

## MICHAEL MARSHALL

*Born in 1953 in St. Louis, Missouri  
Lives and works in Hilo, Hawai'i*

A single mark or stroke of color rests in a limbo of possibility. A second mark, joining it, begins to create the potential for visual dialogue, for spatial relationship. A third mark—and each that might follow—allows for increasingly complex articulation of space, moving across the plane of paper or canvas, or into and beyond it. The work of painter Michael Marshall often involves a complex kind of weighing and measuring, intuitive rather than calculated, in which a reading of and response to what is already visible on the surface of the work leads to a series of subtle adjustments in realizing what is possible as a next step. The frame of reference may be defined entirely by the working surface and the interaction of the marks upon it, or may on occasion expand to bring into play additional responses to other stimuli, including the natural environment. While Marshall is part of a lineage of expressive abstraction that forms the backbone of art of the last century, he has risen to the challenge of developing his own distinct visual language within that tradition.

In the summer of 1974, the year before he earned his BFA in painting from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, Marshall attended the Yale Summer School of Music and Art, where he partici-

pated in a drawing workshop with Gabriel Laderman. During that summer, Marshall retreated to the landscape, hoping to clarify what were initially bewildering concepts. In the weeks that followed, something clicked for the young artist. As he recalls, "Working in vine charcoal with a limited range of finely tuned marks, the notations began to organize the feel of the space that had unfolded in front of me." Add to that the still-potent legacy of Cubism that transformed pictorial space from something perspectival, fixed and singular, to something fluid and multifaceted, and Marshall began to gather what would continue to grow into a substantial repertoire of strategies for work. He has also come to appreciate, in retrospect, the periods of retreat that precede times of new growth.

After receiving his BFA, Marshall entered the graduate program in painting and drawing at Yale University working with several members of the faculty including William Bailey, Bernard Chaet, Al Held, Lester Johnson, John Walker, and Gretna Campbell (for whom he served as a teaching assistant for intermediate painting.) He received his MFA in 1977 and subsequently returned to St. Louis,

where he became a member of the faculties of Maryville College, Fontbonne College and Washington University between 1977 and 1984. In 1984, Marshall accepted a position at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo, where he thought he might remain for a couple of years before returning to the continental U.S. Like so many others, he found the islands increasingly compelling, and became connected to a multi-cultural environment that he felt was profoundly moving, feeding him in ways he did not fully understand. Marshall is now an Associate Professor at UH-Hilo, but has retained strong ties to his hometown, where members of his family still reside, and where he continues to exhibit in regular solo exhibitions.

Painting is an essential part of the way in which Marshall processes the stimulation and sensory energy from the world around him, including the natural environment, his own young children, the students he teaches, and the conceptual challenges of the work itself. Part of the experience includes, of course, the pure pleasure of the materials themselves, whether acrylics, enamels and oil sticks, or more exotic substances such as vine charcoal soaked in linseed oil, or India ink mixed with egg yolk (a medium earlier used by

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the sculptor David Smith.) Another aspect of the work that has grown in strength is Marshall's vocabulary—a variety of line weights, fields of color ranging from the thinnest skins to dense impasto, from dry-brush to viscous layers, matte and reflective surfaces, marks incised, textures articulated with repetitive strokes—now fully orchestrated.

Marshall has found that as his work continues to evolve, he has come to rely more on intuition to determine the moves made in the work. He notes, "I've become more aware of my present-day circumstances—of just living with my family and my children, for example—that shape the work in unexpected ways. Certain images will emerge that will be coded and abstract for others, but very obvious to me in terms of what inspired them."

The emphasis is thus on process, ever mindful of the fundamental challenges of dealing with marks and colors, spaces and forms, attuned to the perceptual cues that even in abstract work remain primary. The challenge persists, directed toward seeking a way to reach a certain resonance in the work, to create something

that has its own presence. Marshall acknowledges, "It's an uncanny thing, but the painting will make itself if you let it." So he tries not to compose an image beforehand, and for that reason resists working from pre-configured arrangements of objects, preferring to find order from the seeming "dis-order" of things placed more randomly or disparately within his perceptual field or physical environment. For that reason too, few works are titled, remaining open to the personal associations of individual viewers.

The emphasis on process carries with it implications of an internal history—not in the sense of a story related to subject matter, but of a narrative about the process itself, and about the mind and hand that guided it. This is particularly evident in Marshall's work, in which multiple layers of material and visual information create an integrated summary of what was, in the making, a series of stages, a sequence of adjustments, even course corrections. This is more visible in works that employ partial or more transparent layers, less so in those in which opaque layers verge on the impenetrable. *Tide*, a work on pale blue paper, distills the flow of water juxtaposed with shoreline (in which

one might envision tide pools) in more discrete layers and passages of drippy black enamel, broader and more brushy areas of green and a band of deeper blue that moves across the paper, echoing the circular motifs in concentric bands. Marshall evokes the meeting of elements, the phenomena of pools and islands, while remaining aloof from the confines of representation. That same tension between evocation and resistance is evident other works, including *Land and Sea*, a more multi-layered work, in which he also brings into play the use of white markings that anchor the surface, and dark lines that tend to break through the layers of scumbled color.

Despite the emphasis on process and the energy made visible in the work, Marshall understands, through its existential implications, the way in which the work must emerge from a space created by sitting still. Action and reaction are part of the process of painting; action and contemplation are equally part of self-discovery. As he has observed, "The work and making it says who I am. This has been my voice, all these years."