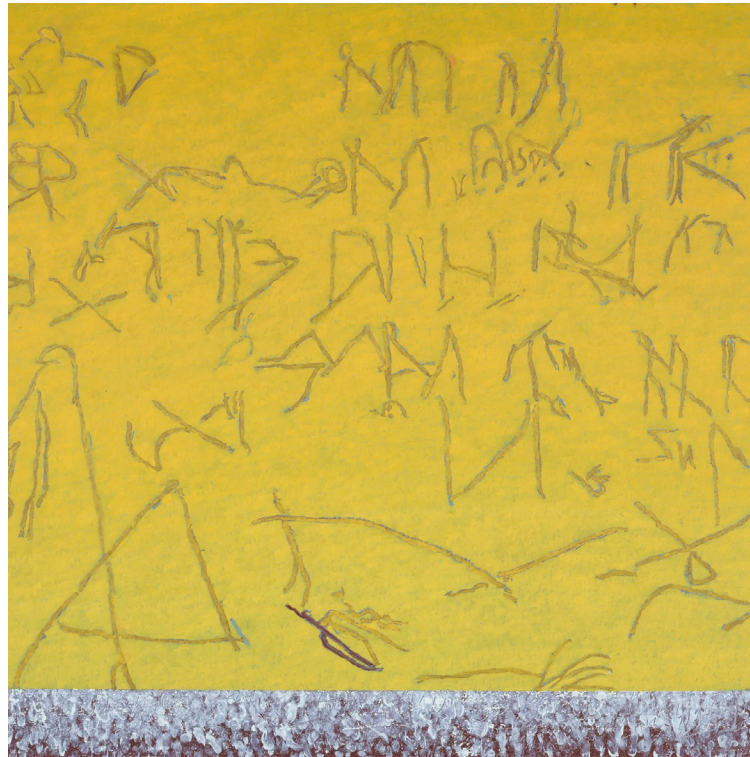


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Warren Rohrer: *Return to Land*

By Alex Grimley

LOCKSGALLERY



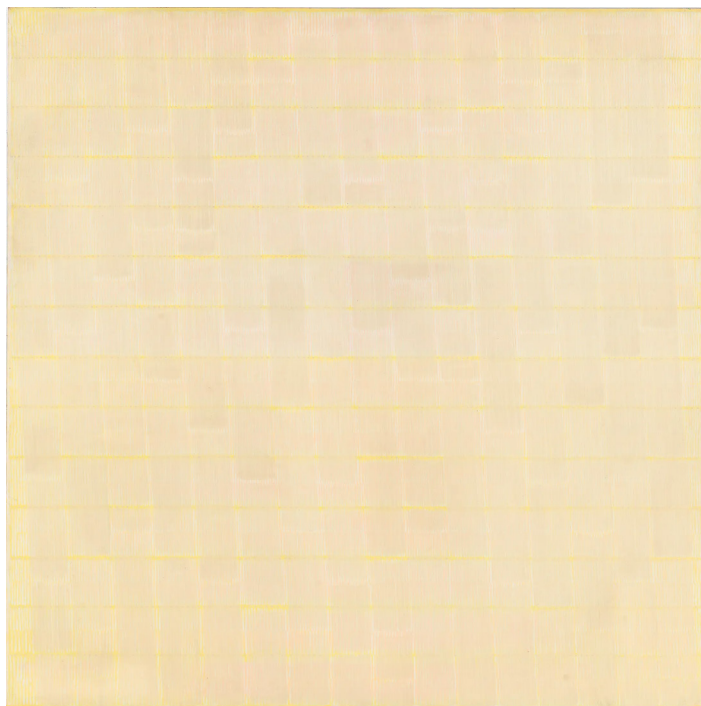
Warren Rohrer, *Field: Language 7*, 1990, oil on linen, 54 1/4 x 54 1/2 inches

Warren Rohrer: *Return to Land*
Locks Gallery
October 4–November 30, 2024
Philadelphia

The interchange between landscape painting and abstraction has been generative to art in both genres for over a century. Near the advent of modernism, in the middle of the nineteenth century, before abstraction had been imagined, landscape painters like Gustave Courbet and Albert Pinkham Ryder were knifing and scraping oil paint in such a way to imitate the ruggedness and tactility of nature rather than merely representing its visual appearance. Two of the early pioneers of abstraction, Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, worked through and relied upon natural

phenomena in their journey, while in the post-war period, landscape painters like Neil Welliver and Alex Katz advanced a “post-abstract” vocabulary. Abstract artists like Helen Frankenthaler and Per Kirkeby developed styles informed by naturalism, and others like Jake Berthot shifted definitively from one manner to the other. Others still—Eric Aho, Lucas Arruda—work in a space between the two.

For an abstract painter, and a relatively economical one at that, Warren Rohrer’s art reflects his deep engagement with and close observation of the rural Pennsylvania landscape that his family first settled in the early 1700s. The twelve paintings in *Return to Land* at Locks Gallery, dating from the 1970s to the early 1990s, show the subtle changes in Rohrer’s work as he gradually shifted his focus from light to land. Rohrer was, first and foremost, a colorist, and it was in pursuit of color’s expressivity that he developed the structure of his mature paintings in the early seventies.

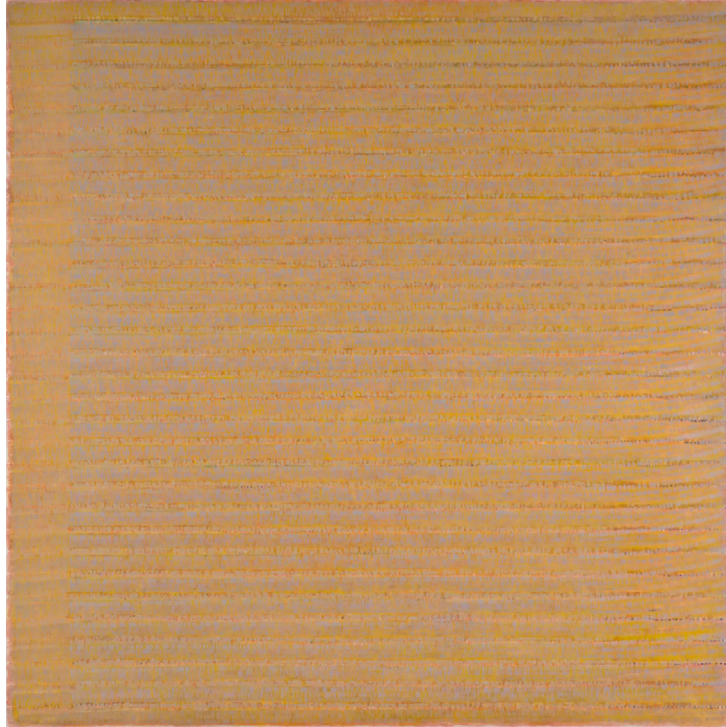


Warren Rohrer, *White Wheat*, 1973, oil on linen, 60 x 60 inches

The earliest painting in the current show was completed in 1973, a transitional moment in his career. Rohrer became interested in quilts and textiles, and their implications for his painting, after visiting the Whitney Museum’s *Abstract Design in American Quilts* exhibition in 1971. He then traveled through Europe the following year, seeing work by old masters and Abstract Expressionists. Shortly thereafter, he met the painter Agnes Martin, whose work seems to have made an immediate, if not lasting, impact on Rohrer, evident in the pale tones and softly-defined grids of the paintings from 1973–76 in the current exhibition.

At first glance, the glistening surface of *White Wheat* (1973) seems metallic and reflective, comprised of inches-wide pearlescent brushstrokes. At closer proximity to the painting, one finds a much more delicate and deliberate pattern—a pale yellow ground covered with sets of thin, quivering, vertical beige marks, laid side by side, never

touching, separated by rows of tiny gray dots, almost as if the marks were stitched through the canvas. My description makes the painting seem far more systematic than it appears; I offer it only to illustrate how divergent my first and subsequent impressions were, and how subtly Rohrer constructed an overall color tonality. Like his other paintings from the mid-1970s, *Pond 2* (1975) and *Field* (1976), the surface of *White Wheat* breathes and pulses, and its patterning is loose and asymmetrical.



Warren Rohrer, *Field*, 1976, oil on linen, 66 x 66 inches



Around this time, Rohrer wrote that the subject of his painting is the brushstroke, and it is with individual, atomized strokes that he created the color gradients in *Settlement: Green to Violet* (1981) and *Passage 1* (1981). In both pictures, Rohrer alternated the direction at which he applied each mark, so that they catch and reflect light from different angles. This patchwork of contoured brushstrokes yields an effect similar to that of acrylic interference pigments developed later in the decade. In the former picture, the transition from green to purple that covers the surface belies the range of underlying tones, visible around the edges of the painting, that inflect and enliven the surface hues.

The final stage covered in *Return to Land* dates from the late eighties and nineties, when Rohrer introduced into his work first a kind of abstract handwriting, as in the aptly titled *Shorthand* (1988), where his scrawling scores the paint surface to reveal colors underneath, and later a glyph-like language at least partly inspired by the familiar sight of brittle post-harvest corn stalks in his native Lancaster, Pennsylvania. In the preceding decades, Rohrer's painting had developed slowly and gradually, as he explored the expansive range of effects he could wrest from the limited means he allowed himself. The shift that occurs in his late paintings was more abrupt and dramatic, and the works that resulted, like *Field: Language 7* (1990) seem outside time, outside the history of art.