

An abstract painting by Werner Drewes, featuring a complex composition of overlapping geometric shapes and vibrant colors. The palette includes deep blues, greens, reds, yellows, and purples, with a prominent white, curved form on the left side. The brushwork is visible, giving the painting a textured, dynamic quality.

Movement, Vision, and Form:  
Werner Drewes Abstractions  
from 1970-1985



# Movement, Vision, and Form: Werner Drewes Abstractions from 1970-1985

MARCH 3 - APRIL 17, 2020

ESSAY BY  
ANNE COHEN DEPIETRO

FRONT COVER

*Destroyed Tranquility* (Detail), 1972, signed *Drewes*, lower left; signed with artist's device  
and dated 72, lower right, oil on canvas, 35 7/8 x 40 in.

BACK COVER

*Counter Movement*, 1984, signed *Drewes*, lower left; signed with artist's device  
and dated 84, lower right, oil on canvas, 24 x 29 in.

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*Indecision*, 1979, signed *Drewes*, lower left; signed with artist's device and dated 79, lower right, oil on canvas, 21 × 44¼ in.

A perceptive observation by Ingrid Rose in her catalogue raisonné of the prints of Werner Drewes (1899–1985) encompasses the entire scope of the artist's late work:

*A sense of not having thoroughly explored the possibilities of abstraction invaded Drewes in the early 1970s. Since moving to Reston [Virginia], his work, with the exception of travel and portraits, has been a determined exploration of abstract designs and color systems. When one explores his color relief work of the St. Louis and Point Pleasant*

*[Pennsylvania] times with the work produced during the past ten to twelve years, one is struck by the continually evolving boldness in design and color and the constant search for expression.*<sup>1</sup>

Werner Drewes was born in Canig, in eastern Germany, a region that is today part of Poland. After military service during World War I, he pursued studies in architecture and design in Stuttgart, but it was his rigorous education at the Bauhaus, first in Weimar in 1921–1922, and at their subsequent location in Dessau in 1927,

that proved critical to the evolution of the young artist. Among the pioneers of avant-garde art and design invited to teach by founder Walter Gropius were Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Lyonel Feininger, Josef Albers, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. They exposed the young Drewes to radical aesthetic principles and their relation to universal dynamics, and he forged friendships with many of them, Kandinsky in particular becoming his artistic mentor.<sup>2</sup>

Already sensing rising political pressure in Germany in 1930, Drewes and his family

immigrated to America; he was the first of the Bauhaus group to do so. Kandinsky provided an introduction to Katherine Dreier, co-founder of the Société Anonyme, who immediately began to include Drewes in shows.<sup>3</sup> He supported his family by printmaking and by teaching at the Brooklyn Museum School, Columbia University, and Brooklyn College, applying the principles and techniques he had acquired at the Bauhaus. His two series of woodcuts, *Manhattan* (1932) and *It Can't Happen Here* (1934), were among the earliest abstract prints issued in America.

Exhibiting paintings and prints regularly in the 1930s and 1940s, Drewes frequently attracted the attention of critics. A reviewer for *The New York Times* called him “an artist of promise” and wrote of his “dynamic quality, an apparent fluency and economy of means,” adding that “he paints with sureness and vigor, with suggestion rather than in detail.”<sup>4</sup> In 1936, having achieved a significant measure of success, he became a founding member of American Abstract Artists, including Albert Gallatin, George L.K. Morris, and Charles Green Shaw, with whom he often exhibited between 1937 and 1951.<sup>5</sup> From 1940–1941, Drewes served as director of the WPA Graphic Arts Division in New York City and worked in Stanley William Hayter’s Atelier 17 beginning in 1944.<sup>6</sup> In the summer of 1945, he joined his old friend Moholy-Nagy in Chicago, teaching at his Institute of Design, known as “The New Bauhaus.” In 1946, Drewes accepted a position teaching design at the School of Fine Arts at Washington University in St. Louis, where he remained until 1965.

Following his retirement, Drewes and his second wife Mary Louise (Maria) first moved to Point Pleasant, Pennsylvania, relocating in 1972, to Reston, Virginia. Drewes later justified the

move by explaining the need “to come back to abstraction in my work. I felt that those good abstractions I made around 1940 were never fulfilled, so I hitched on to those old-timers.”<sup>7</sup>

In the final years of his life, working on a daily basis, Drewes entered into a last, concentrated period of work, in which he vigorously explored the creative and emotional impact of abstraction. His output was prodigious; over a career spanning roughly sixty-five years, Drewes produced more than a thousand paintings, seven hundred fifty prints (including four hundred woodcuts), and hundreds of watercolors, drawings and collages, often alternating between media.

In his engaging memoir, *Who Were They? My Personal Contact with Thirty-Five American Modernists Your Art History Course Never*

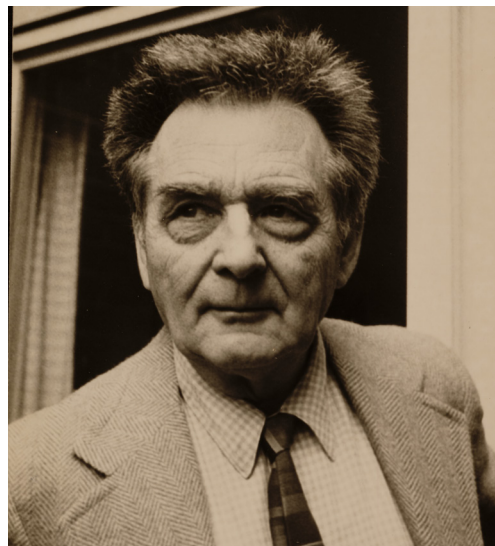


Photo of Werner Drewes by Maria Hans Wingler, circa 1970, Werner Drewes Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

*Mentioned*, the art dealer Martin Diamond wrote of an unanticipated encounter with Werner Drewes around 1977, resulting in an agreement whereby he would represent his work. A visit to Reston ensued within a few days:

*Drewes and his wife Maria lived in a town house [sic]. The top floor was his spotless studio. All his paintings were well taken care of and stored in racks, many titled with an inventory number on each piece. He had a large quantity of work—paintings, watercolors and prints.... Looking through the racks in Drewes’s studio I could only equate it to the treasure hunter finding the hidden trove. It had been there for many years, but no one had ever found it.*

*We filled the trunk and back seat of the car with as many paintings as possible. A week later, I called Drewes and asked him if he was sitting down. I told him I owed him twenty-five thousand dollars as I had sold every painting.... He told me he was going to rent a chalet in Switzerland and spend the entire summer painting. I then said, ‘Not yet.’ He asked, ‘Why?’ I answered, ‘I want to come back and get some more paintings.’ I never gave Drewes an exhibition in all the years I represented him. My clients purchased the work as fast as I got them in.<sup>8</sup>*

The exhibition *Movement, Vision, and Form: Werner Drewes Abstractions from 1970–1985* and the catalogue that accompanies it are the first to focus on Drewes’ late paintings and collages, which through the years have been exhibited less frequently than his graphic work. Indeed, the artist first attracted attention in the 1930s for his prints, most notably his woodcuts; it is this very substantial body of work that has been exhibited extensively. Jacob Kainen addressed the scope





*Destroyed Tranquility*, 1972, signed *Drewes*, lower left; signed with artist's device and dated 72, lower right, oil on canvas, 35 7/8 x 40 in.





*Untitled*, 1977, signed *Drewes*, lower left; signed with artist's device and dated 77, lower right, oil on vellum, 5½ x 5 in.



*Untitled #28AS*, 1977, signed *Drewes*, lower left; signed with artist's device and dated 77, lower right, oil on vellum, 5¾ x 5 in.

and importance of the prints in his essay for the 1969 exhibition, *Werner Drewes Woodcuts*, at the then-named National Collection of Fine Arts (now the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC):

*These are the works of a natural expressionist disciplined by a cubist sense of order. The physical immediacy of the prints is astonishing—transparent veils of color are overlaid with thick slabs of pigment.... These are the prints of a painter accustomed to working freely and resourcefully with color and texture.... In quality and extent [these] woodcuts are one of the important contributions to American printmaking.<sup>9</sup>*

*Destroyed Tranquility* from 1972 (p. 3) is the earliest work in this exhibition and also the most complex spatially. A diagonal line neatly bisects the composition; in the foreground, wedges and segments of circular forms tilt away from each other at acute angles. One ovoid shape, executed predominantly in shades of blue, careens into the distance, while triangles of yellow and orange seem to thrust forward, suggesting a sense of motion. A study in warm and cool tones, this compelling work illustrates Drewes' great interest in color as well as his painting technique. Initially applying paint with a brush, he then selectively employed a palette knife to smooth some areas, achieving a textural contrast. While some elements are solid in color, others—such as a

curved purple shape near the center—appear to have been scraped with the knife to reveal contrasting tones beneath.

At lower right, the work is signed with dates surrounding the artist's monogram, devised early in his career and bearing a superficial resemblance to the now ubiquitous peace symbol. It is comprised of stylized initials contained within a circle, the *D* forming the central vertical axis and right half of the circle, and the curved outer edges of the *W* reinforcing the circular contour, while the angled inner strokes meet at the center axis. Drewes intended "to have it appear as a symbol of an arrow breaking through a circle."<sup>10</sup>

Drawing lay at the heart of Drewes' work. Deftly executed pencil studies often led to color studies or small paintings, and these in turn frequently inspired more substantial works. This exhibition includes a number of small oils, notable for their freshness and spontaneity. Two untitled works from 1977 (left) are identical in composition but executed in entirely unrelated palettes. The center of one is painted in warmer tones of orange, pink, and blue that are surrounded by a cooler perimeter of gray, green and teal and finally, a border of acid green. By comparison, the center of its companion piece is dominated by hot reds and orange, with surrounding areas of maroon, plum and gray and a burnt orange border. Just as he occasionally varied the colorways in paintings such as these, the artist often altered the palette in his prints.

For Drewes, painting and printmaking were closely aligned; at times, turning from one to the other when working on a painting, he savored the technical challenge of woodcut, his favored printmaking medium. He explained: "Every so often as a painter—and I consider myself first and foremost a painter—I came to an impasse,





*Lost in Space*, 1979,  
signed *Drewes*, lower left;  
signed with artist's  
device and dated 79,  
lower right, oil on canvas,  
46 x 34 in.





*Fallen Star*, 1976, signed *Drewes* and with artist's device and dated 76, lower left, collage, 7 ½ x 5 ½ in.

*Witches' Dance*, 1980 (right), signed *Drewes*, lower right, woodcut, 17 ¾ x 11 ¼ in.

I exchanged the brush for the knife, the canvas for a wood panel. Perhaps the greatest discipline of a distinct technique and the limitation of means helped to solve my problems."<sup>11</sup>

It is not surprising to discover parallels between his paintings and woodcuts, as well as the small collages to which he turned later in life. This is particularly evident when considering the painting *Lost in Space*, 1979 (p. 5); the collage *Fallen Star*, 1976; and the complex woodcut *Witches' Dance*, 1980 (both above). The works share a similar palette comprised of pink, blue



and plum tones with accents of green, and in each, sheer areas of pigment allow underlying forms and hues to show through. In all three works, black forms seem to lie on the surface. In the painting and the collage, these resemble projectiles hurtling into space, while in *Witches' Dance*, agitated black forms encircle a glowing sphere. That all three compositions seem to share celestial titles may be coincidental; in this phase of his career, Drewes was exploring elements of pure abstraction and it is likely that titles were devised upon completion.

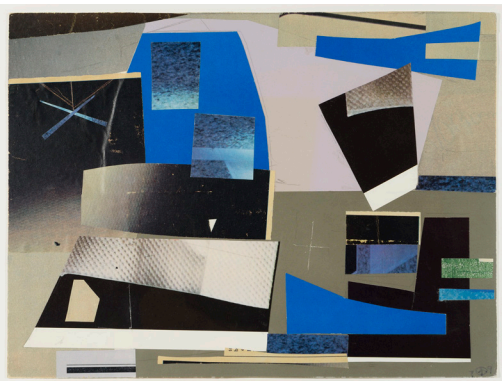
During a videotaped interview conducted toward the end of his life, when asked when a painting was finished, he responded:

*Sometimes it takes me weeks. Sometimes, I come back after months and work again on it, or after years, even. I rework my paintings often, later on, but I usually sit there a little while and... think about it. And if it pleases me, I leave it. I have no great philosophy in my art, as many of my colleagues. I think the greatest impetus for me is just to play, and to build and to create something. Creation is nothing but play.... When it works you are happy and if you are unhappy it does not work. Since I like color, I do it with color.<sup>12</sup>*

Like the small oils that are so enchanting, the collages sometimes inspired larger works in oil. In *Study for 'Solid Against Loose Forms,'* 1979 (opposite), the edges, folds, and abrasions in the small work become as important as the fragments of recycled studies, paper and other detritus that are integrated into the composition. The cut marks and crosses made by the artist's blade are also significant. When transcribing this dynamic little collage into its larger scale painting (opposite), Drewes captured nearly everything, carefully translating an incised vertical cross in a gray rectangle just below the center of the collage into a painted equivalent, along with some vertical scratches above two fine strips of blue crossed in an X. Yet, he exercised artistic license; a white rhombus at lower left was changed to ochre, and other accents in the same color further enliven the composition. A narrow angled strip of black toward upper right in the collage was omitted entirely.

Drewes continued to be inspired by Kandinsky and remembered from his Bauhaus classes that his mentor would:



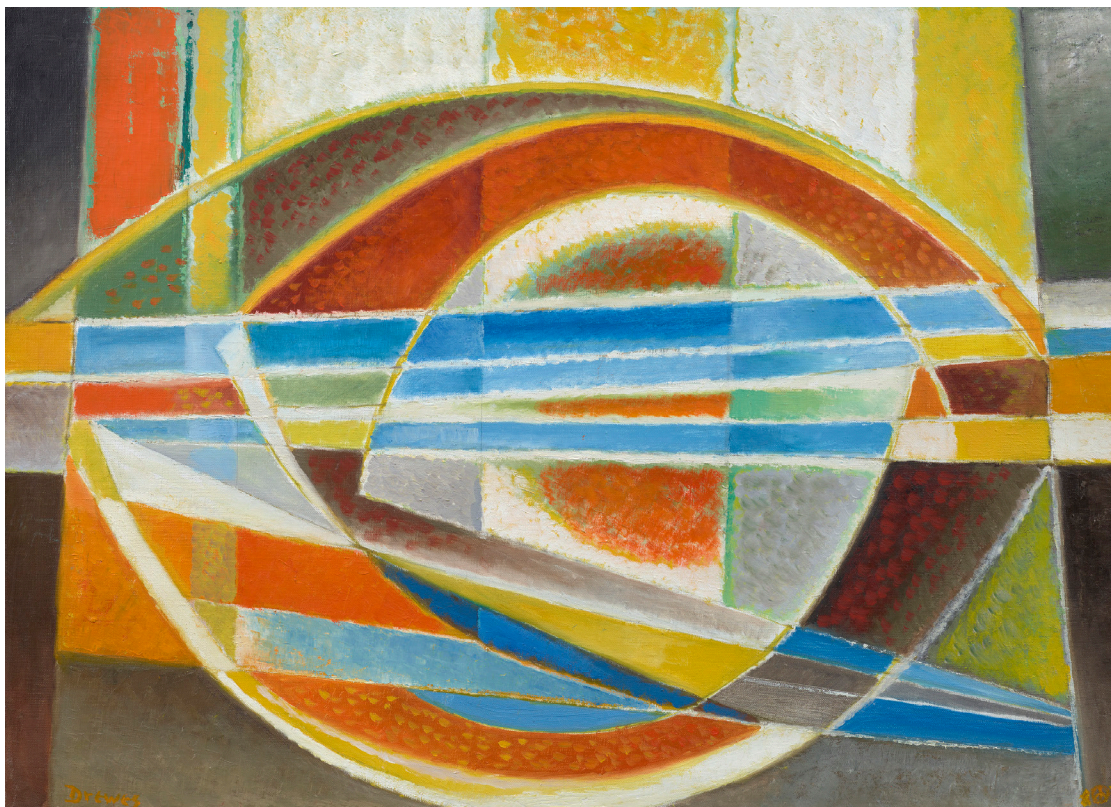


*Study for 'Solid Against Loose Forms,'* 1979, signed with artist's device and dated 79, lower right, collage, 8½ x 11¼ in.



*Solid Against Loose Forms,* 1983, signed *Drewes*, lower left; signed with artist's device and dated 83, lower right, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in.





*Double Vision*, 1983, signed *Drewes*, lower left; signed with artist's device and dated 83, lower right, oil on canvas, 26 1/8 x 36 in.

... give a theme. To paint a picture, ... which was very dense in the center and open around; or to use color perhaps entirely on the cool side or on the warm side, or the clash of cool and warm; or to use red but keep it cool or blue, but keep it warm.... Purely abstract themes. Then each one could develop it entirely differently.<sup>13</sup>

The composition of *Indecision*, 1979 (p. 1), is indeed "very dense in the center and open

around." Narrow stripes of cream and yellow at the lower edge of the active geometric forms contrast with the subtle umber background, as does the fine gray-violet outline against the rich, textural ground toward the top. Rough edges elicit thoughts of torn paper, as colorful painted bands and squares (many in tones of yellow—a signature hue for the artist) call to mind his work in collage.

In *Double Vision*, 1983 (above), Drewes depicts an almond-shaped form in warm tones,

with brilliant strips of blue crossing the center. The central ocular form is set against a squared-off ground comprised of wide vertical stripes that at times appear to sit on the surface and at others, to recede. Energized blue streaks are like beams of light, perhaps inspired by his childhood experience of lying in the sun with eyes squinting against the glare and finding "you see light in different colors."<sup>14</sup> Its surface dappled with dabs of paint in contrasting hues, a related small work, *Transcendent Light (Study for Double Vision)*, circa 1983, is also included in the exhibition.

Toward the end of his life, Drewes created several paintings and collages in both large and small format that were comprised of simple geometric shapes. They generally featured a circular form surrounded or at times, penetrated by meticulously ordered small tiles in carefully chosen hues, sometimes positioned against a triangle or rectangle. Here, the artist seems to be acknowledging Kandinsky, who believed that certain colors and shapes, especially the circle, reflected the harmony of the Universe when combined. Including *Counter Movement* from 1984 (back cover), these pieces are contemplative and quiet, resembling formal painting exercises of the sort described by Drewes in a late interview:

... you can form also cerebrally [sic] the scene, as Kandinsky taught us, to use an idea of organization. Let's say you want to make a painting where... there is a concentration to one side or the other in form, and this might be juxtaposed with a color concentration or a color intensity, or you can limit yourself in color to cool colors or warm colors, to dark colors or light colors, so you have innumerable themes which are cerebral themes, mental themes which you can follow on and you can create a universe this way.



*In my recent work, where I use more semi geometric forms, I often start with very quick sketches, which later develop by redoing it into definite themes which I work out gradually into color themes, and into paintings. And while I am in the process of painting I may find a theme which I enhance later.*<sup>15</sup>

A gifted colorist, Drewes felt that his late paintings and woodcuts had achieved a new level of mastery, at least in part due to his affinity for color:

*No wonder you will find traces of my wood-carving technique in my style of handwriting or painting. Vice versa, because I am a painter and in love with color and its many personalities, I must confess that for many years now my color woodcuts have gone beyond the typical characteristics of woodcuts or even color woodcuts made by the expressionists.*<sup>16</sup>

But finally, and perhaps most importantly for Drewes—there is the notion of play. This is evident in two late examples, *Inner Turmoil*, 1984–1985 (p. 12), and the slightly earlier *Study for 'Autumn Fire'*, 1980 (p. 10). In each, the palette is cacophonous, and we experience a sense of pleasure in the exuberant compositions that are so clearly inspired by collage. While the colored tiles in *Study for 'Autumn Fire'* resemble nothing as much as Albers' studies in simultaneous contrast, and the overlapping forms, brilliant hues and textural richness in *Inner Turmoil* are nearly too much to take in, at the end, it is about the joy of creation.

Adhering to principles espoused by his Bauhaus colleagues, yet informed by his playful and intuitive approach to making art, the late oeuvre of Werner Drewes represents the



*Untitled #121*, circa 1984, collage, 6 x 5½ in.



*Untitled #1524A*, circa 1984, numbered #1524A, lower left, oil and pencil on paper, 8¾ x 8 in.



*Untitled #263*, 1976, signed *Drewes* and numbered 263, lower left; signed with artist's device and dated 76, lower right, collage, 5½ x 9¾ in.





Study for 'Autumn Fire,' 1980, signed *Drewes*, lower left; signed with artist's device and dated 80, lower right, collage, 9 ¼ x 7 ½ in.

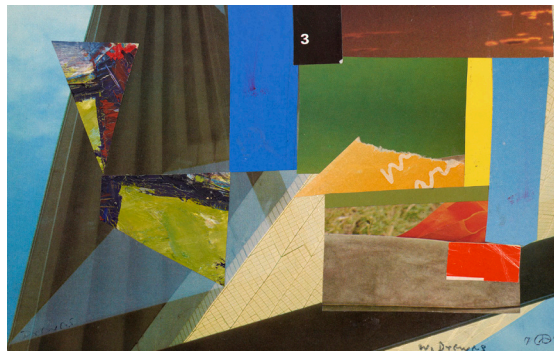
culmination of a lifetime devoted to the creative act. When asked what he considered his strongest work, he replied:

*To be honest, I think my late paintings are the strongest.... I think my recent color woodcuts are also very strong. The transparency of color, which I very much wanted to show, also comes out in my last prints very well.... Rather than approaching abstraction in other ways, I always felt the urge to discipline myself and compose both my paintings and my prints in terms of construction. Each one has to go his own path, and this has been mine.*<sup>17</sup>

ANNE COHEN DEPIETRO

## NOTES

1. Ingrid Rose and Ralph Jentsch, *Werner Drewes: A Catalogue Raisonné of His Prints* (Munich and New York: Verlag Kunstgalerie Esslingen, 1984), p. 40.
2. While a student at the Bauhaus, Drewes attended the free painting workshop conducted by Kandinsky. After Drewes immigrated to America, the two men corresponded and provided mutual professional assistance. Drewes eventually became vice president of the Société.
3. "Works of Werner Drewes and Kniffin," *The New York Times*, Nov. 5, 1932, p. 18.
4. Several of Drewes' former Bauhaus colleagues who had followed him to America joined American Abstract Artists. Albers was a founding member; both Klee and Moholy-Nagy joined subsequently.
5. Founded in Paris in 1927, in its early years, the print studio proved influential with the Surrealists. Hayter moved the studio to New York City at the onset of World War II, and Drewes worked there in 1944 and 1945.
6. "A Conversation with Werner Drewes," Martina Roudabush Norelli, *Werner Drewes: Sixty-Five Years of Printmaking* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press for the National Museum of American Art, 1984), p. 29.
7. Martin Diamond, "Werner Drewes 1899-1985," in *Who Were They? My Personal Contact with Thirty-Five American Modernists Your Art History Course Never Mentioned* (New York: Martin Diamond Fine Arts, 1995), p. 6.
8. Jacob Kainen, *Werner Drewes Woodcuts*, quoted in "Forward," *Werner Drewes: An Exhibition of His Color Woodcuts* (Washington, DC: Charles Marvin Fairchild Memorial Library, Georgetown University, 1997), n.p.
9. "A Conversation with Werner Drewes," Martina Roudabush Norelli, op. cit., p. 16. Regardless of medium, each work was meticulously recorded for the artist's records, initially by Margaret (his first wife), and later by Maria, employing a code and numbering system: A, AB, or AS for Abstract, P for portrait, and so on.
10. Werner Drewes, artist's statement, *Werner Drewes Woodcuts* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press for the National Museum of American Art, 1969), quoted in Una Johnson, "Werner Drewes: An Essay on his Graphic Oeuvre," in Ingrid Rose and Ralph Jentsch, *Werner Drewes: A Catalogue Raisonné of his Prints* (Munich and New York: Verlag Kunstgalerie Esslingen, 1984), p. 17.
11. Franz Geierhaus, videotaped interview with Werner Drewes, *The Creative Act, Paths to Realization. Part I—Werner Drewes*, Trenton State College, 1984.
12. "A Conversation with Werner Drewes," Martina Roudabush Norelli, op. cit., p. 19.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
14. Franz Geierhaus, videotaped interview with Werner Drewes, *The Creative Act*, op. cit.
15. Werner Drewes, artist's statement, *Werner Drewes Woodcuts*, quoted in Una Johnson, op. cit., p. 17.
16. "A Conversation with Werner Drewes," Martina Roudabush Norelli, op. cit., p. 31.



Study for 'Abandoned Stage,' 1976, signed *WDrewes* and with artist's device and dated 76, lower right, collage, 5 ¾ x 8 ½ in.





*Heavy Burden*, 1985, signed *Drewes*, lower left; signed with artist's device and dated *85*, lower right, oil on canvas, 34 1/8 x 42 1/8 in.





*Inner Turmoil*, 1984–1985, signed *Drewes*, lower left; signed with artist's device and dated 85, lower right, oil on canvas, 36 x 39 $\frac{1}{8}$  in.



*Mining*, 1979, signed *Drewes*, lower left; signed with artist's device and dated 79, lower right, oil on canvas, 28 x 34 in.





*Jeweled Radiance*, 1974,  
signed *Drewes*, lower left;  
signed with artist's device and  
dated 74, lower right, oil on canvas,  
28 x 46 in.



*Summer's Mirage*, 1980, signed  
*Drewes*, lower left; signed with  
artist's device and dated 80,  
lower right, oil on canvas,  
33 7/8 x 43 7/8 in.



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