

John Hartell

In 1968, after forty years as a professor of architecture and of art, John Hartell retired and began painting full-time. Since then, most of his work has been done in his Ithaca studio, a sixteen-by-twenty-foot annex whose double door opens into the house. He paints every day from about eight in the morning until noon, precious time assiduously guarded by his gentle wife, Sylvia. Brief interruptions in this schedule occurred when he was a visiting professor of architecture at the University of Puerto Rico, and for two major trips, to London and to Greece. Septembers are often spent on Long Island. Hundreds of watercolors have come from these visits to the island, including the *Sagaponack Series* and the *Quogue Series*, as well as numerous oil paintings and line drawings. His long association with the sea—fifteen years of Hartell's boyhood were spent summering at his father's house in East Moriches, Long Island—can be sensed in his direct capturing of the ambience and diversity of the coastal landscape. "Sand and sea I know very well," Hartell admitted, "but I have not studied rocks."

It was to the sea he went while on sabbatical leave in 1955. Living in East Hampton, Long Island, free from his duties in the art department, he spent his days painting. Such total concentration stimulated development. Extraneous elements dropped away, his work became more impressionistic and abstract, and what Hartell refers to as a pivotal painting, *Flux*, emerged (see the following illustration).

Developments in a mature painter's work usually evolve naturally and represent not so much change as acknowledgment of sensibilities already present. In 1937 Alfred M. Frankfurter, then editor of the *Art News*, wrote about Hartell's first exhibition: "Hartell succeeds in conveying the illusion of mass by careful painting of substance, allowing the outline to remain soft and bounded by tonality rather than draught. In the same way his color is related to a more poetic variety of retinal experience." The description still fits.

Six years later, in 1943, Helen Boswell observed in the *Art Digest*: "He works fragments of buildings and crumbling pieces of concrete blocks into these well composed, but purposely disordered compositions. . . . That Hartell believes in subtleties, both in color and theme, is noted in *Store Front*, softly iridescent with its many suffused hues and in the (believe it or not) rather poetic *Steam Shovels*." There is evidence of his continuity in subject matter as well as in his use of color: during the 1970s Hartell did a series of paintings entitled "Fragments." Boswell also points to Hartell's humor—a humor predominantly visual, playful about his painterly concerns.

The painter Fairfield Porter reviewed Hartell's 1957 exhibition at Kraushaar Galleries, which included work done during his 1955 sabbatical, for *Art News*. Porter's succinct analysis is a tribute to both men: "The subject of his [Hartell's] paintings is an abstraction of the subject, which is landscape. . . . In the paintings the tense of the action is present-imperfect, or the verb has changed to an abstract noun. *Noon* is not a division of time but of blueness and horizontality. . . . He composes like an architect and paints as a naturalist, and these two aspects of his work are as equal as the opposite sides of a square."

Since the 1957 exhibition, the direction of Hartell's work has changed very little. Recently his color has deepened, and his form has become less diffuse. This description makes his development seem linear. In actuality, it has meandered. Light-valued colors continue to appear along with those of deeper intensity. Hartell once said, "The only thing I ever wanted to do was paint a really good painting." Moments later the simplicity of that statement was awesomely repealed when he spoke of "the terrible difficulty of color." This "difficulty," which also creates the great excitement and the sense of discovery in Hartell's paintings, no doubt relates to the nearly unlimited variations in color perceivable by the human eye (estimated at 7,500,000 under optimum conditions) and to the seemingly infinite possibilities arising from their interaction.

Hartell's color is so compelling—so vibrant, nuanced, and luminous—that it often dominates the initial experience of his work. Only when one realizes how compositional elements emerge from the alliance between color and subject does his rare sense of balance become apparent. It is through this unity that we are also led to Hartell's real subject, the subjective part of the work that makes it truly his. And we *are* led, for we get glimpses of it through doorways; it surrounds dancers; it emerges out of carpets; it hugs a spit of land; it surfaces in lakes and oceans; it is half reality and half heightened imagination—it is Place Hartell. At times he clues us through his titles: *Magic Carpet*, *Mythical Place*. But mostly not. Usually his titles are more useful: *Summer Place I*, *Passage VI*, *Studio V*. They tell us that he works in series, and they tell him how many he's done.

Paintings in a series may be done successively or sporadically over many years. His trip to Greece in 1973 "got him started on architecture [again]." The series "Fragments" resulted, as did "Arch," "Open Door," "Summer Place," "Passage," and "Studio." Landscape has not been forgotten either. It is there, through doorways, through windows, framed by an arch; and it emerges in pure form, bold as a Doric column, in his 1981 painting *Aegean III*.

Recently, several new paintings were in various stages of completion in his studio, including one for the series "Studio" and a large landscape. They were wonderful paintings and would be finished, he assured me, in time for the show if I wanted to use them. As I was leaving, a painting of fruit caught my eye. Although no larger than ten inches square, it contained much of what I've come to expect from his work—the field of subtle colors activated by areas of deeper saturation, the beautifully brushed surface, the somewhat surreal sense of place. We were quiet for a bit, and then, answering my unasked question, John said, "Lately I've been studying plums and pears."

Verlaine Boyd