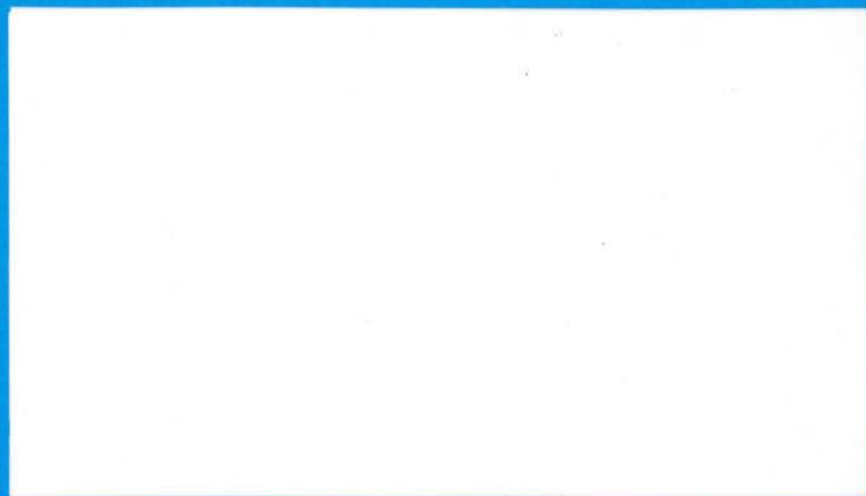


A NEW PARADIGM



Recent Work by Ron Ehrlich



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Overleaf: *Young Montreal*, 2007
oil, mixed media on panel
54 x 48 inches

Courtesy Stephen Haller Gallery

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Recent Work by Ron Ehrlich

Essay by Ronald R. Bernier, Ph.D.

2008–2009 Dr. Roy E. Morgan Exhibition
October 17–December 12, 2008

Sordoni Art Gallery • Wilkes University
Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

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150 South River Street
Wilkes-Barre, PA 18766
Telephone 570-408-4325
Fax 570-408-7733
wilkes.edu/sordoniartgallery

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This exhibition is dedicated to the late Dr. Roy E. Morgan, former arts and drama critic for *The Times Leader* and longtime supporter of the Sordoni Art Gallery.

October 2008

Artist's Biography

American painter Ron Ehrlich is known for achieving rich surfaces and subtleties of tone melding the techniques of vessel-making with the spontaneity and vitality of action painting. Working on panel, wielding a blowtorch as well as a brush, the brilliant colorist creates an art both vigorous and contemplative.

Born in Providence, Rhode Island in 1954, Ron Ehrlich received his BFA from Connecticut College in 1976. In 1979, he traveled to Japan to the Joji Yamasita monastery to study the art of Bizen pottery making. Intending to stay for five weeks, he stayed for five years. He returned to the United States and studied at the Kansas City Art Institute and the Rhode Island School of Design. Ehrlich applied expertise in the techniques of three-dimensional work to two-dimensional painting resulting in a remarkable and unique body of work.

Ehrlich's paintings are regularly exhibited in galleries in major cities across the country including more than 30 solo exhibitions since 1985. In an era of globalization his work is a unique blend of Eastern and Western techniques.

In 1999, he was selected for *Outward Bound: American Art on the Brink of the 21st Century*, an exhibition that traveled to major venues in Asia, including museums in Beijing, Shanghai, Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Jakarta, Singapore and Manila. He was also invited to participate in an exhibition of Korean and American painting at the Art Museum of the Sejong Center in Seoul, Korea in 2005. Ron Ehrlich is represented by Stephen Haller Gallery in New York.

Inner duration is the continuous life of a memory which prolongs the past into the present. . . . Without this survival of the past into the present, there would be no duration, but only instantaneity.

—Henri Bergson

Amidst the increasing digitization of our postmodern visual culture, Ron Ehrlich's paintings compel the viewer to stop and pay attention. That is to say, they speak to the passing of time in our visual experience, the time involved in our engaging with densely pigmented surfaces, layers of seeing, and strata of memory. It is an optical density, and a psychological one. Each piece sustains the appearance of long and calculated efforts of reworking which suggests the thick complexity of our so-called "momentary" perception. There is a curious paradox in his painting, a dialectic of motion and stillness, insofar as the artist's gestural frenzy and aggressive deposits of emotion evoke a slow and extended dimension to the viewer's experience, well beyond the temporally—and spatially—confined "instant" of seeing.

Ehrlich arrives at stillness through action; and while his process of painting is turbulent, his viewer's encounter with it is measured and deliberate. As viewers we sense his compulsive, persistent layering of paint, wax, shellac, and other materials; and the result is arresting, with surfaces so vast we enter, lose ourselves, and yield to a pull powerful enough to sustain prolonged attention. But how can all this painterly action, multiplied over and again, this overload of information, lead to quiet and meditation? The artist begins with the clean blank surface of wood panels onto which splotches, splatters, slathers, drags, and marks of various shapes, sizes and dimensions are made. He applies the paint and scrapes it down, then applies it again, and yet again. Glyphs—sig-

nifiers not yet signified—are etched, crusted, and sculpted onto the surface. With the flames of a propane torch he chases trajectories of paint in arrangements gravity could never accomplish. All the while, within the genealogy of these gestures each stage retains traces of previous markings—vague and elusive memories of earlier thoughts and configurations, yet still perceptible, still present to our awareness. And all this painting, abrading, rubbing, scraping, and burnishing are multiplied both across the surface and into depth, opening up a place for us to wander, all the more effectively, for example, in grand scale works like *Buffalo*. Dueling sensations of simultaneous nearness and farness are conveyed in the very texture of the paint itself—not unlike, given the deliberate evocation of natural form and a flickering pastel palette, a late Monet water mural. And these palimpsests of paint encourage us to linger, to note the marks of presence and absence as they emerge and fade, resulting in something that suggests the fullness, and the nuances, of our momentary perception.

It is all about perception, and perception in Ehrlich's work is a matter of continuous resolving, shifting attention, losing and calling back into focus and back into memory. His is a procedure of painting that gets closer to the way seeing and memory really work, where aspects are at first unnoticed, and so in one sense absent from our momentary view—absent in the sense that their temporary non-occurrence lay outside (unnoticed), but always included within the background of the present

of that view. Visual experience, in other words, is less a sequence of successive yet separate, isolated and discreet moments, and more a multiplicity continually unfolding in the duration of memory—a ceaseless and seamless flow of thoughts, feelings and perceptions. And memory here is not the simple remembering of past experiences but rather the past living on in the present in our perception, affecting our present visual and mental behavior. Similarly, within the highly charged fields of Ehrlich's painting, successive and interpenetrative states of awareness merge into one another, each retaining something of what has just passed and each giving intimation of what is to come—a blurring of the boundaries of past, present, and anticipated future. While evocative titles such as *She Stood Weaving in the Moonlight*, *In the Beginning*, *Tunisia*, and *Mardi Gras* may at first suggest an element of narrative, incident, or event, something we can latch onto to understand what is "going on" in the paintings, that meaning is always just beyond reach, teetering on the edge of referentiality. "Aiming at what lies beyond language and the process of naming," Ehrlich claims, "my paintings resist absorption into a narrative." Even in those works more potentially signifying and self-referencing, as in *You Taste Like the Sky*, with collaged torn fragments of out-of-focus photos and the ironic use of negative film strip as top-edge border, meaning is "erased" as the snapshots are painted over and the film is frustratingly out of reach of visual inspection. Similarly, a primordial soup of drips and rivulets of paint,

skittering lines of oil stick, and emotive inscriptions of color float up to the surface then recede, embryonically reaching the point of meaning just before fading away, seemingly random marks taking on the signs of human intentionality, like gestures in some kind of primitive writing. Such is the effect of Ehrlich's painterly language that its seductively sensual, successively layered and overly-worked surfaces sustain the visual effect of extended perception, both temporally and spatially. Surface and space are perceived as oriented not traditionally as a window on a vertical axis, but as a horizontal plane shifted up onto the vertical. The beholder, thereby, is made to take a disorienting and vertiginous look down into/onto the surface of representation, which pushes beyond the conventional limits of the frame and subverts it for a new paradigm, an Abstract Expressionist-like non-hierarchical expanse of visual attention, disallowing any lingering sense of the single, unified and momentary view. Here the body feels itself released from gravity, indeed from all mental moorings as well. We both hover over the surfaces and peer into their depths, our disengaged viewing position steered by a medium at once fluid and solid. In terms of distance and scale, are we microscopically close or galactically far away? It is the undecidability of such questions that prompts meditation and locates Ron Ehrlich's painting squarely on the edges of the Sublime.

Ronald R. Bernier, Ph.D.
October 2008

She Stood Weaving in the Moonlight, 2008
oil, mixed media on panel
60 x 60 inches

Courtesy Stephen Haller Gallery

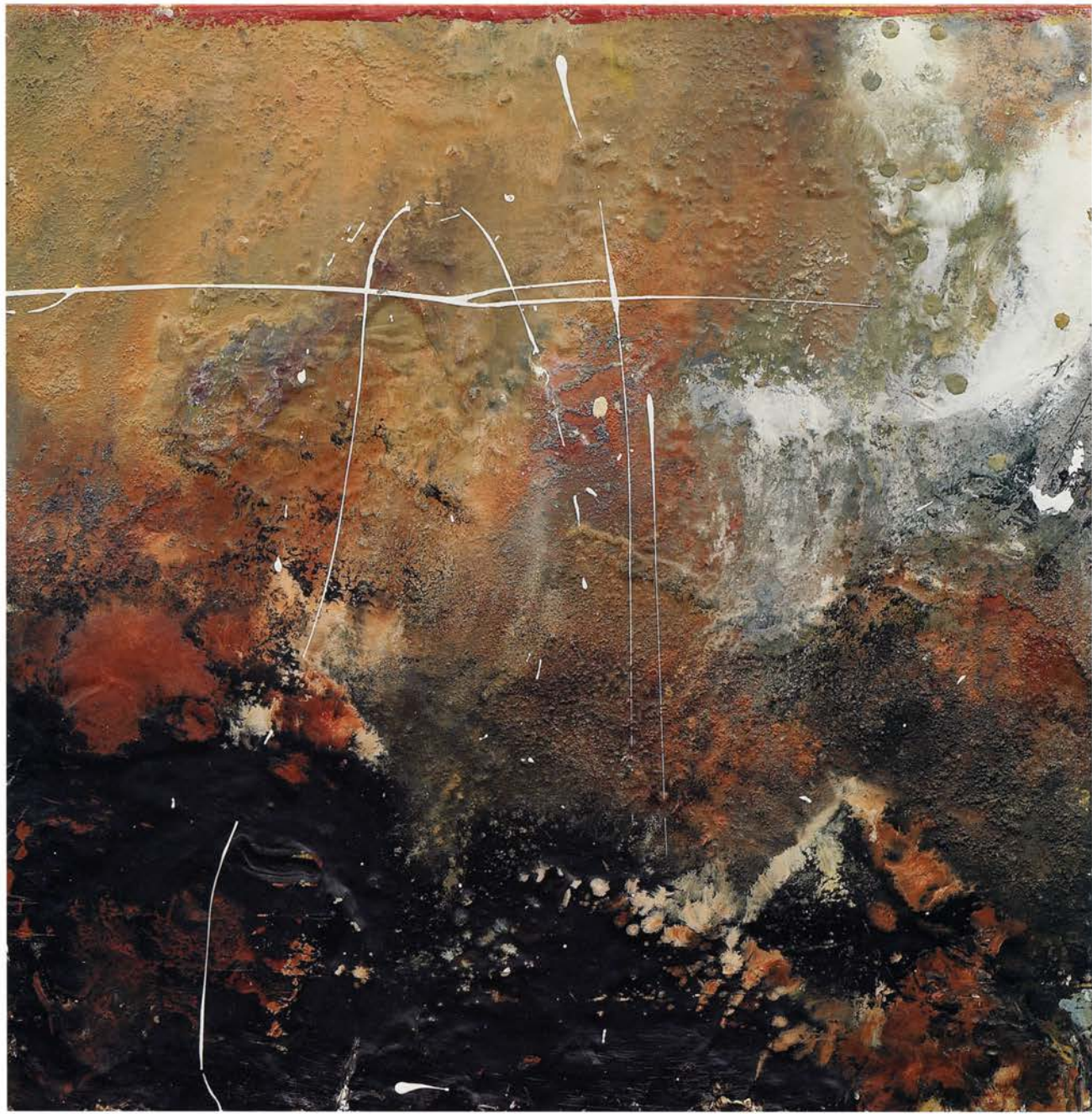


Opposite: *In the Beginning*, 2008
oil, mixed media on panel
18½ x 18½ inches

Courtesy Stephen Haller Gallery

Next page: *Buffalo*, 2008
oil and mixed media on panel
60 x 180 inches

Courtesy Stephen Haller Gallery







Mardi Gras, 2008
oil, mixed media on panel
17¾ x 17¾ inches

Collection of Daniel B. Ferris, New York



You Taste Like the Sky, 2008
oil, mixed media & collage on panel
84 x 120 inches

Collection of Harold and Sandra Grunfeld, New York



Tunisia, 2008
oil, mixed media on panel
59¾ x 59¾ inches

Courtesy Stephen Haller Gallery



Purple Haze, 2008
oil, mixed media on panel
72 x 72 inches

Courtesy Stephen Haller Gallery



Pastorale Blues II, 2008
oil, mixed media on panel
60 x 78 inches

Courtesy Stephen Haller Gallery



Exhibition Underwriters

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Staff

Brittany Kramer DeBalko, Interim Director
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