pictograph into burst:

Adolph GOTTLIEB

paintings in transition

27 September - 8 November 1992

The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art
University of Oklahoma
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...the very nature of abstraction, the very nature of abstract thought, is to reduce the
complexity of all life and to bring it down to something very simple which embodies
all this complexity.

Adolph Gottlieb, 1962

Adolph Gottlieb (1903-1974) spent most of his artistic career creating highly
personal, abstract paintings which he hoped would universally communicate
the "complexity of all life." In this quest, Gottlieb, like many other artists of
his generation, was greatly influenced by the ideas of Jungian psychology—
especially the belief in the existence of archetypes, or images within the
unconscious memory that are common to, and understood by, all cultures.

The development in 1941 of Gottlieb's first series of paintings, which he
called Pictographs, was in direct response to his desire to communicate
universally. Gottlieb was inspired by the Native American pictographs he
had seen several years earlier in Arizona and by an exhibition of European
and African rock drawings which he had visited in New York. Gottlieb's
reference to these archaic tribal drawings, whose literal meaning has been
lost to modern people, was a means of expressing his feelings about the
primeval nature of human beings.

The Couple, dating from 1946, is an example of the Pictographs. In this series,
Gottlieb spontaneously painted images derived from his subconscious and
placed them in a grid format—creating a flat space which emphasizes the
two-dimensionality of the canvas. However, the images have no logical
sequence or literal meaning—they are intended to be felt, rather than read.

Gottlieb's use of images derived from the subconscious mind but placed
within the more rational structure of the grid is typical of the polarity he
developed in paintings throughout his career. His opposition of chaos and
order seems to reflect the time in which he lived. For instance, the rational
order found in the paintings may refer to the technology of the post-World War II era, while the chaotic aspects could certainly mirror the atrocities of the war. With this in mind, Gottlieb’s paintings can be seen as a reflection of his personal feelings and the turbulence of the world around him.

In 1947, a year after The Couple was painted, Gottlieb wrote of the connection between his imagery and the time period:

The role of the artist, of course, has always been that of image-maker. Different times require different images. Today when our aspirations have been reduced to a desperate attempt to escape from evil, and times are out of joint, our obsessive, subterranean and pictographic images are the expression of the neurosis which is our reality. To my mind certain so-called abstraction is not abstraction at all. On the contrary, it is the realism of our time.

Gottlieb’s interest in “obsessive, subterranean and pictographic images” continues in paintings such as Sounds at Night and Running, both from 1948. However, in these works the painted grid of the earlier Pictographs has disappeared, and the shapes have become more abstract with no reference to the human figure.

In 1949, Gottlieb began to develop another series of paintings which he called the Unstill Lifes. As Sanford Hirsch writes in the exhibition catalogue, “the Unstill Lifes are characterized by an organic, animal-like central shape within a simplified ground.” Castle and Indian Red, both from 1950, are examples of this series. With these paintings, Gottlieb moved away from his earlier all-over compositions to ones with centralized images.

A prolific painter, Gottlieb was continually exploring new ideas in his paintings. In 1951, he embarked upon a series called Imaginary Landscapes. However, he continued to paint Pictographs and Unstill Lifes. Sentinel, painted in 1951, combines elements of all three series: the grid of the Pictographs, the reference to the figure of the Unstill Lifes, and the sun-like orb of the Imaginary Landscapes.

With the Imaginary Landscapes such as Nadir, 1952, and Black Sun, 1956, Gottlieb continued his interest in opposing forces by dividing the canvas into two distinct areas. As he said in a later interview:

Actually, my intention when I did those was to divide the canvas roughly into two areas and in the lower part I would have some active, linear winds
or shapes...and then in the upper half I would have roughly round or oval shapes which were completely separate or floating in this area...

Although Gottlieb referred to these paintings as Imaginary Landscapes, he did not view them as literal landscape paintings. Instead, as the title of the series implies, they are landscapes of the creative mind.

The grid format of the Pictographs reappeared in the Labyrinth series, of which Trajectory, 1954, is part. However, by comparing this work with the 1946 painting The Couple, one can see that Gottlieb’s approach to the grid format has changed significantly. While the pictographic images of The Couple are painted on a flat, gray ground, the more calligraphic images of Trajectory float over a gestural background of black and blue—creating a deeper sense of space within the later painting.

The Couple, which Gottlieb painted in 1955, and White Figure, from 1956, are later versions of the Unstill Lifes. The paintings' centralized, abstract human forms contain shapes that seem to suggest the figures' inner turbulence. As Hirsch describes The Couple: "The effect is of two bodies struggling to separate, while shared turmoil binds them together."

Later in 1956, Gottlieb developed the series for which he would become best known, the Burst paintings, which are simplified versions of the Imaginary Landscapes painted on a vertical, rather than horizontal canvas. In paintings such as Black, Blue Red, 1956, and Ascent, 1958, Gottlieb continues his quest for universally understood archetypes with the circular egg shape, which he believed was one of the “universal products of the collective unconscious.” Juxtaposed against this centralized form is the centrifugal mass of the lower portion of the painting, which once again implies the shared inner conflict of humankind.

This exhibition was organized by the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation. All paintings are from the Foundation's collection, with the exception of The Couple, 1946, which is part of the collection of The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art.