

leonardruder

evidence of a life's work

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Silas B. Cook, Guest Curator



evidence of a life's work

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Leonard Ruder is ninety years old. He has lived and worked in Portland, Oregon, since 1950. Virtually every day for the past 57 years he has generated some form of visual art. The resulting archive is impressive in its breadth and complexity. Perhaps the most startling fact, however, is that almost no one has seen this work in forty years.

How best to describe this collection and the artist has been a difficult proposition. In certain ways Ruder seems to fit the loose and often ill-conceived notion of the outsider artist. He did not earn a living from his painting. He worked as a custodian his entire life, starting at the David Douglas School District and eventually transferring to the Multnomah County educational service district. Though not his livelihood, painting was clearly his passion, one that he pursued with rigorous dedication and vigor. His productivity and relentless work ethic produced an astounding body of work that ranges from tiny study drawings to full-scale acrylic paintings as well as an important photographic archive. Yet he chose

The Window, 1948
Oil on canvas, 32 x 24 in.

Opposite: *Flight*, 1950
Acrylic on masonite, 37 x 48 in.



not to promote his artistic efforts, never believing in or advocating the capitalistic structures created to display, distribute and commodify visual art. Ruder's decision to work in seclusion, forgoing the posturing that commercial representation often required could perhaps be construed as mirroring the stereotypic image of the outsider artist toiling away in anonymity. However, Ruder's

and upon graduation in 1950 was included in a traveling show, "Six American Painters," curated by the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston. The show traveled extensively in the United States and was well received. In an accompanying ICA publication, Frederick S. Wight comments on a canvas included in the exhibition at The Art Gym, "*Flight* is a more recent emancipation. In this latter



reality is far more layered. While it is true that he chose to pursue his artistic compulsions outside the prevailing norm of commercial representation, he was no recluse. In fact Ruder was close friends with artists whose names and reputations helped to define the regional art scene in the Pacific Northwest in the 1950s and '60s. Hank Kowert, Jim Hibbard, Charles Heaney and Louis Bunce were among his closest friends.

Ruder's formal training is also notable as a counterpoint to the notion of the untrained outsider artist. He used his GI Bill benefits to attend the Cranbrook Academy of Art,

canvas one felt a new generation's sense of the activity with which science has animated the air about us."

Shortly after graduation Ruder moved to Portland. The migration west must have been a provident decision; he, his wife and their three children still reside here. For the next several decades he toiled prolifically, putting in long hours in his studio after his eight-hour day job. Evidence of his efforts are not completely obscure as shown by inclusion of his work in several Portland Art Museum annual painting shows in the 1950s and constant offerings at the Portland Art Museum's Rental Sales Gallery.



Initial visits to the artist's home and studio in 2006 illuminated a very methodical and organized individual. The studio, though seldom in use these days, still felt occupied and vital. Paintings hung on all the walls, and stacks of inscribed boxes gave shorthand hints at additional hidden visual explorations. One such box, labeled simply "works-paper 1950s," yielded a series of stunning mixed-media drawings that were completed for an exhibition at Portland's Junior Museum in 1950. As one of the first in the country, the Junior Museum (later called the Children's Museum) featured art exhibitions and art classes for children. The works explore imagined celestial landscapes and futuristic cityscapes. The rendering technique — a combination of precise line drawing, watercolor and ink painting with occasional appearances of other media such as graphite and pastel — is clearly labor-intensive and unique. Paintings from this early period do share notable similarities to these works on paper but shift toward more representational subject matter. The large cityscapes that Ruder was making in the late 1940s, some of which were selected for inclusion in the ICA show, feel not unlike those of Louis Bunce in their Cubist-inspired and fractured rendering of architectural spaces. The tendency toward figurative depiction was, however, short lived, and the canvases of the 1950s quickly shift toward a more pure abstraction with iconic forms now hinting at constructed spaces but never returning to overt representation.

The influences of regional and international artists were clearly present, as one would expect given his close association with many of Portland's most interesting and forward-thinking artists. Also noteworthy is his penchant for the scientific. His family recounted that while he seldom looked at art journals he did subscribe to and read voraciously from several scientific and technical journals. His fascination with science, specifically the discipline of experimentation, became more apparent when a second box was discovered that appeared to contain every study drawing the artist had ever made. It is a formidable body of work and evidence of Ruder's studied approach of developing ideas in sketch form and filing them for future reference. These drawings clearly are the artist's experiments and illuminate an extraordinary, almost

encyclopedic, gathering of representational and abstract mark-making. They perhaps best express the artistic compulsions that drove and define the artist.

In the late '60s Ruder shifts away from identifiable regional trends and plots an individual trajectory that is more closely tied to his fascination with science and technology as well as the beauty found in mechanized production. In this large group of acrylic works on masonite, Ruder explores various methods of mark-making and paint application. Where in previous works the artist's hand was clearly present in the painterly application of various media, in the new work Ruder sought to obscure and even erase any evidence of human gesture. Tape, spray paint and monochromatic color fields replace the more organic methods and palette of the earlier works. From simple plaid or striped compositions to complex structures that meld spheres and ellipses, the new pieces feel strikingly confrontational in their rigidly controlled execution.

The paintings in the last group in the exhibition, dating from the late 1970s, explore similar territory as previous works, with notable deviations. Ruder seems to be grappling with the compartmentalization of themes

universe. If these works are indeed representations or illuminations of an envisioned cosmos, it is one of great beauty tempered with ominous overtones.

It is a rare opportunity to view such a complete and unknown collection. It is also sobering to think that the life work of such a gifted artist can and often does simply disappear. Ultimately Ruder's limited exposure comes down to a pervasive personal philosophy. He made art and considered himself an artist as a means to manifest an innate creativity that sought, through line and gesture, darkness and light, to demarcate his universe. His was not a commercial pursuit, nor was notoriety of any interest. Even the concept of an audience was for most of his life not a concern. That said, on a recent visit to his home I asked him what he thought about exhibiting the paintings. In his inimitable fashion he stated simply that it made him "glad." Ruder's willingness and generosity, modesty aside, in allowing this work to be publicly displayed will provide viewers with the chance to explore this heretofore largely unseen body of work. The work exposes a new portal into a historically rich period in Pacific Northwest art, not only for the resonance that it clearly shares with other regional art but, more important, for the dissonance that distinguishes it.



found in the formal construct of earlier works. Where he once seemed predisposed to isolating the organic from the manmade, or the meandering line from the precise ruled line, he now finds great visual chemistry in combining the two. The resulting canvases are more dialectic, pulling the viewer in simultaneously divergent explorations. Ruder once stated that he was trying to depict the



Above: *Untitled II*, early 1970s
Acrylic on masonite, 37 x 49 in.

Left: *Untitled*, late 1960s
Spray paint on masonite, 20 x 37 in.

Opposite: *Painting "B"*, c. 1950s
Oil on canvas, 59 1/2 x 27 1/2 in.



A

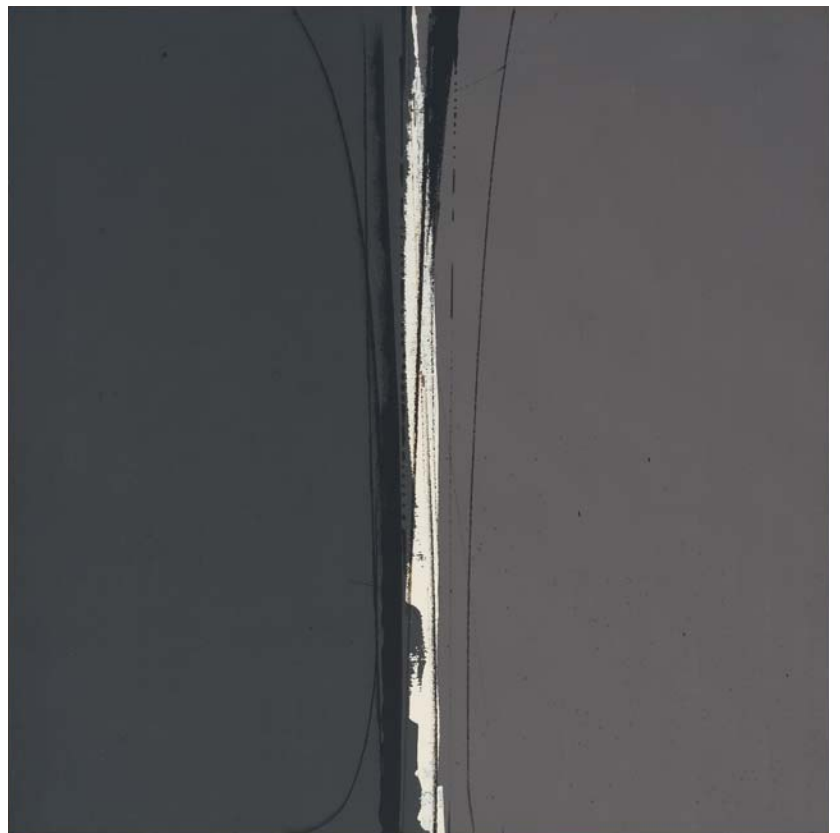


B

A. *Untitled*, 1950
Mixed media on paper, 20 x 16 in.

B. *Rectangles*, 1955
Oil on masonite, 48 x 32 in.

C. *Untitled*, early 1960's
Acrylic on masonite, 41½ x 41 in.



C



D



E



F

D. *Untitled*, c. 1955-60
Acrylic on masonite, 25 1/2 x 49 1/2 in.

E. *Arcing*, 1982
Acrylic on masonite, 36 x 48 in.

F. *Re-entry*, 1983
Acrylic on masonite, 24 x 34 in.



Above: *Untitled*, 1975
Acrylic on masonite, 32 x 48 in.

Right: *Space Scheme*, 1980
Acrylic on masonite, 32 x 48 in.

Cover: *Lizards of Nod*, 1978
Acrylic on masonite, 32 1/2 x 49 in.



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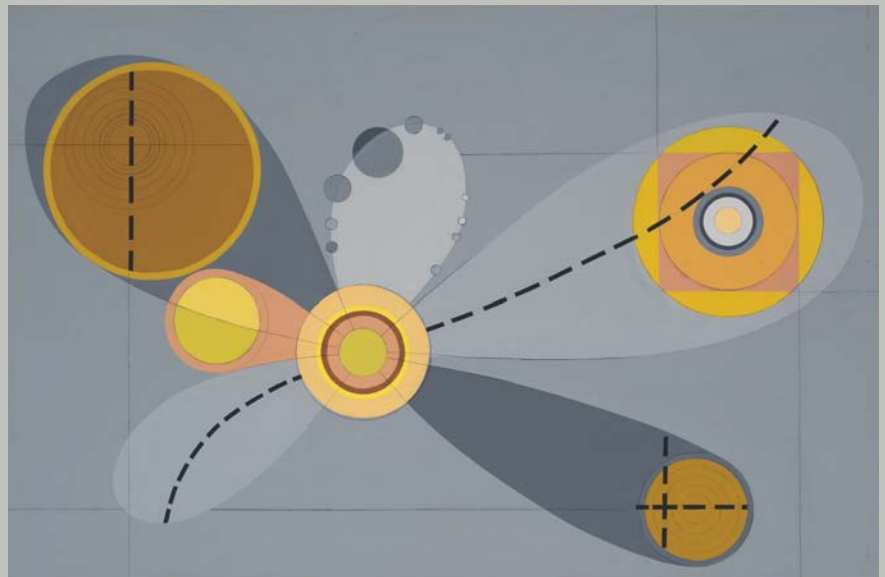
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postscript

Two years ago, Leonard Ruder's art came to the attention of Silas Cook, assistant director of The D.F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery at Reed College. Cook has curated an overview of Ruder's paintings and drawings for The Art Gym. The show includes Ruder's early focus on abstracted architectural and landscape motifs, tracks the work as the artist quickly moved to non-objective abstraction, and demonstrates the artist's formal prowess and constant experimentation.

The Art Gym is pleased to help bring these intriguing works by a little-known, dedicated and accomplished artist to the public's attention. We thank Silas Cook for his curiosity, curatorial expertise, and thoughtful essay for the gallery brochure. We also thank the Cooley Gallery and its director Stephanie Snyder for generous support for the exhibition and the brochure.

Terri M. Hopkins
Director and Curator
The Art Gym

acknowledgements

The reality of seeing this exhibition come to fruition has been an emotional journey. It is certainly the case that without the wisdom, support and help of many the task could not have been completed. As they have for many years, my colleagues at The D. F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Stephanie Snyder and Robin Richard proved indispensable for the myriad ways in which they facilitated the process, and I thank them deeply. Leslie and Donald Jackson at ArtWork Fine Art Shipping were generous beyond compare.

I thank Dan Kvitka for the meticulous images used in the gallery publication. I offer special thanks to my wife, Leslie Congleton, and daughter Pearl, for keeping me mostly sane and to my brother, Ethan Cook, for his assistance with the installation.

Finally I would like to extend my deepest appreciation to the entire Ruder family: Irene, Rhine, Reuel, Rhea, and especially Leonard. The grace with which they guided this process and the respect they hold for each other exemplifies all that is good. There can be no greater gift than that of love toward one's family, and clearly Leonard Ruder provided that. But through his artistic creations he bestowed on them the equally elusive gifts of imagination and beauty.

Silas B. Cook