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ABSTRACT ILLUSIONISM: A PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT FROM THE PROSPECTIVE PUBLICATION TITLED "GEORGE GREEN 1976-2005: THIRTY YEARS OF ILLUSION"

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A by-product of a series of group and thematic exhibitions from the mid-Seventies, it has been called in several ways, predominantly *Abstract Illusionism* and *Trompe l'Oeil Abstraction*, without having being fully historicized yet. My research is currently focused primarily on the artist George Green, whose presence is documented from the first years of development of this stylistic tendency.

Following an early exhibition organized in 1976 at the Paul Mellon Arts Center in Wallingford, Connecticut, in 1977 the Rice University in Houston, Texas organized the exhibition *Seven New York Artists: Abstract Illusionism.*

Fig.1: George D. Green, Untitled #9, 1976
(courtesy the artist)

These first exhibitions are mentioned in later catalogs, however it is very hard to find any documentation about them. The first catalog available dates back to 1978, when the Springfield Museum

of Fine Arts in Massachussets held an exhibition titled *Abstract Illusionism,*[1] where George Green's work was exhibited together with those of the American-Yugoslavian Chris Britz, and with the Americans James Havard, Jack Lembeck, Michael Gallagher and Paul KaneIn the catalog's introduction, Robert Henning admitted the *"controversial"* nature of these works, which were vaguely and prematurely suggesting a new style or movement, therefore raising a question that could not have any answer at that time: *"Why and how it is significant; is it a legitimate 'style' or merely an offshoot; in what way are the individual works effective and how do they relate to the general style?"*.[2]

In that same exhibition, the critic Jay Richard DiBiaso dated the antecedents of Abstract Illusionism as far back as the Romans, the Dutch still-lifes of the XVII century, the American tradition of illusionist painting in the XIX century, notably John Haberle, William Harnett, Richard Goodwin, and finally the most recent developments of Op Art, which is generically mentioned in catalogue.[3]

Fig. 2: George D. Green, *Bare-Narious-Ojay*, 1979
(courtesy the artist)

Of all the paintings exhibited, the works by James Havard and Jack Lembeck seem more 'classical', since these artists insert in their delicate abstractions subtle nuances and tonal passages in the best Italian Renaissance tradition of *sfumato*. On the contrary, George Green's work shows a major degree of

[1] My sincere gratitude to the Springfield Art Museum in Springfield, Massachussets, and to Louis K. Meisel Gallery, New York for their help in getting these first documents.
[2] Robert Henning, Jr, *Introduction*, in *Abstract Illusionism*, catalog, Springfield Art Museum, Springfield, Massachussets, September 24th – October 29th, 1978 (also travelling to the Danforth Museum, Framingham, Massachussets, January 17th – March 4th, 1979).
[3] Jay Richard DiBiaso, *Abstract Illusionism*, Ibid.

appropriation of the American modernist tradition of the hard-edge technique, which has been introduced in the Sixties by artists such as Ellsworth Kelly, Kenneth Noland, and later by Al Held.

Soon after that exhibition, Abstract Illusionism has been shown in several occasions within the years 1979-80: at Denver Art Museum in the summer 1979; at the University of Southern California in the fall 1979; at the Honolulu Academy of Art in spring 1980; at the Oakland Museum in the summer 1980; at the Art Museum of the University of Texas at Austin in Fall 1980; finally, at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University in winter 1980. A grant from the National Endowment for The Arts sponsored the exhibition, and this shows the attention that Abstract Illusionism was given in those early years.

In the catalog of the exhibition at the Denver Art Museum, Donald J. Brewer refers back to Joseph Albers' research in the optical reversal phenomena, where the surfaces are awkwardly pushed forward or pulled inward by the outlines.[4] It is an optical-geometric effect, in a sense similar to Hans Hoffman's *push-pull* theories, however by Albers applied to rigorously geometric grids. Therefore, there is an interesting antecedent to the deceptive awkward spaces created by Abstract Illusionists. As Brewer reminds, the link between Abstract Illusionists and Albers has been historically created by the exhibition *Abstract Trompe l'Oeil*, held in 1965 at Sidney Janis Gallery in New York,[5] the same one that seven years later will organize an exhibition that brought the American Photorealism to international attention. In the 1965 exhibition, the *trompe l'oeil* abstractionists were not considered those artists, such as Green, Havard, Lembeck, Gallagher, etc., that ten years later will be defined by Louis Meisel as Abstract Illusionists, rather the hard-edge post-painterly abstractionists, such as Albers and even the Op artist Vasarely among others. All these definition problems add to the general confusion, which on one side had discouraged distinct and definitive historical labels (corresponding to the truth, since we are not in front of a programmatic artistic movement), on the other side had put such interesting developments on the margins of art history.

In 1980, Edward Lucie-Smith published the book *Art in the Seventies*: one paragraph, specifically devoted to Abstract Illusionism in painting, mentioned James Havard and Jack Lembeck, including in the tendency even Al Held,[6] an artist nowadays more generally classified under the Hard-Edge painting, together with the post-painterly abstractionists Ellsworth Kelly and Kenneth Noland.[7] Lucie-Smith reminded three fundamental antecedents to Abstract Illusionism: "*the Cubist concept of 'shallow space'*", the Abstract Expressionist gesture and its parody by the American Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein (*Big Painting*, 1965, which was actually, in the artist's intention, more an act of respect and admiration than an act of opposition[8]); finally, the *trompe-l'oeil* artists of the late XIX century.[9] Starting from the Abstract Expressionists' brush strokes, which *per-se* would represent the process of painting, and from their parody by Lichtenstein, the Abstract Illusionists gave them the dignity of subject matter and physical consistency by casting shadows, therefore detaching them from the picture plane, giving them the consistency of three-dimensional objects and suggesting their flotation in a three-dimensional space, which contradicts the

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[4] Donald J. Brewer, *Introduction*, in *Reality of Illusion*, exhibition catalogue, Denver Art Museum, July 13 – August 26th, 1979; University of Southern California Art Galleries, October 11th – November 25th, 1979; Honolulu Academy of Art, April 4th – May 18th, 1980; Oakland Museum, June 17th – July 27th, 1980; University Art Museum, University of Texas, Austin, September 4th – October 19th, 1980; Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, November 15th – December 30th, 1980, 16.

[5] Ibid.,18.

[6] Edward Lucie-Smith, *Art in the Seventies* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), 48.

[7] H.H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art* (Upper Saddle River NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004), 531-536.

[8] Lucy R. Lippard, *New York* Pop, in Lucy R. Lippard, ed., *Pop Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 87.

[9] Edward Lucie-Smith, 48.

modernist dogma of a formalistically two-dimensional limit of the canvas, as much as what Lucie-Smith defines as *"the ideas that the canvas and what is painted on it must be completely unified"*.[10]

In the catalog of the exhibition organized in October 1983 at California State University in Long Beach, titled *Trompe l'Oeil Abstraction,* Jane K. Bledsoe has referred back to the 17th century Dutch still-lifes, not just for the high degree of *trompe l'oeil fidelity*, but for the recently discovered challenges of the gravity laws in some paintings.[11]

George Green's paintings of the last Seventies represents a curious synthesis of all these previous artistic developments. In *Bare-Narious-Ojay*, 1979 (fig.2), the frame conceptually frames the abstract illusion: the historical antecedents are mainly Malcolm Morley's conceptual denial of illusionistic power to the depicted realism through the introduction of a realistically painted frame in his paintings of the mid-Sixties, as much as Audrey Flack's *push-pull* dynamic forces between the frames and the still-lifes depicted in her *Gray Border Series* of the mid-1970's.

[10] Ibid., 48.

[11] Jane K. Bledsoe, *Centric 9 – Trompe L'Oeil Abstraction,* exhibition brochure, The University Art Museum, California State University, Long Beach, October 11-30th,1983.

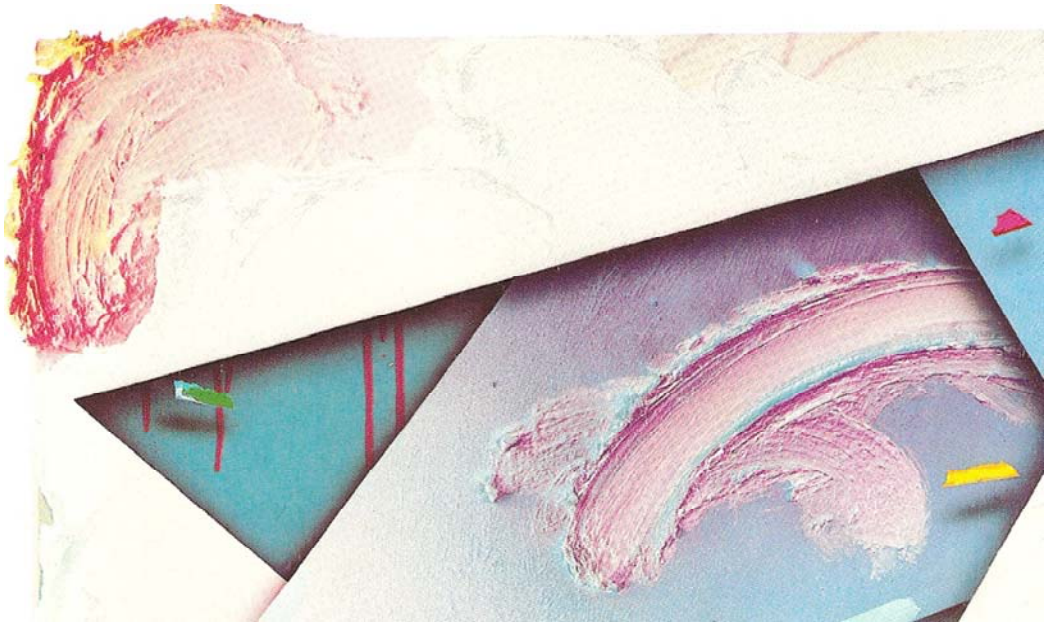

Fig.3: George D. Green, *Mia-Comet*, 1981 and detail
(courtesy the artist)

Furthermore, as *Mia-Comet* (fig.3) shows, especially in the left upper side of the painting, the Abstract Expressionist gesture emerges from the canvas, exiting the edges, and therefore adding an element of improvisation and impulsivity to what seems an architecture of geometric shapes, which overlap each other with a *push-pull* effect which again reminds the abstract work of Hans Hofmann. The gesture will become more and more dominant in the Eighties, so that it will shape the canvas.

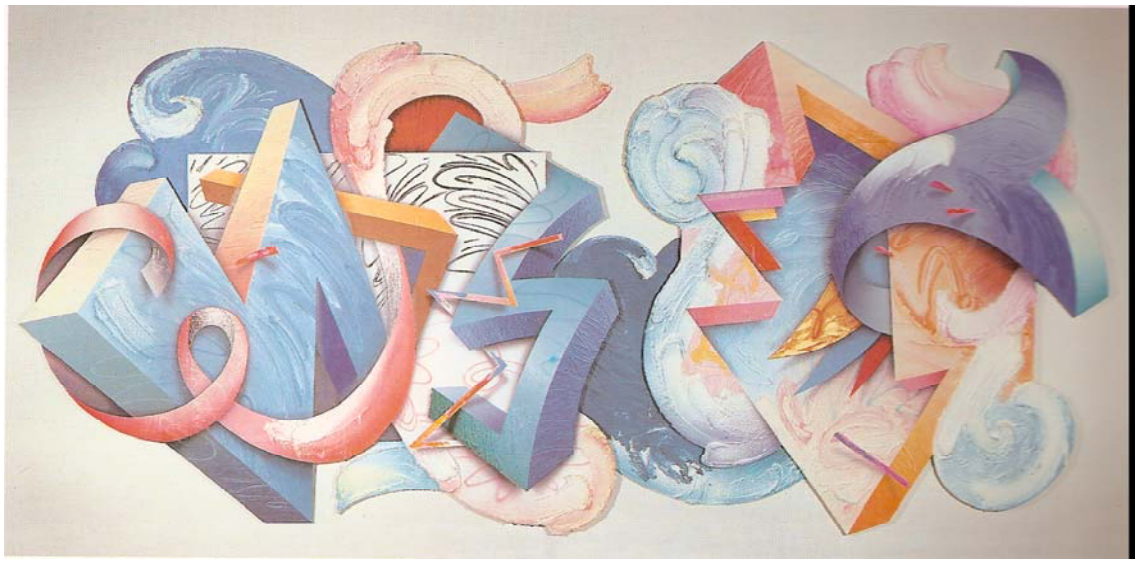

Fig. 4: George D. Green, *Trouble at Sea,* 1985
(courtesy the artist)

The Eighties were those years in which several notable artists, including Elizabeth Murray and Tom Wesselmann, were irregularly shaping their canvasses. It is important to point out that, in the specific case of George Green, the shaped canvas is not an already shaped sculptural construction to paint over, on the contrary it constitutes the continuation of the artist's impulsive painting gesture, whose vibrant energy is emphasized through the use of brilliant colors and a paint thickener applied to the acrylic, in order to give it more thickness and a three-dimensional consistency.

In 1984, an exhibition titled *Breaking the Plane* occurred at the Louis K. Meisel Gallery, displaying works of Michael Gallagher, George Green, Jorge Stever, James Havard, Tony King and Jack Lembeck. Between 1984 and 1986, the same exhibition involved also major museums and Academic institutions, such as the Pennsylvania State University Museum of Art, the Jacksonville Art Museum in Florida, the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University, in Ithaca, NY. As in the 1979-80 exhibition, the German artist Jorge Stever was included once again.

The author of the essay in catalog, Peter Frank, defined Abstract Illusionism in terms of a reaction: on one side to the proliferation of non-studio art (Land Art, Performance Art, Conceptual Art, Video Art, etc.) between the late 1960's and the early 1970's; on the other side, to the prevalent Greenberg's and Minimalist formalism, diffused at the time of Abstract Expressionism, which reaffirmed "*the integrity of the picture plane"*: "*Thus, all paint ought either to saturate the canvas or lie upon it, and all formal incident should be pushed to the edges of the picture"*.[12] Frank emphasized the pure artificiality of the term coined to group these artists. Indeed, according to Frank, what distinguishes this style from that of several other American 'movements' in the XX century, is that they do not share the general European avant-garde attitude, most of the American 'movements' originate spontaneously, and later they get a label which often has a marketing purpose.[13] Frank has specified that only Gallagher has specifically acknowledged the influence of Lembeck in his developing the technique, while Green, Havard, King *"all came to it independently"*[14]. There is also a consistent geographical variety in these artists: Michael Gallagher comes from California, George Green from Oregon, James Havard from Texas, Tony King from Massachussets, Jack Lembeck from Missouri.

However, speaking more in general of the spontaneous emergence of a new style, rather than a group or movement, the main general characteristics of Abstract Illusionist artworks, with a few exceptions, have been listed by Frank as being the following:

1. The use of the cast shadows device;
2. The painterly quality of their work;
3. The use of focalised compositions;
4. The lack of reference to the real world;
5. "*A serious concern for paradoxical visual situations"*.[15]

In particular, Green's paradox is defined by Frank as being *"purely graphic"*, since it involves *"discontinuous contours as well as multi-planar paints"*.[16]

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[12] Peter Frank, *Abstract inflected by Illusion: a Recent History*, in *Breaking the Plane: Stuart M. Speiser Collection* (New York: Louis K. Meisel Gallery, 1984). Clement Greenberg, in the essay *Towards a New Laocoon*, published in "Partisan Review" in Huly-August 1940, explained his concept of "purity" in art as "*willing acceptance of the limitations of the medium of the specific art"*, therefore accepting the two-dimensional nature of the painting. Clement Greenberg in Charles Harrison and Grant Wood, *Art in Theory 1900-2000, and Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing), 2003, 566. It is obvious that a number of artists representing abstract elements illusionistically casting shadows was seen as challenging the then widely accepted theories of Greenberg.

[13] Ibid. The quotation marks in the word „movement" amphasizes the artificiality of this concept and the inadequacy of the term.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

All of Green's paintings are visual paradoxes. In *Untitled #9,* 1976 (Fig.1), the ribbons seem to emerge from a white background, casting shadows and showing their fluidity by folding sometimes towards the canvas, sometimes towards the spectator. Their curvilinear top edges add to the three-dimensional illusion. Green's intention is at first to fool the spectator's eyes through the high believability of his absurd shapes and spaces. Then, after a few instants of being deceived, the spectator is invited to pay more careful attention to some details, which have been diligently spread throughout the canvas, as clues which reveal the eyes' deception: a piece of paper, covered by action painting, seems hanging up from one of these ribbons, and also another ribbon, the blue one in the left, seems to fold up and reveal the painting underneath. These are all clues to reveal that no matter how believable all of this is, it is just a pure illusion of the senses: we do not have to believe our eyes.

In *Trouble at Sea*, 1985 (fig.4), the bottom part of the sharp arrow-like shape in the right side of the painting seems to be pulled towards us by the geometries, the same that in its left side pull the arrow inside the canvas: the same shape is pushed and pulled in opposite directions, and this is visually intriguing since being logically unacceptable. This interplay has been created by using light colors for having the bottom part of the arrow emerging, and a progressively more profound blue to have the same arrow receding in another point. And then again, the fluctuating masking-tape fragment pushes the top of the arrow (which is in the bottom part of the canvas) in a sort of intermediary plane. In the left side of the same painting, another daring blue geometric shape has been vigorously foreshortened in diagonal, therefore suggesting a depth of space coming towards us, which is contradicted by the receding arrow in the right side of the canvas.

[16] Ibid.

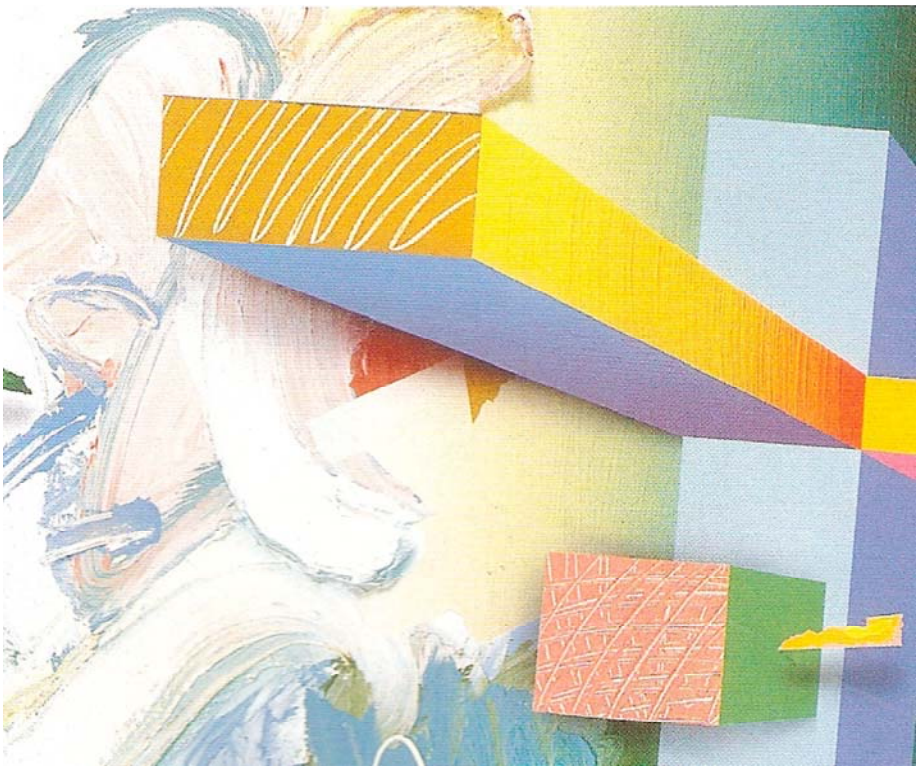

Fig. 5: George D. Green, *Animation & Imagination,* 1990, and detail
(courtesy the artist)

The deception becomes more and more sophisticated by time: in *Animation & Imagination*, 1990 (Fig.5), a complex and solid geometric grid recedes in the right side of the canvas, therefore contradicting the tangle of brush strokes in the left side, which are parallel to the picture plane. This visual paradox seems to have been possible through a progressive rendering of the background in the right side more and more chromatically undetermined and dark.

As stated by the artist, "No matter how close you look this illusion never breaks down". This statement is visible in *187,000 Miles Per Second*, 1990 (figg.6-15), which I had the fortune to photograph in the new artist's studio around Portland, Oregon.

Figg. 6 through 15: 187,000 *Miles Per Second*, 1990, and two details (photo: Leda Cempellin, courtesy George D. Green)

Green's abstract fantasies of the early Nineties underwent a progressive illusionist 'solidification' until they got a paradoxical wood-like and solid structure, as in the case of *Pictures from the Monroe: Free Flow 27* (Fig.16), 2000. In this painting, the abstract-geometric fantasies become frames that hold tiny sections of landscape, as the clouds above right - maybe a recall of Romantic cloud studies by Constable, or the seascape in the center.

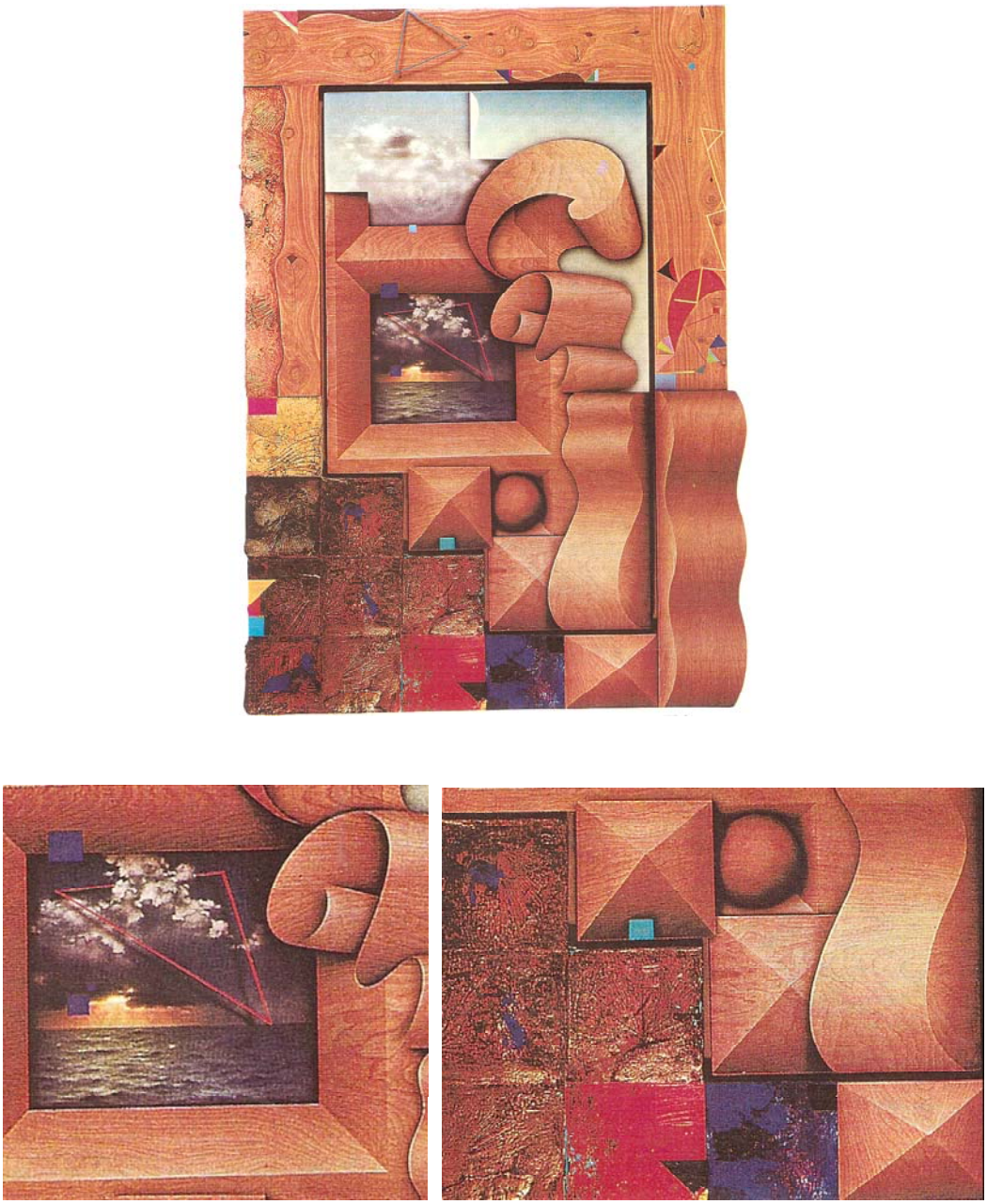

Fig. 16: George D. Green, *Pictures from the Monroe: Free Flow, 27*, 2000, and details (courtesy the artist)

This painting represents a struggle in several formal directions. First of all, between the landscape fragments, represented with a degree of fidelity that Green has admitted having the superb skills of the representational artist Don Eddy as constant reference, and the abstract geometries and shapes overlapping and fluctuating across it, and even sometimes, interacting with the illusion, as in the case of the red triangle crossing the clouds. Moreover, there is a struggle between the painted frame in the upper half of the painting, whose color is actually the natural birch panel used for the painting, and the illusion of sculptural fragments assembled together in the right portion of the painting. Indeed, this work is about illusion: everything here can be questioned, whether a representational landscape, or abstract geometries,

or thick paint that imitates sculpture, or even those parts of the frame which seem a painted representational illusion, but they are actually the real birch panel emerging and mixing with the painted parts.

In the following years, the fragments of landscapes have grown broader until they occupy the whole painting as in *The Elements,* 2004 (fig.17a and 17b), which originated as a diptych. Indeed, an interesting tension occurs between the right panel, which represents the central Oregon coast with a high degree of fidelity, and the left panel, which is a totally invented seascape, as a result of elements borrowed from different photographs, which have been taken in different geographic places. It is absolutely unlikely to see such a dramatic weather condition (multiple tornadoes associated with lightning) in the east coast of Oregon. Therefore, even in the illusion of two representational landscapes, we see a tension between credibility and improbability, with the difference that this tension is increased by its distribution in the larger and divided space of the diptych.

Figg. 17a and 17b: George D. Green, *The Elements*, 2004
(courtesy the artist)

By using these few examples, we have seen that through the singular career of this artist a number of interesting phases, very different from each other, occurred. However, by observing a bigger number of his paintings, it becomes clear that such transformations happened gradually, so that each painting would originate from the progressive discovery and development of elements observed in the previous ones. Indeed, George D. Green has justified these changes by his consistent attitude of "*positive acceptance of chance and error*", so that he does not actively try to cause a change, rather he allows the change to occur in his work. The artist has used the evolutionary theory of the *Punctuated Equilibria,* developed by the scientists Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould in the 1970s, as the most efficient metaphor to explain the developments of his work.

This theory, recently appeared in paleontology studies in order to explain the notable changes in species by time through the observation of fossils, justified these alternate phases of long stasis and sudden changes by assuming that evolutionary changes occur by speciation, that is the scission of an ancestral species into two or more derivative species; this could happen when a minority segment of a

species is isolated and put in peripheral zones (rather than the zone where the mother species lives), where more necessary is the development of mutations in order to guarantee the survival.[17]

In the case of Green's painting, what in the past occupied a marginal position, for instance the little fragments of figurative landscapes, has been given the chance to survive and to progressively expand, until more recently it occupies almost all the entire canvas. The most notable example, coming back to the early years of Abstract Illusionism, of an element which has been given the chance to survive and develop among predominant elements different and opposed to it, has been the illusionist depiction of masking tape fragments (see fig.2): "*Another example of acceptance of chance and error in my paintings: all of the small floating shapes in the paintings between 1976 and 2000 had their origin in paint splattered masking tape scraps. My process of masking out each individual shape before painting generated these. After painting each shape I would tear the tape off the edge and temporarily stick it randomly on other parts of the painting, just to quickly get it out of the way. I noticed that these randomly placed scraps were often quite beautiful. Hence, the floating color element in most of the pictures from this period*" (George D. Green, interview, 2004).

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* Constance W. Glenn, University Art Museum at California State University, Long Beach, California.

[17] Stephen Jay Gould, *Il Pollice del Panda. Riflessioni sulla Storia Naturale*, trans. Simona Cabib (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1983), 208-10.