

Adolph Gottlieb: An Artist who is Surviving

Edmonton Art Gallery organizes touring show

by Andrew Hudson

"I don't know if it's possible for artists to feel that they can even go underground any more. We felt that we were living in an underground; we felt that we were a bit outside of society and, in a sense, outcasts. If such a mood could develop among artists, this would be a good sign — but I haven't seen any signs of it. They all want success more than achievement."

"We had a sort of Boston tea party with the French. They were imperialists, who controlled art all over the world — and we were like colonial subjects. Now, ironically enough, the tables have been turned, and it's we who are the imperialists. That reversal has given me more satisfaction than anything else in my lifetime."

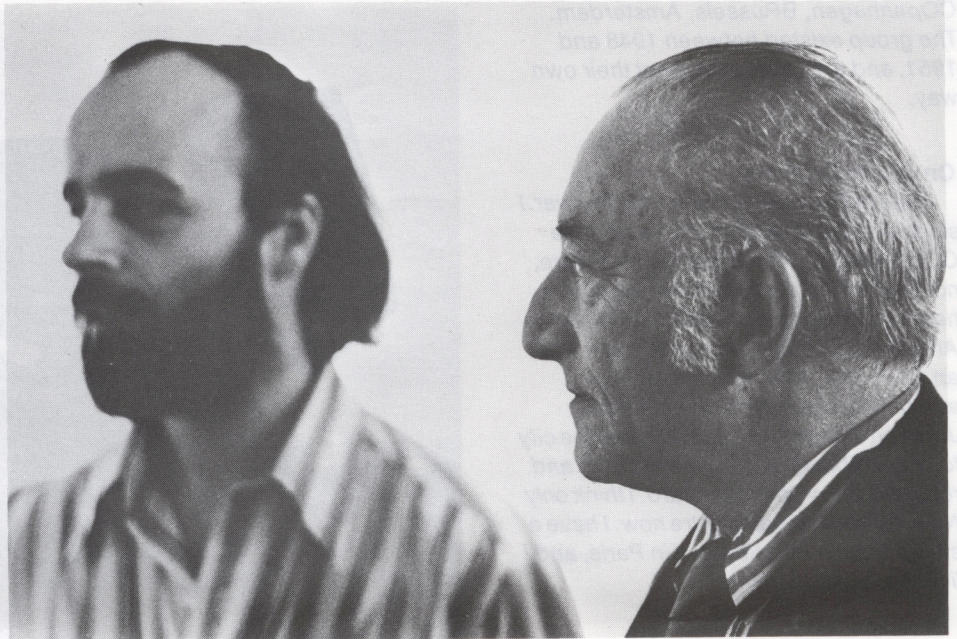
"We're going to have perhaps a thousand years of nonrepresentational painting now. Democracy doesn't demand the kind of visual expression useful to monarchies. Every generation feels that everything useful has been done, that there's nothing left to do. But the climate is better here for a young artist than it ever has been before. He knows that the Americans are the best of the advanced painters in the world today. He knows that he can do *anything*. We've broken through the crust of mediocrity, and the feeling that once existed that Americans can't be artists no longer exists."

"I'd like more status than I have now, but not at the cost of closing the gap between artist and public. I'd like to widen it!"

"The question is, how long some of the young artists who are making hay now will be able to survive. Because that, ultimately, is always the problem of the artist — to survive, not only in his own time but for as long as possible."

The above¹ are just a few of the many outspoken, hard-headed, frequently provocative, sometimes acerbic, most often keenly intelligent and wise remarks that Adolph Gottlieb made during a long lifetime of artistic battles and hard-won aesthetic victories. During the current season Canadians will have an opportunity to see what kind of an artist this determined, tenacious New Yorker was, when the exhibition of his early work, *Adolph Gottlieb: Pictographs*, organized by the Edmonton Art Gallery, travels across the country (see *Itinerary*).

The exhibition is a revelation and a reminder: most of these "Pictographs"



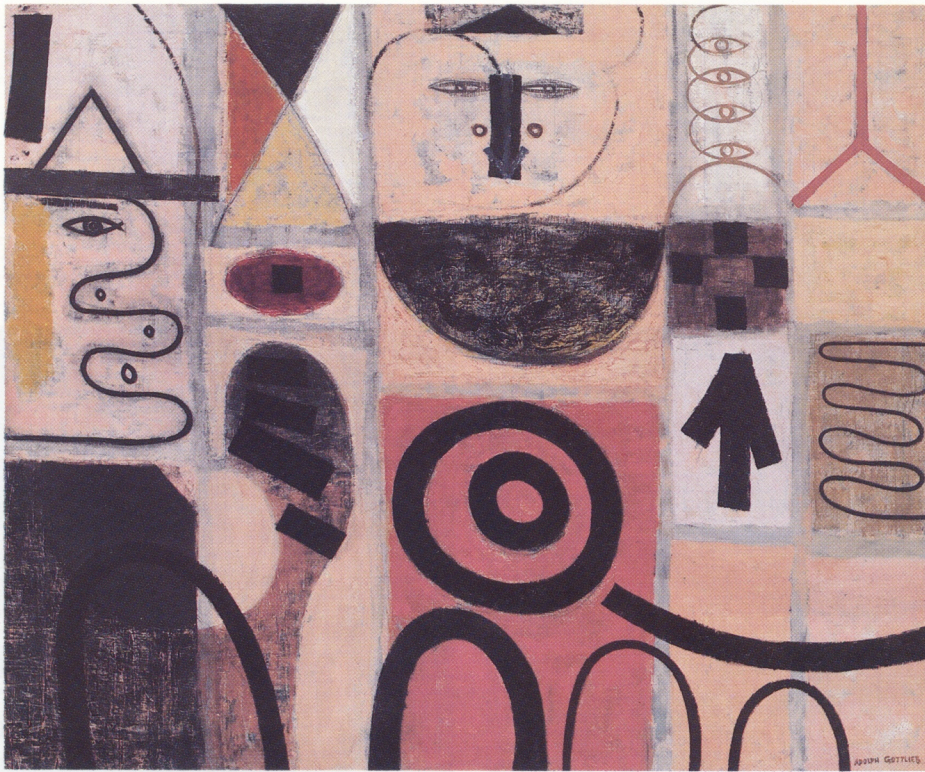
¹ Andrew Hudson and Adolph Gottlieb at the opening of the exhibition, *Gottlieb: Sculptures* — Marcia Relli: *Collages*, University of Maryland, College Park, October 14, 1970/photo: Roger Tripp.

dating from 1941 to 1953 have been cleaned and restored for the occasion, so we see Gottlieb's color in all its original brightness. What a great colorist he was — and how varied! There are green pictures, blue pictures, pink pictures, black pictures; color harmonies that modulate beautifully; color accents that speak out sharp, firm and exact. (In her catalogue essay, Chief Curator Karen Wilkin discusses Gottlieb's use of color, as well as establishing a connection between these early paintings and Gottlieb's later "Burst" series in their "juxtaposition of likeness and unlikeness".) In the exhibition, we see Gottlieb start out small, in canvases of 34 x 26 inches, and gradually move on to larger formats: *Oracle* (1947), 60 x 44 inches, and *The Seer* (1950) and *Archer* (1951), both approx. 60 x 72 inches, stand out like landmarks as the largest paintings he had yet attempted. He seems to have continued this slow, sure-footed evolution in his later paintings of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, which got even larger. Even more interesting is the variety of size, shape and proportion in the formats of these early paintings: at first glance, it is hard to find two works of the same dimensions, as Gottlieb oscillates between wider rectangles (e.g., *Hands of Oedipus* of 1943) and narrower ones (e.g.,

Expectation of Evil of 1945). It was a nice touch in the Edmonton hanging that in three instances, gouache paintings relating to the oils were placed next to them (there is some dispute as to whether these were painted before or after the oils), and that a small (almost miniature) version of *The Seer* hung next to it. Some changes of imagery occur from one to the other: a face becomes a rose, or shell, or incubus; a nose becomes an arrow.

Throughout there is an authority, a self-confidence, a sense of structure: it seems a very solid body of work by an artist who knows well how to place color and imagery on the canvas, at the same time that he is experimenting. But the biggest lesson that these paintings hold is their *crudity*: the roughness of the earliest "Pictographs"; the grotesque, cartoon-element so often present in the drawing (as in the fingernailed hand of *Oracle*); the frequently wacky zaniness (as in the centripetal black brush-strokes that form into a bearded Arab's face, framed by a head-dress, in *Augury* of 1945). This reminds me that in art, *you can do anything*, if you have the requisite nerve. And it may also help to remind us what good new art looks like, how "unacceptable" it can be.

That the "Pictographs" were not ac-



2 Adolph Gottlieb/*The Seer*/1950/oil on canvas mounted on fibreglass fabric/60 × 72 in./coll: The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

55002 ✓



3 Adolph Gottlieb/*Two Discs*/1963/oil on canvas/90 × 108 in./coll: The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.

56706 ✓

Adolph Gottlieb/continued



4 Adolph Gottlieb/*Oedipus* /1941/oil on canvas/34 × 26 in./coll: The Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, Inc., New York.



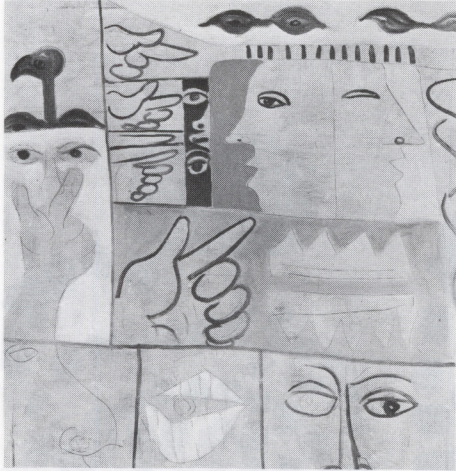
5 Adolph Gottlieb, c. 1942, age 39 with *Pictograph* (1942)/photo: Aaron Suskind.

cepted is attested to by the checklist of this exhibition. For 23 out of the 38 works in the Edmonton showing come from the collections of Mrs. Gottlieb and of the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation (which Gottlieb set up in his will, to give financial aid to artists): sales were extremely few — then, and afterwards. Why was this? Because, as Gottlieb later explained², in these paintings he “made the plunge or the break with everything that was considered to be upright American painting, or painting at all. It just didn’t seem at the time as if I even knew how to paint.” The art world, which ten years before had awarded him the prize in a national competition and given him his first New York exhibition (in 1929 and 1930), now turned its back on him. He had to wait out a change in public taste, as he also did when he later moved from the “Pictographs” to his “Abstract Land-

scapes” and then to the “Bursts”. He often recalled that during this period of limbo, he and his colleagues, such as Mark Rothko, were “isolated, alienated, and nobodies”, “like people who are nothing but chess players, or tennis bums”, “like people condemned to life imprisonment who made a dash for freedom.” It was a period of “desperation” in which he and Rothko decided to rebel against all the accepted standards, and to find something else to do, in order to fill the “void” in American painting. They began (at his suggestion) to explore a new subject-matter, themes from the plays of Aeschylus — hence among the earliest “Pictographs” we find *Oedipus*, *Eyes of Oedipus*, *Hands of Oedipus*, variations on a Freudian as well as a classical theme. However, it wasn’t at all easy, for to treat these themes in such a new, utterly un-classical, improvisational

way took a great deal of courage and stubborn independence.

“We very quickly discovered”, he said, “that by a shift in subject matter we were getting into formal problems that we hadn’t anticipated . . . for which there was no precedent. We were in unknown territory.” “I didn’t have a clear idea. I was merely groping. I think I had a feeling that it was necessary for me as an individual to find my own identity and establish my own values and find sort of a new honesty, and be able to make some sort of a statement and stand on my own feet with that statement; and that it wasn’t even necessary, perhaps, to make art for me but merely to make a statement with paint, because that was the only way that I could express myself. And if I could make some such statement, which was an authentic statement on my part, perhaps this would become art.”



6 Adolph Gottlieb/*Hands of Oedipus*/1943/oil on linen/40 × 35¹⁵/₁₆ in./coll: The Adolph and Esther Gottlieb foundation Inc., New York.

(The latter sentiment has been echoed by Kenneth Noland — and perhaps this situation of making something “unlike art” has been true for many artists. Speaking in 1963³ about his own “break” with previous art in his “Target” paintings of 1957-58, Noland said that he “didn’t know whether his work was art, or not. It’s turned out that it may be art, it is being accepted as art.”)

This aspect of crudity and of “not looking like art” is well illustrated by a comparison between Gottlieb’s *Hands of Oedipus* (1943) and two paintings by Ben Nicholson and Pablo Picasso of the early 1930s that are also concerned with the drawing of hands and faces. It will be seen that whereas Picasso in his *Seated Woman* (1932) and Nicholson is his *St. Remy, Provence* (1933) stay close to the idea of a “classical” profile, take great care to make elegant abstract shapes for the eyes and ears, make the hand and arm a single unit that interweaves or interlocks with the face or figure (Nicholson’s painting, with its mirror effect, probably derives from Picasso’s *Girl before a Mirror*, of 1932, in the Museum of Modern Art, New York) — whereas these artists compose and intertwine their arabesques across the canvas with such scrupulous refinement, Gottlieb’s renderings of face and hands are deliberately loose, open, clumsy, vulgar, disconnected, raw. And the humor in this painting reinforces its “non-art” look: the blue eyes that become the wings of a bird at



7 Pablo Picasso/*Seated Woman*/1932/oil on panel/29¹/₄ × 20⁵/₈ in./coll: Mr. Lee A. Ault.

upper left and along the top; the coarse, graffiti-like depiction of the pointing hands; what looks like a self-caricature at bottom left. (The latter was pointed out to me, as a conjecture, by Karen Wilkin: that it is a self-portrait seems further suggested by a glance at the “silhouetted” photograph of Gottlieb and myself taken in 1970.)

Hands of Oedipus is also remarkable for its color: mostly pink, with black line drawing, some white areas, and the blue eyes/birds, its central hand and “crowns” are surrounded by a sky blue color, and the profile with the fully drawn eye above them is accentuated by an adjacent strip of brilliant orange-red. In addition, it exemplifies (especially in contrast to the Picasso and the Nicholson) what Karen Wilkin in her catalogue essay calls Gottlieb’s “sense of over-all spread”, that stems from his insistence on the paintings’ surface and “the positioning of detached symbols, providing numerous focal points across the expanse of the canvas.” She writes: “By according no more importance to any one symbol than another and by multiplying the symbols, Gottlieb made each part of the painting equally significant. This diffusion of emphasis across the surface is part of the Pictographs’ radical newness, and separates them from Cubist antecedents which tended to concentrate the densest images



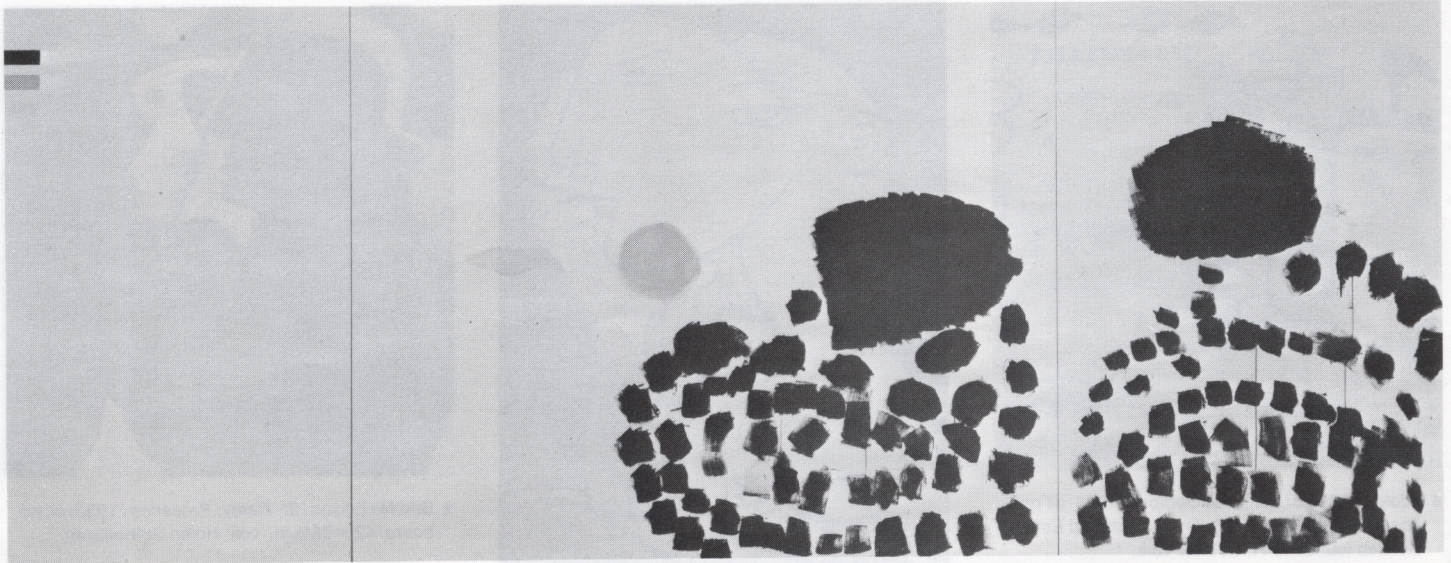
8 Ben Nicholson/*St. Remy, Provence*/1933/oil on board/42 × 36¹/₂ in./coll: Helen Sutherland.

in the center.”

So it was that Gottlieb (along with his colleagues in New York) escaped from Cubism and the influence of European art. (Nicholson, as we know, has remained all his life a Cubist painter.) Diffusion across the canvas, openness, rawness (commenting at the end of his life⁴ on the difference of American, New York painting, Gottlieb affirmed: “European paintings tried to have a patina immediately; American paintings wanted to look brand new, so looked raw by comparison”) — it isn’t surprising that his later work should expand outwards into the “Burst” paintings, with their expressive, articulate placement of a few images within a large field. And the simpler it gets, the more clearly his art stresses what is most important: *not* “correct” drawing; *not* refinement of surface; *not* composing according to “rules”; none of these things that more obviously “look like art.” What is crucial, on the contrary, is *the vitality of the total painting*, its emotion, its life. And every inch of the canvas matters, in this struggle to make an authentic statement, to achieve, and to survive: where the “Pictographs” show his already firm grasp of the format, the more obvious “corrections” in the “Bursts” — where a disc or a color bar is moved a few inches, or a splatter is cancelled out and repainted — reveal his extreme sensitivity and awareness concerning what brings a canvas to life, and what doesn’t.⁵

That Gottlieb is indeed a master has

Adolph Gottlieb/continued



9 Adolph Gottlieb/*Triptych* / 1971 / acrylic on canvas / 90 × 228 in. / coll: Mrs. Adolph Gottlieb, New York.

been borne out for me over and over again — in the arena where experience and the judgments that arise from it are most telling and pivotal: the context of the museums. During his lifetime, I saw again and again how his paintings held up as among the strongest in major museum group exhibitions (the Corcoran Biennial of 1967; the Whitney Annual of 1969; “Abstract Painting in the 70s” at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1972, to name but a few); so I was the more surprised (and not a little outraged) at how the younger art critics — my contemporaries — would ignore his work or dismiss it as “old-fashioned”. Moreover, since his death in 1974, his work has seemed increasingly to detach itself from that of other members of his “generation”, in a way that Matisse’s does. Not only at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where his early “Burst” painting, *Blast I* (1957) reigns supreme on the third floor, just as Matisse’s *Piano Lesson* (1916 or 17) does on the second⁶; but also at the Los Angeles County Museum where his *Rolling II* (1961) and Matisse’s delectable *Tea* (1919) shine out like stars. And at the Phillips Collection in Washington, *The Seer* constantly strikes me as a masterpiece of pictorial composition, quite comparable in its organization of curves within a rectangle to Ingres’s small *Bather* there; at the Hirshhorn Museum, Gottlieb’s *Two Discs* of 1963 continues to be one of my most

admired of the great treasures of that collection, and at the Metropolitan Museum in New York I can still walk from my favorite Titian, *Venus with a Lute-Player*, to see Gottlieb’s *Thrust* (1959) and not feel in any way let down.

So, the achievement is there — and in a sense it’s past history, even while it warms and enheartens us, exerts an influence, and vivifies the present. What is its meaning for Canada and for now? Simply this: that “Imperialisms” in art do not last forever, and can sometimes be brought low (in his own lifetime, thanks partly to his own efforts, Gottlieb saw the overthrow of Parisian domination); and that if you want to dispel the notion that people in your own country can’t be artists (and I mean really “big”, world-important artists), the way to do it is for a few colleagues to steer their way along a hazardous course, watching out for and avoiding its Scylla and Charybdis — narrow “nationalism” on the one hand, and abject imitations of foreign masters on the other — and arrive most insistently at themselves, at their best possible work, at what they alone can do. (At the time of Gottlieb’s venture into his first “Pictographs” the “nationalist” movement in American art, which he despised, was called “American Scene Painting” or “Regionalism”, and had a great deal of support from the government’s W.P.A. program.) But I’ve already said⁷ that I see

signs of Toronto — and Canada — starting out on a journey that may take them beyond New York and the United States. With its emphasis on idiosyncratic, sometimes almost “narrative”-like drawing, its free play with bright, cheerful, sometimes clashing color, its diverse approaches to the surface and to “painterliness”, and its several very different and unique personal “worlds”, the new Toronto painting already looks quite unlike that of New York. And that it is continuing to grow and develop and gain momentum, I saw in a few studio visits on my way to and from Edmonton to see the *Adolph Gottlieb: Pictographs* exhibition last November. If this new generation of Canadian artists can persevere, I should imagine that everything else will just be a matter of time. □

Footnotes

1. These statements by Gottlieb come from the following sources: an interview by me, published in *The Washington Post*, Sunday, July 31, 1966; an interview in “Art Notes” by Grace Glueck, *The New York Times*, Sunday, February 11, 1968; and an interview of 1956 published in Selden Rodman’s *Conversations with Artists*, Capricorn Books, New York, 1961. I hope that one day all of Gottlieb’s recorded statements will be collected together in a book, as Matisse’s have been: they would make good reading. A long list of them, compiled by Mary R. Davis for the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, has been published at the back of the Edmonton Art Gallery’s *Adolph Gottlieb: Pictographs* catalogue, but even this is incomplete, and needs updating, for in her recent article in *Arts* magazine, New York, November,

1977, Ms. Davis quotes frequently from what appear to be lengthy unpublished interviews with Martin Friedman (1962) and Dorothy Seckler (1967), neither of which is included in her Edmonton catalogue list.

2. The ensuing statements about the years of the first "Pictographs" come from an unpublished "Dialogue" between Gottlieb and myself, held on May 9, 1968, at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (taped by Voice of America), at the time of his retrospective exhibition, and from an interview in New York by David Sylvester, broadcast on the BBC Third Programme, London, in October, 1960, and published in *Living Arts*, Vol. 1, June, 1963, pp. 2-10.

3. "Kenneth Noland at Emma Lake, 1963" in my catalogue, *Ten Washington Artists: 1950-1970*, published by the Edmonton Art Gallery, 1970.

4. In the film, *The New York School*, by Barbara Rose, Blackwood Films, Inc., New York, 1974. This film shows Gottlieb, as determined and intrepid as ever, painting from the wheel chair he was forced to use after his stroke (and the paralysis of his left side) in 1971.

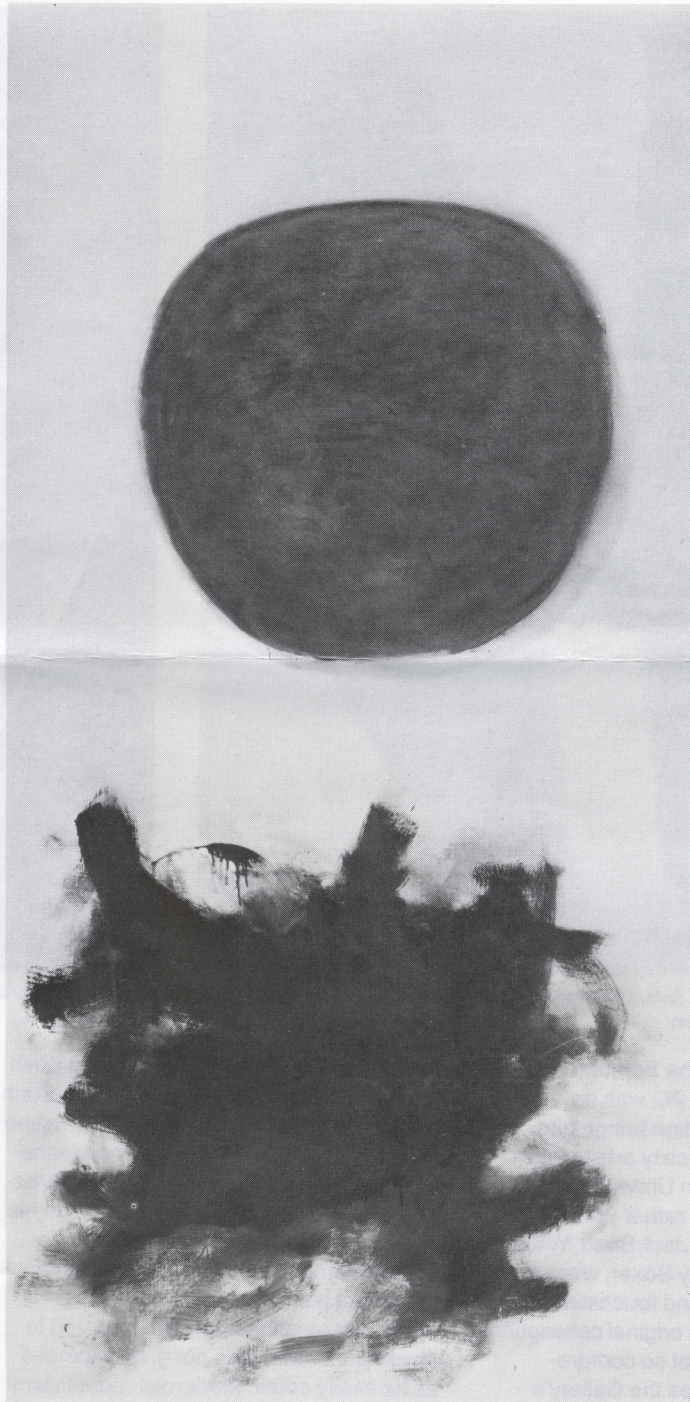
5. When I sent him the text of my first interview with him for possible revisions, Gottlieb added a sentence to say, "my greatest respect goes to Cézanne and the Cubists." That his awareness of the total format was similar to Cézanne's and that positioning on the canvas was of great importance to him is indicated by two stories concerning a later painting. He once told me that Alfred Barr, Director of the Museum of Modern Art, had been asked by a society of psychologists for permission to reproduce *Blast I* as the logo on their notepaper, and that Barr stipulated that they not use just the two images, but clearly indicate the whole rectangle of the painting — a response that Gottlieb wholeheartedly approved. Obviously, if the edges of the painting weren't reproduced, the whole point of the placement of the images — and of the painting — would be lost. The other story was told me by Mrs. Gottlieb and concerns the large painting *Triptych* (1971) that was included in his last exhibition at Marlborough Gallery, New York. It was hanging in the apartment and Gottlieb kept looking at it and saying, "Something bothers me." Then one day, two years after first painting it, he asked his painting assistant, "Do you think you could now mix a color the same as this ground?" She said yes, and painted over the lefthand panel for him. He then painted back in the black and orange color bars where they were situated before, but put the yellow bar below, instead of above them. "It was amazing what this did for the painting," said Mrs. Gottlieb. "He used the bars, but they had to be absolutely in the right place, otherwise he wasn't happy with them." (And today, if you look closely at the painting, you can see that the lefthand panel is actually a little bit yellower, less creamy, than the others.)

6. The contender with this Matisse would be Monet's three-panel *Water-lilies* (c. 1920).

7. In my catalogue, *14 Canadians: A Critic's Choice*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., 1977, and in an interview by Wendy Blair, *Artmagazine* 33.

Adolph Gottlieb: Pictographs

An exhibition organized by The Edmonton Art Gallery



10 Adolph Gottlieb/*Blast I* /1957/oil on canvas/90 x 45½ in./coll: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Philip Johnson Fund.

Itinerary

November 11 - December 18, 1977, The Edmonton Art Gallery, Edmonton, Alta; January 5- February 12, 1978, The Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.; February 24 - April 3, 1978, The Glenbow-

Alberta Institute, Calgary, Alta.; April 12 - May 14, 1978, The Art Gallery of Windsor, Windsor, Ont.; June 8 - July 9, 1978, Musée d'art contemporain, Montreal, Que.; July 12 - Sept. 3, 1978, The Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Ont.