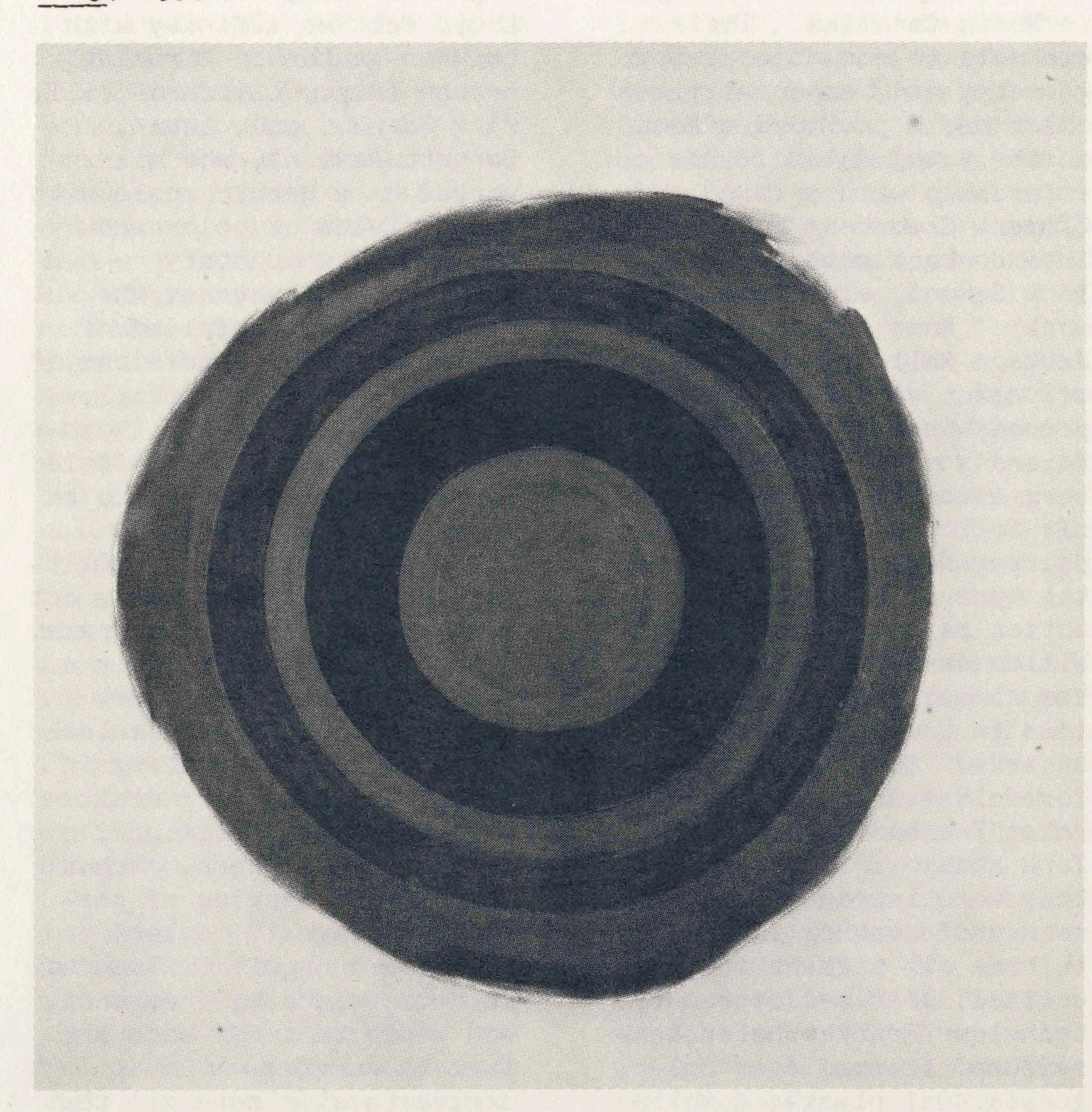
Song, 1958



Kenneth Noland's circle paintings consist of centrally placed concentric bands of intensely colored plasticbased paint that is stained into large, unprimed and roughly square canvases. Before arriving at these radically new works in 1958, Noland worked through many influences, including exposure to the European geometric abstraction of Josef Albers and Ilya Bolotowsky, his teachers at the progressive Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Their emphasis on non-objectivity, geometry and, especially, color had a profound effect on the young Noland. His friendship with critic Clement Greenberg brought him into contact with the New York School, especially the work of Hans Hofmann and Jackson Pollock, whose involvement with materials and process became important to Noland's mature work. Greenberg admonished Noland and his fellow Washington, D.C. painter Morris Louis against the type of gestural or action painting inspired by Willem de Kooning but which had already become formularized in the hands of lesser artists. He also arranged for Noland and Louis to visit Helen Frankenthaler's New York studio in 1953, where they were introduced to her method of soaking turpentinethinned oil pigment into unsized, unprimed canvas (a technique Frankenthaler herself had learned from Pollock's 1951 black-and-white stain paintings made with thinned black enamel paint).

Noland and Louis recognized almost immediately that the technique of staining ("...a way to think about and use color") was also a means of eliminating gesture and drawing, hallmarks of "action"

painting," which had dominated American art for a decade. Finally, staining provided a method of structuring an image without resorting to what the two artists considered outworn Cubist-derived compositional devices based on the asymmetrical balancing of parts (as in the paintings of Piet Mondrian).

Though they reacted against the gestural wing of Abstract Expressionism, Noland and Louis felt an affinity with the non-gestural, "imagist" branch (e.g., Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, and, later, Barnett Newman), who all worked on a heroic scale with large fields of color and simple, often unitary imagery. But whereas the older artists conceived of their works as expressions of either the sublime (Still, Newman) or the tragic (Rothko), the younger color-field painters, as they came to be known (including Noland, Louis and, later, Jules Olitski and Larry Poons) were not interested in personal drama. Rather, as Noland said in a recent conversation, they wished to develop "...a less codified way of painting in which materials were dealt with in terms of texture, color, even pattern, rather than in the service of gesture or images." Noland and Louis were highly influenced in this regard by Greenberg, who wrote that for each art form to survive, it must strive to eliminate all that is not intrinsic to it. In painting, that meant the twodimensional flatness of the surface was all-important, and any attempt to suggest a third dimension had to be avoided at all costs. Formal elements, such as color, had to be purged of representational allusions. Noland and

Louis began to experiment together, staining with the new Magna plastic-based paints, which eventually led Louis to his renowned "veils" and Noland to the circle paintings.

Noland's concentric circle paintings made their debut in 1959 at the French and Company gallery in New York. Song, 1958, and Untitled, 1959, are characteristic of the earliest circle paintings, consisting of a loosely-brushed outer ring (a holdover from Noland's earlier Abstract Expressionist works) enclosing narrower bands of color. Working without sketches or color notations, he started at the center of the painting, choosing each color spontaneously. Since his student days in Paris, Noland had admired the way Henri Matisse placed high-keyed, sensuous colors side-by-side. Matisse and the Fauves had freed color from a descriptive function in their figure paintings and landscapes. In the circle paintings, Noland took this freedom a step further, releasing color from the confines of representational form. Color as pure sensation had become the central theme of Noland's painting.

In Ember, 1960, Noland retained the uneven edge of the outer band, but left narrow, unpainted canvas strips between the intense rust and black bands and the deep red center. He increased the width of the intervening raw canvas strips in later works (Rose, 1961) while smoothing out the edges of the color bands. Spring Cool, 1962, is representative of the best of the late circles. By this time Noland had eliminated all traces of

painterliness. The blue, white and grey color bands are pulled apart so that they fill more of the square surface of the canvas, leaving larger areas of raw canvas in-between. The simplified format results in an unprecedented lightness and airiness.

In 1962 Noland produced a small series of works known as "cat's eyes" (Lebron, 1962), in which an oval surrounding a circle replaced the concentric rings. In late 1962, Noland began the chevron series, a further departure from the circles. Since that time, Noland has continued to present viewers with fresh color experiences stimulated by each new series format: diamonds, horizontal stripes, plaids, irregularly shaped canvases, and the handmade paper works of the last several years. In these new paper works, in which Noland repeats several earlier motifs (circles, chevrons, etc.), he has achieved a literal fusion of color, material and shape.

The pendulum has now swung away from the cool, abstract and geometric art of Noland's generation and the Minimalist painters who followed them, and toward expressive figuration practiced by such artists as Julian Schnabel (MATRIX 52), Francesco Clemente (MATRIX 46) and Georg Baselitz (MATRIX 70). To look anew at these early Noland paintings is to be reminded of and refreshed by the sensuous enjoyment provided by the experience of vivid color allowed to resonate and expand through a simple, holistic format.

North Carolina in 1924. He served in the U.S. Air Force during World War II and

College on the G.I. Bill from 1946 to 1948. After a year in Paris, he settled in Washington, D.C., painting and teaching there until 1962. He lived in New York City briefly before buying Robert Frost's Vermont farm in 1963. Noland currently divides his time between upstate New York and New York City, where he is represented by the André Emmerich Gallery.

Constance Lewallen

Works in MATRIX:

(All works are acrylic on canvas.)

Song, 1958, 65" x 65". Lent by the Whitney Museum of American Art. Gift of the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Untitled, 1959, 36" x 36". Lent by Chiyo Thomas Telford.

Ember, 1960, 70" x 70". Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Wallace Friedman.

Rose, 1961, 81-1/2" x 81-1/2". Lent by Harry W. Anderson.

Spring Cool, 1962, 96" x 96". Lent by Richard L. Weisman.

Lebron, 1962, 69-3/4" x 69-3/4". Lent Harry W. Anderson.

Complete biographical and bibliographical information about the artist through 1976 is contained in the catalogue for his exhibition at The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Selected one-person exhibitions since 1976:

The Solomon R. Guggenheim

Museum, NY, Kenneth Noland: A

Retrospective, '77 (traveled,
catalogue); André Emmerich

Gallery, NY '77, '78, '80,
'81, '82, '83--2 exhibitions,
catalogues; Waddington

Galleries, London '81; Museo
de Arte Moderno, Mexico,
D.F., '83; Galerie de France,
Paris '84.

Selected group exhibitions since 1976:

Albright-Knox Art Gallery,
Buffalo, NY, American Painting of the 1970s, '78
(traveled, catalogue); Museen
der Stadt Köln, W. Germany,
Westkunst, '81 (catalogue);
The Brooklyn Museum, NY, The
American Artist as Printmaker, '83 (catalogue).

Selected bibliography about the artist since 1976 (see also catalogues under exhibitions):

Moffett, Kenworth.

Kenneth Noland (NY: Harry N.

Abrams, Inc., 1977).

York School: The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties (NY: Harper & Row, 1978).

Cummings, Paul. Artists in their Words (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1979).

Russell, John. The Meanings of Modern Art (NY: MOMA & Harper & Row, 1981).

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