



FINDLAY GALLERIES

Frank Lobdell : Beyond Words

Exclusively Representing the Estate of Frank Lobdell (1921 - 2013)



# Frank Lobdell

“I am delighted that Frank’s work is represented by Findlay Galleries. It is my hope that a new generation will come to appreciate his transcendent art.

I observed Frank work for many years and I always felt a deep respect for his love of painting, drawing, printmaking, and at last the bronze sculptures. “Art is built on art,” he would say. He respected and learned from many artists, just as younger artists learned from him.

Frank had a rare capacity to be moved by the paintings he loved and by painting itself. He painted with curiosity and with empathy for the world and for human experience.

Frank had a deep sense of purpose. He was patient and intensely dedicated to exploring his personal vocabulary of line, color, movement, scale, symbols and motif. He felt he found his true voice in his later work after decades of experimentation and invention. His late paintings are bold, confident, intricate, and somehow peaceful. They reward the viewer’s deep attention.

Frank’s work enlarges our ideas about the world and about beauty. They teach us to see.”

**JINX LOBDELL**



Findlay Galleries is proud to introduce the exclusive representation of the estate of the Bay Area's renowned abstract expressionist, Frank Lobdell. Frank Lobdell: Beyond Words is a comprehensive exhibition and overview of Frank Lobdell's paintings, drawings, prints and sketchbooks from his long career as an artist and teacher from the San Francisco Bay area. A seminal figure in the development of the West Coast abstract expressionist painting movement, Lobdell was a pioneer of the American Abstract movement of the 1950s.

For over half a century, Frank Lobdell's work has immeasurably enriched the local and national cultural landscape. His stature is reflected in the acclaim of art critics, in the respect of fellow-artists, and in the admiration of his students, regardless of their personal artistic philosophies. To state that Lobdell is "an artist's artist" is to acknowledge that he has pursued his calling with passion, discipline, and integrity, and that he has elevated the creation of art above its reception in the art world.

Born on August 23, 1921 in Kansas City, Missouri and raised in Minnesota, Frank Lobdell attended the St. Paul School of Fine Arts in Saint Paul Minnesota from 1939 – 1940. He painted independently in Minneapolis and from 1940 to 1942 and on the brink of war he enlisted in the US Army and served in Europe during World War II from 1942 – 1946. In April of 1945, years after enlisting in the Army, Lieutenant Frank Lobdell confronted the harsh realities of war. The horrific scenes he endured were indelibly seared into Lobdell's visual memory. Speaking of his World War II experiences he later recalled:

*"My identity was shaken by that experience, as I think everyone's was... Somewhere in All quiet on the Western Front, [Erica Maria Remarque] remarks that there are no survivors. I think he's absolutely right. No one who was involved in one of these wars truly survives. It'll haunt you for the rest of your life... I painted my way out of a lot of this. Fortunately, I had the talent to do this. I couldn't say that I came to grips with myself except that I was no longer as anxious about a lot of experiences. Somehow the anxiety had maybe gone into my paintings. A bit therapeutic, an unloading on the canvas."*

Following the war, he moved to Sausalito, California and experienced a rebirth of his passion for painting. When Frank Lobdell arrived in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1946, recently married and less than a year out of the Army, he soon found himself in the company of a small group of artists fervent in their pursuit of the New American Abstraction. Their center of gravity was the California School of Fine Art – now the San Francisco Art Institute – a rambling, old Mission-style building collected around a fortress-like tower on the slopes of Russian Hill. Most of the other artists Lobdell met there were much like himself, young veterans funding their studies with the G.I. Bill. He attended the California School of Fine Arts (1946 – 1949) and in 1950 he left the U.S. for Paris, where he painted and studied at L'Academie de la Grande Chaumière until 1951. After returning to the Bay Area, he taught at CSFA from 1957 to 1964. He was a Visiting Artist at Stanford University and taught as a Professor of Art from 1966 until his retirement in 1991.

Several of Lobdell's early postwar paintings reveal his attempts to come to terms with the atrocities committed during the war. A comparison of his works the following years, reveal an exponential artistic evolution from an analytical and geometric dissection of the human figure, to an embodiment of irrational violence and overwhelming emotion – from a depiction of physical pain to the actual sensation of psychic angst.

Like many artists whose working lives have been similarly long and productive, Lobdell's can be arranged into a discernible sequence of stages, even if they do not always assume a neat or outwardly logical order. But his career rightly begins in the late 1940s with his embrace of Abstract Expressionism, in which he recognized that painting might provide a lifelong arena of individualized inquiry, a place where he could, indeed, be entirely himself. Later phases of his career, particularly the complex body of works that began during the mid 1970s, may be more far-reaching in their significance, but Lobdell was occupied from the start with the ideas that have engaged him throughout his career. One sees, for example, a fascination with the exchanges that occur when invented forms are placed in various kinds of spaces that can be created upon painted canvas; these spaces may allude to "real" spaces in an interrogative way but should never be confused with them, since one of Lobdell's subjects, the origin and nature of meaning, is inseparable from his conception of the work of art as a controlled, intensely personal site whose uncertain relationship to the real world is very much the point. "Beyond Words" is a relative expression that characterized Frank Lobdell's works as there is no meaning, no expectation and no relativity, but just meanings that are that, beyond words.

This exhibition includes works from as early as 1951. Lobdell's work has been included in exhibitions at the Petit Palais, the Third Biennial of São Paulo, the Osaka International Festival, Japan, as well as venues in London, Turin, and Eindhoven, including early solo exhibitions in Paris and Geneva. He showed regularly in solo and group exhibitions in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco throughout the 1950s and 1960s, including at the Walker Art Center (1960); The Whitney Museum of American Art (1962); and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (1964). Solo museum exhibitions include San Francisco's M.H. de Young Memorial Museum (1960, 1992); a major retrospective exhibition, "Paintings and Graphics from 1948 to 1965," at the Pasadena Art Museum and Stanford University Art Museum (1966); "Frank Lobdell: Works, 1947-1992," Stanford University Art Museum (1993); California Palace of the Legion of Honor, Fine Arts Museum on San Francisco, "Frank Lobdell: The Art of Making and Meaning" (2003); Portland Art Museum, Oregon, "Frank Lobdell: Making and Meaning" (2004), and others.

# The Psychic Journey of Frank Lobdell

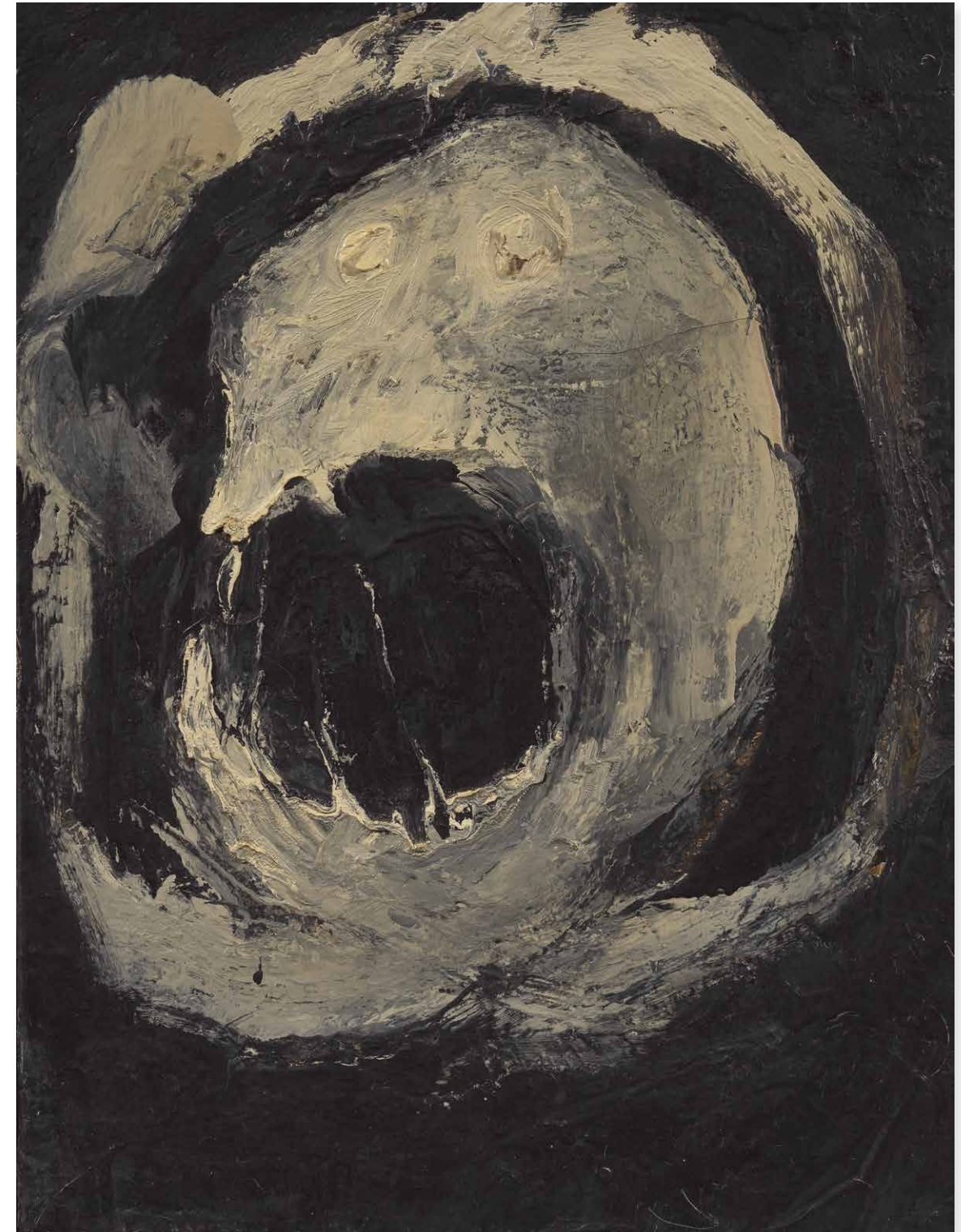
The paintings of Frank Lobdell epitomize the strain of Abstract Expressionism in San Francisco furthest removed from the New York School. Labored and deliberate rather than brash and impulsive, Lobdell's art throughout his career represents the very antithesis of the rapid-fire pyrotechnics of action painting. Nonetheless, the artist was very much a product of the bicoastal movement that art critic Dore Ashton summed up as "a dramatic caesura in the story of modern art" when America, having escaped the furious destruction of the Second World War, experienced a "high-voltage charge of creative energy."

As one of the first World War II veterans who attended the California School of Fine Arts in the late 1940s, Lobdell was immediately drawn to the anti-decorative assault on "good taste" exemplified by the canvases of Clyfford Still, who taught at the school from 1946 to 1950. As Lobdell later explained, an artist with integrity "can't be content with prettiness when a feeling of turmoil seems most characteristic of our times." A veteran who had experienced bloody combat first-hand, Lobdell took the "substance and guts" he admired in Still's rugged paint handling and employed it toward radically different ends. Whereas Still created a language of ecstatic expansion to express his self-liberation, Lobdell viewed the human condition as an endless struggle for meaning, a worldview closely allied with postwar Existentialism's quest for private certitude in the face of emptiness. He expressed that struggle not through turbulent gesture but through forms burdened, as art historian Herschel Chipp described them, "with the agony of a human organism confronted with an environment that offers little that is certain—no gravity, no substance."

The darkest, most brooding works in this vein date from the 1950s, evoking in highly ambiguous terms ghostly presences and in some cases absences, as the current exhibition's painting, 1/13/1955 (1955) (Painting on the right page), suggests with its cavernous, cobwebbed lacuna. Lobdell's wartime haunts continued well into the 1960s with his Dance series (1969-72), which despite its lighthearted title, was based upon the medieval and Renaissance Dance of Death theme, notably Hans Holbein the Younger's woodcuts of dancing skeletons, satirical critiques of the reigning monarchy and Catholic clergy. In Lobdell's version, however, there is little wit to be found, except perhaps in the painful irony of lumbering, ponderous limbs engaged in a futile attempt at gaiety. Whatever humor one might find quickly dissipates after learning that Lobdell conceived of his Dance paintings as a meditation on the Vietnam War.

**SUSAN LANDAUER**

Art Historian



**1/13/1955, 1955**

Oil-based pigments on canvas

19 x 14 Inches

FG©138702

**DANCE I, 1969**

Oil-based pigments on canvas  
60 1/4 x 73 5/8 Inches  
FG©138706

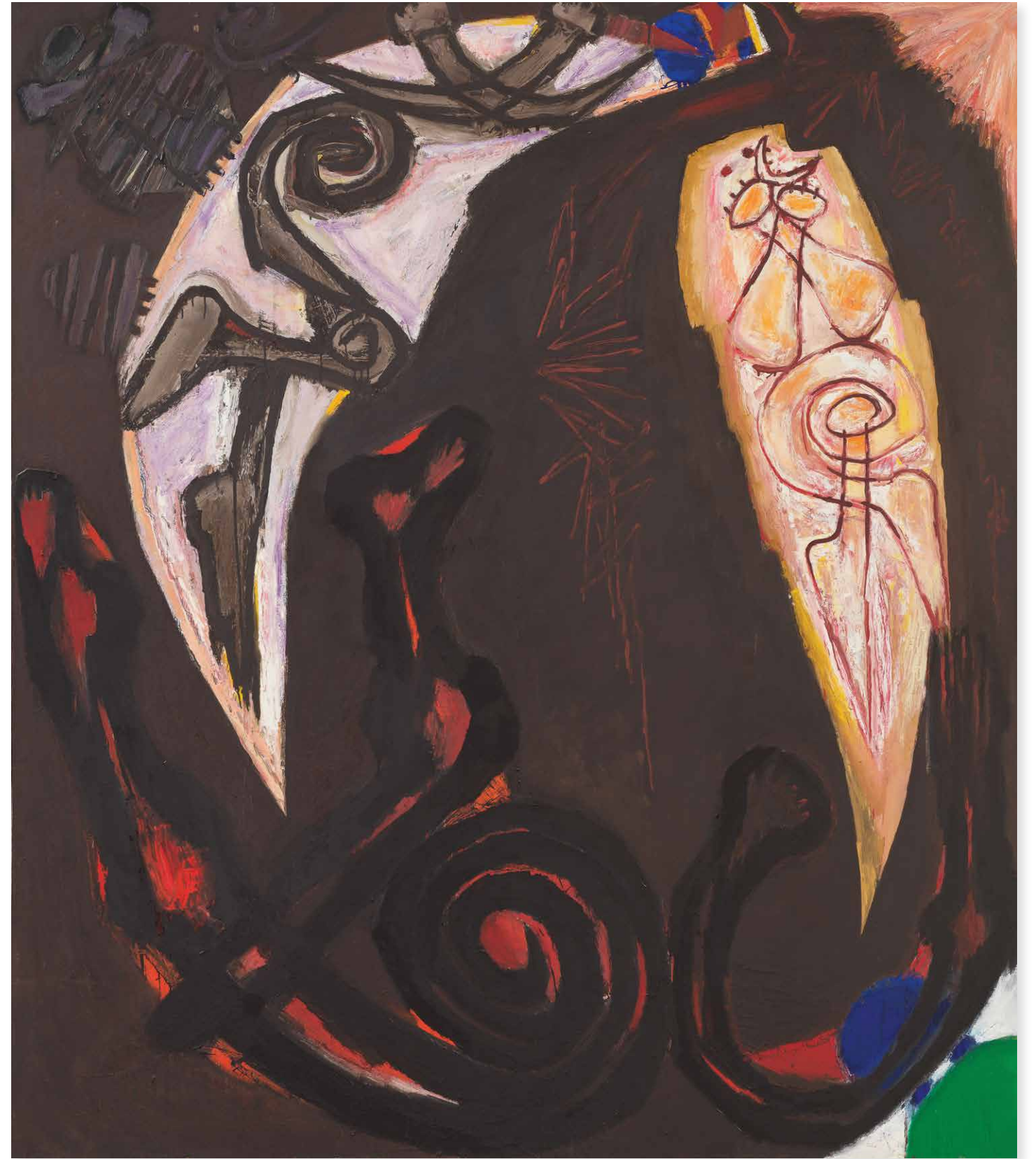


**SUMMER 1969, 1969**

Oil-based pigments on canvas

71 x 61 3/4 Inches

FG©138705



**DANCE V, 1970**

Oil-based pigments on canvas  
67 x 60 3/4 Inches  
FG©138707



Frank Lobdell is a member of the greatest generation, not because he served in World War II, but because he survived the physical and psychic scars inflicted by that war and went on to create a significant body of artwork. As a G.I. Bill student (1947-50) at San Francisco's California School of Fine Arts, he confronted the existential question of whether art retained any relevance in a world that had been permanently transformed by the Holocaust and Hiroshima. For Lobdell, the war became a fiery crucible that stripped his life and art of all illusions. Only through a life long artistic struggle has he been able to confront the disasters of war, to reaffirm his pacifist political ideal, and to resurrect the human figure as the natural locus of a humanity that seemed to have perished during that conflict.

**TIMOTHY ANGLIN BURGARD**  
Curator in Charge of American Art for  
the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco



**FIGURE DRAWING SERIES NO. 2, 1973 (3.22.73 - I), 1973**

Ink, ink wash, graphite, and gouache on paper  
13 x 17 1/4 Inches  
FG©138709





**FIGURE DRAWING SERIES NO. 155, 1964, 1964**

Ink, ink wash on paper  
13 7/8 x 11 7/8 Inches  
FG©138704



**FIGURE DRAWING SERIES NO. 37, 1974, 1974**

Ink, ballpoint pen, and ink wash on paper  
17 x 13 5/8 Inches  
FG©138710

At the close of the 1970s, Lobdell took one of the central tenets of Abstract Expressionism to heart and decided “to begin again”—to embark on a voyage of inner evolving consciousness from which he could develop a new phase of his personal aesthetic. Leaving his gloomy palette and somber imagery behind, Lobdell embarked on a series of paintings that art historian Caroline Jones has called his “Celestial Geometries”—luminous canvases suffused with radiant color and a fresh lexicon of motifs drawn from a wide range of sources, from Paleolithic cave drawings and images of ancient fertility goddesses to Anatolian Kilim rugs. Vestiges of older symbols survive but have now morphed almost beyond recognition. The fetal coils found in paintings from the 1950s, emoting deep feelings of vulnerability, have now sprung to youthful life in the form of spirals suggesting spooling balls of yarn and sometimes pinwheels; the disembodied limbs of the 1960s no longer taper into sharp, menacing claws but sport playful castle-like crenelated edges. Other childlike motifs—some borrowed from Miró, an artist Lobdell had long admired—include flags, pennants, kites, and stick-figures.

All of these symbols come together in his last group of paintings in this exhibition, the Pier 70 series of the early 2000s, which brings to mind Rube Goldberg’s comic contraptions. Here, each form bends and tilts toward the next, linked together in a concatenation of implied events. And yet in spite of the joyful playfulness of these late paintings, their ultimate significance is quite serious, one that all artists must face: the rejuvenation of imagination and sustenance of creative power. Lobdell knew well how to keep his paintings alive—by retaining their ambiguity in perpetuity. Lobdell did not believe in any fixed systems of thought, Christian, Marxist, Freudian, or otherwise, although he seems to have been bent on a quest for universal patterns and recurring themes that resonated within himself. His art is one of lyrical indeterminance that expressed both his own evolving consciousness and that of his viewers. While he repeated images consistently enough to identify major themes, there can be no libretto for Lobdell’s opera of the imagination.

**SUSAN LANDAUER**  
Art Historian

**Pier 70 August 1997, 1997**

Oil-based pigments on canvas  
54 x 42 Inches  
FG©138721





**4/1/1986, 1986**

Oil-based pigments on canvas  
48 1/8 x 60 Inches  
FG©138714



**BLEECKER, 10.28.91 - 12.4.91, 1991**

Oil-based pigments on canvas  
78 x 96 Inches  
FG©138715



**BLEECKER, 5.23.1994, 1994**

Oil-based pigments on canvas  
78 x 96 Inches  
FG©138718



**PIER 70, JANUARY 1997, 1997**

Oil-based pigments on canvas panel  
 16 x 12 Inches  
 FG©138719



**PIER 70, DRAWING 12.30.93, 1993**

Gouache, colored pencil, pastel, collage on paper  
 17 x 20 Inches  
 FG©138716

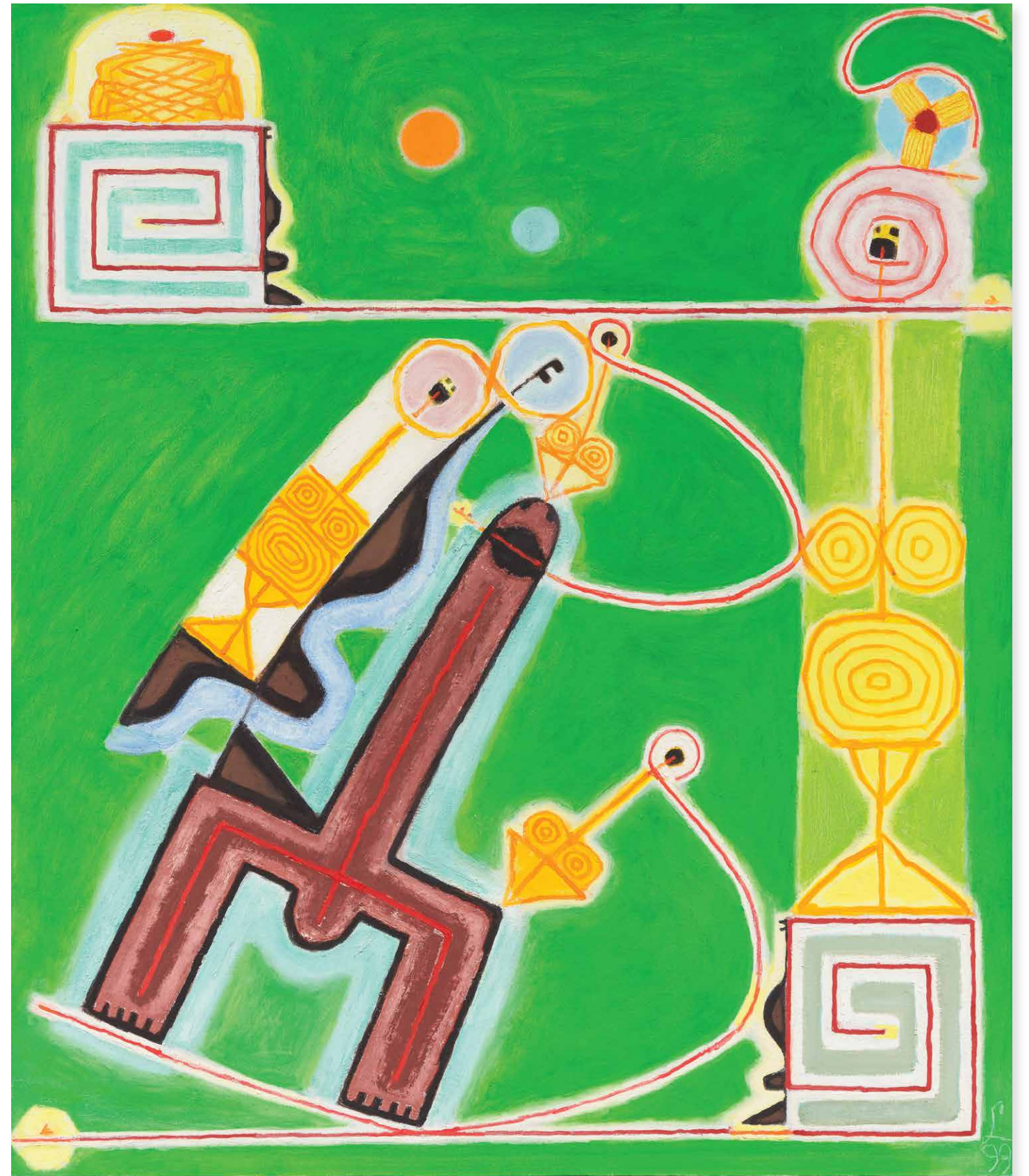


**PIER 70, JUNE 1997 (TRIPTYCH), 1997**

Oil-based pigments on canvas panels  
 12 x 27 Inches  
 FG©138720

**PIER 70, 6.17.99, 1999**

Oil-based pigments on canvas  
42 x 36 Inches  
FG©138723





**PIER 70, SUMMER I 2001, 2001**

Oil-based pigments on canvas

36 x 28 Inches

FG©138726



**PIER 70, WINTER III, 2002**

Oil-based pigments on linen

42 x 36 Inches

FG©138700

**PIER 70, SPRING II 2002, 2002**

Oil-based pigments on canvas  
60 x 48 Inches  
FG©138727





**COVER:**

**FRANCISCO STREET, SUMMER I 2003, 2003**

Oil-based pigments on canvas

54 x 48 Inches

FG©138730



**FRANCISCO STREET, FALL I 2003, 2003**

Oil-based pigments on canvas  
54 x 48 Inches  
FG©138731



**FRANCISCO STREET, SPRING II 2004, 2004**

Oil-based pigments on canvas  
54 x 48 Inches  
FG©138732



**PIER 70, 11.25.99, 1999**

Oil-based pigments on canvas  
57 x 45 Inches  
FG©138724



**PIER 70, FALL I 2002, 2002**

Oil-based pigments on canvas  
72 x 60 Inches  
FG©138728



## SOLO MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS

1960 - M.H. de Young Memorial Museum  
*Frank Lobdell: Exhibition of Paintings*

San Francisco, CA

1966 - Pasadena Art Museum  
*Frank Lobdell: Paintings and Graphics from 1948 to 1965*

Pasadena, CA

1969 - San Francisco Museum of Art  
*Frank Lobdell: Twenty Seven Lithographs and a Large Painting*

San Francisco, CA

1983 - San Francisco Museum of Modern Art  
*Frank Lobdell: Paintings and Monotypes, 1955-1981*

San Francisco, CA

1988 - Stanford University Museum of Art  
*Frank Lobdell: Recent Etchings and Aquatints*

Stanford, CA

1992 - Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco  
*Viewpoints XVIII: Frank Lobdell*

San Francisco, CA

1993 - Stanford University Museum of Art  
*Frank Lobdell: Works, 1947-1992*

San Francisco, CA

2003 - Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco

San Francisco, CA

2003 - Portland Art Museum  
*Frank Lobdell: The Art of Making and Meaning*

Portland, OR



## FINDLAY GALLERIES

For further information and pricing of these artworks please contact the gallery:

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