



The artist in the 1950s

Releasing the Shadow

*An appreciation of
Walter Kuhlman (1918-2009)*

“I release the shadow,” Walter Kuhlman once remarked, in response to a question about his painting process. “I take the canvas and get it dirty,” he said. “I start to work with it, with the color. Then I dream into it. I release the shadow, the sub-conscious. When I see a glimmer of something coming through, I grab it.”

For Kuhlman, that “glimmer of something,” that “shadow,” was in fact “the dark side of our nature.” He advised that “you have to accept the shadow in your personality. You have to come to grips with that guy. He’s not so bad, really. Sometimes he helps.”

Walter Kuhlman was an introspective man – and a dedicated artist driven to express his internal life through his art.

Kuhlman’s career began auspiciously. He was raised and educated in Minneapolis-St. Paul, the son of Danish immigrants of modest means. Nevertheless, while just in his early 20s, he had gained a reputation as a notable Midwestern artist. A painting – a Modernist cityscape – was shown at the 1939 New York World’s Fair and acquired

by Duncan Phillips. The newly opened Walker Art Center gave him a one-man show. The Tiffany Foundation and the Cummington School for the Arts awarded fellowships.

The Second World War interrupted this promising career. Kuhlman served in the U. S. Navy, working as a medical illustrator at the naval hospitals in San Diego and Bethesda. He documented severe, disfiguring and disabling injuries – images that would haunt him for years to come.

The GI Bill opened once unimaginable opportunities for Kuhlman – just as it did for many of his generation. Kuhlman enrolled at the California School of Fine Arts¹, then emerging as a nationally important center for progressive art studies. Faculty and students alike committed themselves to non-objective art, emphasizing experimentation, improvisation, individuality and intuition. The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism took form, with Kuhlman among the core participants.

¹ Since 1961, the San Francisco Art Institute.

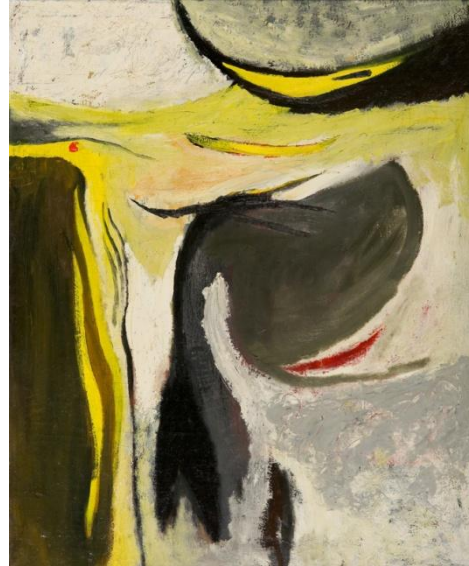
“Shapes and colors exploding on canvas,” is how he later described the work.

After three years in San Francisco, Kuhlman completed his studies in Paris. There he participated in some of the first international exhibitions to feature the new American abstraction.

The artist returned to the Bay Area, where his abstract style matured. His paintings explored interactions among colors and shapes, exploiting the visual tensions that resulted. Kuhlman exhibited frequently and won acclaim. He was, most notably, honored as one of the first recipients (in 1957) of the prestigious Graham Foundation Fellowship.

Kuhlman, however, was not one to rest on his achievements. When pure abstraction no longer offered fresh challenges or insights, he took a new direction. The artist turned toward Figurative Expressionism, developing a highly personal style that combined aspects of abstraction with figurative subject matter.

He would later recall his moment of transition. He was working on a large canvas, already having built a surface of muted greens for what he intended to be an abstract painting. The artist began forming a shape in a contrasting orange-red, but the shape did not remain an abstract element. Rather, it became for Kuhlman the figure of a man engulfed in flames. Kuhlman titled the work *Don Juan in Hell*². This event, which occurred about 1960, set the course for the remainder of his career.



Untitled, 1948. Oil on canvas. 37 x 30 inches

In the years to come, intriguing figures appeared on canvases given often-provocative titles – some, like *Don Juan*, making cultural references. These humans, animals and mythical beings seemed to embody emotional, spiritual and philosophical meanings. Whereas Kuhlman’s abstract paintings had conveyed a sense of subtle tension, these figurative works could speak more boldly.

Kuhlman’s intuitive process also applied to work on paper – a format in which the artist developed great skill. He had produced a small body of important abstract expressionist prints in the late 1940s, energetic works that captured the spirit of the San Francisco School. But it would be in the latter part of his career that the press would become a truly indispensable tool.

The artist developed an intense interest in monotype printmaking. These unique works began with printed inks and paints that provided color and texture. Kuhlman then studied each printed sheet, seeking images. Most were given form with pastel, which

² Family of the artist.



Dance of Death, 1978. Oil on canvas. 56 x 59 inches

put “the actors on the stage” as he once explained. Figures and portraits, animals and mysterious creatures, landscapes and seascapes appeared. He valued the immediacy and intimacy of the process, which resulted in some of his most appealing works. “What happens with this technique,” he noted, “is simply magic.”

Walter Kuhlman’s achievements were many – how best to summarize a long and busy career that involved seemingly distinct phases? Kuhlman was a precocious Regionalist, then an energetic Abstract Expressionist, and ultimately an enigmatic and inventive Figurative Expressionist. To these roles must also be added his activities as a university instructor – one honored by the California Arts Commission (in 1982) as “Outstanding Artist and Teacher.”

These phases, however, were not disconnected. They were part of a continuum. Kuhlman and his art evolved and grew over the years. “A painter spends his life preparing for the moments when *it* happens,” he once remarked – adding that *it* came “out of living, and experience, and technique.”

The artist did indeed spend a lifetime anticipating and seizing those moments when *it* happened. He had the courage to “release the shadow,” to inspect parts of himself that might otherwise have remained closed to scrutiny. He had the bravery to “come to grips with that guy,” to gain insights and perhaps even some control through the creative process.

The results were expressed through images, not words. When asked the meaning of a particular work, Kuhlman’s likely response might be, essentially, no answer at all. “If I could say it, I wouldn’t have to paint it” was a typical reply. His comments were not meant to be unkind. Rather, the artist was simply emphasizing that the artwork itself held its own messages. In the end, it was left to the viewer to decide what the work – and by extension, Kuhlman himself – might be saying.

“I like to hear the reactions from people when they look at my work – that they see what they want to see, that they see from their own experiences,” Walter Kuhlman once commented. “I read Schopenhauer when I was young, and I have always agreed with his belief that you cannot find happiness in the minds of others.”

“Releasing the Shadow” was written by Alan Selsor, the author of the monograph *Walter Kuhlman: The Artist and the Art* (2010). Copies are available from The Walter Kuhlman Studio.

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