics who supported this work, such as Fried, suggested that Pollock was able to create a ‘synthesis’ of figuration and abstraction with these works, bringing together rather than separating the distinct styles of his career.³² Louis’ paintings also explored the potential of incorporating figurative and abstract elements through experimentation with acrylic pigment. However, seen in the context of regional painting in the early 1950s, Louis’ works were taken to be an appropriation of Pollock’s style. Fried, for example, suggested in his major monograph of 1967, that Louis’ early work was ‘of limited significance. One is tempted to characterize it, what has survived of it, as both minor and provincial.’³³

Due to the influence of such comments, many critics were therefore slow to explore the precedents for the ‘Charred Journal’ series within Louis’ own body of work, and the works have rarely been seen by viewers.³⁴ It is actually not known whether Louis would have seen Pollock’s series either in reproduction or exhibitions prior to embarking upon the ‘Charred Journal’ paintings, as Pollock’s stained paintings were first exhibited at Betty Parsons Gallery only in late 1951.³⁵ Precedents within Louis’ own body of work include drawings from 1948 and 1950, prior to Pollock’s series, which unlock questions about the emergence of the ‘Charred Journal’ paintings. *D191A* (1950) (**Image L-5**), a pen and ink line drawing, features two abstracted figures created primarily by a series of interconnected triangles. The figures face one another, and in the centre of the image, a circle with radiating lines indicates a sun. The figures float upon the page rather than being placed within any tangible sense of space. In *D189A* (1950) (**Image L-4**), we see the beginnings of Louis’ focus on the ground of the work, perhaps as a precedent to the background effects in the ‘Charred Journal’ paintings. This pen and ink drawing features similar ‘figures’ to *D191A*, with the addition of striated horizontal lines, some of which cut through the figures and

others are drawn to suggest they exist ‘behind’ the figures. This treatment of the entire surface presages the background feature of the ‘Charred Journal’ paintings.

Louis was playing with some of these concepts even earlier than 1950, in a series of drawings from 1948. These works are strongly influenced by Louis’ exposure to the work of Miró and Picasso. The bimorphic figures featured in Miró’s ‘surrealist’ paintings of the 1920s (**Image C-7**) and Picasso’s playful paintings and prints on the theme of ‘Les Saltimbanques’ or circus performers (c.1905) (**Image C-1**) and paintings of clowns and harlequins are particularly relevant to this period of Louis’ drawings. In *D115* (1948) (**Image L-3**), three figures appear to play with a ball, tossed above the heads of the players. The wire-like figures have been drawn possibly with only one or two lines, curving inside the figures to suggest their three-dimensionality. Louis’ draughtsmanship in this drawing is much more detailed and thoughtful than in the later works from 1950. In these, the figures become more spontaneous and therefore abstract – closely related therefore to Louis’ later abstraction. In the mid-1950s, when Louis focused intensively on developing his abstract painting technique, he ceased to draw. However, despite the disappearance of drawings at this time, many of the major tenets of his later paintings were linked to this early experimentation with drawing.

In 1952, Louis and Marcella moved into the city centre of Washington, and Louis accepted a teaching position at the Washington Workshop Center of the Arts. His local profile continued to increase, teaching more widely in Washington D.C. to private students, as well as a course at Howard University. Louis also became acquainted with Kenneth Noland in 1952, who was a colleague at the Workshop, and through Noland with Clement Greenberg. At this time, almost a decade after Louis’ return from New York, his access to the New York art scene became possible again. Noland was much more acquainted with artists, critics and new trends in New York painting. He studied at Black Mountain College and in Paris prior to moving to Washington D.C., after which Noland continued to maintain close ties with New York. In 1953, Noland and Louis were invited by Greenberg to visit him in New York, and both took a weekend trip from 3–5 April during which Louis was exposed to many new artistic experiences not possible in Washington. Much had changed since his time living in New York during the 1930s and early 1940s, particularly the

surge of abstract expressionist painting. With Greenberg, Noland and Louis visited galleries to see works by Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline, and the studio of Helen Frankenthaler. The collectors Leon and Ida Berkowitz, who founded the Washington Workshop, were also present at this session.

During their visit to Helen Frankenthaler's studio, Louis and Noland viewed her painting *Mountains and Sea* (1952) (**Image C-20**), which she had completed about six months prior. Although Frankenthaler painted the work in oil pigment, and would not turn to using the acrylic pigment until the early 1960s, she achieved the look of acrylic or watercolour by thinning the oil pigment with turpentine and spreading it in small areas across the canvas.³⁶ In some areas, the pigment was poured onto the canvas, and in others, Frankenthaler used a brush. She also delineated areas through drawing, but in such a manner that it drew attention to the openness of the coloured and stained areas of the composition rather than reducing or enclosing parts of the work. While the reference to 'mountains and sea' was evidently figurative, it was more ambiguous than the work of other New York artists such as Willem de Kooning's 'Women' series (**Image C-18**), which he also began in the early 1950s. Greenberg was instrumental in the development of Frankenthaler's work by introducing the artist to Pollock, and a painting such as *Mountains and Sea* can be seen in the context of Pollock's major works as well as his movement towards staining pigment in his black Duco series. The new possibilities opened by Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea*, a large, flat abstract painting, seemed to confront many preconceived ideas about painting. Specifically, the work illustrated that it was possible to combine colour and drawing over a large scale, and to create a painting that was completely 'open', or in another way, less 'compacted' than the recent influence that cubism had been upon the style of abstract expressionist painting.

Upon his return to Washington, Louis was evidently eager to experiment more widely with his materials given his recent experiences in New York. He began exploring colour and experimenting more widely with Magna than in the recent 'Charred Journal' paintings. Louis and Noland also worked together on some experiments at this time.³⁷ New paintings by Louis, such as *Trellis* and *Silver Discs* (both 1953) (**Images L-8 and L-9**), began to reveal aspects of the final technique he would pursue for the majority of his remaining career. The surface of *Silver Discs* showed many

new experimental elements, such as a cohesive, flattened surface, as well as vigorous brush work. Louis expanded upon his experimentation with the versatility of Magna in the ‘Charred Journal’ series. In some parts of the works he used the pigment as though it were oil paint, brushing it onto the surface in gestural and deliberate strokes. In other parts he attempted to create more expansive, flatter, sections by thinning the consistency of the pigment. The circular ‘disc’ sections in *Silver Discs* where Louis used aluminium paint, hint at an attempt to open up the space of the work. However, the overall effect of his technique in the painting, like the ‘Charred Journal’ works, was still contained in a cubist–abstract expressionist sense of compressed space. *Trellis*, on the other hand, suggested a new direction for Louis’ work and indicated more strongly the type of work that he would produce with the ‘Veil’ series shortly thereafter. The brushwork of *Trellis* filtered into delicate stained areas, and the surface of the painting was less dense than *Silver Discs*. Louis allowed the surface of the canvas, although it was primed, to act as an absorptive field or an expansive space in which various other elements could float. While this painting retained some of the elements seen in *Silver Discs*, particularly the areas of *sgraffito* brush work, Louis was experimenting more with his application of pigment to conceive of a new way to interact with the space of the canvas.

Two other key works from 1953, *Dark Thrust* and *Landscape (Mid-day)* (**Images L-11 and L-12**), preceded Louis’ final discovery of his abstract stain painting technique, and were in some ways more adventurous than even Frankenthaler’s painting *Mountains and Sea*. *Dark Thrust* is a more high–key coloured painting than *Landscape (Mid-day)*, however both share the same technique. Louis used two methods of applying Magna pigment to the canvases. He first laid down stained areas of muted grey or black to the canvas, and then applied areas of more viscous coloured pigment on the surface. The top layer is rough and gestural, while beneath the surface a more sombre and equalising effect is produced by the staining. The resulting works echoed ‘a Franz Kline superimposed upon a mid–1950s Frankenthaler.’³⁸ Some facets of these paintings were possibly influenced by recent experiences of Pollock and Frankenthaler’s works, such as the cropping of the composition from a larger sheet of painted canvas. However, other elements of Louis’ paintings were more experimental or free from the constraints of the painted edge, creating a sense of the work expanding outwards beyond the frame. Pollock’s major paintings from 1947–50

constantly drew attention to the compacting effects of the framed edge upon the action of his works, and his more recent Duco paintings were even more contained than earlier paintings. Only during the 1960s did Frankenthaler begin to expand her compositions beyond the constraints of the frame to create paintings that appeared to extend into another dimension.³⁹

As Louis was conducting these experiments with his work following his return from New York, his first solo exhibition was organised. The exhibition, including paintings, collages and drawings, was held at the Workshop Art Center from 12–30 April 1953. Louis' 'Charred Journal' series (1951) was a major feature, as were 'The Tranquilities' collages (1952–53) (**Image L-7**). These large works (approximately 1 x 1.5 metres) were created by layering tissue and acrylic on board. The circular shapes and vertical columns of the compositions recalled Robert Motherwell's 'Elegies to the Spanish Republic' series, which he began in 1948 (**Image C-21**). Like Motherwell, Louis was moved by the Spanish Civil War, which broke out in 1936 while Louis was living in New York. European artists also responded to the war, such as Picasso with his epic painting *Guernica* (1937) (**Image C-10**). Motherwell deliberately reduced his paintings to black and white, exploring the symbolism of the two contrasting against one another as 'death' and 'life'. Louis' use of dress-making paper and acrylic pigment created a more transparent and therefore lighter series of works while making obvious reference to Motherwell's style. The 'Charred Journal' and 'Tranquilities' series drew comparisons with the current work being produced in New York, and the drawings in the exhibition showed Louis' knowledge of the earlier European modernists Picasso, Miró and Klee. In Washington, the reviews of the exhibition were positive, adding to Louis' local reputation at the Workshop and with his private students. However, it is thought that Louis himself would have found the 1953 exhibition of works to be a timely reminder of the move he needed to make towards a more individual style.⁴⁰

While the Workshop exhibition continued, Louis pushed the abstractions of *Dark Thrust* and *Landscape (Mid-day)* further in *Untitled (#13 Experiment)* (1953) (**Image L-10**), a work that could be considered a breakthrough painting in terms of Louis' abstract technique. In this painting, Louis finally removed the brushwork and focused only on staining. The work, cropped from a larger sheet of canvas, features a single

stained column of black pigment that shifts in density as the wide pour tapers across and down the canvas. A second stream of yellow–ochre pigment to the left highlights the black column. Early the next year, Greenberg visited Louis and Noland and selected works by both artists to include in the *Emerging Talent* exhibition that he was organising for the Samuel Kootz Gallery in New York.⁴¹ This was a significant step in Louis' career, as he had not shown a work in New York since 1939. *Emerging Talent* opened in January 1954, featuring *Trellis* and *Silver Discs* by Louis. Works not featured, such as *Untitled (#13 Experiment)* are obvious precursors to the first fully–resolved 'Veil' series produced from January to June 1954, however these were overlooked in Greenberg's selection for Louis' first exposure in New York.⁴²

Greenberg was interested in particular aspects of Louis' paintings, and as his relationship with Louis grew throughout the artist's career, the changes that Louis made to his works have been difficult to disengage from the potential influence of the critic.⁴³ Greenberg provided advice on the direction of Louis' work, which was accepted on occasion. Greenberg's advice included encouraging Louis and Noland to visit New York more during the 1950s to take note of the second–rate gestural abstraction being produced.⁴⁴ However, Louis was also a staunchly independent artist in many respects, not divulging his work with even close friends such as Noland. This would inevitably lead to a break in their friendship during this period.⁴⁵ Greenberg's influence would become poignant when Louis ceased his 'Veil' series in June 1954 and began to explore some of the gestural elements of his pre–Veil paintings such as *Dark Thrust* and *Landscape (Mid-day)*. Louis explored the more viscous properties of Magna. He dripped the pigment onto the canvas in many layers, staining and blending the pigments wet–into–wet, and in some works splattering aluminium paint as he had done in *Silver Discs* in 1953. The combination of gestural strokes, poured pigment and lighter stained areas struggled for attention in these paintings. The works showed Louis' sensitivity for the current vogue of 'Abstract Impressionism' emerging at the time. Greenberg, however, felt they were reverting to Abstract Expressionism.⁴⁶ Contrary to Greenberg's suggestions, Louis' first solo exhibition in New York was held with this series of 'rougher paintings' at the Martha Jackson Gallery in 1957.⁴⁷ Following the exhibition, and likely related to a combination of Greenberg's input and his own viewing of the works, Louis destroyed over 300 paintings from the series leaving only about 12 works from this series to remain.⁴⁸

It was only at the very end of the 1950s that audiences were finally exposed to Louis' major works. Perhaps this came too late to correct the perception of Louis as a 'provincial' artist or the view that these works were influenced by the more famous American abstractionists who resided in New York. In 1959 and 1960 exhibitions were held at the new contemporary department of French and Company, Louis' dealer in New York. Featuring examples mostly from Louis' 1954 and 1958–59 'Veil' series, both exhibitions were curated by Clement Greenberg, which added weight to the selection of paintings for the shows.⁴⁹ Greenberg also held the position as an advisor for the gallery, and his decision to show Louis' paintings at French and Company directly after an exhibition of Barnett Newman's works for the first time in New York since 1951. This was evidently a strategic move relating to his own convictions about what constituted 'advanced' modern art.⁵⁰ While the exhibitions in New York provided important exposure for both Newman and Louis' work, neither exhibition received many reviews. When they did become recognised, both artists were consequently linked with Greenberg.⁵¹

Widespread interest in Louis' work emerged after 1960, with the assistance of published essays on his work. In January 1960, William Rubin suggested in 'Younger American Painters' that Louis was one of the most interesting artists to have 'emerged' in recent years.⁵² Rubin compared Louis with several younger artists, including Frank Stella, Helen Frankenthaler and Kenneth Noland, who were already better known despite Louis' age of 47. In the previous year Frankenthaler at 31 years of age participated in the important roundtable discussion at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 'Is there a New Academy?', which was a response to the growing prevalence of late abstract expressionist painting.⁵³ Rubin grouped Louis with the younger artists as he felt the 'Veils' attempted to challenge the abundance of second-generation abstract expressionist painting in New York and elsewhere. Therefore, as a 'recent' artist, Louis' works showed 'only an indirect, elliptical relationship to the other 'first wave' painters.'⁵⁴ As the first major statement on Louis' work, this perception would have a lasting effect on ideas about Louis' emergence and his artistic interests.

Clement Greenberg published his seminal essay ‘Louis and Noland’ shortly afterward in May 1960. Partly as a response to Rubin’s essay, Greenberg’s text aimed to provide more depth to the discussion of both Louis and Noland’s works, despite the fact that no particular paintings were examined. Greenberg spoke of the freshness of the work produced by both of the Washington–based artists, which resulted from the lessening of pressure for them to produce work under the difficulties of the New York scene, which like Rubin, he felt was losing its significance.⁵⁵ Greenberg spoke of a breakthrough in Louis’ work that came through the influence of Frankenthaler’s *Mountains and Sea*, and through Frankenthaler, to Pollock. Louis’ other abstract paintings or works leading to the ‘Veil’ series of 1954 were not discussed. Rather, Greenberg claimed that Louis’

first sight of the middle–period Pollocks and of a large and extraordinary painting done in 1952 by Helen Frankenthaler, called *Mountains and Sea*, led Louis to change his direction abruptly. Abandoning Cubism with a completeness for which there was no precedent in either influence, he began to feel, think, and conceive almost exclusively in terms of open colour.⁵⁶

Greenberg’s comments were an affirmation of Rubin’s suggestions that Louis’ work was based upon a recent engagement with artists from the ‘first–generation’, which situated his work firmly in 1960s rather than the 1950s.

Greenberg’s essay established some of the most important interpretations of Louis’ emergence and the progression of his style, which continued to affect Louis’ work in the decades following. Those critics following Greenberg’s example, such as Michael Fried, considered Louis a turning point. Fried suggested that ‘broadly speaking, modernist painting since Morris Louis has been antagonistic to de Kooning’s work and to the kind of painting produced by followers of his.’⁵⁷ While the beginnings of a dominant interpretation of Louis’ career were beginning to gain weight, several positive effects also resulted. This included a new–found interest in Louis’ work as it provided a possible new direction for contemporary painting focusing on scale, colour and ‘openness’. These elements would shortly thereafter become associated with ‘Colourfield’ painting or ‘Post–painterly abstraction’, linking Louis with these movements and providing a lasting legacy for his late works. Following the release of the essays by Rubin and Greenberg, more interest was shown in Louis’ paintings. However, Louis only exhibited two more times in New York before his death. André

Emmerich took over as Louis' dealer in 1960 after French and Company closed, and he held a solo exhibition of Louis' work the following year.⁵⁸ The exhibition featured works from Louis' recent series of 'Stripe' paintings (1961–62). At the time Emmerich became Louis' New York dealer, Lawrence Rubin (William Rubin's brother) was commissioned to facilitate the sales and exhibition of Louis' works in Europe, therefore disseminating Louis' work into an international context. This led to group exhibitions of Louis' works in Paris and Rome, and solo exhibitions in Milan and at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London in 1960. Contrasting with this increased attention in New York and abroad, at home in Washington, Louis' abstract paintings were increasingly considered 'difficult ones for the public'.⁵⁹

In comparison to works from Louis' previous series, the 'Stripes' were of modest size; slightly larger than life-size and some less than one metre wide. The tall, narrow paintings communicated a simple, yet powerful optical effect through arrangements of straight multi-coloured pours of pure acrylic colours, echoing his previous technique. Louis was able to retain the intensity that the 'Veil' and 'Unfurled' paintings achieved through their immersive scale by stacking long pours of coloured pigment beside one another in various shimmering configurations. With the easier installation of these works, the 'Stripes' were more widely exhibited and therefore more easily sold due to their accessibility for buying audiences.⁶⁰ With the smaller scale, Louis experienced the freedom to create more than one 'Stripe' painting on his large lengths of canvas. He would later indicate the composition and crop the canvas according to the intended size of the work. This process was undertaken to create the work *Burning Stain* (1961) (**Image L-39**), which was shown in the Solomon R. Guggenheim exhibition *American Abstract Expressionists and Imagists* in 1961, which would be Louis' final showing.⁶¹ Critic and curator Daniel Robbins interpreted Louis' process as a disinterest in finished compositions, and works such as *Burning Stain*, which arrived at the museum neither stretched nor cut, as a deliberate attempt to free the works from the limitations posed by restricting the optical effects of his technique within a defined space. Robbins stated that 'un-composition' suited Louis' technique, for when Louis painted according to the traditional rules of composition 'the spontaneity or freedom of personal rhythmic accident was confined by the limits of chosen boundaries. Louis wanted an expression so intense that it would transcend limits.'⁶² By 'disregarding' the composition, Louis was able to move beyond the

problems of composition and focus solely on surface ‘optical effects’. This suggestion was criticised by Greenberg in *Art International*, where he discounted the idea that Louis did not plan and execute his paintings with precision, to focus only on the ‘effects’ of colour.⁶³

Louis died in September 1962 at age 49, just prior to the scheduled opening of another solo exhibition at André Emmerich in New York. The exhibition opened as intended in late October 1962, a month after Louis’ death and comprised Louis’ most recent ‘Stripe’ paintings from 1962. Until that point, the ‘Stripes’ had been exhibited as either thin vertical or horizontal paintings. Some of the canvases were cropped and framed so that the columns of vibrant colours were severed at one or both ends, suggesting that the stripes extended beyond the frame. Others were stretched so that bare canvas was visible on all sides, indicating that the stripes were floating in a blank field (**Image L-41**).⁶⁴ Some of the eight works exhibited at the posthumous exhibition at Emmerich’s gallery presented new configurations of the stripe style. *Hot Half*, *Equator* and *No End* (all 1962) (**Image L-42, L-43 and L-44**) were stretched as square paintings rather than thin rectangular paintings, and with the stripes running diagonally across the surface, rather than vertically or horizontally.⁶⁵ Louis noted in correspondence to Greenberg just prior to his death that he hoped these ‘Stripe’ paintings would enable his ‘Unfurled’ paintings to be exhibited at his next exhibition in New York, as these works had not yet been seen by his viewers.⁶⁶ It came as a shock that Louis’ life was cut short at this moment in his career, when he was taking his style into a new direction possibly hinted by the new ‘Stripes’. The ‘Stripes’ were situated at the end of a long period of almost a decade during which Louis refined his abstract painting technique. However, the timing of the public interest in Louis’ work with the ‘Stripe’ series in 1961–62 understandably created the impression that it was Louis’ first major series, consequently also situating Louis amongst the emerging group of Colourfield painters of the 1960s.

The first retrospective of Louis’ work, held in 1963 at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, approached the problem of the limited knowledge of Louis’ work outside of the ‘Stripes’. As many viewers had only recently become interested in Louis’ work and not seen his previous exhibitions in New York, curator Lawrence Alloway attempted to show a broader view of Louis’ earlier works by including four

1954 ‘Veil’ paintings, nine 1958–59 ‘Veil’ paintings, several transitional works from 1959–60, and an example of an ‘Unfurled’ painting. Alloway pointedly excluded any ‘Stripe’ paintings from his selection of works for the exhibition. He stated that because ‘the purpose of this exhibition is to emphasize a major but neglected period of Louis’ work, these last paintings are not included.’⁶⁷ Through his selection, Alloway connected Louis with the period of Abstract Expressionism, drawing out his involvement in achieving or working through the same issues as artists like Rothko (with colour and scale) and de Kooning (through ideas of gesture and materiality that embodied human ‘content’).⁶⁸ Alloway’s exhibition was important in widening the focus of Louis’ work to include some lesser known aspects of his career. However, the connections that Alloway drew with 1950s abstract expressionism or ‘field’ painting was a new perspective on Louis’ work at the time. This approach was confronting for many critics and viewers who had been accustomed seeing only one approach to Louis’ works through his exhibitions.

Throughout the 1960s and beyond, many ambiguities relating to Louis’ working methods emerged. Issues such as the cropping, orientation, dates and titles of his works, which Louis often left until the time his works were required for exhibition, were difficult to explain and led to misinterpretations throughout the years following his death.⁶⁹ With Greenberg as the advisor to the Morris Louis estate until 1970, there were consequently minimal questions raised in this period about Louis’ practice and one viewpoint dominated the writings and exhibitions of Louis’ work. Alternative views of Louis’ works were also consequently not thoroughly researched, and were based upon superficial connections, for example, with minimalist painting. Rightly, Alloway proposed that the limited knowledge of Louis’ diverse body of work showed that ‘an artist can still live out of sight behind his notices and, even, behind his exhibitions.’⁷⁰ The next major retrospective to be held in New York after the 1963 exhibition was held at The Museum of Modern New York in 1986, under curator John Elderfield. This exhibition attempted to chart the development of Louis’ sub-series such as his ‘Floral’ and ‘Aleph’ series of the late 1950s (**Image L-34 and L-37**), but only illustrated the ‘Veil’, ‘Unfurled’ and ‘Stripe’ series in colour plates in the exhibition catalogue. Elderfield also continued some of the superficial interpretations of Louis’ ‘breakthrough’ that began with Greenberg’s writing in 1960, stating that:

Louis's and Noland's enthusiastic reaction to seeing Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea* in her studio – and their immediate, abrupt change in working methods and, indeed, in their very conception of painting – is now so firmly embedded in the written histories of contemporary American art that this “revelation” cannot completely be pried clear from its literary existence and actually imagined as taking place on Twenty-third Street between Seventh and Eighth avenues. More than this: such is the power of the often-repeated to engender not belief but the very opposite that the temptation naturally arises to assume that we are in the realm of myth, not of historical fact. But it did take place and it was a revelation.⁷¹

Elderfield's reversion to the dominant history on Louis' work illustrates that even as recently as the 1980s, it has been difficult to deviate from the traditional view of the artist's work due to the weight of myth and ‘revelation’ in the accepted version of Louis' career. David Anfam, in a review of the 1996 Morris Louis retrospective at the Musée de Grenoble in France, suggested that the reversion to the dominant history continues to be an obstacle in the understanding of Louis' work. He says that ‘though one cannot doubt the truth of Louis's sudden metamorphosis after coming face to face with Helen Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea* (1952) with its stained-canvas effects, this ‘revelation’ has all the hallmarks of a modernist topos, a familiar set-piece concerning absolute beginnings and self-discovery from which any distracting traces of the past have been erased.’⁷² This particular approach indicates the possibility to confront certain perceptions of Louis' work through contextualising it within the concerns of the period. Major changes in the priorities within art criticism, and the increasing exposure of American art during the mid-twentieth century, were related to the development of Louis' works and the literature on his work. It is therefore important to consider these influences as part of the history and context of the works themselves. A careful scrutiny of the context in which Louis' works were interpreted during his career, and continue to be interpreted, is vital in the creation of a broader appreciation of the diversity of Louis' interests. The results of this exploration will therefore open up new interpretations of Morris Louis' work as part of an ongoing history.

CHAPTER 2

OPTICALITY AND ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM: 1939–1959

In New York in the late 1930s and 1940s, small groups of artists were involved in making a dramatic shift away from the accepted notions of ‘fine art’ by exploring abstraction. This was the newest and most radical confrontation to traditional realism in the art of the United States and Europe at the time. Consequently, abstract art was not a commonly accepted style. It provoked criticisms from the public that it was too conceptual or difficult to grasp and not highly skilled. Articles in the popular press reflected these concerns. The 1949 *Life* magazine article on Jackson Pollock described the artist’s technique as ‘drooling’ and ‘dribbling’ pigment onto canvas.¹ The abstract artists were also described as ‘bohemians’, who deliberately attempted to isolate themselves from the rest of society in the pursuit of pure or abstract ideas.² These criticisms of the abstract artists illustrated some of the difficulties they faced in relation to popular perceptions of fine art.

Some artists, however, fed into this perception by proposing that the role of the abstract artist created ‘advanced’ art. ‘Advanced art’ was made at a distance from the rest of society. Its primary concern was for the continuation of art’s primary role in the culture of the future, questioning traditional ideas of how this was best achieved.³ This notion of ‘advanced art’ fuelled the perceptions that abstract artists were bohemians and considered themselves separate from, and above, common culture. The term ‘bohemian’ also carried with it connotations of radicalism and hostility. Consequently, conflicts developed between the art-viewing public, artists, and critics over the role of art in society. On the one hand, many abstractionists suggested they need to distance themselves in order to create an ideal society within which abstraction could flourish. On the other, however, they desired for their work to be accepted and bought by the middle-class art-viewing public they criticised for not appreciating their work. Therefore, the role of the art critic took on a greater importance in explaining abstract art and the role of abstraction within society. Like never before, the art critic was vital in the emergence of art and the endorsement of particular artists.

The following chapter traces the evolution of the focus on ‘opticality’ or ‘optical illusion’ in abstract painting in the United States during the mid-twentieth century. ‘Opticality’ was a major theme in the historical progression of abstraction that centred on the purity and effectiveness of sensations that were removed from worldly

experiences or instructions. A series of important essays published by the critic Clement Greenberg over the twenty year period of 1939 to 1959 assisted the development of opticality in American art. Greenberg's suggestion that the emergence of opticality was tied to a gradual withdrawal from traditional representations of reality traced throughout Western art history, illustrated the critic's anticipation that abstraction would require a major shift in the perceptions of the art-viewing public. Greenberg was close to a particular group of abstract artists whose interests in abstraction were confronted by the context of American art of the early twentieth century. This influenced the development of his theory of opticality, not only confirming Greenberg's focus on the Abstract Expressionist artists at the end of World War II, but the possibility for the appreciation of their work within broader historical goals of modernist painting. It was essential for Greenberg to make these connections in order to preserve the idea of high culture during the period – 'to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture *moving* in the midst of ideological confusion and violence.'⁴ The following analysis, which takes in Greenberg's view of the historical progression and value of purely 'optical' sensations in the visual arts, suggests that Greenberg positioned 'opticality' as a type of 'ultimate abstraction' and an historical inevitability or goal in the success of modernist painting in the United States.

The different approaches to abstraction in New York from the mid-1930s resulted in the works that confronted the tastes of the conservative art-viewing public. Artists' rejections of social or historical narratives separated their styles from accepted approaches to visual art. They developed individual styles and communicated personal truths that seemed unbounded to cultural or political expression.⁵ These 'avant-garde' or 'advanced' artists were challenged by the manifestation of pervasive conservative approaches to art, including the WPA projects in New York and the growing popularity of a romantic style of American landscape painting. Greenberg became involved with several small, but cohesive groups of artists, including American-born artists and abstract artists who were recent immigrants from the conflicts in Europe where the Second World War was threatening. He used his understanding of their predicament to explore his own ideas about the continuation of culture in the face of the conservatism of American society.

The WPA public art projects had an enormous effect on the type of work being produced through artists' independent practices. Morris Louis' works from this period reflected that social realist painting provoked artists to express their situations at the time. Common themes were working life and expressions of the dominant social and political issues associated with the period of the Depression. The effects of the period upon rural communities as well as the increasing advancement of technologies that threatened rural economics were taken up by the popular 'regionalist' style of painting of the 1930s and 1940s, most prevalently by Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975) (**Image C-9**), Grant Wood (1891–1942) and John Stuart Curry (1897–1946). Despite training for some of their time in Europe and coming under the influence of movements such as Impressionism, these artists were attracted back to their places of origin in America's Midwest. As their work aimed to fulfil a social purpose, it was best installed in public places. Large-scale public mural projects by these artists idealised the hard work of rural agriculture and represented some of the grand historical and social narratives of American history. Benton's muscular paintings were based upon sculptural maquettes, which created a sense of exaggerated realism in his finished paintings and murals. By the late 1930s, he renounced modernism and suggested that for many people living beyond the cities, modern art was inaccessible and irrelevant to their lives.⁶ Although there were many differences in their ideologies, the social focus of regionalist painting and the public installation of the works forged a link with the social realist painting of the WPA projects. Both of these styles grew throughout the cities and regional centres of America during the 1930s.

The widely acknowledged perception of America's regional 'romanticism' to those outside of the United States, and along with the success of the WPA projects, meant that artists who were interested in alternative modes of expression needed to look beyond the American context for inspiration. The challenge this presented for some artists was to find a style that could confront the perception of America's provincialism. This led some to explore the context of European modernism, to affirm their alternative interests before turning back to explore the potential of their own American context. European modernism, from the Impressionist period to Cubism and works produced more recently in Paris by artists such as Fernand Léger, provided a fertile area for artists to explore their interest in modern art. Two important local factors assisted the transition from conservative styles of art to abstraction during the

period of the 1930s; the first being the establishment of groups such as the American Abstract Artists group (AAA) in 1936. The second was the influence of individual artists who had experience and knowledge of European abstraction and had moved to New York prior to or at the outset of World War II; artists such as Hans Hofmann. This significantly influenced the American artists who would go on to form the core of America's abstract painters in the 1940s and 1950s. The information and inspiration gained from this wider context provided important impetus for a distinctly 'American' style of abstract art in subsequent years.

The AAA group was established amidst the general perception that art needed to reflect issues of social significance and to repair, communicate and draw together a sense of community of historical importance. On the contrary, the AAA argued for the significance and productivity of purely aesthetic and personal modes of expression, for the advancement of modern art. Founding members of the group included Josef Albers, George K.L. Morris and David Smith. Later European members comprised Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Fernand Léger, Piet Mondrian and Jean Arp who were among the artists residing in New York from the late 1930s. As AAA member Ibram Lassaw proposed in 'On Inventing our own Art' (1938), 'the artist no longer feels that he is 'representing reality', he is actually making reality. Direct sensual experience is more real than living in the midst of symbols, slogans, worn-out plots, clichés – more real than political-oratorical art.'⁷ This statement suggested that art claiming to fulfil roles other than its own aesthetic purpose or inspiration was of no value to modern art. This could be taken as a direct reference to the regionalist and social realist focuses then dominating American art.

Hans Hofmann (1880–1966) also reiterated the focus on translating purely aesthetic experiences into art. Although not a member of the AAA, Hofmann's work was of crucial importance to the knowledge and experiences that the emerging American abstract artists gained during this period. When he settled in New York in the early 1930s, Hofmann brought with him an abundance of knowledge of Cubism and early modernist artists of Europe such as Wassily Kandinsky, who was widely acknowledged as one of the first abstractionists. From 1938–39 Hofmann led a series of public lectures and classes from the School of Fine Arts that he established in New York in 1934. He suggested that not merely imitating the world, but interpreting it

through new aesthetic sensations was a primary focus of modern art. He stated that ‘art must not imitate physical life. Art must have a life of its own – a spiritual life. A painter must create pictorial life...which means he must be able to activate the picture–surface with the means at his disposal to create this life.’⁸ ‘Pictorial life’ proposed abstraction as a valid reality within the context of art itself. Hofmann’s understanding and exposure to European abstraction, provided an important bridge between the aspirations of local New York artists to move away from traditional realism and the kind of work being produced in European centres like Paris. Certain artists that Hofmann advocated, such as Matisse and Picasso, could also be viewed at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, which opened in 1929. The immediate contact with the work of these artists provided significant support for the explorations that the American artists were undertaking. It therefore also assisted in changing the focus of art produced in New York from a social realist orientation, to abstract painting.

By the mid–1930s, artists such as Lee Krasner and Willem de Kooning used their experience from the AAA group, Hans Hofmann’s lectures and the insights of other European artists now living in New York, and sought alternative avenues for their work. During this period Clement Greenberg became acquainted with Krasner and de Kooning and other artists associated with the abstract groups. He began to write art criticism in the late 1930s which, in opposition to the current conservatism of American art, aimed to provide support for the work of many artists in the area and to justify their search for alternative modes of expression. At the time, Greenberg suggested that the New York artists needed to ‘assimilate’ the lessons provided by the work of their Parisian counterparts, rather than turning away from the reality of their inherited influence of European abstraction.⁹ This would result in a gradual closure of the gap between the modern art of Europe and America, and establish an ‘international’ communication that would enable the American artists to enter broader debates that concerned the continuation of modernist art. Available European art journals, particularly the *Cahiers des Arts* also enabled the New York artists to engage with these ideas.

During this period of development, it was also important to develop a specific or autonomous identity for the work of the New York artists. This would be crucial to

avoid simply affirming the ‘provincialism’ of their situation, which was already widely acknowledged by the 1930s through the conservatism of American realist painting. Greenberg suggested the possible resolution of this problem in two ways: firstly, in order to affirm the work being produced locally in New York, he traced the lineage of modern art styles throughout history that confronted the ‘limits’ of realism. From Impressionism to Cubism, Greenberg led his readers to understand that the gradual emergence of abstract painting in Europe was concerned only with painting and its aesthetics rather than any extraneous issues. Secondly, he used this historical positioning to set up the tools for interpreting specific contributions in the American context and the individual approaches by the New York abstractionists. Through the combination of these two approaches, of writing on the historical development of modern art as well as its specific contributions, Greenberg was able to propose that American abstraction was a valid form of expression. A major product of this development was the gradual appearance of Greenberg’s theory of ‘opticality’. Opticality manifested through a series of terms related to the strictly visual nature of modernist art and therefore its ‘autonomy’. Like Hans Hoffman, Greenberg considered autonomy to be one of the primary goals of abstract painting, which was closely linked with the continuation of American culture.

Many of Greenberg’s texts from the late 1930s show a deep opposition to the conservatism of representational art. His ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ (1939) takes readers through the gradual withdrawal of those in ‘avant-garde’ circles to explore and create their own autonomy from social, political or artistic influences. For Greenberg, the primary goal of this autonomy or separation was to lead the way towards high culture. Artists needed to investigate the problems specific to the construction of their work rather than concerning themselves with social or political concerns. In the context of the socio-political role of the WPA projects, which embellished public buildings with art containing strong messages for public concern, Greenberg’s propositions were confrontational. While in the early 1920s artists such as David Siqueiros had called for the support of public art to break down the authority and hierarchies that proposed easel painting at the highest level, the alternative view suggested by Greenberg was that to popularise art was also detrimental to the continuation of culture.

Greenberg stated that historically:

the avant-garde poet or artist sought to maintain the high level of his art by both narrowing and raising it to the expression of an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or beside the point...It has been in search of the absolute that the avant-garde has arrived at 'abstract' or 'non-objective' art.¹⁰

To gain a position of autonomy, the artist would need to 'retire from the public', or enter a realm of personal expression that could be drawn from deep within the psyche in order to connect with the experience of others on an abstract level. As such, the 'avant-garde' artist could not enter into popular culture debates as this would conflict with the identity of their work. This view opposed the suggestions of popular artists such as Thomas Hart Benton, who proposed that when disconnected from society art would dissolve into irrelevance. For Greenberg, separation was essential to attain the level of culture that could rectify the dominance of American social realism or romantic regionalism over the visual arts. In this essay Greenberg is already suggesting that abstraction or 'non-objective' art is a destination that artists arrive at, a kind of historical inevitability or ultimate achievement in modernist art.

In the early 1940s, Greenberg began a process of developing a space for abstraction and abstract artists. He wrote to broaden the understanding of the development of modernist art in Western art history by providing critical support for the links between the European past and American present. In addition to the external limitations posed by realist art, there were specific 'limitations' of abstraction that Greenberg explored in order to illustrate the absolute autonomy that he had described in the essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch'. Limitations would set the parameters for the production of art and ensure that each kept to their own distinct field. Art could therefore avoid the problem that realist painting had encountered, which imitated life rather than represented any sense of 'aesthetic' reality. In his argument for ultimate autonomy, Greenberg suggested that different episodes throughout western art history asserted individualism against the mainstream style, just as the Americans were currently attempting to do against the dominance of figurative art. One of the major challenges for artists throughout this history was the exploration of new concepts of 'reality'. This meant overthrowing the reliance upon the sense of three-dimensional

space as a representation of worldly reality, confronting the limits between ideas of the ‘fictive’ and the ‘real’.

In ‘Towards a Newer Laocoön’ (1940), Greenberg used Cubism as a model of this growing confrontation to traditional conceptions of space, and therefore reality. Through Cubism, Greenberg stated: ‘The picture plane itself grows shallower and shallower, flattening out and pressing together the fictive planes of depth until they meet as one upon the real and material plane which is the actual surface of the canvas.’¹¹ The shallowness of space through this kind of painting meant, for Greenberg, that the realistic representation of space or objects occupying a space in painting was now impossible. The deliberate exploitation of the flatness of the canvas itself assisted in affirming a visually illusive or ‘optical’ sensation of space. Greenberg suggested that a visual effect of this attempt to flatten out three-dimensional space in painting was that ‘a vibrating tension is set up as the objects struggle to maintain their volume against the tendency of the real picture plane to reassert its material flatness and crush them into silhouettes.’¹² The knowledge gained from the approach of the Cubist artists was crucial to the development of American abstraction by creating new ways of interpreting the space represented in paintings.

Following the end of the War, in the late 1940s the expressiveness of abstract art and artists began to capture the attention of many in the United States. Articles in the popular magazines, which attempted to provide explanation of the work being made by the New York artists, oscillated between providing support for the newness of the style, and rejections of the works based on the difficulty in understanding their personal idioms. This made it difficult for many to understand the ‘content’ of abstract art, feeding into the negative comments about the artistic capabilities of the New York artists. Discussions in the New York art community brought this confusion to the forefront. In 1948 a major roundtable discussion was held at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), which drew together fifteen curators and scholars to debate the question: ‘Is modern art, considered as a whole, a good or bad development? That is to say, is it something that responsible people can support, or may they neglect it as a minor and impermanent phase of culture?’¹³ The panel, including Greenberg, several New York museum staff, Meyer Schapiro, authors and critics, critiqued several abstract works to explore the proposed question. Works used as their case model

included paintings from the MoMA collection by Picasso (*Ma Jolie* 1911–12 and *Girl Before a Mirror* 1932) (**Image C-2 and C-8**) and Miró (*Person Throwing a Stone at a Bird* 1926) (**Image C-6**). Contemporary American works included Jackson Pollock's recent painting *Cathedral* (1947) (**Image C-12**) and works by de Kooning and Gottlieb. The dominant response of the group, which was published in *Life* Magazine, was that it was difficult to interpret the validity of abstraction without a consensus on standards of quality, or knowledge of the subject matter of the works. It was suggested that this difficulty would result in public confusion over the value of abstract art.¹⁴

The public perception of abstract art was affected by its radical difference from the accepted styles of painting, as illustrated by the MoMA roundtable discussion. Greenberg's writings from this period became more focused on developing the interpretive tools to understand abstraction in light of the general confusion of the public and art community. His terminology also began to focus increasingly on the optical and in essays from this period, abstract art is discussed with great importance as having a crucial role in 'American' culture. This coincided with some major changes occurring in the work of Jackson Pollock. In 1947, Pollock started to extend the field of his compositions outward, almost breaking through the limitations posed by the edges of the canvas. When Pollock destroyed the sensation of traditional depth, Greenberg realised the important 'crisis' that Pollock's work presented for traditional painting, which he outlined in the essay 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture' (1948).

The essay was a major text in support of Pollock's work in light of the discussions at the time. Greenberg introduced several terms that related to the optical nature of Pollock's style. He hinted that Pollock's paintings declared the optical surface as the *only* reality present or necessary in his work, describing the paintings as 'all-over', 'polyphonic' and 'hallucinatory'.¹⁵ The artist's technique of using pigment to break down the surface into 'equivalences', resulted in the surface spreading across the canvas, destroying any possibility of entering through traditional optical means, such as perspective. Greenberg likened this sensation of Pollock's 'patterning' to a decoration, filling the surface so completely with pattern and colour that it created its own ambiguous sensation of space that could not be objectified. The work was seen to communicate the 'feeling that all hierarchical distinctions have been, literally,

exhausted and invalidated.’¹⁶ Instead of this ‘crisis’ or confrontation of abstraction being seen as an end–point or conclusion for painting, Greenberg invited viewers to explore the new optical sensation of abstract painting as a productive and exciting way forward. He stated that:

The fact that the variations upon equivalence introduced by a painter like Pollock are sometimes so unobtrusive that at first glance we might see in the result not equivalence, but an hallucinatory uniformity, only enhances the result.¹⁷

This almost deceptive nature of opticality enabled Greenberg to link the radicalism of Pollock’s abstraction with a long history. This again took him into an historical revision of modernist painting’s origins and the evolution of major themes such as space, colour and technique, in order to confirm the importance of abstraction in the American context.

In its traditional context, painting was focused on the representation of the world and its objects. It therefore concentrated on the recreation of three–dimensions within the two–dimensional surface of the canvas. This created a sensation of space that could be termed ‘sculptural’ or ‘tactile’, that is, space that mimicked the suggestion of three–dimensions through the pictorial techniques of drawing, shading and use of colour. For abstract artists, because they embraced the space of the canvas as two–dimensional, the imitation of ‘sculptural space’ was regarded as a deceptive or impure. Furthermore, the historical focus on representing objects ignored the importance of the act of painting itself and its specific materials and methods. Therefore, the pursuit of ‘optical’ space, as opposed to sculptural or tactile space, needed to renounce the illusion of three–dimensionality. In doing so, it created the possibility to exist more independently from the other traditions such as sculpture. However, for Greenberg it was also important to illustrate that abstraction had historical connections. During this period, Greenberg illustrated the importance of looking back over the origins of abstract painting to show that the resistance to the sculptural was connected to several historical precedents. He proposed that ‘Modernist painting shows, precisely by its resistance to the sculptural, how firmly attached it remains to tradition beneath and beyond all appearance to the contrary.’¹⁸ Greenberg proposed connections between the new opticality and historical painting as

a direct attempt to provide theoretical support for the abstraction emerging in New York at the time.

The eighteenth century artists Jacques–Louis David and Jean–Auguste–Dominique Ingres attempted to inject a new appreciation of space into painting through using heightened colour. While they desired to make the sensation of three–dimensionality more conspicuous, Greenberg suggests the sensation of space created in their works was actually more purely ‘optical’ or flat because they focused attention on factors other than traditional sculptural modelling. Their works seemed to exist more conspicuously as *paintings* than real scenes. In the nineteenth century, the Impressionists opened an entirely new mode of purely optical or painterly space. Their works radically undermined ‘reality’ or sculptural space through colour and the application of pigment. Although they too attempted to recreate the sensation of *reality*, particularly the effects of light, their techniques pulverised the surface and broke up three–dimensional sensations of space. The rejection of traditional three–dimensional space in the work of the Impressionists such as Manet, Renoir, Monet and other artists of the period such as Cézanne, became intrinsically linked with an ongoing move towards flatness and therefore opticality. Greenberg suggested that ‘by the middle of the nineteenth century, all ambitious tendencies in painting had converged amid their differences, in an anti–sculptural direction.’¹⁹ Even in attempts to *capture* reality the work of many historical artists confirmed the inevitable flatness and opticality of painting.

In the twentieth century, Cubism came to explore the literal flatness of painting through works that confounded the separation of two– and three–dimensionality. Picasso and Braque as leaders of the cubist movement, explored the problems of sculptural art in both the ‘analytical’ and ‘synthetic’ phases of Cubism from 1909–1913. The ‘analytical’ phase fused surface and image and was concerned with creating the effect of space through non–sculptural techniques. Feeling trapped by the illusionism of painting, the artists attempted to work within the confines of the two–dimensional surface until they reached a point where the flatness of the surface still supported the illusion of objects whether through shading, modelling, or the representation of recognisable objects. Cubist collage from 1912 took advantage of this problem by beginning to break down the strict delineation of ‘real’ and ‘implied’

space by combining the two onto a flat surface. In works such as Picasso's *Still life with Chair Caning* (1912) (**Image C-4**), the effect of incorporating three-dimensional objects into the surface — whether imitation wood-grain paper, sand, cloth or string — or the implied depth of painted text and objects, drew the eye constantly between illusions of surface and depth. In 'The Pasted-Paper Revolution' (1958) Greenberg argued that with these works:

depicted surfaces will be shown as parallel with the picture plane and at the same time cutting through it, as if to establish the assumption of an illusion of depth far greater than that actually indicated. Pictorial illusion begins to give way to what could be more properly called optical illusion.²⁰

In the case of Cubist collage, optical illusion contrasted between real and implied spaces. In this way, the works became more aware of their own illusionism and were opposed to traditional tactile sensations, constantly leading back to flatness and opticality.

Cubism had achieved ultimate flatness and 'optical illusion' through the placement of real and fictive sensations of space within a painting or collage. However, to do this it suppressed colour, shading objects in modulations of grey, brown and black, which were traditional means of implying the three-dimensionality of objects. Therefore, although it approached full abstraction around 1912, Cubism retreated into the assertion of real space through the traditional representation of objects in space. At this point the movement renounced its 'purity'. As Greenberg said in 'Sculpture in our Time' (1958), 'the desire for "purity" works, as I have indicated, to put an even higher premium on sheer visibility and an even lower one on the tactile and its associations, which include that of weight as well as of impermeability.'²¹ Greenberg's comments suggest that 'sheer visibility' could only be achieved by transcending the associations of tactility or 'matter'. The cubists were therefore unable to attain the level of flatness that was required to shun the tactility of the objects they represented, both in pictorial and literal terms. This standstill led Greenberg to explore the relationship of colour and optical illusion. As initiated by David in the eighteenth century and again with the Impressionists in the nineteenth century, the role of colour was crucial to bring flatness to the surface to suppress the illusion of real space. When Cubism renounced colour, it was left to successive artists

to explore the ‘sheer visibility’ of flat colour. The force of tactility needed to be continually confronted and renounced.

The notion of a ‘sheer visibility’ or ‘opticality’ led Greenberg to the work of Henri Matisse (1869–1954) as a successor to the flatness of Cubism. Matisse’s use of pure colour, in major works such as *Red studio* (1911) (**Image C-3**) undermined traditional sensations of space. The work features a stained red field upon which Matisse delineated features of his studio space, such as furniture and paintings. The conventions of sculptural representation, such as drawing, are used in a way that effaces the suggestion of three-dimensionality. One’s eye is led *through* the space in the work by the use of brilliantly coloured pigment. It bleeds into the surface of the painting, creating a coherent ‘visual’ effect, but a sense of space that is impossible to perceive in traditional terms. We are therefore encouraged to read the work as a unity of pure colour and optical space. Greenberg suggested that ‘the tension between the schematic illusion, which has a curious vividness, and the warm and insistent physical surface makes the picture’s drama. The device of joining top to bottom and background to foreground by a tract of flat colour, sometimes covering only part of the picture will be seen in many of Matisse’s most ambitious and successful paintings.’²² This trace of colour is enhanced by the size of Matisse’s canvas (181 x 219.1 cm), which creates a larger optical field, one that enables the eye to move about within, rather than to look *at*.

A defining factor arrived at by the Abstract Expressionist painters through this rich tradition of opticality was the potential of the large-scale abstract work. The American artists’ development of a new sensation of opticality beyond the restrictions imposed by the history of easel painting was an historical progression that demanded larger-scaled works. Greenberg stated in the major essay “‘American-Type’ Painting’ (1955) that:

the abstract expressionists were compelled to do huge canvases by the fact that they had increasingly renounced an illusion of depth within which they could develop pictorial incident without crowding; the flattening of surfaces of their canvases compelled them to move along the picture plane laterally and seek in its sheer physical size the space necessary for the telling of their kind of pictorial story.²³

By the time of this essay, Greenberg had established an argument for the legitimacy of the American abstract artists' work in historical terms, and in addition to this, had affirmed several factors that were important to their work, including the increased scale, focus on colour and 'allover' optical illusion. These elements were closely positioned with regard to the developments by artists in Europe in the decades preceding the 1940s and 1950s. The flatness of Cubism was taken over by colour, which led to the increased scale and immersion in colour of Matisse's canvases. Matisse's own work could be related to the pulverisation of the surface of the canvas that the Impressionist artists initiated in the previous century. Each of these episodes presaged the work being produced in New York.

By the 1950s, Greenberg's texts, major exhibitions and publications brought the work of the American abstract artists into public focus, enabling the discussion of abstract art beyond its earlier limitations. The attention provided Pollock and de Kooning in particular with widespread reputations in popular culture that rectified some of the initial perceptions about their lack of technical skill. Pollock's abstract paintings *Lavender Mist: Number 1, 1950*, *Autumn Rhythm: Number 30, 1950*, and *One: Number 31, 1950* (**Image C-16, C-15 and C-14**) were exhibited at a major solo exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery in 1950. This exhibition led to a series of publications in 1951 that exposed Pollock's work to a wide audience, including a profile on the artist in *Life* magazine, *Vogue* fashion photographs taken in front of *Lavender Mist*, and a major article 'Pollock Paints a Picture' with illustrated photographs by Hans Namuth in *Art News*.²⁴ Although the widespread popularity of the works may have undermined Greenberg's idea of 'advanced' culture to an extent, by this time the achievements of decades of struggle by the American abstractionists showed in the beginnings of the acceptance of abstraction as a valid form of expression for American artists.

By the end of the decade, Greenberg's vocabulary on opticality provided the interpretive tools for viewers to understand the importance of the visual nature of abstract painting, as well as their own aesthetic positions.

In 'A Case for Abstract Art' (1959) Greenberg reiterated that:

ideally the whole of a picture should be taken in at a glance; its unity should be immediately evident and the supreme quality of a picture, the highest measure of its power to move and control visual imagination, should reside in its unity.²⁵

Two important points are made in this statement that summarise Greenberg's argument for opticality that he initiated in the late 1930s. Firstly, Greenberg suggests that the sensation of an abstract painting should be immediately apparent – that there is no duration involved in viewing, that the necessity to deliberate over the 'content' or 'narrative' is not required. Secondly, the work itself controls the 'visual imagination' – that is, the opticality of the work is something present in the work itself, which reinforces its absolute presence or autonomy. At this point, the opticality of the work, which Greenberg also called its 'at-onceness'²⁶, affects and allows viewers a kind of transcendence from worldly subject matter and concerns. The merits of this kind of aesthetic expression on the part of the work, and the understanding of aesthetic experience on the part of the viewer, reminds us that the disembodied or disconnected nature of experiencing abstraction is alleged as a pure experience, separated from the world. Greenberg's justification for this position links with his notion of a gradual withdrawal from common culture in order to preserve the specific optical reality of visual art.

In his writing during the period of the late 1930s to the late 1950s, Greenberg pursued the importance of abstraction in aspiring towards anti-illusionism or optical purity. This created a unique space for the appreciation of abstract art in the midst of an increasingly conservative art-viewing public in the United States in the mid-twentieth century. A particular achievement of Greenberg's work during this period was a critical review of some of the historical episodes that contributed to the ongoing growth of culture and the avant-garde in the form of abstract painting. Into the 1960s Greenberg's terminology relating to 'opticality' evolved further in accord with the successes of the American abstractionists first criticised for their radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s. Greenberg continued to focus on the work of artists that pushed opticality into new directions. He took up many artists, including Morris Louis, and recontextualised the work of artists he had already championed, such as Pollock, to continue to illustrate the ongoing relevance of his theory of opticality into a new era.

CHAPTER 3

POSITIONING OPTICALITY INTO THE 1960s

CLEMENT GREENBERG'S "AMERICAN-TYPE" PAINTING' (1955–1958)

While Clement Greenberg had established a critical context for abstract painting in the United States by the late 1950s, there were several challenges to his theories that resulted from the work produced by artists throughout the decade. Greenberg proposed that modernist painting aspired for anti-illusionism – the rejection of traditional ‘subject matter’ that could influence the moment of viewing a work of art – and for ultimate autonomy through respecting the inherent ‘flatness’ of painting. However, major changes occurring in American abstract painting in the mid-to-late 1950s, influenced the critic to reposition his theory of opticality. Greenberg was spurred to revise aspects of his writing and theory of opticality due to a growing tendency towards the representation of traditional forms of illusionism that was beginning to re-emerge in the work of abstract artists. This issue lay at the centre of Greenberg’s revision of one of his major texts on American abstraction, “‘American-Type’ Painting’. This text, first written in 1955, was considerably altered in 1958 for the impending publication of Greenberg’s collected essays *Art and Culture* (1961). The revision of the essay radically altered the perception of American abstraction due to Greenberg’s move away from some of the Abstract Expressionist artists he had supported since the late 1930s. This break in the progression of abstract painting produced a certain ‘crisis’ for the position of the artist, who had up to that point been part of an Abstract Expressionist movement towards ultimate form of abstraction termed ‘opticality’.

The context that Greenberg established with the revised “‘American-Type’ Painting’ essay in 1958, enabled a new focus on abstract ‘field’ painting, led by artists such as Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still. These artists were positioned as counterparts to the work of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, which, by the mid-1950s, Greenberg felt was reverting to traditional forms of illusionism. By the early 1960s the work of Morris Louis was considered by Greenberg to follow the breakthrough of field painting into an era of abstraction beyond Abstract Expressionism.

In order to understand the ramifications for Louis’ work resulting from Greenberg’s reassessment of opticality, we need to delve back into the mid-to-late 1950s to explore some of the changes in American art of the period that were confronting Greenberg’s ideas. In the early 1950s, through various popular forms of media such

as *Vogue* and *Life* magazine, artists such as Pollock and de Kooning were publicly recognised for the ‘advanced’ nature of their work. Those artists in New York who were still comparatively unknown to the art-viewing public at this time, despite Greenberg’s support, banded together to have their work taken more seriously by museums that showed a bias towards traditional or conservative art. For example, in 1951, Adolf Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt and several other New York artists wrote an open letter to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to protest against the contemporary art prize exhibition offered by the Museum that year. The artists accused the Met for favouring conservative or traditional forms of art as illustrated by the conservative panel appointed to judge the prize. This linked with other issues, such as the small portion of the museum’s acquisitions budget spent on the purchase of contemporary art. Following the publication of the letter in the *New York Times*, *Life* magazine was spurred to document the ‘group’ of abstract artists, leading to the infamous photograph that accompanied an article titled ‘Irascible Group of Advanced Artists Led Fight against Show’, which positioned the artists as activists.¹

By the mid-to-late 1950s, the efforts of these artists came to result in a general change in the reception of modern art in America away from its bleak beginnings. This meant that some artists once ridiculed for their styles, or who were hostile towards the public for the lack of interest in their work, began to gain public profiles for their work. Progressively throughout the decade the interest taken by museums and critics in American abstraction resulted in several major exhibitions and essays. These included *Fifteen Americans* (1952) and *The New American Painting* (1958–59)², both organised by The Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), and the essays ‘The American Action Painters’ (1952) by Harold Rosenberg and ‘“American-Type” Painting’ (1955) by Clement Greenberg.

The *Fifteen Americans* exhibition held at MoMA in 1952 provided in-depth representation of a number of artists’ works, notably Pollock, Rothko and Clyfford Still.³ *The New American Painting* exhibition from 1958–59 was the first large-scale exhibition of American abstraction to travel internationally. It took the work of some 17 artists, including Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, to eight European cities before showing at MoMA.⁴ In response to the exhibition, one critic in Berlin stated that:

In view of the large number of great talents, one can speak of an American School; for the first time in the history of art, personalities are emerging that are not influenced by Europe, but, on the contrary, influence Europe, including Paris.⁵

Another critic in Milan suggested that:

American art derives from European art and is still sensitive to its cultural echoes, but nevertheless its character is so well defined, the images are so abundant and so permeated by the fantasy and motivations of Americans ideals, that one must admit it has by now the look of independence, decisively recognizable.⁶

This exhibition in particular materialised the aspirations of the abstract artists to have their specifically ‘American’ style of abstraction recognised. This had grown since the emergence of their work in the 1930s and 1940s in the context of the AAA group and Hans Hofmann’s lectures.

Despite Greenberg’s affirmation of the American abstractionists’ work at this time, two primary issues needed to be resolved due to this new found recognition. Firstly, the ‘advanced’ ideals of art and culture that Greenberg had stressed in previous years were in danger of compromise due to the growing acceptance of the Abstract Expressionist style. Adolf Gottlieb attempted to insist in 1954 that ‘art thrives not only on freedom, but on alienation as well.’⁷ This reiterated Greenberg’s earlier comments in essays such as ‘The Situation at the Moment’ (1948), that ‘the American artist has to embrace and content himself, almost, with isolation if he is to give the most honesty, seriousness, and ambition to his work. Isolation is, so to speak, the national condition of high art in America.’⁸ However, it was increasingly difficult to uphold a conceptual distance from popular culture when the artists became more favoured by the general art-viewing public. The potential effects of the new-found recognition of American abstract art upon the autonomy of their work could influence a return to more traditionally accepted forms of painting. Traditional ‘sculptural’ modelling with shade and light, or the suggestion of ‘tactile’ or three-dimensional space were seen as possible threats to the autonomy of abstract painting.

While the artists were beginning to gain recognition outside of their local context with major exhibitions such as *The New American Painting* in 1958–59, the Abstract

Expressionist ‘movement’ had by this time been dominant for a decade and a half. Clement Greenberg was one of the first critics to question exactly how ‘avant-garde’ the abstract artists’ work could be once it had evolved into an accepted ‘style’.⁹ This encouraged Greenberg to strengthen his convictions about the formal qualities of abstract art and particularly the need to pursue certain conventions to reject ‘the representation of the kind of space that recognizable objects can inhabit.’¹⁰ Greenberg began this process of revision through reaffirming the importance of ‘opticality’ in his major texts from the late 1950s such as “‘American-Type’ Painting’.

In 1955, “‘American-Type’ Painting’ created one of the most authoritative positions on American abstraction at the time.¹¹ The radicalism of Jackson Pollock’s technique was positioned as a major feature of his success, particularly how Pollock’s technique advanced the achievements of Cubism. Greenberg stated that one of the first problems facing artists such as Pollock ‘was how to loosen up the rather strictly demarcated illusion of shallow depth’ of Cubism.¹² The cubist technique, which ‘impacted’ upon the limitations of the canvas, was developed in order to move painting beyond the feeling of ‘decoration’ that Impressionist painting had perhaps incited through their technique. Pollock’s work, through freeing the role of line from enclosing areas, which was a detrimental feature of Cubism, and by visually ‘pulverising’ the surface of the canvas as in Impressionist painting, created enormous optical depth. His work also created ultimate flatness, with the ‘allover’ style eliminating the need for traditional approaches towards shading to suggest the illusion of depth. The visual effects caused by Pollock’s technique created ‘unity’ and ‘anti-illusionism’ in Greenberg’s view, which were also important traits of opticality. Greenberg similarly positioned Willem de Kooning as one of the leaders of the movement for his ability to extend the major achievements that Cubism had initiated in the early twentieth century. De Kooning used a painterly technique that visually opened up the shallow plane of the canvas. Greenberg said that in doing so, de Kooning created ‘a synthesis of modernism and tradition.’¹³ In the 1955 publication of “‘American-Type’ Painting’, Greenberg focused on Pollock and de Kooning’s reinvigoration of the many formal elements of traditional painting. This led Greenberg to comment that Pollock’s strength lay in his formal technique rather than in his use of colour (‘he cannot build with color’)¹⁴ and that de Kooning’s technique reaffirmed the positive elements of past traditions (‘he remains a late Cubist’).¹⁵ In

this way, we begin to understand how Greenberg's interest lay in the overall historical progression towards opticality, rather than in each artist's production. Although certain elements of these artists' works did not totally comply with his theory of opticality, he believed that the limitations did not steer the direction of modernist painting from its ultimate goal.

During the period surrounding the publication of "American-Type" Painting', however, Greenberg was confronted by several major changes in Pollock and de Kooning's style, which led the critic to pursue alternative artists to discuss with regard to the aims of advanced modernist painting. From 1950–52 Pollock took a new direction in his work, and developed a series of paintings on raw canvas loosely titled the 'black paintings' or 'black enamel paintings'. The works in this series utilised the commercial enamel pigment Duco, which he combined with his signature 'drip painting' technique (**Image C-19**). Pollock explored how the technique interacted with the malleable qualities of the pigment, and the ways the pigment spread into the porous surface of the raw canvas. The resulting works reinforced his dexterity at controlling the density and flow of each pour of pigment. A striking difference between the works he had produced in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the new series, was Pollock's obvious incorporation of figurative subject matter. He had begun to employ his technique to conjure figurative shapes, rather than an all-over optical abstraction produced by the layers of pigment skeins.¹⁶

When the 'black paintings' were exhibited at Betty Parsons Gallery in 1951 and at Sidney Janis Gallery in 1952, the public were generally supportive of the new series.¹⁷ In many ways, the technique of the new series was seen to have extended from Pollock's technique of the late 1940s. The most overtly representational images of the series were the head studies *10*, *24* (both 1951) and *7* (1952). Many others such as *Echo: Number 25* (1951) (**Image C-19**) diffused a clear distinction between abstraction and figuration. Several critics felt that the series successfully united the individual components of Pollock's style; his technique, use of pigment and interest in surrealist imagery.¹⁸ Lawrence Alloway suggested that the figurative elements in the paintings were 'images invented and found in the act of painting [...] It is not sufficient to say that the paint carries or reveals the forms of figures or animals; one must also allow for the ways in which the paint seems to veil and to bury the

emerging forms.’¹⁹ In this respect, the figuration in the paintings was not problematic, as the imagery oscillated somewhere between abstraction and figuration. The works ranged from semi-abstract scenes of lovers and mythical warriors, to figure studies and self-portraits, and were more suggestive of the influence of Surrealism on Pollock’s early works.

Greenberg initially found some value in the ‘black paintings’. He focused on Pollock’s pared back technique, suggesting that it radically altered the traditional approach of the Abstract Expressionist artist towards the creation of their work. Greenberg stated that ‘this is not an affair of packing and crowding, but of embodiment; every square inch of the canvas receives a maximum of charge at the cost of minimum physical means.’²⁰ In this way, Pollock’s engagement with his work was seen to be vastly different to the physical interaction between the artist and his massive abstract drip paintings of the late 1940s, which evidently recorded the moments of gesture involved in the creation of the works. In the ‘black paintings’, the sense of the artist’s ‘disembodied’ gesture was apparent in the way the pigment bled and soaked into the weave of the canvas, seemingly accidental or independent from the artist’s intentions. This was a significant signal towards the positioning of Louis’ stain paintings in the next decade, which we will return to discuss in the next chapter. However, at the time the positive elements of Pollock’s black paintings could not detract from the fact that these works were in opposition to the several key aims of opticality that were promoted by Greenberg.

‘Openness’, colour and large scale were compromised by the introduction of Pollock’s ‘black paintings’ in the 1950s. The artist’s use of line – often with a brush – was employed in the creation of ‘tactile’ images, or three-dimensional figuration. The physical scale of the works, many of which were smaller and more contained than Pollock’s works of the late 1940s, combined with the limitation to black pigment, also recalled some of the less successful elements of cubist painting. This had a major influence on the optical scale of the works, which retracted rather than opened up onto the viewer’s visual field. Therefore the series fundamentally rejected several important elements of opticality such as the work’s ‘at-onceness’ – the ability for the image to incite an immediate visual response rather than require a deliberate reading of its ‘content’. For Greenberg, the deliberation over ‘content’ recalled traditional

approaches to painting, which suggested an unfolding narrative rather than a focus on the pure and immediate painterly elements of a work. Greenberg was prompted by the ‘black paintings’ to state that they hinted ‘perhaps at the large future still left to easel painting.’²¹ Greenberg had based his theory of opticality on the evolution of formal techniques that would aid the end of traditional easel painting, and so Pollock’s continuation of that tradition led Greenberg away from his work during this period. This caused an enormous confrontation with the accepted understanding of successful American abstract painting in the 1950s.

Along with Pollock, de Kooning’s works became increasingly figurative in the early–to–mid 1950s. In an exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery in 1953, de Kooning revealed a new series of large–scale paintings from his recent ‘Women’ series (**Image C-18**). This series was also vastly different from his paintings of the late 1940s, although he had painted many works with female models during the period. The work *Seated Woman* (1940) (**Image C-11**), for example, belonged to de Kooning’s first series of works on the theme. The composition is broken into two vertical planes of flat red and green pigment. The suggestion of the female figure is placed in front of, as well as blended into these zones of colour. Traditional modelling is abstracted by de Kooning’s use of jarring colour rather than tonal shades of black and grey, and the sensation of space constantly shifts through the different shapes painted and drawn on the surface. In some ways, the vertical treatment of the background and the indefinite nature of the shapes and objects placed within the space recalls Greenberg’s discussion of Matisse’s *Red Studio* (1911) (**Image C-3**) as providing the ‘tension between the schematic illusion [...] the warm and insistent physical surface makes the picture’s drama.’²²

Willem de Kooning’s new series of ‘Women’ paintings of 1952–55, however, cemented Greenberg’s fears of a reversion to traditional painting. The images were built up from layers of pigment and collage, which were then etched back into the surface. This created a literal three–dimensionality in addition to the implied suggestion of space through the presence of the figure. The works were much more visceral and confrontational than de Kooning’s previous paintings on the same subject. For many viewers, however, it was not the inclusion of figurative elements into predominantly abstract paintings that caused controversy, but the artist’s crude

representation of the female figure. Despite this, the exhibition and the new series followed in the steps of Pollock's increasing popularity, leading to an *Art News* feature, 'de Kooning Paints a Picture' by Thomas B. Hess in 1953. In the essay, Hess documented the two-year process of de Kooning's completion of *Woman I* (1950–52), a major work featured in the Sidney Janis exhibition.²³ The feature of de Kooning and articles published Pollock's work during the period demystified the artists' techniques, thereby making it possible for large and diverse audiences to appreciate their styles. The public acceptance of their work confirmed Greenberg's suggestion that as it became more recognised, the quality of Abstract Expressionist painting would become affected.

In 1956, surrounding the publication of "'American-Type" Painting' and these radical new directions or reversions in Pollock and de Kooning's work, Pollock died in a car accident. Symbolically, this brought the era of Abstract Expressionist painting to an abrupt end. The event also opened the way for other artists to take on roles that were independent of Pollock's ubiquity. By the end of the decade, many of the other New York artists, such as Rothko, Gottlieb and Motherwell, became well known for their individual styles. This illustrated the gradual decentralisation of the 'Abstract Expressionist' style and therefore increasing popularity of many more artists throughout New York and beyond. We see this materialised in the comments discussed earlier by European critics towards *The New American Painting* exhibition in 1958–59. Following Pollock's death, Willem de Kooning's work in particular was taken up with more popularity and by the mid-to-late 1950s, he became the leading figure of Abstract Expressionism. The works de Kooning produced following the 'Women' series becoming increasingly visceral and gestural throughout the decade, and 'de Kooning-style' painting became a growing critical field of reference rather than 'Abstract Expressionism'.

A major effect caused by the so-called 'de Kooning' style was that, throughout the 1950s, younger artists imitated the 'look' of Abstract Expressionism although they had not been influenced by the same context as the original group. For example, Greenberg stated that Franz Kline was 'a latecomer [...] to restrict himself to black and white consistently, in large canvases that were like monumental line drawings.'²⁴ The work of numerous other 'second-generation' artists attracted Greenberg's critical

attention, such as Larry Rivers and Antoni Tàpies. In addition to the ‘de Kooning style’ of painting, the period also incited other terms for the evolution of the Abstract Expressionist style, such as *Abstract Impressionism* and the French equivalents *tachisme* and *art informel*.²⁵ The implications of these terms suggested the reversion to traditional elements of Western painting, particularly that the content of the works was experienced through contrasts of light and dark and tactile references. As Greenberg stated, ‘value contrast, the opposition of the lightness and darkness of colors, has been Western pictorial art’s chief means, far more independent than perspective, to that convincing illusion of three–dimensionality which distinguishes it most from other traditions of pictorial art.’²⁶ By hinting at this type of illusionistic space, de Kooning and his followers of the ‘second generation’ brought back traditional approaches to painting. This resulted in the understanding that Abstract Expressionism, as it was originally known, had reached an end. Dore Ashton suggests that by the early 1960s the Abstract Expressionist artists were left with an ‘uncomfortable feeling of finality.’²⁷

These suggestions of the reappearance of traditional forms of illusionism also brought about Greenberg’s decision to position de Kooning’s work as part of the demise of the Abstract Expressionist movement in his essay ‘After Abstract Expressionism’ in 1962:

As the 1950s wore on, a good deal in Abstract Expressionist painting began fairly to cry out for a more coherent illusion of three–dimensional space, and to the extent that it did this it cried out for representation, since such coherence can be created only through the tangible representation of three–dimensional objects. It was most logical therefore that when painterly abstraction in New York finally crystallized into a set manner, it did so in a series of outspokenly representational works, namely de Kooning’s “Women” pictures of 1952–55. This manner, as returned to abstract art by de Kooning himself and the countless artists he has influenced, I call “homeless representation”. I mean by this a plastic and descriptive painterliness that is applied to abstract ends, but which continues to suggest representational ones.²⁸

One of the major issues involved with this decision to call an end to the style that had given twentieth century American painting its identity, was the artists’ seeming disinterest in pushing the quality of their works. Many of those of the ‘second generation’ were imitating rather than extending the core principles of the movement,

leading towards a steep decline in the quality of the work being produced. The result of this moment in abstract painting was, understandably, a crisis in the perception of abstract painting and its goals. Greenberg delved into his writing on opticality in the late 1950s in order to rediscover the path of abstraction towards opticality. This period of revision may well have stemmed from the significance of Pollock's death in 1956, which raised the need to reposition modern American art and seek out its possible future. One of the most important results of Greenberg's re-investigation of opticality and abstract painting was a revised version of the major 1955 essay "'American-Type" Painting' in 1958. This essay was to be included in the forthcoming collection of Greenberg's essays, *Art and Culture*, which was published in 1961. In the preface to the book Greenberg stated that 'this book is not intended as a completely faithful record of my activity as a critic. Not only has much been altered, but much more has been left out than put in.'²⁹ This was a telling statement. Many of the significant alterations to Greenberg's essays included in the publication, specifically "'American-Type" Painting', either omitted or recast the interpretation of several artists' work, including Pollock and de Kooning. Throughout the text he reiterated the importance of flatness, colour, openness and large scale in order to indicate the strength of the historical progression of opticality. This period revealed that Greenberg was continually led back to explore the significance of work *currently* being produced by artists in relation to the past, because this would provide a possible foundation for artists of the next generation.

Several crucial questions were to be resolved by Greenberg's revision of "'American-Type" Painting' in order to move abstraction into a new era. These questions, which also contributed towards the reception of Morris Louis' work in the early 1960s were: first, how did the changes occurring in abstract painting of the late 1950s relate to the ultimate progression of abstract painting towards opticality; second, what were the effects of this upon the role of the 'artist', and third; which artists would lead the way once Abstract Expressionism had reached an end. By analysing these issues in relation to Greenberg's work in the late 1950s, we can see that many of the alterations that Greenberg made to the second publication of "'American-Type" Painting' were ultimately related to the critic's own attempts to raise the profile of certain artists he was interested in pursuing in his efforts to

strengthen his theory of opticality. Greenberg felt that the changes that were taking place were related to a larger historical progression that would inevitably extract 'quality' painting from the imitation and second-rate appropriation, which he felt was escalating in the mid-to-late 1950s. The results of these questions therefore put certain emphases on aspects of the work of artists such as Morris Louis in the next decade.

Greenberg brought about a definite redirection of the achievements of Abstract Expressionism in the revised "'American-Type" Painting' essay in 1958. He stated that "abstract expressionism" makes explicit certain constant factors of pictorial art that the past left implicit, and leaves implicit on the other hand, certain other such factors that the past made explicit.'³⁰ These factors made initially 'explicit' by Abstract Expressionism were colour and flatness. Elements left 'implicit' by the work produced at the end of the decade were the persistence of traditional modelling and representations of space. The results were a reversion to those values initially resolved through abstraction. We see in Greenberg's changes to the essay that he narrowed his selection of which artists were able to move beyond the restrictions of traditional painting. Whereas in the 1955 version, 'a number of young painters' were alluded to as potentially influencing the future of American abstraction, by 1958 this was refined to only 'six or seven' artists who had first exhibited their work in solo exhibitions at Peggy Guggenheim's 'Art of this Century' gallery during the period of between 1943 and 1946.³¹ Presumably the artists were Jackson Pollock (1943), Hans Hofmann (1944), Robert Motherwell (1944), William Baziotis (1944), Mark Rothko (1945) and Clyfford Still (1946).

Greenberg began to steer American abstraction into a new direction once he had narrowed the field. He introduced the possibility that there were two 'sides' to abstract painting, one that seemed to 'rely on ungoverned spontaneity and haphazard effects' and another that presents 'surfaces which appear to be largely devoid of pictorial incident.'³² This first style was influenced by Cubism and therefore led to the Abstract Expressionist and ultimately representational works of Pollock and de Kooning. The work of artists such as Rothko and Still were included in the latter style, which was devoid of a 'painterly' approach. These artists followed the cues of Impressionism, leading towards more 'open' or 'optical' paintings. However, the

suggestion of this particular style, a more cool and distanced approach to abstraction, was not mentioned in Greenberg's first version of the essay. His suggestion that there was perhaps an alternative to Abstract Expressionism in the revised essay in 1958, would create an important break in the understanding of American abstraction that would separate modernist painting from that point onwards. Therefore, while it appeared to be a straightforward documentary of the emergence of New York style painting, by 1958 the essay was instrumental in splitting the artists of the time into two distinct directions. The revision of "'American-Type' Painting' became an important step in Greenberg's redirection of the values of opticality away from the perception of Abstract Expressionism as the only style open to American painters. Faced with the major contrasts between those leading, and those imitating, in the 1958 version of "'American-Type' Painting', Greenberg put more emphasis on the group of artists who upheld the values of opticality in the midst of this 'crisis' of abstract painting. Those artists who did not pursue opticality as the goal of abstract painting would be left for those who did.

It is understandable that the proposition of a separation within American abstraction caused major issues for the current understanding of the role of the artist, who until that point had maintained a strong identity in the development of a specifically 'American' form of abstraction. Many critics have since affirmed that the massive changes that took place during this 'post-Pollock' period instigated a situation of 'crisis', similar to other breaks in the history of modernist art to that point.³³ John Elderfield, for example, suggests that the term 'crisis' 'implies instability, a turning point or break in continuity. Modernism knows no total breaks, for its turning points turn back to the past even as they challenge the conventions of the past.'³⁴ The decisive termination that came with the end of Abstract Expressionism encouraged Greenberg to turn towards investigating the elements of the past – particularly those elements that could be made 'explicit' through the medium of painting and extended upon by new generations of artists. Artists following Pollock were faced with the issue of seeking out a new identity for art during the period of uncertainty illustrated by the late work of Pollock and de Kooning and that of many artists following their style. With Pollock's death this was a major issue. It revealed that the medium was not connected with the artists' personality or expression, and that alternatively 'under modernism, the medium is noticed, and [...] its impersonality.'³⁵ The issue of

‘impersonality’ permeated beyond the formal qualities of abstract painting, feeding into a larger crisis about the position of the artist in the era of ‘post–Pollock’ painting.

As the elements of Abstract Expressionism, such as painterly effects and the physical engagement between the artist and their work, became less identified with ‘advanced’ painting, the more distanced became the artist. This initiated the problem of how to reposition the ‘artist’ within a new era of abstract painting. Specifically, the artist became caught between ‘embodiment’ and ‘disembodiment’ – between being absolutely engaged with the creation of their work, while also not attracted towards traditional forms of ‘expression’. The issue of too much focus on the ‘self’ was reiterated through Greenberg’s focus on the necessity of ‘purity’ in abstract painting leading towards the 1960s. He suggested that purity was the result of a rigorous process of self–criticism. In this way, the artist would be more strongly connected with an ideal of purity rather than with the level of the physical engagement in making the work. Greenberg suggested that:

The task of self–criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thus would each art be rendered “pure”, and in its “purity” find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well of its independence. “Purity” meant self–definition, and the enterprise of self–criticism in the arts became one of self–definition with a vengeance..³⁶

While the issue of disembodiment presented new challenges to the position of the artist in modernist painting, the issue of purity in optical painting united the physical making of works with a higher conceptual engagement. Greenberg moved further away from the gesture of Abstract Expressionism, however, Pollock’s work continued to maintain its presence in the new era. His work stood at the juncture between both sides of modernist painting. Greenberg could not ignore that, during the early post–war period, Pollock provided American artists with a unique opportunity to translate the influences of earlier movements such as Cubism *and* Impressionism into purely abstract paintings. In the revised version of “‘American–Type’ Painting’, however, it was actually Barnett Newman more than Pollock, Rothko or Still, who received the most critical positioning in the new era of modernist painting. While Rothko was known for his large colour–stained canvases, the zones of colour in his paintings were more painterly and could be likened to tangible spaces such the landscape.³⁷ Newman

focused his work on flat fields of saturated colour, seemingly detached from the ‘handwriting’ of Abstract Expressionism. There was a complete absence of any direction with which to ‘read’ Newman’s paintings, as they provided the pure ‘sensation’ of colour and scale rather than any particular subject matter. The shift in Greenberg’s theory of opticality by the beginning of the 1960s was therefore led by Newman’s work. Greenberg’s discussion of Newman’s embrace of disembodied gesture and his focus on colour and scale would have a major effect on the understanding of Morris Louis’ work throughout the decade.

In Greenberg’s 1955 essay, he stated that Newman ‘has replaced Pollock as the *enfant terrible* of Abstract Expressionism.’³⁸ By this time, Newman had already retreated into relative obscurity from the New York art scene. He introduced his abstract ‘zip’ motif in early paintings such as *Onement I* (1948) (**Image C-13**). The ‘zip’, a thin stroke of pigment down the centre of his canvases, created a sense of geometry even though it was still evidently ‘hand-painted’ at this stage. Newman’s style resulted in criticism against the artist concerning his first solo exhibitions in 1950 and 1951 at Betty Parsons Gallery. Regarding the 1950 exhibition Thomas B. Hess stated that ‘Newman is out to shock, but he is not out to shock the bourgeoisie – that has been done. He likes to shock other artists.’³⁹ Hess similarly rejected Newman’s 1951 exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery, suggesting that *The Wild* (1950) (**Image C-17**) was simply ‘a red line surrounded by nothing at all’.⁴⁰ This work was a red oil on canvas ‘zip’ painting, measuring almost 2.5 metres in height, while only 4.1 centimetres in width. It showed Newman’s interest in pushing the self-sufficiency of the zip to the extent that it could be exhibited without the support of a painted background. In the early 1950s, Newman’s radical style evidently required critics and viewers to consider alternative ways of experiencing abstract painting. However, the reviews of Newman’s work were representative of the major lack of interest in his style.

Shortly after the 1951 exhibition and continuing for rest of the decade, Newman’s work was unseen because of the criticism he received. He withdrew his work from contact with the New York scene and this affected knowledge of the artist and his paintings. He was thereafter regarded as somewhat eccentric, using his philosophical ‘ethics’ as reasoning for his estrangement from the New York scene.⁴¹ It was not

surprising, therefore, when Newman was excluded from the major exhibitions of Abstract Expressionism such as *Fifteen Americans*, an exhibition that included Pollock and Rothko's work. In both his stylistic and physical separation, Newman's approach was different to many other artists of his time. Greenberg, perhaps sensing the integrity of Newman's reclusiveness and its connection to his own ideals about 'high art', was one of the few supporters of Newman's work. In 1952, Greenberg lashed out at Newman's critics, stating that:

A work of art can make you angry only if it threatens your habits of taste; but if it tries only to take you in, and you recognize that, you react with contempt, not with anger. That a majority of the New York "avant-garde" gave Newman's first show the reception it did throws suspicion on them – and says nothing about the intrinsic value of his art.⁴²

Greenberg's revision of "'American-Type' Painting' in 1958 was essential in bringing Newman's work back into the forefront of abstract painting in New York. Major additions he made to the new version of the essay included significantly expanded sections on Newman's work, particularly references to how the artist's style moved beyond both Cubism and Abstract Expressionism. This encouraged Greenberg to claim that Newman's paintings 'have to be called, finally, "fields"'.⁴³ Led by Newman, the work of the period could therefore be divided into two major styles: Abstract Expressionism, and 'field' painting. Whereas the influence of Cubism upon New York painting resulted in the enclosure of shapes and contrasts and the restriction of colour, Newman's paintings focused on the continuity of the surface achieved with pure colour and disembodied gesture. In the manner of Monet's late works, Greenberg stated that Newman's 'powers of color he employs to make a picture are conceived with an ultimate strictness: color is to function as hue and nothing else, and contrasts are to be sought with the least possible help of differences in value, saturation, or warmth.'⁴⁴ In this way, painterly hierarchies were broken down, not through the techniques instigated by Pollock or de Kooning's late work, but through colour. Colour and size consequently became the dominating features of Greenberg's interpretation of modernist painting by the early 1960s.

Barnett Newman's work was related to several other developments in Greenberg's work in the late 1950s to the early 1960s. In addition to the forthcoming publication of *Art and Culture*, Greenberg also curated exhibitions and became closely linked

with Morris Louis. The series of exhibitions by Greenberg at French and Company in New York at the very end of the 1950s contributed to the development of field painting. Greenberg was employed by French and Company from 1958, to assist with developing exhibitions for their new contemporary art department. This provided Greenberg with the freedom to guide perceptions of the current situation in art. He had first curated exhibitions of Barnett Newman's works at Bennington College, Vermont in 1958, and in 1959 presented Newman's first return to the New York scene with a solo exhibition at French and Company.⁴⁵ Following this exhibition, Newman was finally included in his first major museum exhibition, *The New American Painting*, which encouraged MoMA director Alfred H. Barr to alter the original title, *Abstract Expressionism in America*.⁴⁶ Newman's inclusion in the exhibition related the artist's work to the new generation of so-called 'Colourfield' painting or 'post-painterly abstraction'. Greenberg's essays for the exhibitions of Newman's work not only marked the artist's return to the New York art scene, but also provided a heritage of 1950s optical painting for the new generation, particularly the work of Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland.⁴⁷

Greenberg's recasting of opticality in the late 1950s was crucial to guiding perceptions of the quality and role of abstract painting into a new era in the 1960s. In many ways, Greenberg's focus on opticality and its elements of flatness, colour, large scale, and the rejection of three-dimensional space, enabled the redirection away from certain artists that had previously been championed for the opticality of their work. This period of revision was also crucial for increasing the exposure of artists considered 'outsiders' or largely unknown to public, artists such as Newman and the unknown artist Morris Louis. Newman's work suggested a new direction for opticality by the mid-to-late 1950s. Aspects of Newman's paintings, such as his focus on scale, colour and abstraction, were compatible with Greenberg's deepening interest in opticality. In his large, colour saturated works, Greenberg saw the potential to steer abstraction towards 'field' painting, that is, towards a type of painting that existed beyond the discrete object, and disengaged itself from the trace of the artists' 'handwriting' or mannerisms, which were indicative of the downfall of Abstract Expressionism. Into the 1960s, Morris Louis' work took on a central role in the development of Greenberg's opticality, resulting in some of the most popular approaches to his works that continue today.

Greenberg's awareness of Morris Louis' work, which he had been in contact with since 1953, was intrinsically related to several important revisions and developments occurring in his own work. The advent of Louis' first series of abstract 'Veil' painting in 1954 and the second component of the series in 1958–59, coincided with Greenberg's two versions of "'American-Type' Painting' in 1955 and 1958. The second series of 'Veil' paintings also emerged at the time of the new public exposure of Newman's works through Greenberg's exhibitions at Bennington College and French and Company. Louis' 'Veils' were exhibited in a solo exhibition at French and Company just three days following the closure of Newman's exhibition in 1959, which importantly provided a direct link between the two artists' work for viewers. Louis' exhibition was only his second solo showing in the city, even though he had been a practicing artist for over two decades. As Louis was an unknown artist outside of his immediate situation as a teacher and artist in Washington DC, Greenberg needed to connect Louis with other, more well-known, artists who were involved in steering modernist painting away from the gestural expression of Abstract Expressionism. The revision of "'American-Type' Painting' and the subsequent inclusion of Newman's works were important in providing a foundation for the emergence of Morris Louis through the essay 'Louis and Noland' in 1960. This particular essay, we will begin to see, influenced the popular approaches towards Louis' paintings that continue to exist today, suggesting the ongoing strength of the narratives initiated by Greenberg's writing of the 1950s and 1960s.

CHAPTER 4

SITUATING THE TEXT 'LOUIS AND NOLAND' (1960)

One of the positive effects resulting from Clement Greenberg's support of the American abstractionists in the mid-twentieth century was the establishment of an audience for abstract art that had not previously existed. In addition, amidst the revisions that occurred in Greenberg's work during the late 1950s, certain individual artists who were not well known either due to their 'radicalism' or remoteness from the centres of art production, were provided the opportunity for their works to be discussed in the context of a new era. Barnett Newman, for example, was ridiculed for most of the 1950s for his approach and the style of his work, and although critical recognition was slow for Newman's work even following his exhibitions and essays by Greenberg, there was a strong position established for Newman's as an influential figure in the development of colourfield painting in the 1960s. Morris Louis, who was based in Washington D.C. throughout the 1950s, was also unknown to the mainstream art-viewing public until the early 1960s because of his distance from the New York art scene. When his work was taken up through exhibitions and essays by Greenberg in the early 1960s, the 'regionalist' perception of Louis' work changed dramatically. With Greenberg having set the foundation for the reception of Louis' work through the precedent of Barnett Newman's approach, Louis was regarded as a leading artist in the new decade. This came, however, only in 1960, which was two years prior to Louis' death.

On the other side of the positive effects of this new-found recognition for artists such as Newman and Louis was the potential for their work to be swayed by the interests and opinions of critics as well known and widely regarded as Greenberg. Opponents of Greenberg's 'formalist' approach would also direct their attacks on the work of the artists he championed. Therefore, the various changes occurring in Greenberg's work leading into the 1960s had an enormous effect upon the artists he pursued with regard to his theory of opticality. By exploring how the work of Morris Louis was situated within Greenberg's revision of opticality during the late 1950s to the early 1960s, we can argue that the viewpoints on Louis' work that have dominated the literature on the artist since the 1960s are difficult to distance from the influence of Greenberg's ideas. This is essential to consider when reviewing the context of Louis' 'breakthrough' with the support of Clement Greenberg's essay 'Louis and Noland' in 1960. Through this investigation, we are led towards a discussion of the effects of art criticism upon Louis' work in the decades since. The following text situates the

emergence and recognition of Louis' work during the period of his two major series of 'Veil' paintings in 1954 and 1958 within the context of Greenberg's reassessment of the role of opticality in abstract painting.

The year prior to Louis' first major series of 'Veil' paintings in 1954, was important in the development of Louis' work for two reasons. Firstly, in April 1953 Louis' first solo exhibition was held at the Workshop Art Center Gallery (Washington Workshop Center of the Arts), where he was an instructor. The exhibition presented recent works by Louis and drawings from the 1940s and it was a major showcase of Louis' work to that point.¹ Although he had previously worked in both figurative and abstract styles, the exhibition featured many of Louis' recent abstract works, which was a strong interest of the artist's. Since the late 1930s, Louis' work became increasingly abstracted following a period of social realism, which had also influenced many other artists' styles at the time. Louis was exposed to abstraction through the work of Picasso and Cézanne, which he studied as a student in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and Miró, which he saw at The Museum of Modern Art during the period in which he lived in New York in the mid-1930s to the 1940s. In his paintings of the early 1950s, such as the series of 'Charred Journal' black and white paintings of 1951, and the large-scale 'Tranquilities' collages of 1952-53, these influences were apparent and showed the artist's ability to adapt his medium to various styles. The works were also evocative of the work of his American contemporaries such as Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell. To local audiences, Louis' showed the breadth of his technical ability and his proficiency at assimilating the influences of various American and European artists' work into his own style. Alternatively, beyond a local context this selection of works featured in Louis' first solo exhibition would also introduce the artist as a regionalist whose work appropriated the styles of well-known contemporary and historical artists.

A second important event in Louis' career in the early 1950s was his introduction to Clement Greenberg in 1953 through Kenneth Noland, who was also an instructor at the Washington Workshop. Louis and Noland developed a close friendship since meeting in 1952 and the two artists shared a strong interest in abstraction. At Greenberg's invitation, Louis and Noland made a trip to New York in April 1953, just prior to the opening of Louis' exhibition at the Workshop Art Center Gallery. After

this period, Louis and Greenberg maintained a close relationship until the artist's death in 1962. Louis invested increasing confidence in Greenberg's thoughts on his work, which can be seen in the important role that the critic came to take throughout Louis' career, such as assisting with titling his paintings.² Greenberg also visited regularly with Louis either at his home and studio in Washington D.C. or in New York, where Louis would infrequently take trips to install his exhibitions or to undertake studio visits with New York artists.³ While Louis and Kenneth Noland had been very close up to the mid-1950s, their relationship was affected by the strong privacy that Louis maintained around his work. He would not discuss his work with his wife, students, or close friends such as Noland, nor invite anyone into his studio while he was working on a painting. The role that was reserved for Greenberg in the development of Louis' works was therefore not widely available for others. These aspects of Louis and Greenberg's relationship are important to consider, alongside the positioning of Louis' work in Greenberg's theory of opticality, which gained strength in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Following the period of these two major events – of Louis' first solo exhibition and his re-acquaintance with the New York art scene through meeting Greenberg and visiting with him in New York in 1953 – Louis' work began to open up onto new approaches. In some ways, the development of Louis' work at this time seemed to be completely without precedent in his career. Louis produced several paintings during the time of his solo exhibition at the Workshop Art Center Gallery in 1953, including *Landscape (Mid-day)* and *Dark Thrust (Image L-12 and L-11)*, which showed new experimentation with his use of Magna acrylic pigment and the beginnings of the staining technique that he would pursue almost exclusively from 1954 until his death in 1962. In other ways, however, the work that Louis' produced following this period of meeting Greenberg continued some aspects of his work prior to the visit to New York in 1953. *Trellis* and *Silver Discs (Image L-8 and L-9)* continued to use a brush, and both were still indicative of the work of Louis' contemporaries. *Trellis* showed hints of Helen Frankenthaler's influence, who Louis met during the New York visit in April 1953; *Silver Discs* echoed the work of de Kooning and Pollock in the heavily worked surfaces topped with aluminium paint. Impressed by Louis' approach in *Trellis* and *Silver Discs* Greenberg selected these two works to feature in the group exhibition, *Emerging Talent*, at the Samuel Kootz Gallery in New York in January

1954. This was Louis' first showing in New York since he lived there during the 1930s and 1940s. It was an indication of an era of new possibilities for Louis' work.

Shortly following the *Emerging Talent* exhibition in 1954, Louis began his series of 'Veil' paintings, which would become the most well known of his career until the 'Stripe' series was initiated in 1961. From January to June 1954, Louis evolved a major change in his work, away from the painterly style he had explored through the examples of Pollock, Motherwell and de Kooning, towards a more abstract style of painting. He explored the potency of Magna colours as well as the possibilities of manipulating the consistency of this medium. As the 'Veil' series was the first by Louis that appeared to be completely independent of obvious references to other artists' work, the series was regarded as a breakthrough in his career. The series of sixteen paintings varied in style, but common to each work was Louis' newly developed technique of fixing surges of bright acrylic pigment into his canvases, almost as though they were 'stained' with paint.

Intrigue (1954) (**Image L-18**), for example, is a horizontal-format painting in blue, rose and purple. The points at which Louis poured the individual streams of colour along the top edge and sides of the canvas are clearly visible. With these streams, Louis created a fan-like composition, before uniting the entire surface with a deep brownish-purple wash. The surface is composed of these individual pours applied in successive layers, but the optical illusion created by the relationships between the colours, evades our attempts to identify the exact depth of the surface. According to the length of time that Louis left between pouring the colours, some of the pigment bled into the next layer, while other pours remain sharp beneath the covering colour. Louis' 'veil' wash hides the suggestion of depth even further by pulling the colours upwards to the surface. Left behind the wash, which was created through diluting the Magna pigment to such an extent that the particles began to separate from the medium, is a series of thinner streams whose 'flecks' of pigment appear almost to be 'drawn' onto the surface. Finally, surrounding the composition, Louis applied white pigment to heighten the suggestion that the composition emerged from within the surface of the canvas.

In other works from the series, such as *Longitude* (1954) (**Image L-17**), Louis worked with a vertically-oriented canvas and cropped the composition by the edge of the canvas so that it appeared to be entirely a 'field' rather than a defined composition. The yellow, green, blue and red pours of *Longitude* cascade down the canvas, gravitating towards the middle, where they begin to puddle. The muted veil cover, which tones down the intensity of the colours, is swept across the canvas from a multitude of directions, which confuses the directional pull of the pigment and leaves the composition seeming to be hovering in an ambiguous space. From one work to the next in the series of sixteen paintings, Louis created many different effects, and evidently experimented with the possibilities of the pigment as well as the veil itself. Greenberg encouraged Louis to send a selection of nine paintings from the series, which included *Atomic Crest* (1954) (**Image L-14**) to the New York dealer Pierre Matisse for consideration.⁴ Matisse was unmoved by the works, and sent the paintings back to Greenberg where they remained in his care in New York until 1959. Only at this point, five years later, were the works stretched and framed for display at the French and Company exhibition curated by Greenberg.

In the context of Greenberg's work, his interest in Louis' emergence was situated at a time of major revision to his writing between 1954 and 1958, specifically the publication and revision of the essay "'American-Type' Painting", written in 1955 and revised in 1958. During this period, Greenberg came into contact with Louis' 'Veils' series, which reaffirmed his suggestion of the historical progression towards optical flatness in abstract painting. The changes that Greenberg made to this essay came to create a foundation for the emergence of Morris Louis' work in the early 1960s. We could suggest that the refocus on opticality in Greenberg's work in the late 1950s had strong links with Louis' approach, giving the emergence of Louis' style more critical weight in the early 1960s. Greenberg commented that part of the achievement of Louis' 'Veil' series was the effect of opticality created by his technique of staining. Greenberg stated that:

The effect conveys a sense not only of color as somehow disembodied, and therefore more purely optical, but also of color as the thing that opens and expands the picture plane. The suppression of the difference between painted and unpainted surfaces causes pictorial space to leak through – or rather, to seem about to leak through – the framing edges of the picture into the space beyond them.⁵

Louis' work seemed to uphold opticality as a central concern, which indicated for Greenberg the artist's pure engagement with his work.

Throughout the period of Greenberg's revision of "'American-Type' Painting' in the mid-to-late 1950s, Louis remained an unknown artist to the mainstream art-viewing public in New York, despite the creative success of his 'Veil' series. Greenberg instead took up the example of Barnett Newman's work during this period, which provided a lineage for the emergence of Louis' work in the early 1960s. Greenberg wrote on Newman's work as a precursor to the new generation of 'field' painting in the mid-to-late 1950s, where he may have also used Louis' work in a similar manner. The introduction of Louis' work "'American-Type' Painting' alongside pre-eminent artists such as Pollock and de Kooning would not have had merit as Greenberg had not yet fully positioned Newman's work in the development of this period of abstract painting. Therefore, Greenberg needed to detail his thoughts on Newman's work before introducing Louis' work. This time spent on developing the role of Newman's work in the context of American abstraction would importantly provide Louis' work with a historical precursor. Linking Louis' work with Newman, an artist more prolific and controversial throughout the 1950s also enabled a more stable critical grounding for Louis' work in the future publication of Greenberg's essay 'Louis and Noland' in 1960.

By the late 1950s Louis was already a mature artist, and although Greenberg focused specifically on Barnett Newman's work in "'American-Type' Painting' and its revised version, several points in the essays suggest that Greenberg's experience of Louis' 'Veil' paintings were possibly more motivating in the approach taken by the critic on opticality at this time. Greenberg's experience of Louis' work was relevant to his discussions in "'American-Type' Painting' due to several points of contention in the 1955 version that provoked criticism by Barnett Newman, but remained unchanged in the final version in 1958. Firstly, Greenberg's placement of Newman within the context of American painting at the time had strong relevance for Louis more so than Newman. In the 1955 version, Greenberg connected Newman's work with Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko.

Greenberg stated that Still was:

almost the only expressionist to “make” a school; by this I mean that a few of the many artists he has stimulated or influenced have not been condemned by that to imitate him, but have been able to establish strong and independent styles of their own. Barnett Newman [...] is one of these artists.⁶

Newman was outraged by the suggestion that Clyfford Still influenced his style or that his work was related to Mark Rothko. He saw the artists as his contemporaries, not his predecessors. Although aware of this point when revising the essay, Greenberg’s lineage remained largely unchanged in the second version in 1958.⁷

A second point of contention between Newman and Greenberg related to the critic’s discussion of Newman’s technique in “‘American–Type’ Painting’. Greenberg’s analysis of Newman’s technique played an important role in the development of a position for Louis’ work in Greenberg’s text ‘Louis and Noland’ in 1960. In the 1955 version of “‘American–Type’ Painting’, Greenberg again spoke of Newman’s work in relation to Rothko and Still, but at this time on the subject of technique. He stated that Rothko ‘too is a brilliant colorist; like Newman, he soaks his pigment into the canvas, getting a dyer’s effect, and does not apply it as a discrete covering layer in Still’s manner.’⁸ Following the publication of the essay, Newman responded to Greenberg that: ‘You know that my paint quality is heavy, solid, direct, the opposite of a stain.’⁹ Despite the obvious rejection of this description, Greenberg retained his comments on Newman’s technique in the revised essay and in 1958 he wrote that:

like Newman (though it is Rothko who probably did the influencing here), he [Rothko] seems to soak his paint into the canvas to get a dyer’s effect and avoid the connotations of a discrete layer of paint on top of the surface.¹⁰

This revised statement made a more overt attempt at securing Newman into a relationship with Rothko and Still through the subject of ‘technique’, while also referring to the idea of Newman’s technique itself as a process of staining pigment, which Newman had decisively rejected three years earlier.

Greenberg’s focus on Newman’s technique in “‘American–Type’ Painting’ provided the foundation for his discussion of Louis’ technique in later texts such as ‘Louis and

Noland'. To create the 'Veil' paintings, Louis poured layers of acrylic pigment onto large unstretched lengths of raw or partially sized canvas. While perhaps not quite evoking a 'dye's effect', the pigment did 'stain' and 'soak' into the weave of the canvas. The effect of pouring many layers of the brilliant pigment in thin washes from the top of the canvas also called attention to the gravitational pull of the pigment. Similarly, while the discussion of Newman's work with regard to his American contemporaries through the issue of technique was not regarded by Newman as accurately reflecting his work, these themes would become dominant ways of interpreting Louis' work.

More than these suggestions, however, there was an aspect of Louis' work relating to his technique, which held Greenberg back from pursuing Louis' work earlier than he did. In 1955 Louis took a major shift in his work, away from the cool, 'disembodied' paintings of the 'Veil' series, towards a style more reminiscent of late Abstract Expressionism.¹¹ Louis held his first solo exhibition in New York in 1957 with this series, which was his first showing in New York since his inclusion in the group exhibition *Emerging Talent* in 1954. While Louis' 1954 'Veils' supported some of Greenberg's ideas about opticality, the 'expressionist' works were not compatible with Greenberg's focus on opticality. To the critic, the works signalled a reversion to a style of the past. In fact, during 1954, Louis had visited the studio of Willem de Kooning, who by that time was producing works that were opposed to Greenberg's view of opticality. An exhibition of de Kooning's work was also held at the Workshop Art Center Gallery the previous year, which presumably Louis would have seen particularly given his employment at the Workshop.¹² For Greenberg, Louis' technique needed to evolve through a period of 'uncertainty' relating to Abstract Expressionism before affirming the suggestion of the opticality of his work.

Following the exhibition of his expressionist works in 1957, Louis re-explored the veil format. In 1958 this resulted in another series of 'Veils' that comprised over one hundred paintings, which were individually much larger than those from the first series.¹³ Greenberg was particularly interested in this second series of 'Veils' because it marked an end to Louis' period of experimentation from 1955–57. In his engagement with the veil format and his technique in the second series, Louis appeared to reject the expressionist suggestions of this earlier period, and delved into

exploring the achievements of his 1954 'Veil' paintings, such as their focus on colour, scale and technique. This was indicated by Louis' technique, which was considerably refined in the 1958–59 series. There were more detailed and complex pours veiled beneath the surface of the paintings. He created many more variations within the framework of his pouring technique and explored more subtle colour combinations. Another distinctive feature of the second series was a dark, uniform veil covering the majority of the works. While Louis achieved incredible variation in technique and mood through the 'veil' format, a number of works created later in the series were executed in bright colours. Works such as *Tet* (1958) (**Image L-22**) and *Vav* (1959) (**Image L-28**) are indicative of this technique and evoke lighter moods within the series.

In over half of the works from the second series, Louis used the compositional feature of the vertical stretcher bars that were attached to his working stretcher due to the increased size of the canvases in this series. Louis began to use the bars to create specific effects within the surfaces of his works. One centre brace, followed by another to the right, divided the canvas into three unequal areas. In works such as *Beth Heh* (1958) (**Image L-26**), a 'bronze' veil so-called for the deep shimmer of the veil, which the individual colours beneath seem to emanate from, Louis poured streams of colour on top of the braces in addition to the pours along the top edge of the canvas. The effect of the heavy liquid pigment spreading over the surface was to draw the pigment down either side of the wooden brace. When dry, the impression of the brace remained in the surface and divided the work into three sections, each featuring an elongated triangular cascade of colour. Other compositional features used by Louis in the second series featured in works such as *Saraband* (1959) (**Image L-29**), where he pleated the bottom of the canvas in four areas to 'catch' the pigment as it cascaded from the top of the canvas. The rhythmical movement of the coloured pours, which billow outwards from the top of the canvas are then pulled sharply inwards to the bottom where they freeze in the shape of the pleat, illustrates the confidence that Louis gained in this series for creating many different effects within the framework of his pouring technique.

The return of the 'veil' style in 1958–59 came at a time when Greenberg was cementing his suggestions of a possible new direction for opticality, away from

Abstract Expressionism, through focusing on Newman's work. He revised Newman's place in the "'American-Type" Painting' essay as well as curated exhibitions of Newman's work in 1958 and 1959. The 1959 exhibition at French and Company marked Newman's return to exhibiting in New York since 1951. Louis' first exhibition at the gallery opened only three days following the closure of Newman's show, and was the first to show the achievements of his first major series of 'Veil' paintings. The exhibition featured 23 paintings from Louis' 1954 and 1958–59 series, including the nine works that Greenberg had housed since they were turned away by Pierre Matisse in 1954.¹⁴ It is possible that viewers had previously seen Louis' 1955–57 'expressionist' paintings at Martha Jackson Gallery in 1957, which were very different from the 'Veils'. We see reflected in works presented in Louis' exhibition at French and Company, such as *Atomic Crest* (1954) certain comments that Greenberg related to Newman's works the year prior, for example 'the color comes first and does the controlling. The stained surface spreads, ascends and descends.'¹⁵ In terms of the works presented in Greenberg's exhibitions of Newman's paintings, there was no such movement present in Newman's work, but more correctly related to Louis' 'Veils'.

This exhibition of Louis' works in 1959 illustrated a strategic move by Greenberg to confirm a new set of artists and approaches towards the expression of 'opticality' in abstract art into the 1960s. Greenberg therefore took up certain aspects of Louis' that were more obviously connected to his ideas in order to confirm the suggestions about the historical progression towards opticality. He had explored the work of Barnett Newman at a time when the artist was not regarded for his work and suggested Newman's possible links with more well-known artists such as Rothko and Still. This provided a lineage for the emergence of Louis' work in the early 1960s as Louis required the connection with more experienced artists. At this moment, Greenberg began to situate Louis' work within a particular lineage, which would affect subsequent interpretations of his work in the 1960s and beyond. The context of Newman's re-entry into the avant-garde would seem to be the most relevant link with Louis' work. However, as Greenberg was interested in the broader historical goal of abstract art towards the attainment of pure 'opticality', he needed to situate Louis within a larger historical lineage that looked back to the achievements of artists such as Pollock.

In Greenberg's essay 'Louis and Noland' (1960), which was the first major text written on Louis work, the critic positioned Louis' work within the progression of opticality that began with artists such as Pollock in the early 1940s. This positioning created two major effects; firstly, it suggested that the progression of Louis' work fit within a trajectory of modernist painting that underwent various 'breakthroughs' throughout recent history. Louis' own emergence came with his first series of 'Veil' paintings in 1954, when he began to explore a level of abstraction that approached the quality of previous abstract artists. Secondly, the text initiated a focus on Louis' technique as one of the most important aspects of his work. This enabled Greenberg to suggest that with Louis' work, 'before he caught a glimpse of anything by Still, Newman or Rothko, he had aligned his art with theirs.'¹⁶ With this level of technical accomplishment suggested by Greenberg's alignment of Louis artists such as Rothko, Newman and Still – while they were Louis' contemporaries in terms of age and the duration that each had been practicing artists – Greenberg began to propose that Louis' work was the most recent expression of opticality. This would situate Louis' works within a 1960s context rather than the 1950s, the period in which his 'Veils' were produced.

In the opening passages of 'Louis and Noland' Greenberg offered a link between Louis' work and the goals of modernist painting. As he stressed in his essays since the late 1930s, it was essential for artists to produce their work outside of the mainstream culture in order to 'preserve' culture and maintain the condition of high art. Similar to Newman's reclusiveness throughout the 1950s, Louis' position in the new development of opticality was closely related by Greenberg to the artist's identification with a place outside of the mainstream culture of New York, in this case, with Washington D.C. As Greenberg had indicated in the revised version of "'American-Type" Painting', New York painting experienced a downward turn in quality throughout the 1950s, including the appearance of appropriation and second-rate gestural painting. Louis, on the other hand, produced his works in 'isolation', hinting at a level of integrity absent in much of the work produced in the art 'centre'. Greenberg stated that 'from Washington you can keep in steady contact with the New York art scene without being subjected as constantly to its pressures to conform as you would be if you lived and worked in New York.'¹⁷ This was one of the first

crucial comments made about Louis' approach in 'Louis and Noland', which situated Louis within the new era of opticality. The focus on Washington D.C. and other locations outside of New York experienced an increased focus in the 1960s, which was reflected in the exhibition 'Post-Painterly Abstraction', curated by Greenberg in 1964.¹⁸

In terms of the historical progression of 'opticality', Louis, like Newman before him, was positioned at the juncture between Pollock and 'colourfield' painting that had been difficult for many artists to traverse during the period. He took on a role within the evolution of field painting that was faced with the return to figuration in Pollock's black enamel paintings. Due to the limitations of the black paintings, Greenberg explored Louis' connection with Pollock's legacy through the work of another artist. The work of Helen Frankenthaler was proposed as a link between Pollock and Louis. Louis had come into contact with Frankenthaler's work during the weekend trip to New York in April 1953. In 'Louis and Noland', Greenberg stated that Louis'

first sight of the middle-period Pollocks and of a large and extraordinary painting done in 1952 by Helen Frankenthaler, called *Mountains and Sea*, led Louis to change his direction abruptly. Abandoning Cubism [...], he began to feel, think, and conceive almost exclusively in terms of open colour.¹⁹

For Greenberg, Frankenthaler provided ways for Louis to explore colour and line to expand the sensation of space. This was different to Pollock's use of line, which aided the representation of three-dimensional figures or de Kooning's use of line, which restricted or enclosed parts of the canvas. In this regard, Frankenthaler's work conjured an 'impressionist' revision of painting through the enigmatic qualities of colour while also incorporating the use of line to indicate areas within the work. This connection was specifically targeted at discussing Louis' works independent of the recent focus on Cubism. Frankenthaler therefore became an intermediate reference between Louis and Pollock.²⁰

The development of Louis' work was based, then, upon a combination of 'revelations', of both historical and technical kinds. The historical situation secured Louis' work into a modernist history, while the technical focus provided tangible conventions for assessing the quality of Louis' work with regard to opticality. Both of

these resulted in the perception that Louis experienced a 'breakthrough' in 1954 with his 'Veil' series. This provided Louis with access to the ideas explored in Frankenthaler's work. Through Frankenthaler's use of colour and the ways in which her oil painting technique opened the space of the canvas, Louis was able to find an alternative way to explore Pollock's legacy. The lineage also aligned with Greenberg's conception of modernist painting as a series of successive breaks and breakthroughs into new eras, taking with it the essential formal qualities of the past. One of the major effects of these comments regarding Louis' breakthrough in 'Louis and Noland' was the focus on Louis' technique – indicative of Greenberg's 'formalist' approach – which has since dominated the discussions of Louis' work and continued to Louis with Greenberg's ideas. Greenberg stated that:

The crucial revelation he got from Pollock and Frankenthaler had to do with facture as much as anything else. The more closely colour could be identified with its ground, the freer would it be from the interference of tactile associations; the way to achieve this closer identification was by adapting watercolour technique to oil and using thin paint on absorbent surface... The fabric, being soaked it paint rather than merely covered by it, becomes paint in itself, colour in itself, like dyed cloth: the threadedness and wovenness are in the colour.²¹

In this regard, Louis' ability to adapt the technical lessons that Frankenthaler had taken from Pollock's work illustrated the significance of his work in the continuation of opticality. Even Pollock's 'black enamel paintings' found a place in this context, particularly through the role of the artist's technique becoming increasingly 'disembodied'. Louis' opticality came through the combination of his technique and use of colour, which 'opens and expands the picture plane', hinting at the existence of a realm beyond the discrete art work.²² Louis' extension of Pollock's technique enabled him to move beyond the two aspects of his late work that provoked criticism from Greenberg; Pollock's inability to incorporate colour into his last works, and the engagement of the artist's body in the act of making. Michael Fried suggested in his essay, 'Some Notes on Morris Louis' (1963) that Louis' work differed significantly from artists such as Pollock, and therefore Frankenthaler, because of his act of disengaging his work from the hand.²³ Louis' works were seen to have moved beyond these restrictions. The opticality produced by Louis' new style showed adeptness at technique, influenced by Pollock, and a sensibility of colour combinations, by Frankenthaler.

The influence of Greenberg's position was reflected in comments by Louis himself. In 1961, Louis stated that Frankenthaler 'was a bridge between Pollock and what was possible.'²⁴ In this way, he began to affirm suggestions that he was part of a subsequent generation of colourfield artists, even though the majority of his mature works were produced in the 1950s, the same period as Pollock, Newman, Rothko, and Frankenthaler. In this regard, Louis' work was inevitably disconnected from the era in which it was made, and he became locked into a 1960s context. Successive generations of writing on Louis' work, such as Michael Fried came to confirm this perception.²⁵ One of Fried's early texts, 'Three American Painters' (1965), initiated a link with Greenberg's ideas. Fried stated that:

Broadly speaking, modernist painting since Morris Louis has been antagonistic to de Kooning's work and to the kind of painting produced by followers of his [...]. At the same time recent modernist painting has revealed profound affinities with Pollock's work, especially his all-over drip paintings executed between 1947 and 1950, and a number of pictures made in 1951 by staining thin black paint into unsized canvas.²⁶

In this statement, Fried positioned Louis' work within the context of both Pollock's late works, such as the transcendence beyond the gesture of the body illustrated through the 'black paintings'. These works, according to Fried, existed 'as if to acknowledge that at this scale the drip technique, with its implied reference back to the artist's bodily movements, had reached the limit of its effectiveness.'²⁷ Louis' works heralded a new generation of disembodied painting – removed from the artist, in a pure, optical expression of colour and technique, while maintaining a large scale.

By 1960, the focus on Louis' technique became involved in Greenberg's discussion of the gradual disengagement, and therefore purity, of abstract painting away from its previous connections with 'expressionism'. Louis' technique of stain painting had an important role in Greenberg's idea of disembodiment, which in turn positioned Louis' work as a leading example of quality abstract painting.

Greenberg stated that Louis' work:

succeeds, when it does succeed, by reaffirming in the end (like any other picture that succeeds), the limitedness of pictorial space as such, with all its rectangularity and flatness and opacity. The insistence upon the purely visual and the denial of the tactile and ponderable remain in tradition – and would not result in convincing art if they did not.²⁸

Greenberg continued that the opticality of Louis' 'Veil' paintings as creating an 'almost literal openness that embraces and absorbs color in the act of being created by it. Openness, and not only in painting, is the quality that seems most to exhilarate the attuned eyes of our time.'²⁹ This raised the suggestion that 'opticality' was a measure of the level of success or quality of an abstract work of art.

'Louis and Noland' has held an important role in Greenberg's work, being issued the same year as the essay 'Modernist Painting', which would become the critic's most well known text on the development of abstract painting since the late nineteenth century.³⁰ Undoubtedly, the publication of 'Modernist Painting' in 1960 brought together the various threads of Greenberg's arguments from the past two decades into one coherent theory. It confirmed Greenberg's opinions of a new sensibility in modern painting, bringing artists such as Newman and Louis into the forefront of opticality. On opticality, Greenberg stated that:

the flatness towards which Modernist painting orients itself can never be an absolute flatness. The heightened sensitivity of the picture plane may no longer permit sculptural illusion, or trompe-l'oeil, but it does and must permit optical illusion [...]. Now it is a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension.³¹

Within the context of this new era for opticality, Greenberg's focus on Louis' technique understandably took priority in the discussions of his work, which in turn established the mainstream view of Louis' style. 'Modernist Painting' reiterated the focus on the purely optical sensations caused by the technique of abstract painting, which could be closely related to Louis' works. In the text, Greenberg suggested that the sense of space created by optical works, perhaps those such as Louis', 'can be travelled through, literally or figuratively, only with the eye.'³²

In the context of the major changes occurring in American abstraction, which were initiated largely by Greenberg's influence, Louis' work is immensely fertile for exploring the point of intersection between the 1960s 'colourfield' painting and the concerns of colour and scale of the earlier generation of the 1940s to 1950s. While Greenberg's ideas remain strong indicators of the approach that provides insight into Louis' works even today (or negatively posits Louis as one of Greenberg's 'chosen' artists), the framework initiated by Greenberg's texts such as 'Louis and Noland' and 'Modernist Painting' also dictate the major approaches to Louis' work. This suggests the need to look beyond the major narratives and approaches to enable a broader view of Louis' contribution to modern American painting outside of the perception of Louis as an artist situated in the 1960s. Here we can interpret Louis' works not simply as similar to the work of painters emerging in the 1960s, but as providing the formal and compositional grounds for their work. Louis' achievements are further revealed as we explore the approaches taken by subsequent artists who gained prominence during the mid-to-late 1960s. We begin to see that Louis not only responded to change in modern painting, but directed it as well. Michael Fried suggests that there are aspects of the work of these later artists that also 'gives significance to aspects of Louis's paintings which otherwise could not be experienced as significant.'³³ However, on the other side of this interpretation, we need to be aware of the possibility that our understanding of Louis' role in mid-twentieth century painting positioning can be often influenced by the historical legacy left by the writing on his work. This issue requires more investigation and discussion in order to propose which aspects of Louis' work have been affected by the popular narratives that were established around the period of the artist's death in the early 1960s, and to contextualise these within a broader consideration of Louis' work.

CHAPTER 5

**OVERTURNING TRADITIONAL FOCUSES IN WRITING ON
MORRIS LOUIS**

It is important to question some aspects of the critical writing on the work of Morris Louis. During his working career, that criticism was dominated by the viewpoint of Clement Greenberg whose essay 'Louis and Noland' (1960) not only introduced readers to the possibility of experiencing Louis' work, but also impacted upon the way in which his work would continue to be regarded in the future. Greenberg situated Louis amongst the leading artists of the 1960s whose work related to the critic's evolving theory of 'opticality'. He was interested in how artists pursued opticality through detaching their work from traditional modes of representation, and explored the elements of pure colour, scale and 'disembodied' technique. Greenberg also related opticality to artists' aspirations to achieve 'purity' or 'self-definition' in their work, which could be interpreted as the 'identity' of their work.

The discussion of Louis' work in the essay 'Louis and Noland' in 1960 linked Louis' work with the revision of essays written by Greenberg during the preceding years such as "'American-Type' Painting' (1955/58). Today, Louis' works continue to be linked with the viewpoint provided by Greenberg's writing, which has arguably limited the possibilities for exploring Louis' body of work beyond the ideas that were proposed by the critic. As Greenberg's interests extended only to those works by Louis that he saw as fitting into his theories, his focus both promoted and gave a context for Louis' work, but also limited the scope and extent of critical and public awareness of Louis' work. In addition to 'Louis and Noland', other texts and exhibitions that discussed Louis' work, therefore setting up the context for the history on his work, were a brief discussion in William Rubin's 'Younger American Painters' (1960), and exhibitions such as *Abstract Expressionists and Imagists* (1961, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York).

Following on from the period, Greenberg's critical work dominated and, consequently, limited the critical perceptions of Morris Louis' work. In the 1970s and 1980s, new generations of critics began to write on Louis' work. In one respect, this provided varied interpretations of Louis' work, for example, the position of Louis' style in light of the development of 'colourfield' painting and minimalism. However, many of these texts lacked a broad understanding of Louis' career, as they primarily followed Greenberg's focus on Louis' working period of 1954–1962. Early major exhibitions held in the period following Louis' death, which prompted many

responses by critics and also influenced the approach taken towards Louis' works included a retrospective exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in 1963 and *The Responsive Eye* (1965), held at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. This latter exhibition firmly positioned Louis' work as part of a 1960s generation of abstract painters. Influencing many of these exhibitions and texts was the fact that Greenberg was the only authority on Louis' works. As a result, the major texts on Louis' works since the artist's death have often referred only to the three series he produced after 1954: the 'Veil', 'Unfurled' and 'Stripe' series, until the artist's death in 1962. Therefore, out of a career of approximately three decades, the major understanding of his work has been largely based upon the paintings produced by Louis during a short, eight year period.

There are alternative ways of thinking about Louis' work.¹ However, in order to appreciate the complexity of Louis' position outside of the accepted view of his work, we need to highlight some of the continuing effects of the period on our understanding of Louis' work. The following chapter situates Louis' work through several themes that were established in the early 1960s. These themes include the principles of Louis' approach as an artist, his pursuit of quality and the resulting self-criticism of his work, the development of his stain painting technique, and the historical significance of Louis' 'breakthrough' to his mature painting style in the mid-1950s. By relating these issues to some of Louis' lesser known works and approaches to his work, we are faced with many confrontations to our understanding of the history of Louis' work. While these different perspectives present challenges to the accepted history on the artist, they are also useful in appreciating the full complexity of Louis' position within abstract painting in the 1950s and 1960s.

It is difficult to interpret Louis' own conceptual approach because he very rarely provided an interpretive framework for his work. Painting for him was a private activity. Even those with privileged access to Louis' works and ideas, such as his friend and colleague Kenneth Noland, or Louis' wife Marcella Louis (now Brenner), were not provided with insight into his working methods. During the important period of the early-to-mid 1950s, when Louis' painting style was undergoing new development, Louis and Kenneth Noland shared a deep interest in abstract painting. Although they experimented together on developing some of their techniques, Louis

did not open his studio to Noland. He strictly guarded his own work, which was perhaps an important factor in the break in their friendship during the 1950s. Louis' own students at the Washington Workshop Center of the Arts report that Louis did not speak about his work during their sessions. Greenberg was possibly one of the only individuals that Louis engaged in discussion about his works. The extent of Greenberg's influence upon Louis' work came through in the critic's suggestions on which aspects of his work he should pursue, as well as providing titles for several of Louis' paintings.² In other ways, particularly regarding his style, it has been suggested that Louis remained fiercely independent and rejected Greenberg's advice.³ Certain aspects of Louis' work were therefore kept deliberately separate from those close to Louis, while a level of confidentiality was invested in his relationship with Greenberg.

Following their first meeting in 1953, Greenberg made several trips to Washington D.C. to visit Louis and view his works. Although Louis witnessed the levels of success gained by artists of the 'first generation' such as Pollock and de Kooning, he did not seem to desire public acknowledgement of his work and this was despite the restrictions that being an unknown 'regional' artist would have had on his work financially and therefore creatively.⁴ Put another way, if Louis was interested in his work gaining the level of success comparable to Pollock or de Kooning, he did not want this to alter the privacy that he needed to engage with making his works. As Greenberg was one of the only individuals to have gained access to discussions of Louis' work with the artist, the theme of Louis' privacy was not an issue raised in Greenberg's texts on Louis. The critic focused instead on the necessity for Louis to maintain a physical separation from the mainstream art culture of New York in order to maintain the quality and 'advanced' nature of his work. The importance of Louis' distance from New York was therefore proposed by Greenberg as an essential component of his work. This related to Greenberg's idea of the historical positioning of Louis' work rather than his individual position. In 'Louis and Noland', Greenberg suggested that Louis maintained a close interest in the trends of New York painting during the 1950s and early 1960s, but it was necessary that he produced his work from the distance of Washington D.C. As he had commented in several earlier essays, Greenberg proposed that 'advanced' art needed to be produced in isolation from mainstream culture. He asserted this again in 'Louis and Noland', that:

[...] both live in Washington, D.C., which fact is not unrelated to the quality of their work. From Washington you can keep in steady contact with the New York art scene without being subjected as constantly to its pressures to conform as you would be if you lived and worked in New York.⁵

One of the issues rising from this statement was Greenberg's attempt to provide a context for Louis works that related to the situation of New York painting, rather than the individual merits or the complexities of Louis' approach to his work. This was influenced by Greenberg's conception of the historical lineage of American abstraction.

Greenberg's interest in Louis' works produced after 1954 related to the recent achievements of American abstractionists, particularly the 'field' painting approach of artists such as Rothko, Still and Newman. To introduce the importance of Louis' approach, Greenberg suggested in 'Louis and Noland' that 'before he caught a glimpse of anything by Still, Newman or Rothko, he had aligned his art with theirs.'⁶ However, not only had Louis 'aligned' his work with the artists discussed by Greenberg, he had been *of* the same generation. Louis had by 1960 been a practicing artist for approximately three decades. He lived and worked in New York for about a decade during the period of the WPA projects, when American abstraction was in its early development, and he evolved his style throughout the late 1940s and 1950s based upon his experiences of the work of European artists he encountered at that time. Technically, Louis was therefore as much a part of the 'first generation' as Pollock, de Kooning, Rothko, Newman and others discussed by Greenberg. Greenberg's writing contributed to the perception that Louis' works were part of the generation of 1960s abstraction rather than the period in which many of his works were produced.

Louis' own comments on his work in the mid-1950s contrast the perception provided by Greenberg's writing, that is, the perception of Louis as an artist influenced by the Abstract Expressionist generation of 'field' painters. At this time, critics' suggestions of Louis' recent emergence conflicted with his long relationship with the New York art scene. According to Helen Jacobson, who was one of Louis' students based in Baltimore during the 1950s, Louis was disinterested in the work of many of his New

York contemporaries in the 1950s – ‘his experience with the New York art world made him bitter.’⁷ In a letter to Greenberg from 1954, Louis suggested that conceptually his work was not influenced by the leading New York artists:

I believe I spoke to David [Smith] about a related point of difference between myself as affected by paintings and most other painters I’ve known. I don’t care a great deal about the positive accomplishments in their work or my own since that leads to an end. I look at paintings from the negative side, what is left out is useful only as that leads to the next try and the next. In this sense the positive accomplishments of Pollack [*sic*] or anyone else has little meaning for me.⁸

Reflected in Louis’ statement is the complexity of his position as an artist of the first generation of American abstract painters, while still relatively unknown to audiences familiar with the style of Abstract Expressionism. Similar reactions were felt by other artists that Greenberg attempted to introduce in his writings, such as Barnett Newman. Newman rejected Greenberg’s positioning of his work in relation to Rothko and Still in the text ‘“American–Type” Painting’ in the late 1950s, as he had been practicing his style for many years prior and independently of these artists.

In addition to the historical lineage proposed by Greenberg’s texts of the early 1960s, his writing initiated a focus on the quality of Louis’ paintings. In ‘Modernist Painting’ (1960), Greenberg proposed that many artists struggled with the desire to make ‘good’ works of art while also challenging the accepted styles of painting of the past. The struggle Greenberg referred to was an internal one because modernist art was spurred by ‘self–criticism’.⁹ The link between the quality of Louis’ works and the pursuit of an ultimate opticality also illustrated the hierarchy that Greenberg was attempting to develop at the time between ‘optical’ and ‘tactile’ approaches to painting. Tactile painting, such as late Abstract Expressionist painting, concerned itself with the gestural handling of pigment, colour and technique. Tactility often resulted in figurative or representational elements which could therefore be interpreted as attempting to communicate a type of worldly reality. Opticality, on the other hand, was achieved through the isolation of the individual components of colour, medium and scale in the pursuit of new sensations of space. It could be suggested that for Greenberg, the issues of quality and integrity took on the role of the ‘content’ of abstract painting itself, suggesting that the ultimate form of abstraction

that was completely self-referential. He stated that ‘the quality of art inheres in its “content”, and vice versa. Quality is “content”.’¹⁰

In the text ‘Louis and Noland’, Greenberg suggested that the quality of Louis’ approach was closely related to the artist’s decision to disengage his hand from the production of his work. This resulted in the ‘disembodied’ technique of stain painting, which opposed past traditions of painting by using colour as a means of pure expression, rather than connected to the representation of objects or figures. The immediacy and purity that resulted from Louis’ staining technique illustrated a higher form of connection with, and communication of, ‘opticality’. It is of significant concern that during this period the self-definition or purity of abstract painting was affirmed through the denial of artists’ expression or use of gesture. This set up a disjunction within Louis’ own body of work, separating his pre-1954 works from his post-1954 ‘optical’ stain painting. Some contemporary critics suggest that during this period Greenberg avoided the problem of ‘matter’ altogether by negating its existence.¹¹ This will become apparent as we investigate more of the work that Louis produced in the late 1950s and early 1960s, which can be seen to refute some of the major categories of quality and disembodiment that critics such as Greenberg proposed.

In opposition to the viewpoint established on Louis’ ‘disembodied’ approach to his work, we find that that many of Louis’ works, even those used by Greenberg to uphold his theory of opticality, challenge the idea of a pure or distanced engagement with the process of painting. This raises an important point of investigation through which we are able to begin to reincorporate some of Louis’ lesser known works back into the discussion of his technique. It may be considered that through this process, our understanding of Louis’ major series can be augmented by different ideas about the artist’s approach to his work. We can begin by exploring the issue of Louis’ breakthrough to his mature painting style in the 1950s.

In ‘Louis and Noland’, Greenberg supposed that Louis achieved a ‘breakthrough’ after he visited New York in April 1953, specifically when he witnessed Helen Frankenthaler’s painting *Mountains and Sea* (1952) (**Image C-20**) and some of Pollock’s major works. The encounter with Frankenthaler’s painting has since been

treated as a definite turning point in Louis' career, with subsequent critics continuing to attribute Louis' subsequent work to this brief moment. Michael Fried, for instance, was one of the first critics to follow Greenberg's cues on Louis' breakthrough. In his introduction to the exhibition *Morris Louis* in 1967, which was subsequently published as a major monograph in 1970, Fried stated that 'the most important event in Louis' career, his breakthrough to major achievement'¹², was his visit in 1953 with Helen Frankenthaler. Fried defined the rest of Louis' career as a continual struggle between this exhilarating moment of 'breakthrough', which influenced the production of his 1954 'Veil' paintings and other times in his career that put strain on his artistic 'integrity', or the quality of his works. He stated that:

The ambition to make good paintings has always entailed a stringent artistic morality. But for Louis, as for modernist painters generally, the relation of his personal integrity to that actually manifest in his paintings seems to have been acutely problematic. Louis' notorious reluctance to visit New York, both before and after his breakthrough to major achievement in 1954, is a case in point. In an obvious sense, it was characteristic of his integrity.¹³

Here we notice two major influences of Greenberg's work emerging in Fried's history on Louis. Firstly, Fried links the idea of Louis' separation as part of his intention to produce quality works of art, and therefore as indicative of his integrity. This creates a situation where the quality of Louis' works becomes based upon a moral decision. Secondly, Fried reiterates that from 1954, Louis' work entered a new phase of 'major achievement' separate from his previous work.

In order to situate Louis' breakthrough with the period in which he visited with Frankenthaler in New York in 1953, we would need to prioritise discussion of the works that Louis made following that visit. The first of Louis' major series, the 'Veils', were not commenced until nine months after the visit. Louis' works produced following the trip, such as *Trellis* and *Landscape (Mid-day)*, and *Dark Thrust* (all 1953) (**Image L-8, L-12 and L-11**) are not, however, widely explored in relation to Louis' achievements. Rather, the suggestion of Louis' breakthrough to his mature style is continually linked with a mythical notion of the insight that Louis gained from the work of a more experienced artist from the art 'centre' of New York. Fried stated that Louis' work seemed to emerge in 1954 without precedent in his own body of work:

The paintings that constitute his breakthrough represent a radical departure from his previous work, especially work executed before his visit to New York, as regards both technique and general appearance... Pictures like *Intrigue*, *Salient*, and *Iris* (all 1954) do not represent a culmination or fruition of specific tendencies visible in his previous work. On the contrary, they amount to a repudiation of that work and its underlying assumptions.¹⁴ (**Images L-18, L-16 and L-13**)

The suggestion of artists' refinement of their style in the years following their early works might be related to many artists, however the issue of Louis' breakthrough was also used for another purpose in the critical writing of Michael Fried, as it was similarly used by Clement Greenberg.

The focus on the breakthrough that Louis experienced in the mid-1950s and the associated interpretation of this change in his work, which is a major theme in both Greenberg and Fried's writing on Louis, relates more broadly to issues of the interpretation of the progression of modernist painting. Both critics suggested that the development of modernist painting was itself a successive series of artistic 'revelations'. In a related way, Fried spoke of Louis' breakthrough as 'one in which *painting itself* broke through to its future.'¹⁵ This posited Louis' body of work as a series of episodes, not unlike the development of modernist painting since the late nineteenth century. Louis' breakthrough began with the 1954 'Veil' series, then his 1958-59 'Veils', the 'Unfurleds' of 1960 and the 'Stripes' of 1961-62, each series seen to build upon the achievements of the past work. This interpretation has therefore merited Louis' significance upon a very small period of his career and upon isolated sets of works rather than looking at Louis' body of work as a whole. Both critics' limited use of Louis' career illustrates the importance of the critical re-reading of Louis' work against this limited view of history as well as that of Louis' career.

A significant issue with Fried's interpretation of Louis' work has been the critic's denial that Louis' early concerns were revised and re-appeared in different series throughout Louis' work after 1954, which would challenge the proposition of Louis' successive 'breakthroughs' throughout his career. There are works that Louis created well into his major series that are starkly different in 'technique and general appearance', using Fried's words, from the accepted style of Louis' work. Following

Louis' first series of stained paintings, the 1954 'Veils', he looked back to the expressive possibilities of the drawings and early paintings, and emerged with the series of untitled paintings broadly known as his 'expressionist' paintings of 1955–57. Certain of the untitled works link with Louis' earlier explorations of his staining technique in works such as *Landscape (Mid-day)* (1953), and others such as *March 1956 (Image L-21)* appear as variants of Louis' 1954 'Veils' such as *Terrain of Joy (Image L-15)*. The work from 1956 concentrates on the centre of the composition, with the stains and pours of pigment compiling in the centre of the canvas. In a similar manner, *Terrain of Joy*, considered as one of Louis' 'successful' images of the 1954 'Veil' series, is a vigorous expression of colour, with the licks of pigments converging towards the centre of the work and mixing into a brownish shade. The 1956 work achieves a similar effect, but by using Magna in a more viscous form, suggesting a more gestural approach. The main features of the works in the 1955–57 series were Louis' technique of piling pigment and colour onto the canvas, using brushwork as well as staining, and pouring liquid pigments onto one another. In some works, Louis also dripped aluminium paint, making this the only time that Louis combined his usual Magna pigment with other paints in work after 1954. The effect of the aluminium pigment provides a comparison with Pollock's use of the same pigment in his paintings of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and similarly in Louis' works is used to draw attention to the surface of the image.

Louis' first solo exhibition in New York was held with eleven paintings from the 1955–57 series. Following the exhibition, it is reported that Louis destroyed up to 300 paintings made as part of the series, with less than ten examples remaining today. The existing works would seem to be significant in Louis' career, and so too, the reasons behind his destruction of the rest of the series. In his 1970 publication, however, Fried did not illustrate any of those remaining works from the period, nor did he analyse any in depth in order to discuss why Louis made them, or why he subsequently destroyed most of them. Fried's brief reference to the 1955–57 period of Louis' work was to reinforce the traditional view that Louis experienced yet another 'breakthrough' when he began to create a new series of the 'Veil' paintings in 1958 once he realised the inferior quality of the 1955–57 works. Fried positioned this period in Louis' career as time of 'uncertainty', and his mention of the role of these

transitional works was important only in order to reinforce his focus on the integrity of Louis' decision to destroy the works.

At the time of the production of the 1955–57 works, the series was a major undertaking for Louis. By comparison with the sixteen works produced by Louis' for the 1954 'Veils' series, the hundreds of paintings produced in the mid–1950s numbered as many as his later major series such as the 'Unfurleds' or 'Stripes'. In this regard, we can suggest that the Louis was consumed by the ideas and style of his 1955–57 series at the time. In the mid–1950s, many artists were exploring the potential of combining Abstract Expressionist gestures with the light touch of Impressionism – or 'Abstract Impressionism'. John Elderfield attributes some of the interest in this style to the purchase of Claude Monet's late *Nymphéas (Waterlilies)* (**Image C-5**) by The Museum of Modern Art in 1955.¹⁶ It is possible that, following the exhibition of works from Louis' series at Martha Jackson Gallery in New York in 1957, where Louis had the opportunity to see several of the works from the series installed, he decided to destroy the paintings. So too, in light of Louis' strong reactions to the styles of the New York artists as illustrated through his correspondence with Greenberg in the mid–1950s, Louis may have felt that he was conforming with the work of other artists of his time, which was evidently something he wished to avoid.

The difference of the works from this series to Louis' 1954 'Veils' or his subsequent 1958–59 'Veils', was Louis' use of his technique to draw attention to the composition of the works. In the 'Veils', Louis was careful to maintain a high level of illusion with regard to his technique. Strong statements were made by Greenberg and Fried against Louis' gestural work in the mid–1950s, including Greenberg's claim that the remaining paintings from 1955–57 that were not destroyed by Louis during the period 'survived only because he'd become so immersed in making that he no longer got around to destroying.'¹⁷ Fried extended Greenberg's interpretation, stating that 'even the most incorruptible integrity in combination with even the highest gifts cannot guarantee that the paintings that result will evince integrity in pictorially significant terms.'¹⁸ Fried also proposed that the 1955–57 period illustrated a 'reversion' in Louis' career, that it was 'characteristic of Louis' strength of mind that he was able to ride each such episode out and then put it behind him: once he found himself in a new

vein all uncertainty vanished.’¹⁹ In this way, the influence of Fried’s position on Louis’ work, which would continue for many decades, contributed to the exclusion of this period of Louis’ work from the mainstream interpretations by successive critics as well as the misunderstanding of Louis’ approach to his entire body of work. E.A. Carmean, writing in 1976 on Louis’ ‘Stripe’ series, suggested that Louis’ ‘chromatic deftness’ and ‘strict geometric composition’ were enhanced by the fact that the works appeared ‘without a transitional period such as those which had accompanied Louis’ earlier changes of style and format.’²⁰ This conforms to some of the suggestions initiated by Greenberg and Fried, particularly that Louis’ series were conceived in moments of breakthrough. The proposition that Louis’ series were each produced in isolation, as we will see from analysing the progression of his works after 1954, is a misleading statement that denies the productivity of Louis’ career.

The paintings that Louis created during 1955–57 are difficult to integrate with the accepted view on his work, as they do not seem to comply with our expectations of Louis’ style. However, while the works are different in their technique from Louis’ major series, they enable a broader appreciation of Louis’ interests throughout his career, and the progression of his style. In order to re-evaluate Louis’ body of work to include those aspects not fully explored in the major texts, we must shift our perceptions of the value or ‘quality’ of Louis’ work. In opposition to the influential claims made by Greenberg and Fried, and their followers, on the unproductive nature of the 1955–57 period, Louis found inspiration for the works from within his 1954 ‘Veil’ series. Shortly following Louis’ critical, if not public, success with the ‘Veil’ paintings, he hinted in a letter to Greenberg in 1954 that he was on the cusp of the expressionist paintings series. The statement in the letter suggests that Louis gained inspiration for the expressionist works from some of the ‘Veil’ paintings he created that year:

In my mind two of them are different than the continuity of simple pattern and slow motion of the majority. These two are the rougher ones with lots of black and white areas. Maybe these are lousy enough to interest me now and make me want to explore this further. The others I feel I’ve done all I feel like doing about that episode.²¹

The works Louis referred to as ‘simple pattern and slow motion’ were the 1954 ‘Veil’ paintings. The ‘rougher’ paintings referred to by Louis would influence the new

series of paintings. Comparing Louis' description in the letter with works from the 'Veil' series, those most likely to be the ones referred to by their 'roughness' were *Untitled B* and *Untitled (Image L-20 and L-19)*.²² In these two works, in comparison with the rest of the 'Veil' paintings, Louis was evidently exploring the intensity of various arrangements of colours. In the selection of works, Louis showed his ability to manipulate his Magna pigment into a variety of styles, from the sweeping transparency of the more conventional 'Veil' paintings, to the denseness of the pigment achieved in the 'rougher' paintings.

In his correspondence with Greenberg, Louis proposed that there was an important place for 'expression' in his work. Had this aspect of his work been more apparent at the time, the perception of Louis' 'disembodied' approach would have been significantly affected. Louis' direct reference to the potential of his 'lousy' works refutes some of the perceptions of the quality of his paintings that have subsequently dominated the critical interpretation of Louis' work. As Leo Steinberg suggested in the essay 'Other Criteria' (1972), critics often set the standards for interpreting quality, not artists.²³ This is true of the approach taken towards Louis' 1955–57 period. Greenberg's conception of the purpose of abstract painting to move towards the ultimate goal of anti-illusion, therefore disallowed the opportunity for any other type of expression in Louis' work, which has had an ongoing effect on our knowledge of this artist's career. It is evident that a careful analysis of the works in between the two groups of Louis' important 'Veil' series could have provided a context to appreciate the works. Consequently, later generations of viewers may have been provided a more accurate sense of the entire span of Louis' career rather than a selection of his most 'successful' works. The inclusion of Louis' lesser known works may have also enabled readers to consider another side to the artist's work in contrast to the disembodied interpretation provided by Greenberg and Fried. As a result of the interests of such influential critics, however, many publications that have continued to be issued on Morris Louis' work have created an uneven view of the artist's career.

If we look deeper into Louis' body of work, we find that throughout his career the principles of disembodied painting, or opticality, were confronted by many aspects of Louis' work, not only those paintings that overtly engaged with gesture. Louis created many groups of works after 1954, beyond the overtly expressive 1955–57 works,

which hold clues to different sides of his artistic sense. Experimentation with the gestural qualities of his technique can be experienced in several of Louis' transitional series from his later career, including the 'Para', 'Ambi', 'Omega', 'Aleph' and 'Floral' series from 1960–62. These five groups, for example, emerged in dynamic bursts in the period between Louis' 1958 'Veil' series and the 1960 'Unfurled' series.

Works from the 'Florals', the most investigated of Louis' 'transitional' series are closely connected with Louis' interests in gesture and figuration through abstraction. *Point of Tranquility* (1959–60) (**Image L-35**), for example, contains central stains that merge outwards from the centre of the canvas rather than being poured from the top. These stains suggest the contours of sinuous figures or winged animals, each approaching the viewer's space. *Beth* (1959–60) (**Image L-32**), a transitional work situated between the 'Aleph' (**Image L-37**) and 'Floral' series, combines the technique of a 'Veil' painting with the vigorous figurative movement of the 'Floral' motifs. The whole image, veiled by a field of red–orange pigment, makes the action appear to be performed behind a sheet of colour. When we then look back at the expressionist works of 1955–57, we see that some of the achievements of these works came through in Louis' concentration on the role of composition, which was then used as a technical motivation in his later works.

The 'Para' series (1959) (**Image L-30**) is defined by individual pours of pigment without any veiling. These pours seem quite unpredictable in comparison with the even flow of the pouring technique in the 'Veils'. There is also a deliberate presence of white canvas in between each pour, which may have developed from the so-called 'split' veils of 1958.²⁴ In this sub-series, and other related works from the period such as *Chet* (1958) (**Image L-23**), Louis began to consider breaking the veil format into two or more parts. In the 'split' works, Louis did not veil the entire canvas, but poured his washes of pigment so that certain parts remained uncovered. This resulted in several works within the series, such as *Aurora* (1958) (**Image L-27**), which are composed of distinct channels of pigment poured from the top of the canvas and allowed to pool and re-join at the base of the work. In the 'Para' series, however, a distinct presence of black pigment contrasts the white canvas. The black pigment is poured from the outer edges, giving the sense of 'framing' the work.

The contrast of black pigment against the raw, white canvas in these later works was explored further by Louis' 'Ambi' series (1959) (**Image L-31**), in which Louis poured individual streams of bright pigment, or sometimes a combination of vibrant pigment and black pigment, from the top of the canvas down towards the centre. In his control of the pigment, Louis ensured the pours stopped short of the centre. He then turned the canvas upside-down and repeated this process, until the composition was revealed; a 'Veil' painting with a cavernous space of white canvas present in the middle of the work. This technique presaged the 'Omega' series (1959-60) (**Image L-36**) in which Louis focused on lighter and more pure Magna colours, without the presence of black pigment and re-oriented the canvas to a vertical position. The 'Omega' series is referenced in Louis' 'Unfurled' and 'Stripe' series. His use of Magna in its more opaque form connects the 'Ambi' and 'Omega' series with Louis' 1955-57 period, and in turn, is evident in the 'Unfurled' and 'Stripe' series of 1960-62. Each of these series experiments with the vibrancy and consistency of the Magna pigment that Louis used solely since the late 1940s. In both series of 'Veils' Louis focused on the level of transparency he could achieve by thinning the pigment, whereas in his later series, Louis returned to the potential of his 1955-57 period and refined the relationship between the opacity of the pigment and use of colour relationships.

Louis' 'transitional' series in addition to the 1955-57 paintings, have a strong connection to Louis' larger body of work, and yet are rarely explored in the major texts on his work. In order to gain support for the recognition of these 'other' aspects of Louis' work, we must look at the relationship and significance of the lesser known aspects of his works to his major and well-known series. As we have seen, Louis did not produce each of his series in isolation; they emerged through an ongoing evolution of his technique and engagement with his work. The 1955-57 works, for instance, grew from within the 'Veil' series of 1954 and brought out Louis' strong sense of composition. In the 'Veils' of 1958-59, Louis explored the possibilities of further experimenting with 'composition', investigating the placement of the veil image in relation to the shape and size of the canvas. 'Inside' or 'beneath' the veil, he used the viscosity of the Magna paint to push it around the canvas, using various instruments, such as pieces of card or lengths of dowel.²⁵ In this series, due to the much larger sizes of the canvases in comparison to his 1954 'Veil' series, Louis

added additional length to his working stretcher in order to support new works. He used the vertical wooden bars added to the stretcher to intensify the compositional interest of the works.²⁶ It could be stated that many of Louis' major works, although they are often majestic in scale and contain very subtle colour combinations, retain much of the act of creation. The paint in many of Louis' later 'Veils', such as *Beth Chet* (1958) and *Turning* (1958) (**Image L-24 and L-25**) seems to be guided by the stretcher braces, cascading the pigment into arcs on either side of the braces, which Louis was able to heighten through his technique and selection of coloured pigment. While the series suppresses the unimpeded gestures of the 1955–57 works, we do see with over half of the works from the late 'Veils' that beneath the surface the effect of the pours creates a kind of movement in the pigment. This complicates the suggestion of a purely flat surface attributed to the 'field' quality of these works.

During the period of the late 1950s, the complexity of Louis' technique was illustrated through the artist's strong interest in the productiveness of composition and experimentation – rational and 'irrational' approaches. The variations that Louis produced with his pigment and technique provide an important basis for understanding his major works. Diane Upright suggests that the diversity of Louis' work shows that throughout his career Louis was constantly confronted by his 'boldly expressionist sensibility', which conflicted with his 'rational and disciplined pictorial intelligence.'²⁷ This alternative view on Louis' technique and approach, beyond the suggestion of his disembodied style, or his negative reaction towards his expressionist works, allows for a greater understanding of the many ways that Louis' works can be interpreted. We can suggest that in his works an obvious engagement with the body is sometimes 'veiled' or disguised by his technique, and in other works left more open or 'obvious' to the viewer. In both instances, however, despite the weight of Greenberg's ideas about the disembodied nature of Louis' works, we are not blinded to the process involved in the creation of the work. The crucial effect of Louis' work is that, once fixed into the surface of the canvas, there is a transformation, from *active* gesture to *implied* gesture. The characteristics of Louis' 'gesture' were not merely 'recorded' through the act of creating his works in the stain painting style, but the continual oscillation between physical movement and the disembodied or 'distanced' effects of gesture that came about as a result of his technique. Robert Ayers proposes that the purpose and effect of Louis' technique 'doesn't seem to be a mere remnant of

gravitational effect, but rather to continue to respond to it.²⁸ In this way, we could suggest that in works such as Louis' 'Veils', the body is not removed, but its involvement is traced and refined so that it is retained in the finished work. In this way, the body or Louis' 'expression' transforms and responds to the elusiveness of the technique of staining pigment.

When suggesting the importance of a more encompassing view of Louis' history, not only the established perceptions and debates that are included, but also the elements that are *excluded* illustrate the complexities of the history that we are provided. This is largely due to the emphasis upon certain elements of Louis' work that fit with the direction of certain critics' theories at the time of Louis' emergence. Due to the important lineage of modern abstraction that Louis was positioned within at the time of the early 1960s, certain aspects of his work such as his technique and practice of creating distinct and in-depth series of paintings were prioritised over other aspects, such as his interest in repetition and the expressive qualities of his technique. Some contemporary theorists have questioned the consequences of the influence of theories, such as opticality, by particular critics at the time of Louis' work. Rosalind Krauss' work since the mid-1960s has critically analysed the focus on the disembodied opticality of 1960s abstraction and criticism. She states that 'I want to focus on works...against the formal premises of modernist opticality – the premises that connect the dematerialisation of the visual field to the dilated instantaneity of peculiar timelessness of the moment of its perception.'²⁹ Marcia Brennan has more recently questioned the gendered, specifically masculine, focus on 1960s opticality, suggesting that 'formalist criticism intrinsically needed the body that it continually sought to deny, as modernist paintings in their sensuous materiality were repeatedly made to function as analogues of embodied experience itself.'³⁰ These comments support alternative discussions of Louis' and other artists' work of the period outside of the traditional framework of Greenberg's criticism and his followers.

The possibility for wider discussions of Louis' work also emerges from the critical analysis in recent decades of the many issues that stem from writing as a form of expressing knowledge or truth. As suggested by critical theorists such as Jacques Derrida, writing can challenge established viewpoints through working from inside traditional fields such as writing or art history. In *The Truth in Painting* (1987),

however, Derrida proposes that only a true criticism of art and its theories arises when writing ‘works the frame, makes it work, lets it work, makes work for it.’³¹ Authors on Louis’ work such as Diane Upright were some of the first to challenge the accepted viewpoints on the artist’s work. In an early essay on Louis’ work, ‘In Addition to the Veils’ (1978), Upright suggested that ‘the many phases of Morris Louis’ slow development present inconsistencies that blur the conventional formalist view of his career.’³² ‘Formalist’ can be regarded here not only as the repeated focus on the form and technique of Louis’ major works or the period in which the works were interpreted by critics such as Greenberg, but also as a tendency to follow a conventional view of Louis’ progression. Louis’ work itself presents a challenge to the major perceptions of his progression. His ‘many phases’, or types of work, show the complex array of styles and revisions that he explored in addition to the major series that we know well.

Through this discussion, it has been suggested that Morris Louis did not constrict the suggestive possibilities of his work through claiming to have a singular vision in mind. The development of Louis’ work was not simply concerned with the attainment of quality, rather Louis’ focus on the exciting possibilities of reworking and revisiting some important themes carried the artist through a multitude of styles. Some of Louis’ influences came from the period of his early works, and others emerged as he gained new skills in abstract stain painting throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. Through challenging accepted notions of quality attributed to Louis’ works since the 1960s and therefore opening alternate viewpoints, we can add to the interest of Louis’ most well known works without having to ignore some aspects. Importantly, we can use the history of Louis’ own works to make suggestions about his style and progression rather than the common narratives that have since been raised to the level of myth. In the process, we are able to interpret more closely what we read, and the histories that are presented to us through writing. Integrating different views of Louis’ work is an important means of encouraging the creation of new and multiple impressions for future writing.

CONCLUSION

OPTICALITY AND THE WORK OF MORRIS LOUIS (1912-1962)

This thesis has reviewed several major issues concerning the development of Morris Louis' work from the period of the 1930s until the artist's death in 1962. The aim of this investigation has been to discuss Louis' paintings from a variety of perspectives: the role of Louis' work in the emergence of abstract painting in the United States in the mid-twentieth century, and the work of the critic Clement Greenberg, whose support for abstraction and various abstract artists during the period came to focus on Louis' paintings. From the mid-1950s to the early 1960s, Louis' works became closely associated with Greenberg's theory of abstract painting, termed 'opticality'. By the early 1960s, Louis' work was discussed as leading a new generation of abstract artists towards the attainment of opticality. Therefore, in discussing the development of Louis' career, it has been crucial to analyse the critical context in which his works were positioned through the writing of the period. This offers a perspective that illustrates Louis' position in the development of one of the most important periods of twentieth century art. This study also expands our perception of Louis' work beyond the status of a 'regional' artist based in Washington D.C.

In order to analyse the impact of the connection between Greenberg's writing and Louis' work, it has been necessary to investigate issues associated with the emergence of 'opticality', particularly how the concept of a purely optical form of painting came to dominate Greenberg's writing by the 1960s. The historical development of opticality was seen by Greenberg as occupying an important place in the progression of the culture that abstract art aspired to in order to ensure its future. This connection between abstraction and the advancement of 'culture' was initiated by Greenberg's major texts such as 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1939). From this point, Greenberg's terminology about the purity of abstract painting evolved into a complex theory. In this theory, the work of several American artists was discussed in a number of essays throughout the 1940s and 1950s, such as 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture' (1948) and "'American-Type" Painting' (1955). Each of these essays discussed the relevance of artists' works with regard to the historical unfolding of abstraction. Terms began to emerge in Greenberg's writing as indicators of opticality, including 'optical illusion' and 'sheer visibility', providing a language with which to discuss the experience of viewing new styles of abstract painting by artists such as Pollock, de Kooning and Rothko.

This new language concerning the opticality of abstract painting related to several elements visible in the works, such as the use of colour, engagement with the scale of the work (as related to the optical ‘field’ of viewers’ own perceptions) and technique. Each of these material elements underwent investigation by Greenberg’s writing, and by the 1950s resulted in a particular set of criteria used to assess the quality of abstract painting. At this point, opticality came to be opposed to various ‘traditional’ notions of space, which Greenberg termed ‘sculptural’ or ‘tactile’. With this theory of opticality beginning to take shape, Greenberg was forced to reassess some of the ideas that he had previously upheld. Specifically, the issue of ‘gesture’ within the context of opticality needed to be reconsidered. One of the first confrontations to the focus on Abstract Expressionism and opticality came through the late work of Jackson Pollock, and Willem de Kooning’s series of ‘Women’ paintings of the early 1950s.

By the early-to-mid 1950s, Greenberg therefore began to widen his perception of ‘avant-garde’ art beyond the context of New York. As we have seen throughout this thesis, Greenberg’s turn against New York painting was spurred primarily by decline in the regard for opticality in the work of several major New York-based artists in the early 1950s. At this time, opticality became more crucially linked with the issue of ‘quality’ than ever before. As a result, Greenberg’s writing delved more deeply into confirming that the pursuit of ‘quality’ works of art were inextricably linked with artists’ pursuits of opticality. This meant that a definite disengagement with notions of expression and gesture, which had previously been highly regarded for opening the space of painting from traditional forms of representation, was required in order to assert the purity of abstraction. Greenberg’s refinement of opticality came through in his re-writing of essays during the period, most prominently, “‘American-Type’ Painting’ (1955), which had indicated the historical context, and therefore importance, of the work of many of the abstract artists in New York. When he re-wrote “‘American-Type’ Painting’ in 1958, Greenberg was evidently inspired to reconfirm some of the elements of optical painting, and in doing so opened the way for his discussion of alternative artists outside of the New York context, particularly artists such as Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland.

As Louis' works entered at this point in Greenberg's writing, certain aspects of Louis' works seemed more apparent to the critic than others. The discussion raised in this thesis has aimed to provide the context for Greenberg's interest in Louis' work, specifically Louis' role within Greenberg's reinvestigation of abstract painting and opticality once the major artists he had discussed in his previous essays were no longer seen as leading the way for abstract painting into the future. Greenberg had been aware of, and more than this, actually in possession of more than half of Louis' 'Veil' series during the period in which he re-wrote aspects of "'American-type' Painting', which subsequently reconfirmed his focus on opticality by moving away from Abstract Expressionism. Louis' works became linked, therefore, with the major tenets of Greenberg's theory, before any critical interpretation or exhibitions of this major series.

As Greenberg's theory on opticality became more resolved, involving an increasingly complex language and set of criteria with which to analyse abstract painting, the artists and styles that were promoted through his writings confirmed the end of 'Painterly Abstraction', a term that Greenberg used to describe 'Abstract Expressionist' painting from the late 1940s–1950s. The style of painting to evolve from the focus on pure abstraction and the distancing of artists' gestures from their work would become termed 'Post-painterly abstraction' by Greenberg in the early 1960s. In effect, these suggestions of separation split the work of the period into two distinct styles. Louis' work was illustrated as a forerunner of the 'branch' of abstract painting in the 1960s, which renounced expression, and artists immersed themselves in expressing the pure elements of colour, technique and scale. This perception culminated in the only major text on Louis' works written during his lifetime, 'Louis and Noland' (1960), which was written during the same period as Greenberg's 'Modernist Painting', arguably one of his most important essays on the historical role of abstraction. The issues resulting from Greenberg's positioning of Louis' works have since become difficult to disengage from the influence of the critic. As Thierry de Duve commented: 'Greenberg has always insisted that "Modernist Painting" was a neutral account of history, that it was descriptive and did not in the least seek to establish criteria for judgement. Still, it is informed throughout by its author's taste, which seems to have evolved under the same pressure as modernist painting itself.'¹

One of the major issues that the preceding chapters have focused upon is the ongoing effect created by Greenberg's work on Louis, particularly the perception that Louis' works strove to strive to attain 'opticality'. While Louis' paintings appear to support the suggestion of a deliberately distanced or less gestural form of painting through the technique of staining pigment, this perception has resulted in the exclusion of many other important aspects to Louis' style. Certain elements of Louis' works have therefore been important to reclaim. These include Louis' early practice of drawing from the 1930s–1950s and his lesser known series of paintings from the mid–1950s until the artist's death in 1962. Since the 1960s, with the influence of the early narratives on Louis' work initiated by Greenberg and followers of his ideas, we have been accustomed to the view that Louis' emergence involved several distinct series of paintings that each attempted to achieve a pure or 'disembodied' style of abstract painting. At this point, it becomes crucial to begin questioning the accepted approaches to his work, explore alternative interpretations of his style, and incorporate a broader exploration of Louis' career. By investigating the non-traditional focuses in Louis' work, it becomes possible to draw together the various aspects of Louis' career rather than continue to separate his body into various 'phases', each of which resulted echoed the goals of modernist painting as a series of 'breakthroughs' into new eras.

When we consider the possibilities of another 'side' or underside to Louis' practice, many more opportunities are open for discussion. In one way, we can suggest that Greenberg's writing had a negative effect upon the knowledge of variance within Louis' work. In another way, however, we might propose that without Louis' works, the development of 1960s abstraction, and the effects of this period upon the emergence of minimalist painting and contemporary abstraction may have occurred differently. This frees Louis' work from the role of solely illustrating the development of Greenberg's theory of opticality, and positions Louis' work in a principle role for the development of a variety of contemporary art styles.

An important goal of this thesis has been to culminate in a discussion of the alternative views that we can explore regarding Louis' career. This has highlighted the various ongoing issues concerning the history of Louis' work, which has ignored some of the most important aspects of the artist's approach. The inspiration that Louis

derived from the 'expressive' components of his work, or his disinterest in an 'ultimate' goal for his work, for example, are important for viewers of Louis' work to acknowledge. This raises two crucial issues, both of which concern the influence of dominant histories over our knowledge and understanding of artists' careers. Firstly, the work that was left out of the major discussions of Louis' work remained unknown and is still difficult to integrate into wider discussions on Louis' work. Louis' drawings, for example were underexposed for some 15 years following the artist's death, and consequently have affected how we regard Louis' interests. Secondly, and linking with the first issue, certain elements of Louis' style that have been overlooked due to the major approaches to his work continue to pose problems for our interpretation of Louis' work. For example, underlying Louis' major series such as his 'Veil' paintings is a deep connection with various 'expressive' techniques and approaches, such as the figurative gestures that could be created in his works behind the veiling technique in some of his most well known paintings. Works that contain these expressive connotations, which have been integrated into major histories on Louis through other means, have been presented to audiences in limited ways. It has been attempted throughout this thesis to provide ideas about Louis' work that take up the many different sides of his production rather than a single view, which is often the interpretation provided only by Greenberg's writing and that of his successors, or those who oppose Greenberg's view. Both of these approaches ignore the nuances that are contained within Louis' works.

We have explored the ways in which Louis' early ideas came to be included in his later 'successful' series. Repetition, or working in series was, for example, a very productive technique emerging from Louis' early drawings in the 1940s. When he was inspired by a particular motif or idea, Louis reproduced these in his drawings over and over, with only minute changes between each work. As Louis came under the influence of European modernist painting by Picasso, Matisse and Miró, drawing became an important way for Louis to work through some of his emerging ideas about abstraction. It is probable that Louis' interest in repetition emerged while he was a student at the Maryland Institute of Art from 1927–31. Louis' fellow student and friend Charles Schucker noted that Louis 'couldn't realise, he couldn't make anything... For example, when he was trying to make one figure sit in a space, he'd do twenty or thirty versions with hardly any difference between them.'² These aspects

of Louis' early career continued into his later work, such as his difficulty in reaching a single, 'finished' work, which became an important part of his sensibility in his major series, indicating the importance of refinement rather than abrupt change in his work.³ However, with the little discussion of Louis' early career or aspects other than his stain painting, the proposition that Louis' major series of 'Veils', 'Unfurleds' and 'Stripes' were inspired by the same ideas as Louis' drawings, and the works he came to destroy, requires investigating Louis' work beyond a chronological approach towards his distinct or 'contained' series. This invites the question of what inspired Louis' approach, and why certain parts of his career were taken up by major authors over others.

In recent decades, major followers of Greenberg's theories, such as Michael Fried, have come to question the dominant role that opticality played in the interpretation of artists' works in the 1960s. Looking back on the period in which Fried developed his writing on modernist painting, through texts such as *Morris Louis* (1967), he stated in 1998 that 'I wish I hadn't celebrated 'formal' criticism the way I did.'⁴ Fried began to consider the impact of Greenberg's conception of the historical unfolding of abstract painting and the effects of this upon the artists' work. In this recent re-investigation of opticality, Fried proposed that opticality had a 'double' function in Greenberg's writing.⁵ Firstly, opticality functioned as a 'global' statement about the way in which abstract painting ought to evolve in order to attain the utmost purity. This global aspect resulted in many of Greenberg's most important essays on modernist painting, including 'Louis and Noland' and 'Modernist Painting', where the expression of 'opticality' was related to a long history that aimed for 'pure abstraction'. Opticality also functioned in a 'particular' or 'non-global' mode, with the individual works of artists such as Louis and Noland used to illustrate how opticality was expressed through the work of individual artists. In this way, Greenberg refined opticality to a specific function. Louis' works, for example, illustrated opticality through the technique of stain painting.

With what we have gained from the various accounts of Louis' work, it is possible to state that Louis' works were influenced by the subjective reactions of various critics, and therefore used in a number of different ways to illustrate some important movements in modern art of the twentieth century. This is crucial to understanding

the history that we have become accustomed to with regard to Louis' work. The results of the subjective responses that influenced the many essays, articles, exhibitions and books on Louis only since his death, have tended to focus on aspects of Louis' work without aiming to integrate each of his different styles or phases or discuss why major changes may have been made to his work. It was central to Louis' style that he investigated each different 'episode' in his career with a vigour and energy that consumed his entire practice. This could lead Louis into a series of many hundreds of works, or even just a few canvases. It could also mean that when he embarked upon a new 'idea', he would need to go back and revise his catalogue of works. This sometimes resulted in the destruction of hundreds of works, as in the case of Louis' 1955–57 series which it has been estimated that Louis destroyed around 300 paintings.

This raises an important question regarding Louis' production of over 600 works during a short span in his career from about 1953 until his death in 1962, which concerns the issue of 'quality'. Was it 'quality' or 'purity' that Louis strove for, which made him dissatisfied with certain series and led him into numerous directions, or was it something more experimental or energetic in which case he would not be concerned to leave a series in order to pursue another 'thread' or idea? Unfortunately, throughout the critical interpretation of Louis' works since the artist's death in 1962, more has been revealed about various critics' subjective feelings about positioning Louis' works within specific changes occurring in art history, rather than an analysis of the entire production of works, from Louis' drawings, to large series, and those in-between. This situation, which has resulted in the ambiguous position that Louis' works still occupy even today, is indicative of larger misunderstandings about Louis' possible interests and what spurred the artist to create his works.

Our understanding of Louis' works might benefit from the consideration that, due to the dominant history on the artist, there is always a sense of something missing from our understanding of Louis' work, which we will need to strive to attain by investigating his entire career in more depth. Diane Upright illustrates this in her proposition that as Louis' works first came to be known through the 1959 exhibition at French & Company in New York, this exhibition 'not only provided the first public exposure of the Veil series but also heralded its conclusion.'⁶ This slippage between

what we consider to know about the positioning of Louis' works in art history will be confronted by other aspects that are not widely acknowledged in the written literature on the artist until we begin to widen the focus and interpret other lesser known aspects of the work of artists of the period. The aim of this thesis topic has been to explore the context in which Louis' works emerged and how his works were interpreted following his death, and to provide some methods for exploring a wider understanding of Louis' importance with regard to his connection with major theories of art history during the twentieth century, such as 'opticality'.

CHAPTER 1

SITUATING MORRIS LOUIS 1912–1962

¹ See David W. Galenson and Bruce A. Weinberg, ‘Age and the Quality of Work: The Case of Modern American Painters’, *Journal of Political Economy*, vol.108, issue 4 [Aug 2000] 761. Comparing statistical information gathered on sales and publications of the work of artists born during the periods 1900–1920 and 1921–1940, the authors suggest that there were various factors during the late 1950s that contributed to the second generation of artists producing and selling their best work at a younger average age. Henry Geldzahler, the first curator of contemporary art appointed by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1966, stated that ‘the younger generation has had the example of the successful Abstract Expressionists before them and are much less vulnerable than were the artists in the fifties, the first to sit on this particular griddle.’ Henry Geldzahler, *New York Painting and Sculpture 1940–1970*, exh. cat [New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1969] 28.

² Daniel Robbins, ‘Morris Louis at the Juncture of Two Traditions’, *Quadrum*, vol.18 [1965] 41–54.

³ See Lawrence Alloway, ‘Notes on Morris Louis’, in *Morris Louis 1912–1962: Memorial Exhibition, Paintings from 1954–1960*, exh. cat [New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1963] unpaginated.

⁴ See Diane Upright Headley, *The Drawings of Morris Louis*, exh. cat [Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1979].

⁵ The titles ascribed to Louis’ most famous series were not provided by the artist. The ‘Veil’ paintings came about through a description by William Rubin. The ‘Unfurled’ paintings were posthumously named through an indirect reference in one of Louis’ letters to Greenberg, where the artist referred to his ‘large unfurling’ paintings. The ‘Stripes’ series was initially referred to as ‘columns’, ‘pillars’, or ‘pillars of fire’. See Diane Upright, *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings: A Catalogue Raisonné* [New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985] 44-47.

⁶ See Diane Upright Headley, ‘In Addition to the Veils’, *Art in America*, vol. 66, no.1 [Jan.–Feb. 1978] 84. Upright is the current advisor for the Morris Louis estate, and the most authoritative scholar on Louis’ work. The estate was previously advised by

Clement Greenberg from 1962–1970. Greenberg’s role was crucial in establishing our knowledge of Louis’ immense body of work. During his advisory role, Greenberg assisted in dating Louis’ paintings. Subsequent advisors to the Morris Louis Estate have included André Emmerich (1970–1998) and Diane Upright (1998 to present). Upright and Greenberg had a public debate on Louis’ work in 1978 in response to Upright’s discussion of Louis’ lesser-known works in ‘In Addition to the Veils’, *Art in America*, vol. 66, no.1 [Jan–Feb 1978] 84–94.

⁷ See Clement Greenberg, ‘Louis and Noland’, *Art International*, vol.4 [May 1960] 26–29, reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Reviews: Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O’Brien [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993] 97.

⁸ William Rubin, ‘Letter to the Editor’, *Artforum*, vol. 9, no. 7 [March 1970] 78.

⁹ Diane Upright, ‘The Technique of Morris Louis’, in *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings*, n. 8, 58.

¹⁰ Diane Upright suggests that the second ‘Veil’ series may have commenced in the winter of 1957–58. Upright, ‘In Addition to the Veils’, 88.

¹¹ The largest of the ‘Unfurled’ paintings is *Beta Iota*, 1960, Magna on canvas, 261.9 x 719.5cm, Estate of the artist, Diane Upright, *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings*, cat. no. 338, p.219, ill.164. This work is closely followed in size by *Beta Nu*, 1960, Magna on canvas, 259.1 x 701cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, cat. no. 360, p.221, ill.166.

¹² The works *Delta*, 1960, Magna on canvas, 268.3 x 353.4cm, The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Diane Upright, *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings*, cat. no. 325, p.218, ill.162 and *Alpha*, 1960, Magna on canvas, 268.3 x 368.3cm, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, Diane Upright, *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings*, cat. no. 335, p.219, ill.163 were exhibited at *Morris Louis* [Vermont: Bennington College, 19 Oct–15 Nov 1960], however Louis did not visit to see this exhibition. See Diane Upright, *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings*, 22.

¹³ For a comprehensive biographical information on Morris Louis, see Diane Upright, ‘Biographical outline’, in *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings* [1985] 59–62 and *The Drawings of Morris Louis* [1979] 12–31, or Angelica Rudenstine, ‘Chronology’, in Michael Fried, *Morris Louis 1912–1962*, exh. cat [Boston: Museum of Fine Arts,

1967] 25–28. The information on Louis' career included in this thesis is drawn primarily from these sources.

¹⁴ See Diane Upright Headley, *The Drawings of Morris Louis*, 13. The Cone Collection of about 3000 objects was bequeathed to the Baltimore Museum of Art in 1950, following the death of Etta Cone.

¹⁵ Upright suggests that Louis and fellow student Charles Schucker became aware of Paul Cézanne through the work of Eugene Speicher (1883–1962), a portrait artist born in Buffalo New York. See Upright, *The Drawings of Morris Louis*, 14.

¹⁶ David Siqueiros et.al., 'A Declaration of Social, Political and Aesthetic Principles' (1922), reprinted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art In Theory: 1900–1990* [Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992] 388.

¹⁷ Rosalind Krauss stated in her introduction to 'Morris Louis' that the 'Veil' format 'is horizontal; and the canting of the waves of colour slightly away from the vertical at the edges of the veil images acknowledges this format and its intrinsic horizontality. Thus from the start, Louis imbedded the release of color within a surface that was mural-like that was oriented to the wall in terms of its continuity and its resistance to being bounded or enframed.' Rosalind Krauss, *Morris Louis*, exh. cat [New Zealand: Auckland City Art Gallery, 1971] unpaginated.

¹⁸ This emergence was assisted by the fact that many European artists, affected by the war, came to live in New York during the period, including Delaunay, Breton, Picabia, Ernst, Miró, Léger and Mondrian.

¹⁹ Clement Greenberg, 'New York Painting Only Yesterday' (1957), reprinted in *The Collected Essays and Reviews: Volume 4*, 19.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

²¹ The name 'Bernstein' appears on a mural that Louis contributed to in 1934 as part of the Public Works of Art (PWAP) project in Baltimore. By 1937, Louis had changed his name, reflected in another work, *Young Man in the City* (1937), signed 'M. Louis'. See Diane Upright, 'Professional Development, 1927–1946' (12–22) and 'Paintings and Drawings, 1930–1945' (22–28) in *The Drawings of Morris Louis*.

²² Chet LaMore, an acquaintance of Louis' with whom he stayed in New York during his first month in the city stated that each day Louis would purchase a new sheet of good quality paper each day and produced a line drawing. See Diane Upright, *The Drawings of Morris Louis*, 19.

²³ Morris Louis, letter to Joseph Bernstein, 31 October 1941, reprinted in Diane Upright, *Ibid.*, 21–22.

²⁴ Diane Upright, 'Biographical outline', in *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 60.

²⁵ From a 1956 advertisement for Bocour's Magna pigments, reproduced in Jo Crook and Tom Learner, *The Impact of Modern Paints* [London: Tate, 2000] 26.

²⁶ Marcella Louis Brenner, in conversation with the author, Chevy Chase, Washington D.C., 9 November 2002.

²⁷ It is not documented the exact year that Louis returned to Baltimore, but his friends and widow suggest it was during 1944 or 1945. See Diane Upright, *The Drawings of Morris Louis*, 22.

²⁸ In conversation with Marcella Louis Brenner, Chevy Chase, Washington D.C., 9 Nov 2002. See also Diane Upright, *The Drawings of Morris Louis*, 28.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁰ Helen Jacobson, 'As I remember Morris Louis', in *Ten Washington Artists: 1950–1970*, exh. cat [Canada: The Edmonton Art Gallery, 1970] 8.

³¹ Diane Upright, *The Drawings of Morris Louis*, 52.

³² Michael Fried, *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella*, exh. cat [Cambridge: Fogg Art Museum, 21 Apr–30 May 1965; New York: Garland Publishing Co., 1978] 19.

³³ This perception was continued into some of the major texts on Louis' work after his death, including Michael Fried's catalogue essay for the 1967 retrospective at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and his subsequent publication of *Morris Louis* in 1970. Fried says that 'until 1954, Louis' work is of limited significance. One is tempted to characterize it, what has survived of it, as both minor and provincial'. Michael Fried, *Morris Louis 1912–1962* [1967] 9.

³⁴ The 'Charred Journal' series was exhibited in Louis' first solo exhibition in Washington D.C. in 1953, and then not until 1997 in the exhibition *Morris Louis: The Charred Journal Series, 1951* [New York: The Jewish Museum, 19 Jan–13 Apr 1997].

³⁵ Diane Upright considers that Louis may have encountered Pollock's black paintings through the article on Pollock in *Art News* in 1951, or he may have seen one image during a visit to New York, however, these claims are difficult to confirm.

Diane Upright, *The Drawings of Morris Louis*, 52. Louis' widow, Marcella Louis Brenner, claims that Louis did show any interest in the work of Pollock even when he became aware of Pollock's major success. In conversation with the author, Chevy Chase, Washington D.C., 9 Nov 2002.

³⁶ Crook and Learner, *The Impact of Modern Paints*, 29.

³⁷ It has been often quoted that 'Louis and Noland spent two to three weeks working together, sometimes on the same canvas, in an attempt to break down their previous assumptions about painting.' Rudenstine, 'Chronology', 26. Louis' widow, Marcella Louis Brenner, says this aspect has been overstated in the literature on Louis. She says that Louis and Noland worked together to create a painting intended for a charity auction. In conversation with the author, Chevy Chase, Washington D.C., 9 Nov 2002.

³⁸ Diane Upright Headley, 'In Addition to the Veils', 85.

³⁹ Upright Headley, *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Diane Upright, 'The Emergence of Morris Louis' in *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings*, 12.

⁴¹ *Emerging Talent* [New York: Kootz Gallery, 11–30 Jan, 1954].

⁴² Diane Upright, 'The Emergence of Morris Louis', 15.

⁴³ Greenberg assisted Louis with duties such as naming his paintings, a task that Louis was not as interested in as composing the images themselves. See Diane Upright, 'Documentation: The Veil Paintings', in *Morris Louis: The Veil Cycle*, exh. cat [Minneapolis: Walker Art Centre, 1977] 17. In this essay, Upright explains Greenberg's role in naming many of Louis' 'Veil' paintings of 1954 and 1958–59. She also explains the system the Morris Louis estate developed to name the remaining works by Louis that were untitled at the time of his death, which was the majority of his works. The estate used letters from the Greek alphabet for titling Louis' 'Unfurled' paintings, and letters from the Hebrew alphabet to title the 'Veil' paintings. This followed the approach of some works that were named during Louis' lifetime. Upright says that once each letter had been used once, titles with two letters were assigned to the paintings. In other documentation, Greenberg provided lists of titles for Louis to consider for his 'Stripe' series of 1961–62, and also rationales for the titling, including whether the titles for the series were to be comprised of one or

two words. See Diane Upright, 'The Practice of Morris Louis' in *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings*, 38.

⁴⁴ Greenberg said of both artists that they 'are curious about what goes on in New York, they show there, and have learned a lot there. But what they have learned mostly is what they do not want to do, and how to recognize what they do not want to do.' See Clement Greenberg, 'Louis and Noland' (1960), reprinted in *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Volume 4*, 96. Greenberg was referring to the wave of second-generation Abstract Expressionism then under dominance by the late work of Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, which he felt to be a poor imitation of the original ideas and sensibility that informed their major work of the 1940s to early 1950s.

⁴⁵ According to Marcella Louis Brenner, Louis' personality was very introspective. She suggested that Louis stated when he was often silent, that he was 'thinking'. In conversation with the author, Chevy Chase, Washington D.C., 9 Nov 2002.

⁴⁶ See John Elderfield, *Morris Louis*, exh. cat [New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1986] 21.

⁴⁷ See Morris Louis, letter to Clement Greenberg, 6 Jun 1954, reprinted in Diane Upright, *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings*, 15.

⁴⁸ See Diane Upright, *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴⁹ The 1959 exhibition comprised 23 paintings from Louis' 1954 and 1958 'Veil' paintings series. The exhibition in 1960 was made up of 21 paintings mostly from the 1959 component of his 'Veil' series and other similar works completed in 1959–60.

⁵⁰ Greenberg also curated exhibitions of Barnett Newman and Morris Louis' works at Bennington College in Vermont in 1958 and 1960 respectively.

⁵¹ On this topic see Bradford R. Collins, 'Clement Greenberg and the Search for Abstract Expressionism's Successor: A Study in the Manipulation of Avant-Garde Consciousness', *Arts Magazine*, vol.61 [May 1987] 38.

⁵² See William Rubin, 'Younger American Painters', *Art International*, vol.4 [Jan 1960] 24–31.

⁵³ 'Is There a New Academy?', *ARTNews* [Summer 1959 and Sept 1959].

⁵⁴ William Rubin, 'Younger American Painters', 25.

⁵⁵ See Clement Greenberg, 'Louis and Noland', 94–100, and Michael Fried, *Morris Louis 1912–1962* (1967), 81–83 (excerpt). Greenberg's reference to the benefits of

Louis and Noland's position in Washington D.C. is described in *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Volume 4*, 95–96.

⁵⁶ Clement Greenberg, 'Louis and Noland', 96.

⁵⁷ Michael Fried, *Three American Painters*, 11.

⁵⁸ *Morris Louis*, New York: André Emmerich Gallery, 3–21 Oct 1961.

⁵⁹ James Truitt, 'Art–Arid D.C. Harbors Touted 'New' Painters', *The Washington Post*, [21 Dec 1961] A20.

⁶⁰ Greenberg noted in correspondence to Louis in 1961 that he felt the 'Stripes' were as visually powerful as his larger works, and although works from the series were evidently selling more easily, he did not want Louis deliberately reducing the scale of his works for this reason. Clement Greenberg, 3 May 1961, Morris Louis archives, Collection of Marcella Louis Brenner, Chevy Chase, Maryland. Reproduced in Diane Upright, *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings*, 27. Upright suggests that the 'Stripe' works continued at least until 1970 to be the most well-known, often exhibited and most collected of Louis' various series (33).

⁶¹ *American Abstract Expressionists and Imagists*, New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 13 Oct 1961–1 Jan 1962.

⁶² Daniel Robbins, 'Morris Louis: Triumph of colour', *ARTNews*, vol.62, no.2 [October 1963] 58. The belief in Louis' interest in breaking down composition, or rather, the artist's supposed disinterest in the formal components of composition in his work, is reflected in more recent texts such as Howard Singerman's 'Noncompositional Effects, or the Process of Painting in 1970', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol.26, no.1, 2003, 127-150.

⁶³ Clement Greenberg, 'Letter to the Editor of *Art International* about Morris Louis' (1965), reprinted in *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Volume 4*, 209–212.

⁶⁴ See, for example, *Horizontal I* 1962, Magna on canvas, 81.3 x 292.1cm, Collection: Marshall S. and Maureen Cogan, New York, Diane Upright, *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings*, cat. no. 652, p.242, ill. 191.

⁶⁵ Some scholars have suggested these could also have been intended to be hung as 'lozenge' or diamond-shaped works, as in the practice of artists of the past such as Piet Mondrian. See E. A. Carmean Jr., 'A Possible Reversion in Morris Louis' work', *Arts Magazine*, vol.50 [April 1976] 69–75. In the same issue, Diane Upright

discussed Louis' other issues relating to the diagonal stripes. Diane Upright, 'Morris Louis: Disposing the Diagonal', 69–75.

⁶⁶ Morris Louis, letter to Clement Greenberg, 18 June 1962, reproduced in Diane Upright, 'Morris Louis: Disposing the Diagonal', 69.

⁶⁷ Lawrence Alloway, 'Notes on Morris Louis', unpaginated. The exhibition ran from September to October 1963.

⁶⁸ Robert Rosenblum extended some of Alloway's suggestions in his review article 'Morris Louis at the Guggenheim', proposing links between Louis' work and other artists of the 'first generation' of abstract painting in America. See Robert Rosenblum, 'Morris Louis at the Guggenheim', *Art International*, vol. 7, no. 9 [1963] 24–27.

⁶⁹ Greenberg curated *Post-Painterly Abstraction* [Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 23 Apr–7 June 1964] which connected Louis with the emerging 'Colourfield' painting movement. This exhibition with its accompanying essay was Greenberg's attempt to describe a period style that appeared to replace the painterly abstraction of the preceding generation known popularly as Abstract Expressionism. Louis' work was taken into a 'minimalist' discussion from exhibitions such as *The Responsive Eye* (1965), which focused on the emerging 'optical' styles of painting in the mid-1960s [New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1965].

⁷⁰ Lawrence Alloway, 'Notes on Morris Louis', unpaginated.

⁷¹ John Elderfield, *Morris Louis*, 12.

⁷² David Anfam, 'Morris Louis – Grenoble', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol.139, no.1128 [Mar 1997] 215. *Morris Louis* [Germany: Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte Münster, 19 May–28 Jul 1996; France: Musée Grenoble, 28 Sept–16 Dec 1996].

CHAPTER 2

OPTICALITY AND ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM: 1939–1959

¹ ‘How Pollock Paints’, *Life* [8 Aug., 1949] 45.

² See Bradford Collins, ‘*Life* Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists, 1948–51: A Historiographic Study of a Late Bohemian Enterprise’, *The Art Bulletin*, vol.73, no.2 [June 1991] 280–308.

³ See, for example, the letter composed by Adolf Gottlieb (1950) to the Metropolitan Museum of Art president Roland L. Redmond, in opposition to their conservative philosophy on ‘contemporary art’ relating to an exhibition prize held in 1950. Reprinted in Bradford Collins, ‘*Life* Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists, 1948–51’, 295.

⁴ Clement Greenberg, ‘Avant–Garde and Kitsch’, *Partisan Review*, vol.6, no.5 [Fall 1939] 36.

⁵ Russell W. Davenport and Winthrop Sargeant, ‘A *Life* Round Table on Modern Art’, *Life* [11 Oct., 1948] 69.

⁶ See Elizabeth Broun, ‘Thomas Hart Benton: A Politician in Art’, *Smithsonian Studies in American Art*, vol.1, no.1 [Spring 1987] 58–77.

⁷ Ibram Lassaw, ‘On Inventing our own Art’ (1938), reprinted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art In Theory: 1900–1990* [Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992] 380.

⁸ Hans Hofmann, ‘Hans Hofmann on Art’, *Art Journal*, vol.22, no.3 [Spring 1963] 180.

⁹ Clement Greenberg, ‘New York Painting Only Yesterday’ (1957), reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Reviews: Volume 4: Modernism with*

a Vengeance, 1957–1969, ed. John O’Brien [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993] 25.

¹⁰ Clement Greenberg, ‘Avant–Garde and Kitsch’, 36.

¹¹ Clement Greenberg, ‘Towards a Newer Laocöon’, *Partisan Review* [vol.7, no.4, July–Aug 1940] 308.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Davenport and Sargeant, ‘A *Life* Round Table on Modern Art’, 56.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁵ Clement Greenberg, ‘The Crisis of the Easel Picture’ (1948), *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* [Boston: Beacon Press, 3rd edition, 1968] 157.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Clement Greenberg, ‘Modernist Painting’ (1960), reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism: Volume 4*, 88.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Clement Greenberg, ‘The Pasted–paper Revolution’ (1958), reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Reviews: Volume 4*, 64.

²¹ Clement Greenberg, ‘Sculpture in our Time’ (1958), reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Reviews: Volume 4*, 60.

²² Clement Greenberg, *Matisse* [New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1953], unpaginated.

²³ Clement Greenberg, ‘“American–type” Painting’, *Partisan Review* [Spring 1955] 188.

²⁴ *Life Magazine* [8 Aug 1949], *Vogue* [March 1951], *ARTNews* [May 1951].

²⁵ Clement Greenberg, ‘The Case for Abstract Art’ (1959), reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Reviews: Volume 4*, 80.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

CHAPTER 3

POSITIONING OPTICALITY INTO THE 1960S: CLEMENT GREENBERG'S "AMERICAN-TYPE" PAINTING' (1955–1958)

¹ 'Irascible Group of Advanced Artists Led Fight against Show', *Life* [15 Jan. 1951] 34. See Bradford Collins, 'Life Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists, 1948–51: A Historiographic Study of a Late Bohemian Enterprise', *The Art Bulletin*, vol.73, no.2 [June 1991] specifically pages 294–300.

² *The New American Painting As Shown in Eight European Countries 1958–1959* [New York: The Museum of Modern Art, May–Sept 1959].

³ *Fifteen Americans* [New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 9 Apr–27 July 1952]. The exhibition, curated by Dorothy C. Miller, included the artists William Baziotas, Edward Corbett, Edwin Dickinson, Herbert Ferber, Joseph Glasco, Herbert Katzman, Frederick Kiesler, Irving Kriesberg, Richard Lippold, Jackson Pollock Herman Rose, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, Bradley Walker Tomlin and Thomas Wilfred.

⁴ The artists included in *The New American Painting* were William Baziotas, James Brooks, Sam Francis, Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Philip Guston, Grace Hartigan, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Theodoros Stamos, Clyfford Still, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Jack Tworkov. The exhibition travelled from April 1958 to May 1959 before showing at The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

⁵ Will Grohmann, *Der Tagesspiegel*, [7 September, 1958] reprinted in *The New American Painting*, 10.

⁶ Marco Valsecchi, *Il Giorno*, [10 June, 1958] *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷ Adolf Gottlieb, 'Artist and Society: A Brief Case History', College Art Association annual meeting (1954) quoted in Collins, 'Life Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists, 1948–51', 295.

⁸ Clement Greenberg, 'The Situation at the Moment', *Partisan Review*, vol.15, no.1 [Jan 1948] 82.

⁹ Other discussions on the decline in quality of Abstract Expressionism during the 1950s included William Rubin's 'The New York School – Then and Now' (1958) and the 1959 roundtable discussion held at MoMA, 'Is there a New Academy?', which discussed the growing number of 'imitators' of the Abstract Expressionist style. Helen Frankenthaler declared at the roundtable that 'it is no longer a question if the question must be asked.' 'Is There a New Academy?', *ARTNews*, no. 58, no.6 [Sept 1959] 36–39; 58–60. Even critics such as Harold Rosenberg, whose support of the Abstract Expressionists' was through ideas of the artists' engagement universal themes such as the struggles of living in the modern world, came by the early 1960s to question whether the movement could still be considered relevant. Harold Rosenberg, 'A Risk for the Intelligence', *New Yorker* [22 Oct 1962] 152.

¹⁰ Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting' (1960), reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Reviews: Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O'Brien [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993] 87.

¹¹ The term 'Abstract Expressionism' was first used by the New Yorker critic Robert Coates in 1946. Other major critics in the field of American abstraction during the 1950s included Harold Rosenberg and Thomas B. Hess. Rosenberg's approach differed from Greenberg's in his focus on gesture and action of the American painters, therefore using the term 'Action Painting' in his major essay 'The American Action Painters' (1952). In opposition to Greenberg's views, Hess supported the work of de Kooning throughout the 1950s and while he rejected Barnett Newman's paintings in the early 1950s he turned to support the artist's work in the late 1960s.

¹² Clement Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting", *Partisan Review* [Spring 1955] 181.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 186–7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹⁶ Some critics have suggested that Pollock's major works of the late 1940s actually often began with figurative or recognisable subjects, which were then obscured by his signature webs and skeins of pigment until the dense covering of the surface made the image unrecognisable. See Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel, eds., *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches*, exh. cat [New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999]. Reproduced in this catalogue were comments on Pollock's works by Lee Krasner Pollock that 'many of the most abstract, began with more or less recognizable imagery – heads, parts of the body, fantastic creatures. Once I asked Jackson why he didn't stop the painting when a given image was exposed. He said, 'I choose to veil the imagery.' Lee Krasner interviewed by B. H. Friedman, 'An interview with Lee Krasner Pollock', reprinted in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, ed. Pepe Karmel [New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999] 34.

¹⁷ It is important to note that the 'black paintings' series did not appear without precedent in Pollock's career. The 'black paintings' were preceded by a short period of experimentation in 1950, in which Pollock reduced the colour scale of the previous 'all-over' paintings and produced the predominantly black abstract painting *One: Number 32, 1950* (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam). Subsequent abstract paintings (*Black and White Triptych*, 1950) and drawings in black pigment on paper (*Drawing*, 1950) were produced just prior to the first works of the 'black paintings' series.

¹⁸ Ben Heller argued that separating the black enamel paintings from Pollock's 1940s abstract paintings on the basis of quality overlooked the inherent similarities between the two phases. See Ben Heller, *Black Enamel Paintings* exh. cat [New York: Gagosian Gallery, Apr–May 1990].

¹⁹ Lawrence Alloway, 'Introduction', *Jackson Pollock: Paintings, Drawings and Watercolours from the Collection of Lee Krasner Pollock*, exh. cat [London: Marlborough Fine Art, 1961] unpaginated.

²⁰ Clement Greenberg, 'Feeling is All', *Partisan Review*, vol.19 [Jan–Feb, 1952] 102.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Clement Greenberg, *Matisse* [New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1953] unpaginated.

²³ Thomas B. Hess, 'de Kooning Paints a Picture', *ARTNews* [March 1953] 30–33, 64–67.

²⁴ Clement Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting' (1958), 220.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, n.1, 209.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 221.

²⁷ Dore Ashton, *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning* [New York: Viking Press, 1972] 213.

²⁸ Clement Greenberg, 'After Abstract Expressionism' (1962), reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Reviews: Volume 4*, 124.

²⁹ Clement Greenberg, 'Preface', *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* [Boston: Beacon Press, 3rd edition, 1968]

³⁰ Clement Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting' (1958) 210.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

³² *Ibid.*, 210.

³³ Other terms for work produced after Pollock included 'post-cubist' painting and 'post-painterly abstraction'. See John Elderfield, 'High Modern: An Introduction to Post-Pollock Painting in America', *Studio International*, vol.188, no.968 [July–Aug 1974] 4–7. See also Jerrold Lanes, 'Reflections on Post-Cubist Painting', *Arts* [May 1959] 24–26. Greenberg's exhibition and essay 'Post-Painterly Abstraction' (1964) was a major influence upon the use of that terminology.

³⁴ Elderfield, 'High modern: An introduction to post-Pollock painting in America', 5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting' (1960) 86.

³⁷ Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting' (1955) 193. 'The three or four massive, horizontal strata of flat color that compose his typical picture allow the spectator to think of landscape – which may be why his decorative simplicity seems to meet less resistance.' In the 1958 version of the same essay, Greenberg referred to Rothko's 'dream landscapes'. Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting' (1958) 222.

³⁸ Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting' (1955) 193.

³⁹ Thomas B. Hess, 'Barnett Newman', *ARTNews*, vol.49, no.1 [March 1950] 48.

⁴⁰ Thomas B. Hess, 'Reviews and Previews: Barnett Newman', *ARTNews*, vol. 50 [Summer 1951] 49.

⁴¹ In 1951 Pollock, Rothko and Newman approached their dealer Betty Parsons with a proposal to focus solely on representing their work rather than other artists. When refused, Pollock and Rothko moved to Sidney Janis Gallery and Newman, after the negative reception of his 1951 exhibition at Parsons' gallery, decided not to show his

work in New York again. See Collins, 'Life Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists', 301–02.

⁴² Greenberg, 'Feeling is All' (1952) 101.

⁴³ Greenberg, "'American-Type" Painting' (1958) 227.

⁴⁴ Greenberg, "'American-Type" Painting', (1955) 193.

⁴⁵ *Barnett Newman: First Retrospective Exhibition* [Vermont: Bennington College, 4–24 May 1958]; *Barnett Newman: A Selection 1946–1951* [New York: French and Company, 11 Mar–5 Apr 1959].

⁴⁶ *The New American Painting* [New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 28 May–8 Sept 1959]. See Ann Temkin, 'Barnett Newman on Exhibition' in *Barnett Newman*, exh. cat [Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art; London: Tate Modern, 2002–03] 57.

⁴⁷ Despite his radical independence, Newman's work attracted many artists of the new generation. Artists such as Frank Stella, Donald Judd and Richard Serra followed Newman's reputation through his many written responses in art magazines during the 1950s. See Richard Shiff, 'Whiteout: The Not-Influence Newman Effect', in *Barnett Newman*, exh. cat [2002–03] 90–99.

CHAPTER 4

SITUATING THE TEXT 'LOUIS AND NOLAND' (1960)

¹ *Morris Louis* [Washington D.C.: Workshop Art Center Gallery, Washington Workshop Center of the Arts, 12–30 Apr 1953].

² See Diane Upright, 'The Practice of Morris Louis', in *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings: A Catalogue Raisonné* [New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985] 35 onwards.

³ Greenberg's visits with Louis occurred in January 1954, April 1955, November 1957 in New York, and four other visits to Louis' studio in Washington D.C. In an interview with Diane Upright, Greenberg stated that he visited Louis approximately at six-monthly intervals after their meeting. See Upright, 'The Practice of Morris Louis', 36.

⁴ Amongst the works included in the shipment to Matisse were six *Untitled* works and *Atomic Crest*.

⁵ Clement Greenberg, 'Louis and Noland', *Art International*, vol.4 [May 1960], reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Reviews: Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O'Brien [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993] 97.

⁶ Clement Greenberg, "'American-Type" Painting', *Partisan Review* [Spring 1955]192–93.

⁷ In the 1958 version of "'American-Type" Painting', Greenberg stated that 'Still is the only "abstract expressionist" to have founded a school, by which I mean that at

least two of the many painters he has stimulated and influenced have not lost their independence thereby. Barnett Newman is one of these.’ 224–225.

⁸ Greenberg, ‘“American–Type” Painting’ (1955) 193.

⁹ Barnett Newman, letter to Clement Greenberg, 1955, quoted in Ann Temkin, ‘Barnett Newman on Exhibition’ in *Barnett Newman*, exh. cat [Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art; London: Tate Modern, 2002–03] 54.

¹⁰ Clement Greenberg, ‘“American–Type” Painting’ (1958) *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* [Boston: Beacon Press, 3rd edition, 1968] 225.

¹¹ This series of works by Louis from 1955–57, and the issues raised by the works, is explored further in the next chapter, ‘Overturning traditional focuses in writing on Morris Louis’.

¹² *Willem de Kooning* [Washington D.C.: Workshop Art Center Gallery, Washington Workshop Center of the Arts, 13 Jun–3 July 1953].

¹³ The 1954 ‘Veil’ paintings were approximately 180cm x 240cm; the 1958–59 series was 240cm x 370cm.

¹⁴ *Morris Louis* [New York: French and Company, Apr–May 1959]. This exhibition comprised nine works from 1954 and 14 works from 1958.

¹⁵ Clement Greenberg, ‘Introduction’, *Barnett Newman: First Retrospective Exhibition* [Vermont: Bennington College, 1958] reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Reviews: Volume 4*, 54.

¹⁶ Greenberg, ‘Louis and Noland’, 96.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 95–96.

¹⁸ *Post–Painterly Abstraction* [Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 23 Apr–7 Jun 1964]. The exhibition travelled to Minneapolis and Toronto. Some of the artists included in the exhibition, who were not based in New York, included Walter Darby Bannard (Princeton, New Jersey), Jack Bush (Toronto, Canada), Gene Davis (Washington, D.C.), Sam Francis (Santa Monica, California). Louis was the only deceased artist whose work featured in the exhibition.

¹⁹ Greenberg, ‘Louis and Noland’, 96.

²⁰ On this topic see Marcia Brennan, ‘How Formalism Lost its Body but Kept its Gender: Frankenthaler, Louis, and Noland in the Sixties’, *Modernism’s Masculine Subjects: Matisse, the New York School, and Post–Painterly Abstraction* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004] 116–151.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Michael Fried, 'Some Notes on Morris Louis', *Arts Magazine*, vol.38, no.2 [Nov 1963] 25.

²⁴ Morris Louis quoted in James M. Truitt, 'Art – Arid D.C. Harbors Touted 'New' Painters', *Washington Post* [21 Dec 1961] A20.

²⁵ The formation of Fried's philosophy on modernist painting is suggested in an early essay, 'Modernist Painting and Formal Criticism' (1964), written following 'Some Notes on Morris Louis', and just prior to *Three American Painters*, which was a major exhibition and accompanying catalogue essay to establish many of Fried's views on modernist painting of the time.

²⁶ Michael Fried, *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella*, exh. cat [Cambridge: Fogg Art Museum, 21 Apr–30 May 1965; New York: Garland Publishing Co., 1978] 11.

²⁷ Michael Fried, 'Optical Allusions', *Artforum*, Issue 8 [April 1999] 99.

²⁸ Greenberg, 'Louis and Noland', 98.

²⁹ Clement Greenberg, 'After Abstract Expressionism' (1962), reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Reviews: Volume 4*, 131.

³⁰ There are published discrepancies regarding the date of publication of 'Modernist Painting'. In John O'Brien's *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Reviews: Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, the essay is dated 1960. See Francis Frascina, 'Institutions, Culture, and America's 'Cold War Years': The Making of Greenberg's 'Modernist Painting'', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol.26, no.1 [2003] 71–96. Frascina notes that the date of 1960 is incorrect, citing that 'Modernist Painting' was originally recorded as a radio lecture for the *Voices of America* series (*VOI*) on 11 May 1960, published as a *VOI* pamphlet in December 1960 and broadcast on 6 February 1961 (72). The series aimed for audiences to 'gain added appreciation and respect for American intellectual achievement by displaying its best products' (79). Greenberg's lecture concerned the topic of 'the abstract movement' as part of the section of the series titled *Forum – The Arts and Sciences in Mid-century America*, which ran from November 1960 to March 1961. Frascina notes that by March 1960 Greenberg had sent his essay to the Forum editor, Lamar Dodd, and requested the title be changed from *Abstract* to *Modernist*. Given the frequent use and

definition of the term by Greenberg, this was granted (81–82). Greenberg also requested in April 1960 to submit a newer version of the essay with some recent revisions. When the essay was published in the *Arts Yearbook* in 1961, Greenberg made more revisions to sections of the essay.

³¹ Clement Greenberg, ‘Modernist Painting’ (1960), reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Reviews: Volume 4*, 90.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Michael Fried, ‘Blue Veil by Morris Louis’, *Fogg Art Museum: Acquisitions 1965* [Cambridge: Harvard University, 1965] 180.

CHAPTER 5

OVERTURNING TRADITIONAL FOCUSES IN WRITING ON MORRIS LOUIS

The ideas explored in this chapter owe particular recognition of the work of Diane Upright, the New York–based author, art dealer, and current advisor to the Morris Louis estate. Upright is the author of several of the most definitive publications on Louis’ work, including *The Drawings of Morris Louis* (1979), which studied the works on paper Louis produced throughout the 1940s and 1950s, *Morris Louis: The Complete Paintings* (1985), a catalogue raisonné on the artist’s work from the 1930s to 1962, and important essays such as ‘In Addition to the Veils’ (1978), which raised awareness of the problems inherent in the accepted approaches to Louis’ work.

¹ Michael Fried’s *Morris Louis* [New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1970], based upon his introduction to the 1967 exhibition *Morris Louis: 1912–1962*, exh. cat [Boston: Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 1967], revised and reprinted in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998], followed many of Greenberg’s ideas such as the narrative surrounding Louis ‘breakthrough’ with his first ‘Veils’ series in 1954. Only in the late 1970s and 1980s, with more large–scale exhibitions and in–depth study into Louis’ works did diverse interpretations of Louis’ concerns occur in the criticism on Morris Louis. John Elderfield’s major catalogue *Morris Louis* [New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1986] was published in

conjunction with the Museum of Modern Art New York retrospective of Louis' work in 1986 and it explored some new connections between Louis' works and major art movements of the late nineteenth to the mid– twentieth century. Greenberg's role as the advisor to the Morris Louis estate dissolved in 1970. In the late 1970s, Diane Upright's research emerged and has continued to remain the most in–depth on Louis' work and the many aspects of his career. Upright was appointed as advisor to the Morris Louis estate in 1998.

² See Diane Upright, 'The Practice of Morris Louis', in *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings: A Catalogue Raisonné* [New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985] 37.

³ Marcella Louis Brenner, in conversation with the author, Chevy Chase, Washington D.C. [9 Nov 2002].

⁴ From around 1960 onwards, Louis was able to purchase materials to have as stock in his studio, and finer grade canvas. This was due to the financial pressure of his work being slightly relieved by the sales of his works. Louis' 'Stripe' paintings (1961–62) were the most accessible paintings, due to their smaller size than many of Louis' previous works.

⁵ Clement Greenberg, 'Louis and Noland', *Art International*, vol.4 [May 1960] 26–29, reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Reviews: Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O'Brien [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993] 95–96.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁷ Helen Jacobson, 'As I remember Morris Louis', in *Ten Washington Artists: 1950–1970*, exh. cat [Canada: The Edmonton Art Gallery, 1970] 8.

⁸ Morris Louis, in correspondence with Clement Greenberg, 1 June 1954, cited in Dean Swanson, *Morris Louis: The Veil Cycle*, exh. cat [Minneapolis: Walker Art Centre, 1977] 32.

⁹ Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting' (1960), reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Reviews: Volume 4*, 85.

¹⁰ Clement Greenberg, 'Complaints of an Art Critic' (1967), reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Reviews: Volume 4*, 269.

¹¹ See Hope Mauzerall, 'What's the Matter with Matter? Problems in the Criticism of Greenberg, Fried, and Krauss', *Art Criticism*, vol.13, no.1 [1998] 87.

¹² Michael Fried, 'Morris Louis' (1967/1970), revised and reprinted in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998] 101.

¹³ Fried, 'Morris Louis', 101. Diane Upright, in 'In Addition to the Veils', *Art in America*, vol. 66, no.1 [Jan–Feb 1978] 86, suggests that Fried is incorrect in placing Louis' mature period from 1954, the date of commencement of Louis' first 'Veils' series. She instead sights 1958, as only in that year did Louis resolve the issues he raised in the first 'Veils' series. In the period of 1955–57, Louis was looking back to his 1950–53 period (where he worked through the styles of Pollock, Miró, and Motherwell), and worked in a radically experimental style. Upright, in suggesting this date, sees Louis' experimental practice as a necessity to his achievement. In addition, she states Fried's criteria for Louis' breakthrough in style, such as the larger scale, brighter hues and stain painting technique, should have arrived at 1953 as his breakthrough date as Louis' painting *Trellis* actually inaugurates these qualities. We could suggest that Fried's writing was inherently troubled by the existence of these works from 1955–57 as they confound his declaration of maturity in Louis' work.

¹⁴ Fried, 'Morris Louis', 104.

¹⁵ Michael Fried, 'Introduction', in *Morris Louis 1912–1962*, exh. cat [Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1967] 11.

¹⁶ John Elderfield, *Morris Louis*, exh. cat [New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1986] 21.

¹⁷ Clement Greenberg, 'Letter to the Editor', *Art in America*, vol. 66, no.2 [Mar.–Apr. 1978] 5.

¹⁸ Fried, 'Morris Louis', 102.

¹⁹ Fried, 'Introduction', in *Morris Louis 1912–1962*, 7.

²⁰ E.A. Carmean Jr., 'Morris Louis and the Modern Tradition: VI: Principles of Abstraction', *Arts Magazine*, vol.51, no.4 [1976] 116.

²¹ Morris Louis, letter to Clement Greenberg, 6 June 1954, reprinted in Diane Upright, *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings*, 15.

²² *Untitled B*, 1954, Magna on canvas, 261.6 x 228.6cm. Diane Upright, *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings*, cat. no. 67, p.198, ill. 139; *Untitled*, 1954, Magna on canvas, 245.1 x 184.2cm, cat. no. 68, p.198, ill. 139.

²³ Leo Steinberg, 'Other Criteria' (1968), reprinted in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* [London: Oxford University Press, 1972]. Steinberg

suggests in his essay that problems with formalist criticism include that it ‘tells an artist what he ought not to do, and the spectator what not to see.’ (64) The issue of various ‘criteria’ that set the standards for the work of the period of Louis’ work is relevant in the following statement made by Steinberg: ‘One way to cope with the provocations of novel art is to rest firm and maintain solid standards. The standards are set by the critic’s long–practiced taste and by his conviction that only those innovations will be significant which promote the established direction of advanced art. All else is irrelevant. Judged for “quality” and for an “advancedness” measurable by given criteria, each work is then graded on a comparative scale.’ (63).

²⁴ Diane Upright categorises Louis’ ‘Veil’ series in ‘Documentation: The Veil Paintings’, *Morris Louis: The Veil Cycle*, exh. cat [Minneapolis, Walker Art Centre, 1977]. 16-32.

²⁵ See Jo Crook and Tom Learner, *The Impact of Modern Paints* [London: Tate, 2000] 130.

²⁶ Diane Upright terms these works the ‘triadic’ ‘Veils’. See *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings*, 54.

²⁷ Upright Headley, ‘In Addition to the Veils’, 84.

²⁸ Robert Ayers, ‘Colour and Motion’, *Artscribe*, vol. 33 [Feb 1982] 43.

²⁹ Rosalind Krauss, ‘The Im/pulse to See’, in Hal Foster, ed., *Vision and Visuality*, [Seattle: Bay Press, and the Dia Art Foundation, 1988] 53.

³⁰ Marcia Brennan, ‘How Formalism Lost its Body but Kept its Gender: Frankenthaler, Louis, and Noland in the Sixties’, *Modernism’s Masculine Subjects: Matisse, the New York School, and Post–Painterly Abstraction* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004] 150.

³¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987] 16.

³² Upright Headley, ‘In Addition to the Veils’, 84.

CONCLUSION

¹ Thierry de Duve, 'The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas', *Kant After Duchamp* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998] 203.

² Charles Schucker (1970) quoted in Diane Upright Headley, *The Drawings of Morris Louis*, exh. cat [Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1979] 14.

³ Diane Upright Headley, *ibid.*

⁴ Michael Fried, 'An Introduction to My Art Criticism' (1998), *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998] 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1–74, particularly pages 19–23.

⁶ Diane Upright, 'Introduction: The Emergence of Morris Louis', in *Morris Louis – The Complete Paintings: A Catalogue Raisonné* [New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985] 17.