ARTFORUM

TALKING TO ALAN SHIELDS

PRINT FEBRUARY 1971

LATELY YOU'VE BEEN USING clusters and strings of threaded beads, draped into and over many of the newer paintings, as well as striped wands, long colored poles in canvas sheaths, gauze, ropes, and "see-through" grids. Can you describe your working process for any particular painting? What about the canvas hanging in the studio, called Don Duck Wiggly?

It got so complicated at the center, that I took it out. The cut-out piece then became a small beaded medallion (a separate painting in itself) about two inches in diameter. I did two rosettes like that—one is sewn with a lot of threads over paint, and it looks like a shoulder patch. The other is encrusted with beads.

In some of Stella's black or silver banded paintings, it looked so tense at the center that he had to cut it out of the canvas also—although the exact structural reasons may have been different from yours.

He did that? But did he ever notch them with a cross?

I think there is one silver painting, a cruciform shape, in which the central cut-out is also a cross . . .

. . . I don't think I've ever seen it, but I had a feeling he would know that too—because if that kind of geometric energy starting from the periphery of the painting comes into focus strongly at the center, then you can't find your way back out.

If you begin by looking at the cut-out center of Don Duck Wiggly, *you have to start moving your eye around in its stitched and checkered spiral—it doesn't really let you scan out laterally (or vertically) from that empty point.*

But it is smoother than a target, where the circles would be concentric. And I like this much better because it allows a more natural flow for the eyes, rather than a jump. A target pattern has to be so controlled, and it can work badly, so that you're trapped by its bands.

So the notched center is an "out" too?

Yes.

Even in ancient domed buildings, such as the Pantheon, or some early Christian and Byzantine churches, often there was a hole (an oculus) made at the apex of the dome, for light to shine through, and to symbolize heaven. But the architects must have known, too, that for an eye to travel up into that much interior space, it seeks an "out." So in a way, that allowance is related to the forms and implied movement of some work you've done, especially in three dimensions.

Yes. Also, the [flat] six-sided painting called *Alst Wro* [1969, shown at Paula Cooper's gallery last year] had the center shifted so that it wasn't exactly repeating the exterior form. The center piece was the same shape as the outside edge, but it was turned one-twelfth of a revolution, so that the angles of the internal shape were pointing at the sides of the other, external one; in other words, the center turned somewhat.

What happened to your use of sewing-machine stitching during the past year?

It didn't disappear, it's still there—

—but it's pretty submerged now.

Maybe so, but that's just a cycle that you go through.

Before you were using the stitching as a kind of "actualized drawing," instead of sketching anything with paint. You had done a canvas hexagon, just stitched and not painted, which was exhibited in the "Soft Art" show at the Trenton State Museum in February, 1969.

But those earlier pieces were all reinforced pencil drawings. They're drawn on the back, but in order to make the image read from the front, I sewed it through.

Since then, it looks as if you haven't had to be so consistent or disciplined about drawing in that way—the paintings are much looser and more open now.

During the show at Paula Cooper's this December, a friend was talking to me about a dissolving of the intimacy that was necessary to viewing the older work. In those first paintings you couldn't see most of the stitching unless you came very close to their surfaces. You actually had to get inside the periphery of the canvas, so that your field of vision wasn't catching the exterior edges, before you could see some of the things that were in the middle. My friend pointed out that the viewing point has now moved further away from the canvas.

When you use double and triple-stitched lines, and then the stained or painted shapes don't exactly follow them (or are rotated, and asymmetrical to the sewing), there is a further suggestion of changing vantage points. Don Duck Wiggly *makes you want to lie on your back and look up at it on the ceiling sometimes.*

Some people saw *G.U.G.U. Well* as a possible ceiling painting too. The viewer can put himself anywhere within the circumstances of a painting. It can be more aggressive out in the middle of a space than on an ordinary wall. But if you don't situate a painting "neutrally," and you hang it in some strange relation to the architecture (on a slanting wall, on the ceiling, etc.), it unbalances the architecture with a work of art.

Do you think of the paintings as having a specific front or back? Don't you normally work from both sides?

Well, they do have a front and back, although in some instances it's hard to choose which. I change it around, though because of the way they're constructed, they do sometimes have a technical front and back. I usually leave the reinforced border strips on the back—but I don't use that edging all the time now either. Also, I don't always draw the lines on the canvas anymore before I sew or paint. The stitching is getting more submerged because I'm interested in working at freeing that "drawing" from any preconceptions.

You've done two-sided work which can be seen from both sides, especially in your watercolor studies and drawings on paper.

In the "see-through" [grid] paintings, if the individual bands are started before the whole painting is sewn together, then they never do have an actual front or back face (*Ride Cowbody Bun Sam, Long 1/2 Miner Demmm, Devil Devil Love)*. Different sides have different attitudes, but they don't have a front or a back—they only have "sides," and all the sides are equally important when you hang a painting out in the middle of a room.

What about your relation to Larry Poons' earliest dot and ellipse paintings? He had done drawings of grid scaffolding, then these were discarded or made invisible in the final canvas versions.

Especially in later pictures with the big loaf-like shapes, which have no grid to relate to. If you think about it in terms of a long time, in a similar sense both Larry's and my grids were "student periods," because it implies a basic definition of subdividing space. From working that way, eventually you get an education about space which you then have to try out; you've cartooned it down so much on the grids. That gives you some way to relate to the larger picture, starting from a small space. From one of the grids within the painting, your eye can expand out to the whole thing. That would be an assignment in a mechanical drawing class, because cartooning is just a way of increasing or decreasing something in size by means of a grid structure, and the scale is then related.

So you no longer "draw" first—you paint, and then sew?

The processes are interchangeable and becoming more so—because there's not a line already there before I start painting. In those first paintings, there almost always was a line, even though that was just a preparation.

There are much more definite and rigid geometric shapes in those pictures too, as in D.B. J.H. Kisses.

Yes—they were much tighter paintings altogether.

What are the differences between the groups of hanging ropes and the more three-dimensionally stretched pieces like the Whirling Dervish, *the tent* (W.S.A. John Wilkis Tun, *shown at the 1969 Whitney Annual), or the drum* (Circle)?

When you get up next to *Whirling Dervish* you see all of it.

If you're tall enough! What if you were very short?

Then you would never be able to do it! But it's scaled so that almost everyone can see all of it in some way. On the other hand, you can't get close enough to or you can never see all of the big triangular tent; it's also a blockade, if your feet are level with its base. With the circular drum [16 feet in diameter], you can only see less than half of it—you really have to keep moving around the circle. If you're stationary, then you've stopped the painting (there's no way to make that circle move like a carousel, without a mechanical hassle that would be ridiculous for me to try).

What about the rainbowed ropes?

Some are made of clothesline, some of packing string, and some are big half-inch (diameter) ropes—a forest of 30 or 40 ropes experienced at one time.

As I recall, they were hung from the ceiling pipes, and kept surprising you by hitting your face while you were absorbed in one, and couldn't yet focus on the next one.

There were so many of them, that if you were noticing one, or if you wanted to isolate it, you were missing all the rest of them. There are a few possibilities for looking at those ropes. Either you're standing outside the whole group, and you see all of them—like having to view all of the Brancusi sculptures installed at the Museum of Modern Art from behind a guard-rope, or as I remember seeing Oldenburg's giant pool balls filling up a gallery room that could not be entered. Or another approach to the ropes is walking through them, seeing only one at a time.

Does the dancing and mime work you've been doing this year have any relation to how you move or manipulate the viewer around your three-dimensional paintings? Does the energy from one activity feed over into your attitudes or approaches to the painting, in any specific way?

Yes—but really, those paintings have more to do with ideas about my scale or what my whole life is about—what I do with dance concerns the whole painting (and living) process, rather than the relationship to specific pieces. That relationship alone was probably formulated when I reached my full, mature size. So I can't separate it and say that my sense of painting-movement began when I got involved with dance and comic mime. Certainly a lot of new things did happen, but I don't know what it relates to directly in the work, because I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't participated in the dance experience. So I give it all of the credit and none of the credit.

The frame of the Whirling Dervish *is lifted a few inches off the floor, as if it were already spinning. The drum makes you want to skip or run around it, and the tent can imply walking through it like a tunnel—those are dance-like movements which are suggested by the paintings themselves, to a person who is alert and active in relating to them.*

Yes, they are like dance; and theatrics is in there too.

Did you go to a lot of circuses when you were young?

I went to a few. I went to sideshows and carnivals with ferris wheels and spinning car rides—there were more of those in Kansas than the three-ring type circuses. At these carnivals you

had to walk around and through the amusements—like that drum painting of mine which you have to walk around in order to see it all.

Then there is some connection between this memory of circulation around the carnival rides or shows, and how you make a spectator relate to and experience your paintings? Some of that "festive" aspect in the paintings looks back to where you came from, and some comes out of your recent dance work, though you can't necessarily measure the degree or combinations of each source.

Yes, sure. *(A discussion about Midwestern people, Shields' grandfather, Kansas Indian tales, and about growing up next to the route of the old Sante Fe trail followed.)*

You're using cages and grids, which are reminiscent of the earlier preliminary drawing lines, quite a bit lately. But now they're open in a number of ways that the older, plain stitched canvases were not. You can spin them around when they're suspended from one wire, and pass your eyes through them. I remember seeing one in the studio that made me think of the sails on an Egyptian river boat—it was done with painted gauze, and canvas strips. Did living near the ocean this past summer affect you in relation to this type of painting?

Yes. A friend of mine and I had a big argument about one of those first grids I hung in the middle of the room. He had been out on a boat and he immediately said: "That's not hanging right, and I don't like it hanging that way, because I've experienced the real thing, and it doesn't look correct." He made me come out sailing and experience what he did, and I saw the difference too; but I don't believe that the two experiences have to conform to each other.

It's like taking a photograph—once it's a print, it's already something quite separate and distinct from the subject or source. If you're making paintings that look like or refer to the experience of sails, it doesn't matter, once you get them away from the ship, if they function in a different way.

It's a mistake to think that they have to be the same.

What he was implying is related to the issue of control or imaginative license—what happens when you bring a thing farthest away from a drawing. The ship with the sail would be the "drawing"—in this case it's the functional model. Your friend was objecting to how you carried your experience away from that model. You were simply allowing it to take on new qualities as another entity.

Yes, you see, I didn't change my mind about that question—though my mind was changed in other ways. There's something strange about those grid paintings though; some people can see through them and some can't. I found out that some viewers look through them and have colors on the edges of their eyes while others see them and stop right there.

They just see a drawing . . .

They don't see through it at all; they only see a flat sub-divided surface.

That's what I meant by the word "cage"—a grid of bars—some people can see out of them, and some can see into them, but with a barrier in between; like transparency and translucency.

Well, translucency is diffusing—it's not emitting any light.

Yes, grids don't actually diffuse light, when they're as big as your paintings.

Things that are really emitting light are luminescent—they're producing it, altering it, or amplifying it.

So "luminescence" means projecting light—do you want your paintings to do that?

There are things all over the place that do that.

A student I know who saw your paintings at the Paula Cooper show said he thought "it was a good idea." I never saw it as being so much a matter of conceptualizing, and that's an important issue with your work. For me, it seems to read as coming out of a procedure that is more spontaneous and intuitively experimental, rather than intellectualized to any great extent.

It isn't "conceptual" anymore—but it was, as a beginning. The notion of being an artist can be just a concept, at first; the farther along you move, the more chance there is that something will flow along like a vessel, instead of coming out as idea number 1, 2 or 3. The use of this loose hanging canvas, its edges reinforced with binding, is a "good idea"—being flat against the wall, not having a stretcher, so that the tension over the whole field becomes an element, instead of a given, flat thing. This also has a certain gravity formation that's different from the conventional canvas.

What do you mean by "gravity formation"—it's not an object too?

I mean that the tension on this canvas is not a given thing. Ordinarily when you think about a painting, it's a surface pulled flat, so that it doesn't have any wrinkles in it. It's pulled out to the point where it's supposedly neutral—but I don't think it's neutral ground at all, because that's the physicality which any painted mark on that surface then has to deal with. In my painting I have different elements to consider. I'm not working with that canvas as a rigid thing. It comes more naturally formed. The canvas itself has a form too, and it's not the form of a rectangular box that's a fixed distance out from the wall.

That relates again to the issue of front and back, because when the paintings are suspended in the middle of a room, they're like banners, and the wind also determines their shape. . . .

And that wind is a direction. Hanging on a thread, the paintings can be affected by the wind, and when they are, that is their particular direction; they don't have another more fixed orientation. Some of them do hang more parallel to a wall so that they echo the whole form of the wall. These are just two different views explored in my work, because one kind of painting is still closer to the wall than it is to the middle of the room. Others cut right through the center of a space, so there's no vulgarity of having one side selected over another side—it's neutral, if anything can be neutral. But the drum can be really neutral itself, when located in a square room, because it's approximately an equal distance from everywhere.

What about the corners of the room?

Those corners are regular and you can always see the same amount of an area on the drum that you saw from the other corners. Your movement sections it. From back in a corner you can see a quarter of the painting or more, so that you have overlaps each time you go back in that corner.

Do you think that the drum painting has to be situated in a certain sized or shaped room, in a very sculptural way?

That has just occurred to it, .so some people have seen it that way.

Were you thinking that that was a possibility for the drum when you made it?

It happened, so I thought about it. But maybe it reveals something about my sense of geometry when I think of a “square” room as a neutral container for a “circle.”

When I first saw the drum in your studio, you still had big uneven spaces on all sides of it.

And it wasn’t neutral space at all. But you can’t find *purely* neutral spaces, there aren’t any. There’s something that’s going to affect the damn thing, no matter where you are. Even the humidity in the air changes the surface of these paintings daily. When you live with a painting, you can see that change, if you’re exposed to the elements (though some houses or museums are obviously not exposed to weather changes of that sort—they don’t like or want that to happen).

And you intend your paintings to be exposed to the elements?

Yes, sure.

So that’s one of the difficult things about looking at your paintings in a gallery or museum situation, where it’s airless for the most part. You can’t see the fluctuations and responses to atmospheric conditions very clearly. When you talked about going sailing during the summer, I wondered what was new, from that experience, for making the paintings responsive in this way to air currents, humidity, etc.?

Not that much, because I was already involved with those qualities before I went out on a boat.

Then it simply confirmed what you were already thinking or doing?

That’s what it did. Sometimes it happens that you have a feeling about something and then you experiment to discover if that really does exist. That’s generally how you find out about the things you want to explore.

Is it preparing people too much to make verbal sense of your work?

No, as long as they realize it’s incidental. . . . But if I am a moron, all the better for evaluating, because then you don’t have to use ordinary terms—you can use crazy terms—you’re free to be happy doing something that doesn’t have “significance,” and you can have fun doing it.

Although they're not overly serious, systematic, or consistent, your paintings are not conceptually esoteric and difficult either. All that experimental variety leaves me with a feeling of real openness and visual generosity. . . .

I hope that's true.

EMILY WASSERMAN

Lately you've been using clusters and strings of threaded beads, draped into and over many of the newer paintings, as well as striped wands, long colored poles in canvas sheaths, gauze, ropes, and "see-through" grids. Can you describe your working process for any particular painting? What about the canvas hanging in the studio, called Don Duck Wiggly?

It got so complicated at the center, that I took it out. The cut-out piece then became a small beaded medallion (a separate painting in itself) about two inches in diameter. I did two rosettes like that—one is sewn with a lot of threads over paint, and it looks like a shoulder patch. The other is encrusted with beads.

In some of Stella's black or silver banded paintings, it looked so tense at the center that he had to cut it out of the canvas also—although the exact structural reasons may have been different from yours.

He did that? But did he ever notch them with a cross?

I think there is one silver painting, a cruciform shape, in which the central cut-out is also a cross . . .

. . . I don't think I've ever seen it, but I had a feeling he would know that too—because if that kind of geometric energy starting from the periphery of the painting comes into focus strongly at the center, then you can't find your way back out.

If you begin by looking at the cut-out center of Don Duck Wiggly, *you have to start moving your eye around in its stitched and checkered spiral—it doesn't really let you scan out laterally (or vertically) from that empty point.*

But it is smoother than a target, where the circles would be concentric. And I like this much better because it allows a more natural flow for the eyes, rather than a jump. A target pattern has to be so controlled, and it can work badly, so that you're trapped by its bands.

So the notched center is an "out" too?

Yes.

Even in ancient domed buildings, such as the Pantheon, or some early Christian and Byzantine churches, often there was a hole (an oculus) made at the apex of the dome, for light to shine through, and to symbolize heaven. But the architects must have known, too, that for an eye to travel up into that much interior space, it seeks an "out." So in a way, that allowance is related to the forms and implied movement of some work you've done, especially in three dimensions.

Yes. Also, the [flat] six-sided painting called *Alst Wro* [1969, shown at Paula Cooper's gallery last year] had the center shifted so that it wasn't exactly repeating the exterior form. The center piece was the same shape as the outside edge, but it was turned one-twelfth of a revolution, so that the angles of the internal shape were pointing at the sides of the other, external one; in other words, the center turned somewhat.

What happened to your use of sewing-machine stitching during the past year?

It didn't disappear, it's still there—

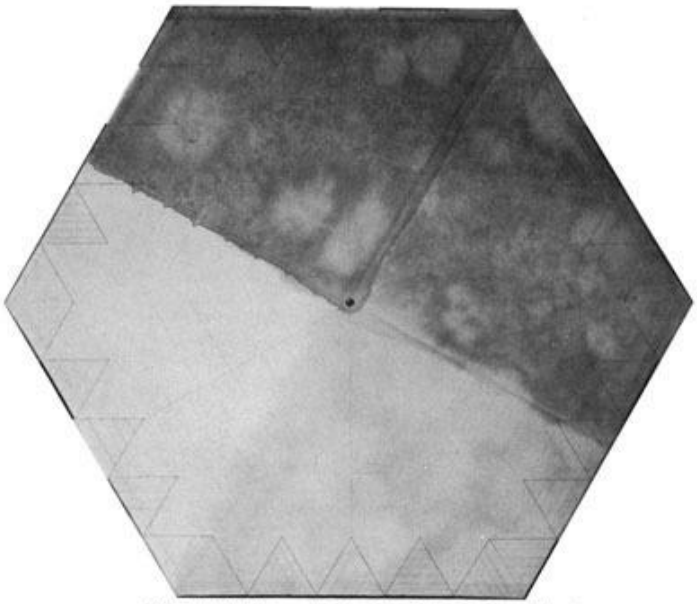
—but it's pretty submerged now.

Maybe so, but that's just a cycle that you go through.

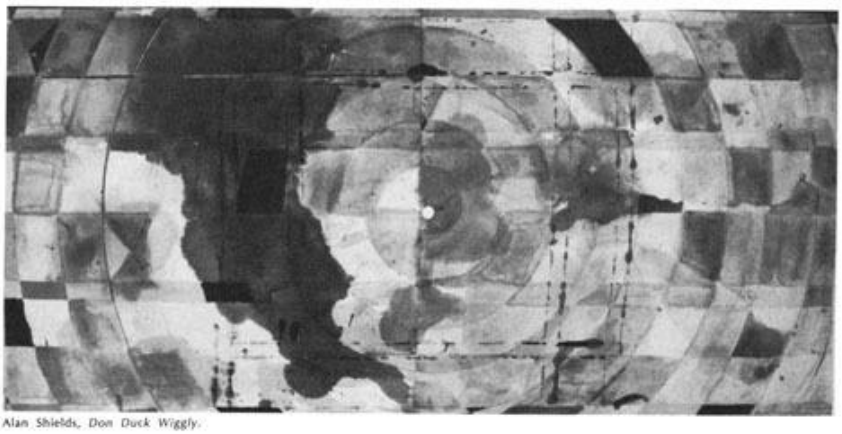
Before you were using the stitching as a kind of "actualized drawing," instead of sketching anything with paint. You had done a canvas hexagon, just stitched and not painted, which was exhibited in the "Soft Art" show at the Trenton State Museum in February, 1969.

TALKING WITH ALAN SHIELDS

Alan Shields, *Back Inside (God is Only a Man)*, acrylic on canvas, beads, cotton belting, thread, 93 x 192", 1970. (Paula Cooper Gallery.)



Alan Shields, *Alst Wro*, acrylic, 118 x 136", 1969. (Paula Cooper Gallery.)



Alan Shields, *Don Duck Wiggly*.

But those earlier pieces were all reinforced pencil drawings. They're drawn on the back, but in order to make the image read from the front, I sewed it through.

Since then, it looks as if you haven't had to be so consistent or disciplined about drawing in that way—the paintings are much looser and more open now.

During the show at Paula Cooper's this December, a friend was talking to me about a dissolving of the intimacy that was necessary to viewing the older work. In those first paintings you couldn't see most of the stitching unless you came very close to their surfaces. You actually had to get inside the periphery of the canvas, so that your field of vision wasn't catching the exterior edges, before you could see some of the things that were in the middle. My friend pointed out that the viewing point has now moved further away from the canvas.

When you use double and triple-stitched lines, and then the stained or painted shapes don't exactly follow them (or are rotated, and asymmetrical to the sewing), there is a further suggestion of changing vantage points. Don Duck Wiggly *makes you want to lie on your back and look up at it on the ceiling sometimes.*

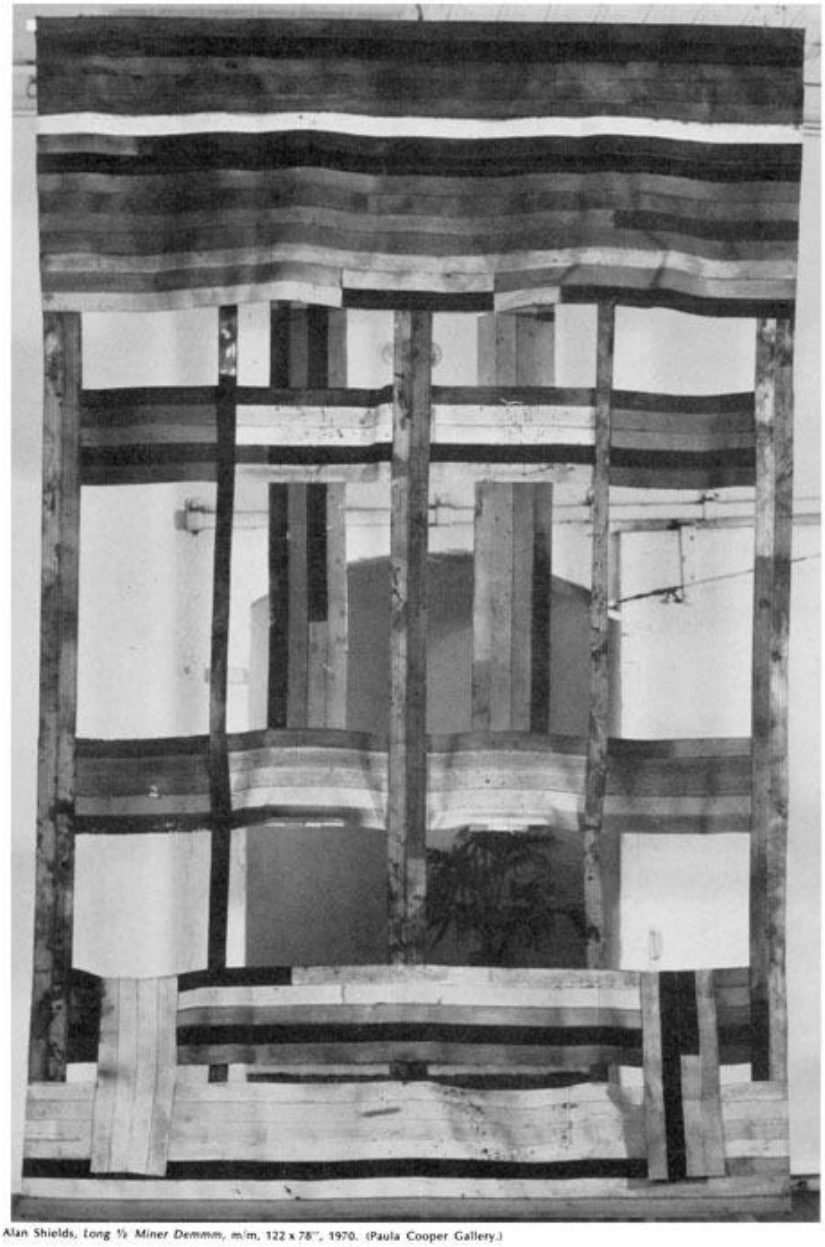
Some people saw *G.U.G.U. Well* as a possible ceiling painting too. The viewer can put himself anywhere within the circumstances of a painting. It can be more aggressive out in the middle of a space than on an ordinary wall. But if you don't situate a painting "neutrally," and you hang it in some strange relation to the architecture (on a slanting wall, on the ceiling, etc.), it unbalances the architecture with a work of art.

Do you think of the paintings as having a specific front or back? Don't you normally work from both sides?

Well, they do have a front and back, although in some instances it's hard to choose which. I change it around, though because of the way they're constructed, they do sometimes have a technical front and back. I usually leave the reinforced border strips on the back—but I don't use that edging all the time now either. Also, I don't always draw the lines on the canvas anymore before I sew or paint. The stitching is getting more submerged because I'm interested in working at freeing that "drawing" from any preconceptions.

You've done two-sided work which can be seen from both sides, especially in your watercolor studies and drawings on paper.

In the "see-through" [grid] paintings, if the individual bands are started before the whole painting is sewn together, then they never do have an actual front or back face (*Ride Cowbody Bun Sam, Long ½ Miner Demmm, Devil Devil Love*). Different sides have different attitudes,



Alan Shields, *Long ½ Miner Demmm*, m/m, 122 x 78", 1970. (Paula Cooper Gallery.)

Installation view, Alan Shields exhibition, Paula Cooper Gallery, December, 1970. Left, *Devil, Devil, Love;* Floor, *Whirling Dervish;* Wall, *S.P.*

but they don't have a front or a back—they only have "sides," and all the sides are equally important when you hang a painting out in the middle of a room.

What about your relation to Larry Poons' earliest dot and ellipse paintings? He had done drawings of grid scaffolding, then these were discarded or made invisible in the final canvas versions.

Especially in later pictures with the big loaf-like shapes, which have no grid to relate to. If you think about it in terms of a long time, in a similar sense both Larry's and my grids were "student periods," because it implies a basic definition of subdividing space. From working that way, eventually you get an education about space which you then have to try out; you've cartooned it down so much on the grids. That gives you some way to relate to the larger picture, starting from a small space. From one of the grids within the painting, your eye can expand out to the whole thing. That would be an assignment in a mechanical drawing class, because cartooning is just a way of increasing or decreasing something in size by means of a grid structure, and the scale is then related.

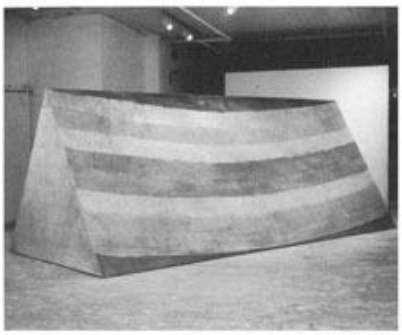
So you no longer "draw" first—you paint, and then sew?

The processes are interchangeable and becoming more so—because there's not a line already there before I start painting. In those first paintings, there almost always was a line, even though that was just a preparation.

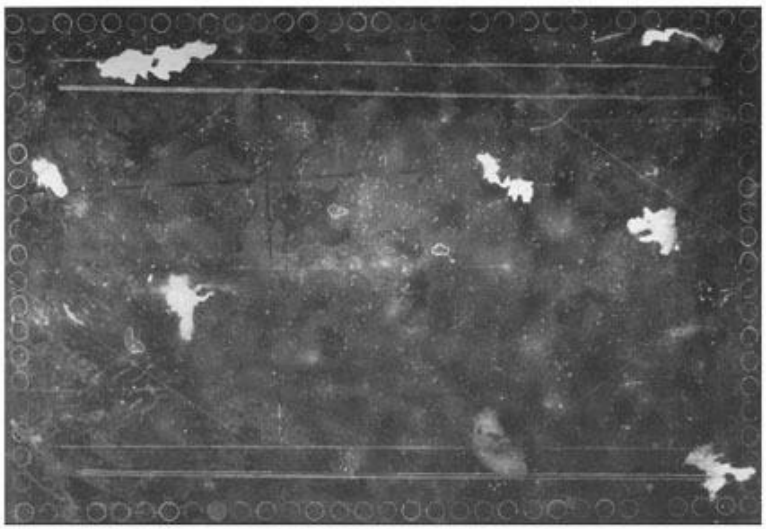
There are much more definite and rigid geometric shapes in those pictures too, as in D.B. J.H. Kisses.

Yes—they were much tighter paintings altogether.

What are the differences between the groups of hanging ropes and the more three-dimension-



Alan Shields, W.S.A. John Wilkis Tun, 99 x 99 x 203 x 86¼", 1969.



Alan Shields, G.U.G.U. Well, acrylic, thread on canvas, 10 x 16', 1969-70. (Paula Cooper Gallery.)

ally stretched pieces like the Whirling Dervish, *the tent* (W.S.A. John Wilkis Tun, *shown at the 1969 Whitney Annual), or the drum* (Circle)?

When you get up next to *Whirling Dervish* you see all of it.

If you're tall enough! What if you were very short?

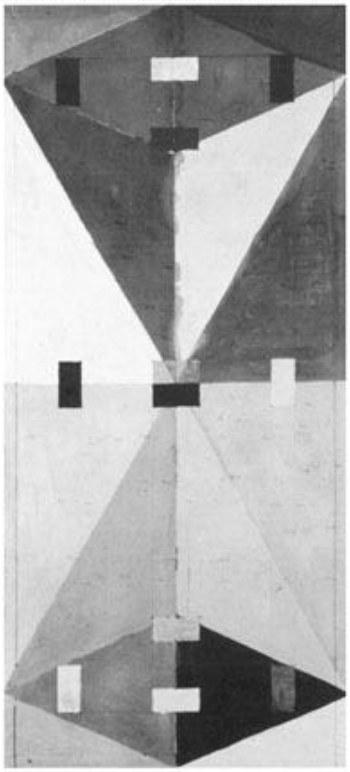
Then you would never be able to do it! But it's scaled so that almost everyone can see all of it in some way. On the other hand, you can't get close enough to or you can never see all of the big triangular tent; it's also a blockade, if your feet are level with its base. With the circular drum [16 feet in diameter], you can only see less than half of it—you really have to keep moving around the circle. If you're stationary, then you've stopped the painting (there's no way to make that circle move like a carousel, without a mechanical hassle that would be ridiculous for me to try).

What about the rainbowed ropes?

Some are made of clothesline, some of packing string, and some are big half-inch (diameter) ropes—a forest of 30 or 40 ropes experienced at one time.

As I recall, they were hung from the ceiling pipes, and kept surprising you by hitting your face while you were absorbed in one, and couldn't yet focus on the next one.

There were so many of them, that if you were noticing one, or if you wanted to isolate it, you were missing all the rest of them. There are a few possibilities for looking at those ropes. Either you're standing outside the whole group, and you see all of them—like having to view all of the Brancusi sculptures installed at the Museum of Modern Art from behind a guard-rope, or as I remember seeing Oldenburg's giant pool balls filling up a gallery room that could not be entered. Or another approach to the ropes is walking through them, seeing only one at a time.



Alan Shields, D.B.J.H. (Kisses), acrylic, 132 x 60", 1968-9. (Paula Cooper Gallery.)

Does the dancing and mime work you've been doing this year have any relation to how you move or manipulate the viewer around your three-dimensional paintings? Does the energy from one activity feed over into your attitudes or approaches to the painting, in any specific way?

Yes—but really, those paintings have more to do with ideas about my scale or what my whole life is about—what I do with dance concerns the whole painting (and living) process, rather than the relationship to specific pieces. That relationship alone was probably formulated when I reached my full, mature size. So I can't separate it and say that my sense of painting-movement began when I got involved with dance and comic mime. Certainly a lot of new things did happen, but I don't know what it relates to directly in the work, because I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't participated in the dance experience. So I give it all of the credit and none of the credit.

The frame of the Whirling Dervish *is lifted a few inches off the floor, as if it were already spinning. The drum makes you want to skip or run around it, and the tent can imply walking through it like a tunnel—those are dance-like movements which are suggested by the paintings themselves, to a person who is alert and active in relating to them.*

Yes, they are like dance; and theatrics is in there too.

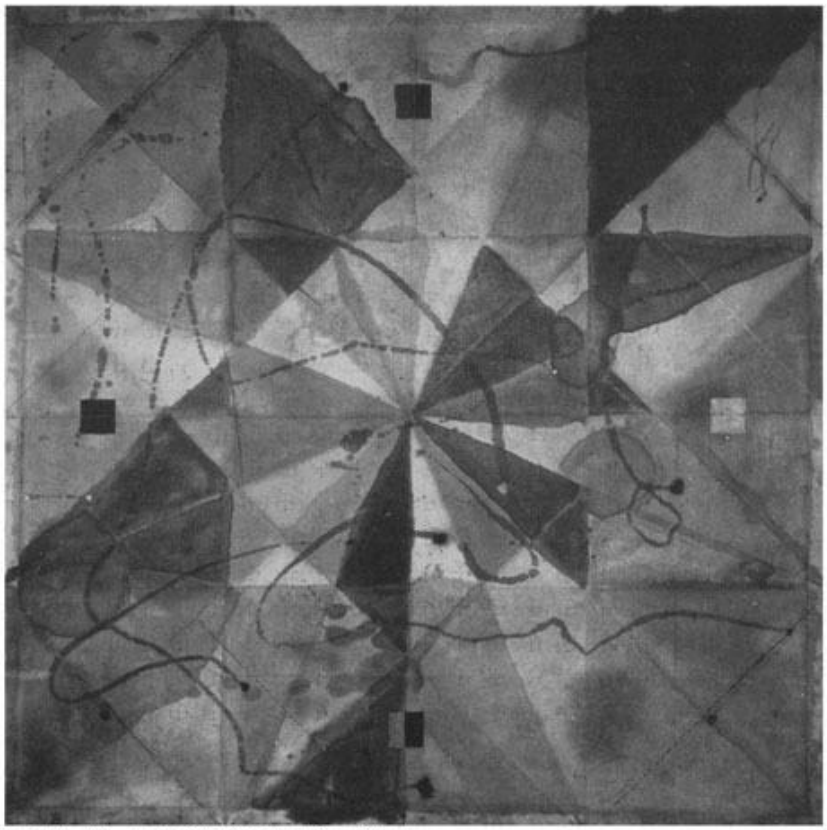
Did you go to a lot of circuses when you were young?

I went to a few. I went to sideshows and carnivals with ferris wheels and spinning car rides—there were more of those in Kansas than the three-ring type circuses. At these carnivals you had to walk around and through the amusements—like that drum painting of mine which you have to walk around in order to see it all.

Then there is some connection between this memory of circulation around the carnival rides or shows, and how you make a spectator relate to and experience your paintings? Some of that "festive" aspect in the paintings looks back to where you came from, and some comes out of your recent dance work, though you can't necessarily measure the degree or combinations of each source.

Yes, sure. *(A discussion about Midwestern people, Shields' grandfather, Kansas Indian tales, and about growing up next to the route of the old Sante Fe trail followed.)*

You're using cages and grids, which are reminiscent of the earlier preliminary drawing lines, quite a bit lately. But now they're open in a number of ways that the older, plain stitched canvases were not. You can spin them around when they're suspended from one wire, and pass your eyes through them. I remember seeing one in the studio that made me think of the sails on an Egyptian river boat—it was done with painted gauze, and canvas strips. Did living near the ocean this past summer affect you in relation to this type of painting?



Alan Shields, Kent, m/m, 118 x 118", 1967-70. (Paula Cooper Gallery.)

Yes. A friend of mine and I had a big argument about one of those first grids I hung in the middle of the room. He had been out on a boat and he immediately said: "That's not hanging right, and I don't like it hanging that way, because I've experienced the real thing, and it doesn't look correct." He made me come out sailing and experience what he did, and I saw the difference too; but I don't believe that the two experiences have to conform to each other.

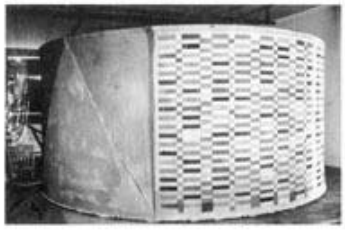
It's like taking a photograph—once it's a print, it's already something quite separate and distinct from the subject or source. If you're making paintings that look like or refer to the experience of sails, it doesn't matter, once you get them away from the ship, if they function in a different way.

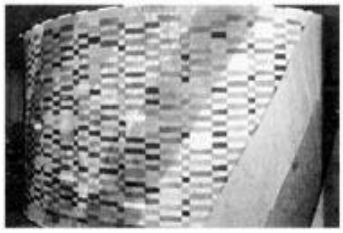
It's a mistake to think that they have to be the same.

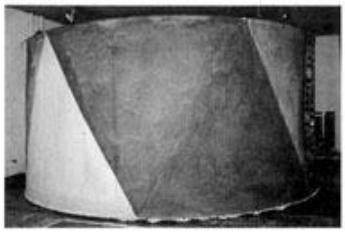
What he was implying is related to the issue of control or imaginative license—what happens when you bring a thing farthest away from a drawing. The ship with the sail would be the "drawing"—in this case it's the functional model. Your friend was objecting to how you carried your experience away from that model. You were simply allowing it to take on new qualities as another entity.

Yes, you see, I didn't change my mind about that question—though my mind was changed in other ways. There's something strange about those grid paintings though; some people can see through them and some can't. I found out that some viewers look through them and have colors on the edges of their eyes while others

Alan Shields, *Drum*, m/m, 1969-70.







— Emily Wasserman