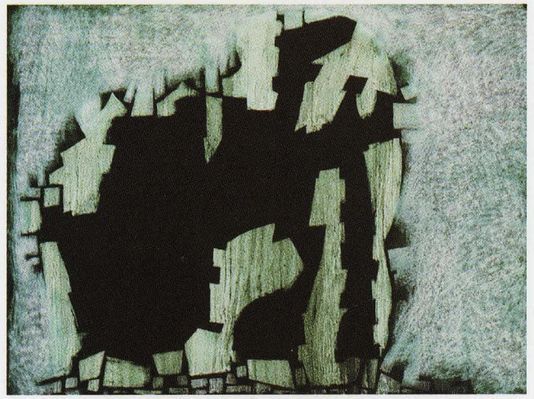
Thomas Nozkowski
WORKS ON PAPER

2002 october 25 through december 11
clough-hanson gallery, rhodes college, memphis, tn

Untitled (Q-10), oil on paper, 22.50" x 30", 2002



Untitled (Q-12), oil on paper, 22.50" x 30", 2002

After our studio visit in the spring, I left Thomas Nozkowski's Lower East Side studio with a slower eye. Despite the cups of coffee and icing-filled doughnuts, I was looking with a more patient and steady pace. As I walked through the Chinese neighborhood I saw huge expanses of graffiti, lines over broad shapes, the fresh paint covering the very old. I noticed the graffiti tags, their thick and thin shapes mixing with the careful symmetry of the doorways, support columns, bricks and wooden slats—each somehow visually dependent on the other. Remnants of a machine shop sign peeked through the years of paint, with words erased or covered over, pressure-sprayed clean and then painted again; left behind were the ghosts of what was there before and the sturdy hand of the most recent mark. Each spot was specific: those particular marks couldn't live anywhere but *there* on *that* part of *that* wall in *that* city on *that* day.

Later in Memphis, driving along one of the city's older, more well-worn streets, Second heading northbound towards Frayser, I thought about how the parts in Nozkowski's abstraction were assembled and arranged. I saw how the grain processing plant on Second Street was built for its specific purpose, completely free of unnecessary adornments. I realize now that its clarity of purpose is not at all unlike how Nozkowski's paintings seek to find the core of an experience. Hammering away, he reduces and expands the images until they come as close as paintings can to matching the moment of the initial impulse.

As I make the drive down Second Street, I understand how Nozkowski's occasional hard-edged structure has to mix parts that seem to come from dissimilar sources. It is kin to the way the Second St. neighbors use the materials at hand to fashion makeshift fences from palettes, plywood scraps and old signs. Each painting calls for an entirely new vocabulary of parts.

Nozkowski's abstractions, like the drive, are littered with changes brought on by necessity—necessity that sometimes has to be met using an economy of means. In the studio layers are scrubbed loose by a turpentine-soaked rag to open the space and allow for the insertion of something more true. On Second Street weathered, gray shingles on an expanse of church rooftop are patched by larger, newer and brighter red ones, and the meandering Y-shaped tree row is shaped by the energy company's power-line aesthetic.

The fleeting partial views of salvage yards through the cracks in the fencing, or the flicker of the soy bean fields through the roadside row of trees and darkened underbrush, call to mind how Nozkowski offers a variety of visual openings or ways of entering the modest feasts his paintings offer. Nozkowski's images run the gamut from the flat, impenetrable space of a hard-edged, checkerboard pattern to the airy atmosphere brought on by drippy wash.

The artist's view can give and sway, the same way recollections of a time or place can be altered by a heavy lunch, the rattle of the subway, the thickness of the hot Memphis air, or the way the quickness of a moment can make slippery what we are able to compose and recall. We know Nozkowski's recollections to be different with each particular painting.

I realize that it isn't necessarily one (Thomas Nozkowski) who borrows from or mimics the other (Allen St. in NYC or Second St. in Memphis). The similarities between the two arise from a shared process—the addition, subtraction and addition of information—as well as from a similar aesthetic of "rightness," a way of putting together parts to construct or reconstruct.

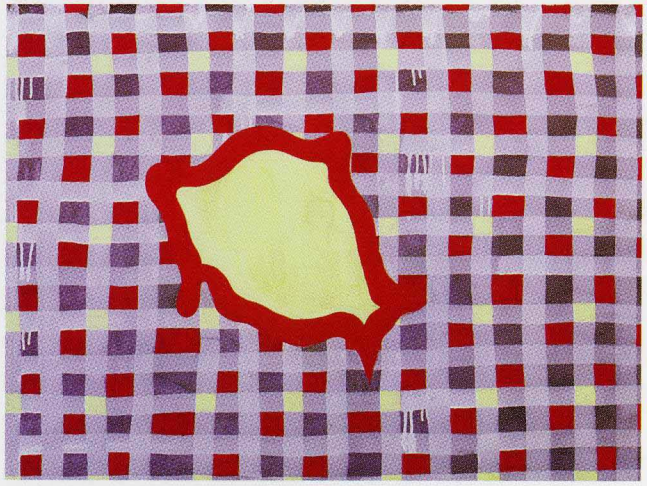
In Nozkowski's studio (and outside on the street), a move is made and then another. When an image isn't realized the slate is scraped or wiped down; there is a correcting and editing of what came before, and as time passes, more moments are realized. Elaborations are made and images are revealed, first to Nozkowski and then to the viewer. In the end, if the image doesn't ring true for the maker, it won't be able to breathe on its own.

In the months that followed my studio visit with Nozkowski, I tried to keep my mind's eye open for these occurrences in time and space, observing how they shared with Nozkowski's paintings honesty, specificity and familiar glimpses into places I had not yet seen. Once we slow our eyes down we can begin to recognize the way his images work and how they can make us view the landscape around us with a slower, more careful eye. In that way Thomas Nozkowski's paintings do what paintings *should* do: change not only the way we take in paintings, but also the way we take in our surroundings.

–Hamlett Dobbins, Interim Director

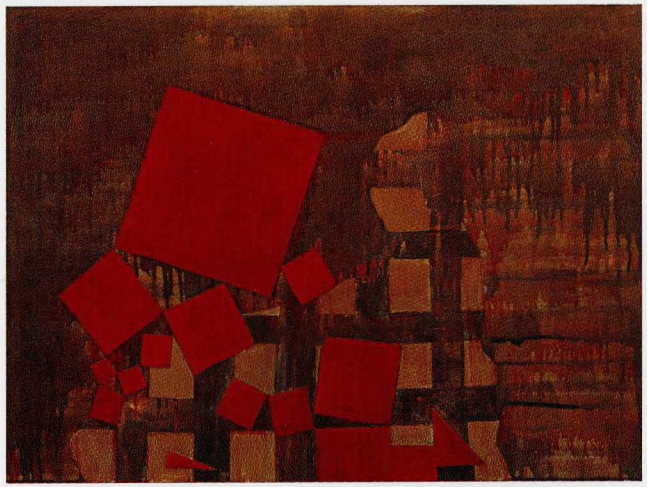
Images courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch Gallery in New York.

Untitled (Q-13), oil on paper, 22.50" x 30", 2002



Untitled (Q-6), oil on paper, 22.50" x 30", 2002

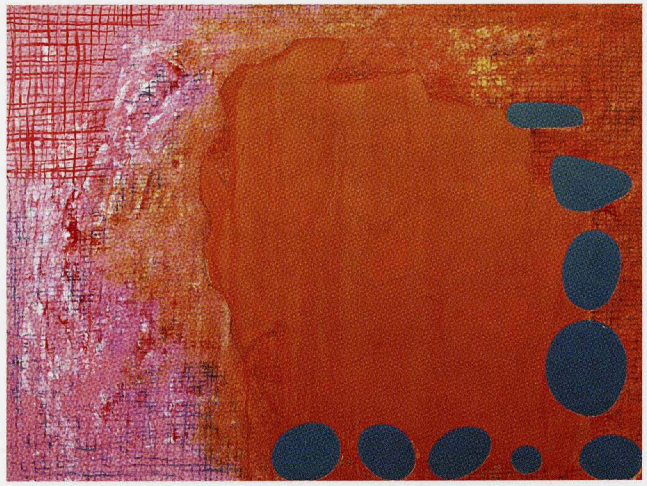
Untitled (Q-2), oil on paper, 22.50" x 30", 2002



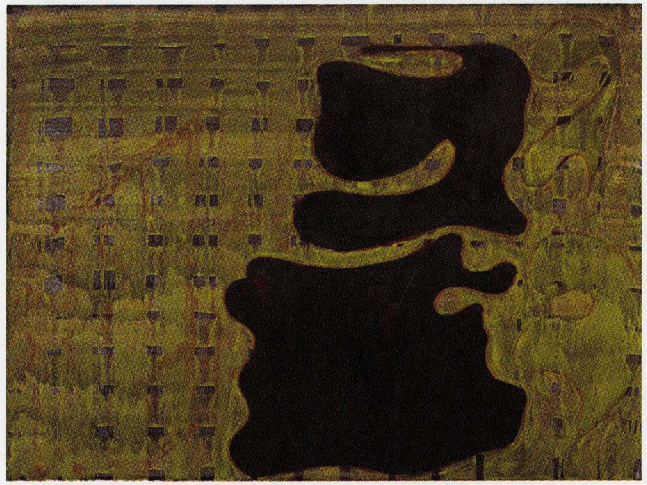
Untitled (Q-11), oil on paper, 22.50" x 30", 2002

Untitled (Q-18), oil on paper, 22.50" x 30", 1995

Untitled (Q-5), oil on paper, 22.50" x 30", 2002

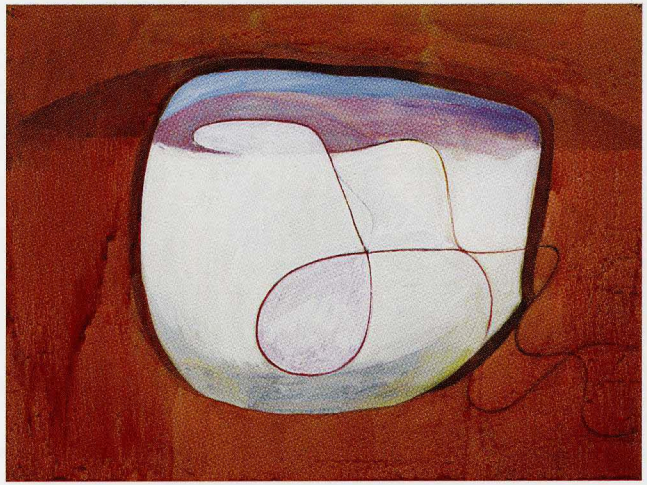


Untitled (Q-3), oil on paper, 22.50" x 30", 2002



Untitled (Q-7), oil on paper, 22.50" x 30", 2002

Untitled (Y-98), oil on paper, 22.50" x 30", 2002



Untitled (Q-15), oil on paper, 22.50" x 30", 2002