

ALAN PAINE RADEBAUGH
Mass: Of Our World

An Essay by
DOUGLAS KENT HALL

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Photographs of paintings © APR Studio 2007

Douglas and Alan are friends; this essay, not published during Douglas's lifetime, is published now in 2009 in his memory.

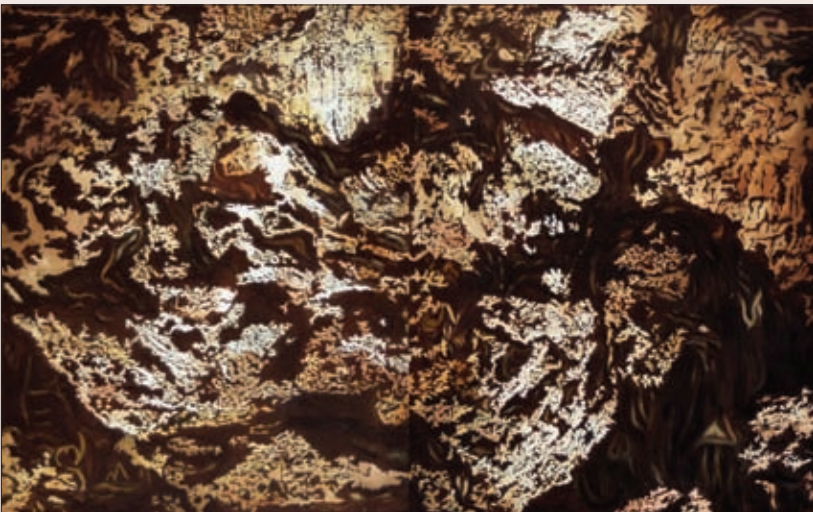
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Front cover: *Jonson Thirty three-Thirty four* 2006 Oil on canvas 80" x 50"

Back cover: *Jonson Thirty five-Thirty six* 2006 Oil on canvas 100" x 40"



Jonson Thirteen-Fourteen 2005 Oil on canvas 50"x 40"

Painting doesn't have to be about anything.

It becomes what it is. A canvas reveals its identity instantaneously—a portrait, a still life, a landscape. A particular painting can be recognized by style—expressionism, abstraction, modernism, cubism, abstract expressionism, conceptualism, minimalism, or any -ism between and beyond. Sometimes a painting does not feel bound to reveal to the viewer anything, and that silence takes on significance, yet it offers the viewer passage into its world and presents clues sufficient to initiate a search for magnitude and meaning. This is precisely what happens with *Mass: Of Our World*, the powerful new work by Alan Paine Radebaugh.

One could simply call Radebaugh's style lyrical abstraction and be done with it. While that label sounds like it might have promise and has perhaps been used in the past to describe his work, it isn't even close. Radebaugh's recent paintings, unique for their simplicity and their complicity, inspire a new round of questions. Is *Mass* a maze or a map? What are the secrets it wants to divulge? The individual pieces appear organic, driven by some unstated purpose. Initially, they seem to bridge the viewer back to the painter's previous work. Certain familiar forms start to emerge, but they are more like a memory of the imagery found in earlier series. In fact, with the very first canvas, Radebaugh begins to deconstruct his whole idea of painting, and with the resulting fragments and micro-matter he rebuilds his entire visual base, allowing an abridged style and renewed energy to take over. The transformation is seamless. The key to its nuance is process.

The title of Radebaugh's current group of paintings, *Mass: Of Our World*, sheds light on his thinking as an artist. *Mass* talks about energy and momentum. The mass of an object is a fundamental property of that object, a numerical measure of its inertia, and a fundamental measure of the matter contained in the object. The orders of magnitude (mass) outline various elements ranging from a single human cell to the known universe, which has been defined as the summation of all particles and energy that exist and the space-time arena where all events occur.

With that in mind, my initial impression is that the *Mass* paintings are less about science than they are about music and light. They share the concomitant formal simplicity and complexity of music and match it to the constantly building and evanescent light that flows from canvas to canvas. Both music and light can be created and controlled. The unity of music and light makes the paintings accessible, at least ostensibly. However, at the epicenter of *Mass* is silence, which also resides at the core of music. Music, like the shape and form of the paintings,

distills in the works—sometimes coming with the softness of a wind chime, sometimes bursting out stridently, like the sound of a stone kicked loose and clacking down a hillside covered with rocks, only to stop suddenly and allow the underlying silence to surface. Light can be brightened, dimmed, reinvented, and refocused to reveal aspects of the form. Radebaugh, a technician, handles the interchange of the music and the light with superb skill.

The thirty-six paintings that make up *Mass: Of Our World* challenge the viewer to name them, then to name their source, almost as if their identification as a scientific exercise could lead to art. Each time I assume I know what an individual work attempts to convey I see some errant detail that makes me think I could be wrong. Nonetheless, at each viewing I am drawn into the paintings in a different way, lured into the paint, drawn into the light. That they seem in a state



Jonson One 2005 Oil on canvas 50"x 40"

of perpetual change is a testament of their strength. The works are more a journey than a description. They detail Radebaugh's experience. In this respect *Mass: Of Our World* is like a series of letters home; Radebaugh appears comfortable in the act of telling about them, but important details, key paragraphs, and even whole pages of his story appear mysteriously to be missing. Which is all right. Science proves its theory and the answer is immediate.

Art is different. It can offer a blueprint that sometimes leaves the impression of being written in a different language and therein, strangely, it discloses its truth.

Legerdemain is too easy a word to describe what Radebaugh accomplishes in this group of paintings. There is no sleight of hand. Radebaugh can more accurately be called a trickster (a term I am not using lightly). He controls and manipulates.

How one looks at the *Mass* canvases is the difference between taking a walk in the park or being lost in a dense forest. *Mass: Of Our World* is the forest that harbors, as opposed to the forest that holds.

With *Mass: Of Our World*, Radebaugh has come into his style. The method and progression of the actual painting in this series is authoritative and bold. What he had in mind, it seems, was to consider *Mass: Of Our World* in situ and thus to effectively separate it from his previous work. He planned the exhibition based on the specific space of the Jonson Gallery on the campus of the University of New Mexico, creating, in a sense, a world. The initial result is architectural, a floor plan and a wall plan, through which the viewer gains insight into Radebaugh's mode of operation. While this information provides clues about the paintings, it finally renders few answers and even fewer easy solutions, thus helping Radebaugh to keep their mysterious quality alive.

The painter has taken the Jonson Gallery as the framework for a roadmap to his painting. He appropriates the gallery space in the same way he fills a canvas—prodigiously. The idea that he identifies the works as the Jonson paintings is revealing. More significant is, I think, that he planned them to in fact negate the museum's space and master its light. Thus the meaning of the mass theory keeps growing as it works its way into his art.

The structure of a Radebaugh painting is like the structure of a flower. And a review of that structure provides a glimpse into how Radebaugh sees his universe. We are not given a pot of sunflowers the way Van Gogh offered it, a decorated vase canted on a table, with a profusion of long-stemmed blossoms bristling from its mouth. Radebaugh shows significantly less: the base of a petal attaching to the lip of a receptacle with just a sliver of what might be filament and pistil. To further complicate matters, Radebaugh offers this view in a dominant repeating pattern that affects not only the imagery in a single painting but also the imagery in *Mass: Of Our World* as a collective whole. Added to that complication is the fact that we might be observing this fragmentary imagery (if it is indeed fragmentary) from a slow-moving train, the images blurring just enough to leave us uncertain about what we are seeing. The artifice is akin to time travel—except we have no indication whether we are going back or shooting forward, whether we are looking down into the object or up into the object. The dark in any painting may be the dark in the negative space, although it can just as easily be the light in the negative space, perception endlessly reversing itself.

The density of the abstract form along with an exacting attention to detail in the application of the paint leaves the *Mass* canvases a troubling edge. Radebaugh's balancing act is to maintain density and still paint some air into the form, to allow it to breathe. Here again, light and dark do not declare which is density and which is air. The truth is that in these paintings density and air could be perfectly interchangeable. Or they could be both.

The *Mass* paintings hint at topography. Yet for them, in spite of the Jonson Gallery plan, no map is available, and a map, if it existed, would merely confuse and complicate. Some abstract painting suggests poetry. *Mass: Of Our World*, as previously noted, avoids that in favor of music. Here is not the quirky logic of Bach. Instead, the paintings as a whole possess the modern patterned structure of works by Steve Reich or Philip Glass—the form appearing to repeat without becoming repetitious, forming and reforming without losing itself in its own immediate past image.

Mass: Of Our World implies all the attributes of abstraction but as the spectator moves into the canvas she/he discovers nameless primal forms that imply an inner-earth quality or a rough-shaped but incomplete landscape. There are hints too of an imminent population waiting to be named or an individual threatening identification. This very possibility seems to catch the painter, who moves in

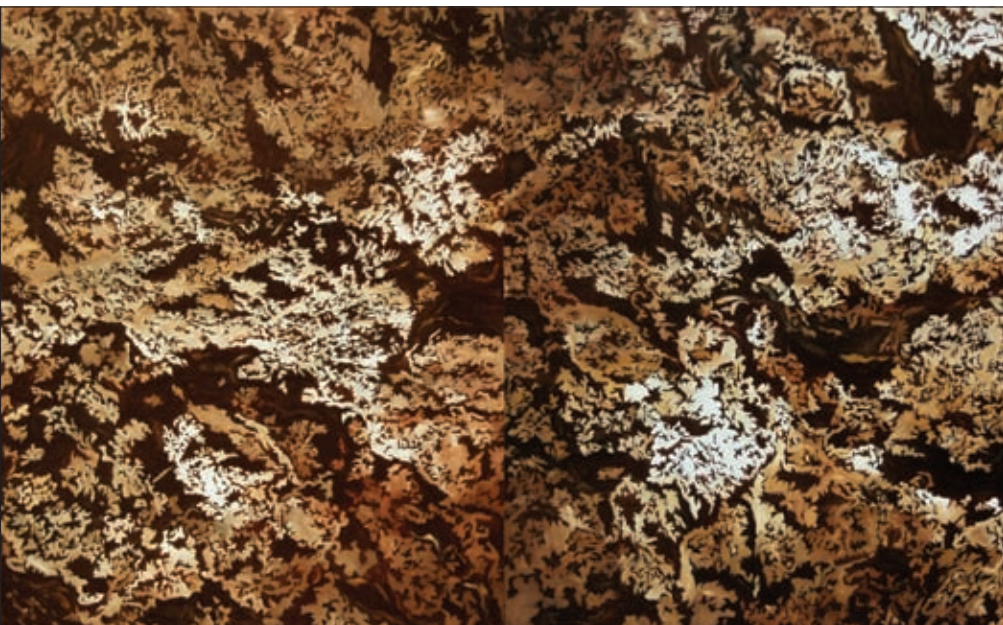


Jonson Seventeen-Eighteen-Nineteen-Twenty 2006 Oil on canvas 50"x 160"

small leaps and bounds, by surprise. Yet he deliberately makes no effort to correct the absence of information.

The paintings that make up *Mass: Of Our World* call attention to everything except their own circumstantialities. This is partly due to the mysterious interplay Radebaugh insinuates between line and form, which, in turn, keeps the viewer searching for an explanation as to why everything that emanates from the canvases seems so familiar. We are reminded that these are not so much individual paintings as fragments of a large complex work. Although they were painted as individual pieces, certain canvases were subsequently joined to create the larger pieces Radebaugh intended them to finally become. There arises for the viewer a strong conviction that the works, the diptychs, the triptychs, the tetrads, form some natural progression and that collectively they are destined to answer the questions they elicit. To that end, they again present only a crisp, impressive silence.

The paintings do not repeat but they echo one another and ultimately neither the question they ask nor the answer they never give matters. Important to each canvas is motion, the movement within the paint that dominates each visual plane. They remain constantly in flux. Their pattern seems small but, without a comparison, who can attest to that. Deception lurks in every brushstroke. Line



plays back upon itself. Fusion defuses. No clear frame of reference announces. *Mass: Of Our World* is first and foremost about painting as an act. Likewise, painting reflects Radebaugh. He is all about the pigment and the brush. He trusts the brush and he loses himself in the brush. In *Mass* there are no cheap tricks, no gratuitous exploitation of the latest art fad. Radebaugh paints. He spends his hours confronting the canvas, choosing color, and making his current gesture answer to his last brushstroke. In talking about his hours at the easel Radebaugh leaves one with the feeling that for him painting is a kind of penitence; but he does not mean his description to be a negative comment. He confesses, in fact, that the work of painting, although long and exhausting, leaves him with a feeling of joy.

Is Radebaugh's enterprise about content or process? Perhaps, in the framework of *Mass: Of Our World*, they are the same thing. Radebaugh comes to the canvas full of questions and then he paints until those questions are quieted by the arbitrary content inherent in the images he offers.

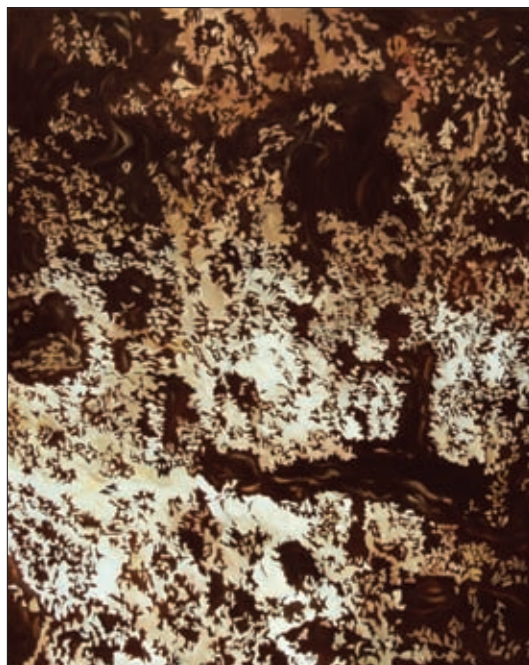
Radebaugh is clearly a landscape painter. Yet he is a landscape painter of a very different kind. He is perfectly willing to share the part he sees, just as he sees it, which is the domain of landscape art. To a certain degree Radebaugh is doing what Jackson Pollock did as an artist. Pollock, also a landscape painter of sorts, performed drips and gestures that anyone can see as drips and gestures. The drips and pours and splashes were not anything in themselves but as a whole, on the canvas, they become painting. Movement and action defined the canvas. They were the metaphor. In the end, the painting was the painting.

Radebaugh, too, is an action painter. He is perfectly in sync with his particular vision. The action he presents is in slow motion, few drips, if any, but plenty of gesture. The painting is what he creates. And it may be the whole story. If Pollock and others of the abstract expressionist school freed line and form from their traditional roles in painting, Radebaugh has responded to their spontaneity and extended it with his almost self-conscious linear detailing. It appears to be form for form's sake, line for line's sake, its end-product a world unlike any other. In this respect Radebaugh reminds one of J. M. W. Turner. Recognized for his ability to paint light, Turner in his later works saw the world from a perspective few painters could ever share. In fact, the art historian David Piper called Turner's late paintings "fantastic puzzles," a label that might easily apply to the body of Radebaugh's *Mass: Of Our World*.

A kind of playfulness manifests in Radebaugh's biomorphic forms. Willem de Kooning and scores of other artists in the last century, including Franz Kline and Robert Motherwell, worked with biomorphic shapes. Mark Tobey employed a similar densely fit-together pattern of apparently random lines and forms that fed his spirit and that he defined as holy in content. Radebaugh approaches biomorphic form in his own manner, presenting pattern that looks like pattern yet lacks pattern, content so ambiguous it hedges, form canceling itself by blindly reforming its original manifestation, no shape quite like the last one. To this end, Radebaugh vigorously controls the painting process.

An overall pictorial uncertainty characterizes *Mass: Of Our World* and possibly accounts for its distinctiveness. The images that inhabit the works include none of the sensational lines and shapes that often distinguish abstract and abstract expressionist works.

Yet in *Mass* Radebaugh makes no overt statement of a destination. His interest is the trip. The imagery demands attention appropriate to the dedication that holds Radebaugh riveted to his canvases. Landscape is perfectly in the purview of abstraction. Radebaugh abandons himself to the freedom of abstraction, the arena in which he learned his craft; at the same time he insists on careful control of the brush, a tenet of landscape.



Jonson Sixteen 2006 Oil on canvas 50" x 40"

Radebaugh permits no prodigal color in *Mass*. Understanding that point is essential to understanding Radebaugh. He is in fact a skilled colorist, his infrequent flashes of color coming as a surprise. He allows color to appear sparingly, like another arcane element in his inexplicable universe. Still, color in *Mass* appears with the same ambiguity as form. Red, you wonder and then as you move

closer you see that what you assumed was red is a brushstroke of blue. Finally, your eye shifts and you lose it. The issue is not the absence of color, but color that disguises its richness.

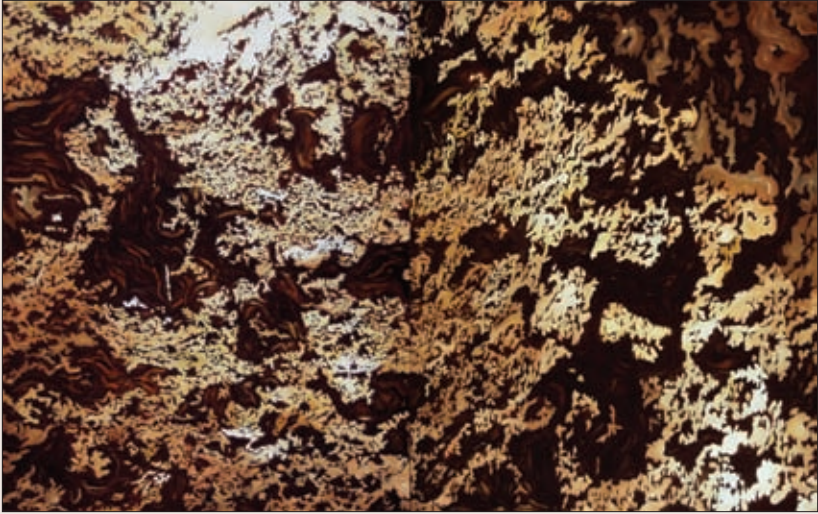
The paintings for all of their intricacies of muted color and patches of dark are sensuous in the same way that lace and brocade engage and still avoid the cloying intensity of their threadwork. Radebaugh is obviously in a position to dominate the painting and determine its outcome, but he is also bound to the brush and to his own penchant for chance. An essential feature of his work ethic is his ability to allow the painting moment to engross him and to lose himself to it. His focus is on the immediate—the shape, its color, and its hold on the contiguous space.

Mass: Of Our World generates more a sense of time than of space. In fact, space seems almost expendable. The movement that manifests, especially in the edges of the joined canvases, in their abruptness—a sensation felt no place else in the works—emphasizes the disjointed aspect of a hypothetical time-space event as it might differ from the familiar space-time. The theory applies to Radebaugh more as Edgar Allan Poe and H. G. Wells defined it than as seen in the works of Hermann Minkowski and Albert Einstein. Space, time, and structure were one thing in traditional art, or art prior to the mid-nineteenth century. They occupy a decidedly different place in contemporary art. Thought has changed, and thought has brought art and how art thinks about itself into new territory.

For example, Radebaugh has methodically rethought landscape painting; he has ripped apart landscape theory, abrogating all he found extraneous and unnecessary, and put it back together again. Radebaugh's procedure involves synthesis and reinvention. The forms it produces serve not as symbols. They are facts. They await the kind of objective correlative that will justify their being, an act Radebaugh entrusts to his viewers.

In *Mass: Of Our World*, the painted image is full and wonderfully deceptive. That the light and the dark seem somehow interchangeable is like watching the paintings react to their own reality. The procedure entices the viewer back to the trickster. This image of a unique figure with an unusual approach to a shifting universe characterizes Radebaugh and embodies everything he has done to bring this work to life—as if he has finally learned what it is he meant to say all along.

Douglas Kent Hall



Jonson Twenty eight-Twenty nine 2006 Oil on canvas 50"x 40"

Douglas Kent Hall, writer and photographer, received the Medici Gold Medal Career Award, Florence Biennale Internazionale Dell'Arte Contemporanea, 2005 and the New Mexico Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts, 2005. His photographs are in many private and public collections, among them the Albuquerque Museum; New Mexico Museum of Art; Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, France; Brooklyn Museum; Museum of the American West, Los Angeles. He has published 25 books. His most recent *In New Mexico Light*, 2007 was a finalist for the 2008 New Mexico Book Award for Art and won the 2008 Hoffer Book Award for Art.

Alan Paine Radebaugh, artist, spent two and a half years painting the 36 canvasses for *Mass: of Our World*, exhibited at Jonson Gallery of the University of New Mexico Art Museum in 2007. He received Albuquerque Arts Alliance Bravos Award for Excellence in Visual Arts in 2008 for the exhibition. Widely exhibited, his paintings appear in *New Mexico Capital Art Foundation Catalogue*, 1998 and *Abstract Art: New Mexico Artist Series*, 2003. Permanent collections include the Albuquerque Museum, New Mexico Museum of Art, University of New Mexico Museum of Art, Ohio State University—Shisler Center, and Portland Museum of Art.

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