

**DALE HENRY**

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## ABOUT

Dale Henry (1931 – 2011) was a productive and respected artist in New York from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. He showed in non-profit institutions and alternative art spaces including the Clocktower Gallery and MoMA PS1 (then the Institute for Art and Urban Resources), and in the well-regarded John Weber Gallery. He taught at the School of Visual Arts.

Henry became disenchanted with the commercialization of the art world, and felt under-appreciated by critics, dealers, and even his peers. In 1986, he permanently left New York for the rural town of Cartersville, Virginia. For an emerging artist, to leave New York was to risk being forgotten, and this issue haunted Henry for the rest of his life. Beginning in the early 2000s, he unsuccessfully approached curators, including Clocktower and PS1 Founder Alanna Heiss, and artist friends including Robert and Sylvia Plimack Mangold and Marcia Hafif, to undertake responsibility for his work and legacy.

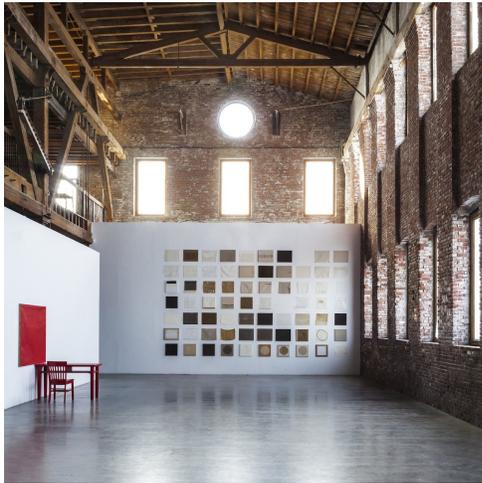
In the fall of 2011, Heiss received a letter from Henry's lawyer revealing that the artist had bequeathed his entire oeuvre to her, with a modest sum of money to carry out curatorial projects at her discretion, with the proviso that the work remain outside of the art market. Should Heiss decline the bequest, the lawyer had explicit instructions to destroy the works. Heiss visited Henry's studio in Virginia, and found his work unusual and compelling. She consulted Henry's peers, including Hafif and the sculptor Richard Nonas, who remarked on the relevance of the ideas and processes Henry was exploring at the time. Heiss decided to take on the unusual task.



Dale Henry installation view at Pioneer Works, 2014.

# PROJECT

The result of the bequest was a multi-part retrospective: *Dale Henry: The Artist Who Left New York* that premiered at the Clocktower Gallery in 2013—the last of the historic space’s forty years of exhibitions—, followed by a second presentation in spring 2014 at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn, and a final installment presented at Clocktower’s administrative headquarters in summer 2014.



To satisfy Henry’s paradoxical wish that the work gain exposure but be devoid of any commercial value, Heiss has given the most significant groups of works as gifts to prominent museums and collections in the United States and abroad, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Brooklyn Museum, the Cleveland Museum, the Fralin Museum of Art at the University of Virginia, the Birmingham Museum of Art, and the Sammlung-Hoffmann Collection in Berlin, among others. The remaining 200 works have been disseminated to individuals including artists, critics, curators, and Henry’s artist peers, in all cases, free of charge. The goal of this series of projects is to bring forth critical post-minimalist and conceptual works by an artist whose relative anonymity belies the relevance of his work.



Top left: Pioneer Works. Top right: the Clocktower Gallery. Above left and right: Jones Day.

# ACQUISITIONS

## **The Sammlung-Hoffmann Collection, Berlin:**

- *Wet Grounds* series, 1971:
  - *Audaz*
  - *Bhrug*
  - *Ters*

## **The Museum of Modern Art:**

- *Primer Sets*, 1972:  
(Full title: *Primer Sets Of A Revealingly Graphic, Personal History Of Western Painting Using The Complete And Basic Iambus Throughout. Eighty Pieces In Eight Sets: Marster Buckt Tho Nitid / Makar Vanisht / Oyez Fúnnee*)

## **The Fralin Museum of Art at the University of Virginia:**

- *Prosody Drawings* series, 1973-76

## **The Wellesley College Davis Museum:**

- *Plan of the Uffizi* series, 1973:
  - *After a photograph of Rembrandt van Rijn, Youthful Self-Portrait – Room XLIV*
  - *After a photograph of Sandro Botticelli, Primavera – Room X*
- *Body of Work* series, 1976:
  - 1962

## **The Brooklyn Museum:**

- *Interiors* series, 1978:
  - *Cadmium-Vermillion (Barium) Red, Medium – Studio*

## **The Cleveland Museum of Art:**

- *Interiors* series, 1978:
  - *Pure Cadmium Red, Medium – Bath*

## **The Birmingham Museum of Art:**

- *Interiors* series, 1978:
  - *Pure Cobalt Blue - Bedroom*

## **Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art (on hold):**

- *Interiors* series, 1978:
  - *Cobalt Blue, Hue Deep - Stable*

Most of the remaining 200 works have been disseminated to collectors, critics, curators, and artists, including Joan Jonas, Lynn Hershman-Leeson, Eric Boman and Peter Schlesinger, Todd Eberle, Amy Oppenheim, Lawrence and Alice Weiner, Mickalene Thomas, Eric Shiner, Sasha Frere-Jones, Robert Wilson, Marcia Hafif, and Dustin Yellin, among others.



Dale Henry, *Interiors* series, 1978

Left: *Pure Cobalt Blue - Bedroom*, acquired by the Birmingham Museum of Art

Right: *Cadmium-Vermillion (Barium) Red, Medium – Studio*, acquired by the Brooklyn Museum



Dale Henry works installed in the home of Eric Boman and Peter Schlesinger, 2018

## EVENTS

October 29th, 2013

### **Clocktower Gallery opening**

*Dale Henry: The Artist Who Left New York*, an exhibition of painting, sculptural works and writing by Dale Henry, exhibited in the historic galleries of the Clocktower. The exhibition presented bodies of work not seen since the 1970's, and in many cases, never shown.

January 18th, 2014

### **Pioneer Works opening**

The second installment of *Dale Henry: The Artist Who Left New York*, presented in the soaring galleries of the Clocktower's partner space, Pioneer Works. Showcasing several series of works not seen since the 1970s, including *Interiors* (1978) and *Plan of the Uffizi* (1973).

February 2nd, 2014

### **Pioneer Works Lecture: *The Artist Likes Words, Poets Read For Dale Henry***

Recordings from a poetry reading reflecting on Dale Henry. Throughout his life, Henry was an avid poetry lover and considered Robert Creeley, T.S. Eliot, Francis Ponge, and Gertrude Stein among his favorite writers. Poets Stephen Motika, Tonya Foster, Camilo Roldan, and Gracie Leavitt read selections from Henry's favorites, as well as their own projects.

July 12th, 2014

### **Jones Day opening**

A selection of early works by Dale Henry, presented in the lobby of the Clocktower's administrative headquarters at Jones Day.

December 18th, 2014

### **Holiday party give away event**

A holiday party and the first public giveaway event, launching the dissemination of Henry's works to artists, writers, critics, curators, and cultural partners in New York and beyond. With a performance by the Amirtha Kidambi Quartet.

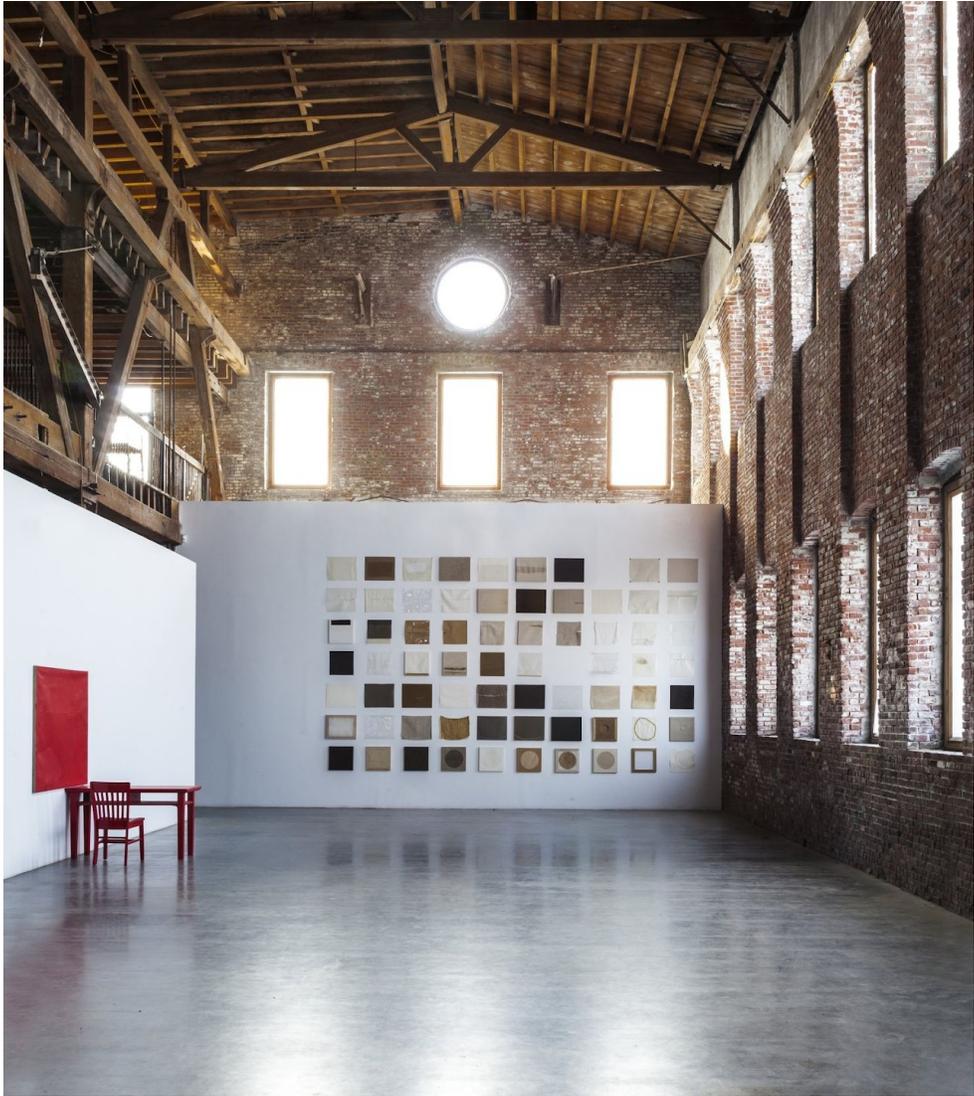
July 24, 2018

### **Closing event: panel discussion**

A panel discussion celebrating the culmination of the Dale Henry project, and discussing some key topics raised by Henry's story, including the organization of artists' archives and estates, preserving artistic and personal legacies, museum gifts and acquisitions, an artist's decision to leave New York, and the way personal artist narratives shape exhibition-making. With speakers Andy Battaglia (Deputy Editor, ARTnews), Todd Eberle (artist), Laura Hoptman (Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, Museum of Modern Art), Amy Oppenheim (Executor, Dennis Oppenheim Estate), and Kirsten Weiner (MOVED PICTURES ARCHIVE/LAWRENCE WEINER STUDIO). Conversation moderated by Alanna Heiss and Beatrice Johnson.

GALLERY







Page 7: Clocktower Gallery installation, courtesy Lary 7, 2013.

Page 8: Pioneer Works installation, courtesy Carolina Sandretto, 2014.

Page 9: Franklin Street panel discussion installation, courtesy Charles Billot, 2018.

# CONTACT

For information about Dale Henry, a catalogue raisonné of his oeuvre, and details about the exhibitions and the give away process, visit [www.dalehenry.org](http://www.dalehenry.org).

Beatrice Johnson

Project Director

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## SELECTED PRESS

August 29, 2018

**Artnews**

“What a Generous Gesture! But . . . : On Artist Dale Henry’s Plan to Give Away His Life’s Work”

Andy Battaglia

August 10, 2018

**Artsy**

“Building a Legacy for an Artist Who Shunned the Art World”

by Benjamin Sutton

April 7, 2014

**Art in America**

“Dale Henry”

by Nora Griffin

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NEW YORK CULTURE

## Art Unmarked by the Color of Money

Little-Seen Dale Henry Works Come to Light in Exhibition Respecting His Wishes

By *Andy Battaglia*

Oct. 25, 2013 9:29 p.m. ET

On Tuesday, the painter Dale Henry returns to the New York art world he fled decades ago—this time on his own peculiar, posthumous terms.

When he died in 2011, alone in Virginia, his will stipulated that his work be left to local arts maven Alanna Heiss, to be used for noncommercial purposes or else be burned.



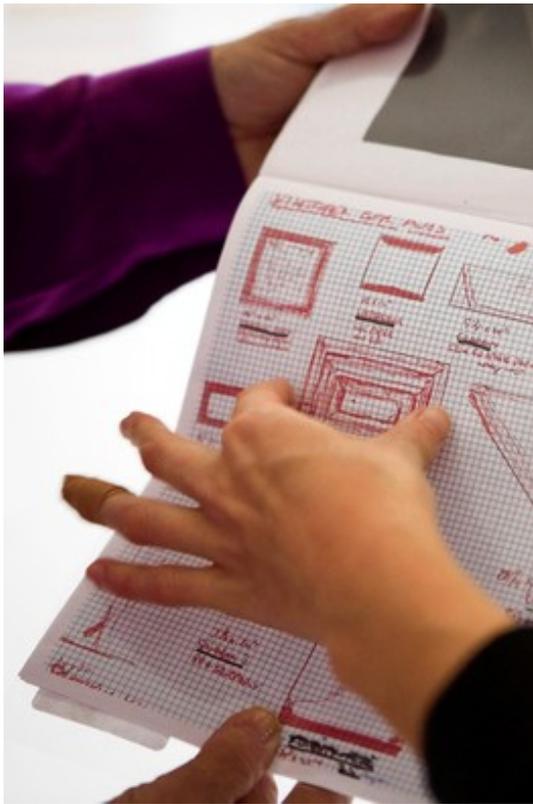
Gallery installers configure the exhibition of art by Dale Henry, whose work Ms. Heiss inherited, at the Clocktower Gallery, which is leaving its space in TriBeCa. MARK ABRAMSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Alanna Heiss with a portrait of Dale Henry, whose work Ms. Heiss inherited, at the Clocktower Gallery. MARK ABRAMSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The arrangement came as a surprise to Ms. Heiss, but she accepted the works and staved off the flames. The result is "Dale Henry: The Artist Who Left New York," an exhibition of works unseen since the 1970s or never shown at all. Perhaps fittingly, their resurrection on Tuesday marks the beginning of an end for Clocktower Gallery, which Ms. Heiss founded, as it prepares to vacate the TriBeCa space it has occupied since 1972.

Henry and Ms. Heiss worked together on exhibits at Clocktower and PS1, which she also founded, during his creative peak in the 1970s, but he escaped to rural isolation soon after.



Ms. Heiss goes over Henry's own plans for the installation. MARK ABRAMSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"He became completely disenchanted with what happened to artists in New York," Ms. Heiss said of Henry, who left his home in SoHo in dismay over the art world's moneyed ways and

misguided attentions.

"He felt he was being misunderstood," said Richard Nonas, a sculptor and colleague of Henry's at the time. "His work was separate from what other painters were doing. He was investigating what painting meant, not in terms of style but as an object on the wall. He was thinking about this object that historically had been spoken of as a framework to display an image. He was interested in totality."

Though he achieved early success and proved prescient in his conceptual ideas, Henry died in obscurity compared with contemporaries like Robert Rauschenberg and Sol LeWitt. So the prospect of exhibiting him again presented certain challenges.

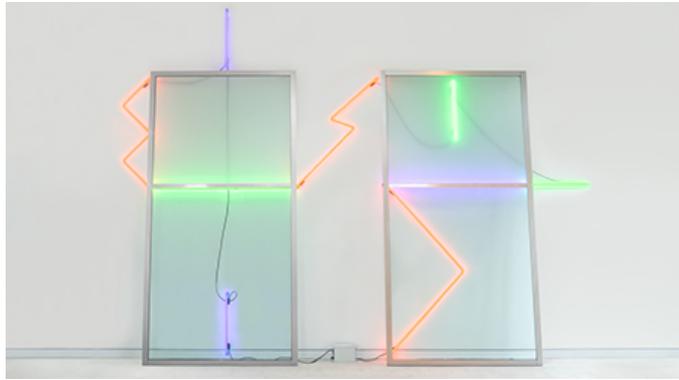
"In some cases, he has really outrageously precise installation guidelines, down to the inch. In other cases, he has general wishes but explicitly says that variations on the theme are fine," said Beatrice Johnson, associate curator of the Clocktower show, which will feature about 70% of Henry's life's work.

Other Henry works will figure into a second exhibition at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn in December, after a luxury real estate deal forces the Clocktower Gallery from its TriBeCa location.

Asked if such a collusion of forces seems significant, Ms. Heiss was philosophical. "I haven't thought about it that much because it's the first show at the next space," she said. "This show leaves the oldest existing alternative arts space and goes to the youngest one. That balance I like a lot."

After that, the plan for Henry's work is to abstain from the prospect of auction or sale and to give it instead to artists, as per his noncommercial wishes.

"He didn't want the work to become valuable and then we sell it or put it out, so that it enters the world of gallerists and dealers and collectors," Ms. Heiss said. "The world that he painfully left, he did not want to re-enter—but he wanted his work to be saved."



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Keith Sonnier (American, born 1941) Rectangle Diptych, 2015. Etched acrylic, aluminum, neon tubing, electrical wire, and Transformer, 148 x 162 1/2 x 15 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery, New York. Image courtesy Keith Sonnier Studio, New York. Photograph © Caterina Verde.

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## Dale Henry

NEW YORK

at The Clocktower/Pioneer Works

by Nora Griffin



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The Clocktower Gallery, one of Manhattan's oldest alternative art spaces, returned to its roots last fall for a retrospective of Dale Henry (1931-2011), the final exhibition to be held at its downtown address. The little-known American artist was a key player during the unfolding of Post-Minimalism in New York in the 1970s, showing at the John Weber Gallery, Fischbach Gallery and P.S. 1's inaugural "Rooms" exhibition. Since his departure from the city in 1986 to live in rural Virginia, Henry has slipped into relative obscurity, eventually bequeathing his entire artistic output to independent curator Alanna Heiss, founder-director of the Clocktower (and formerly of P.S. 1).

Part two of "Dale Henry: The Artist Who Left New York," featuring work that was exhibited at the Clocktower as well as previously unseen art, was recently on view at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn. Devotedly curated by Heiss, Beatrice Johnson, sculptor Richard Nonas and Dustin Yellin (artist and founder of the nonprofit Pioneer Works), the exhibition presented eight bodies of work that amounted to over 100 individual pieces, spanning the 1950s to the 2000s.

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Henry worked within an expanded definition of painting that moved from investigations of support materials (such as stretcher bars, canvas and paper) to explorations of the installation of the art object and methods of theatrical display. Paintings from the 1950s and '60s made in San Francisco reveal a variety of abstract forms that have the psychological timbre of Rorschach tests. Modestly framed in raw wood and painted mostly in neutral colors on canvas or linen, the small works are reminiscent of Forrest Bess's visionary paintings as well as the gothic-beatnik abstractions of Jay DeFeo.

Themes that emerged in each group of work were a longing for the image and the creation of a radical viewing experience unmediated by commercial interests. In the installation *Plan of the Uffizi* (1973), fragmented images of Renaissance paintings taken from a guidebook to the eponymous museum are painted in clear acrylic on a series of 23 trapezoidal canvases, meant to evoke the dimensions of an airplane seat. A wooden lectern placed in front of the paintings displays the museum guidebook, allowing the viewer two methods of spectatorship, each a pale, if strangely personalized, substitute for the famous artworks.

Three furniture installations from the 1978 series "Interiors" each comprise a wooden table, a chair and a monochrome painting, along with a smaller wall painting protected behind glass. Each set is painted either a deep cobalt or cadmium red. There is a mystical, schoolboy intensity to the works, evoking a protagonist who has just abandoned the scene. The cathedral scale of Pioneer Works lent an operatic presence to the brightly painted triad of chair, desk and painting; the Pop modernity of the colors fit inexplicably with the Quaker simplicity of the furniture arrangement.

Henry's work speaks to the act of painting as a state of mind, and there is a devotional aspect to his preference for either an extreme visibility to the paint or a watery non-presence. The "Continuous Lineage Drawings" (1973) are part of a larger group of works (titled the "Four Series") that use stringy, clear lines of emulsion on the inside of Plexiglas box frames to describe a variety of representational and abstract images. The familiar outline of a prehistoric cave animal in one box is next to another containing the dips and dashes of metrical scansion, both pieces embodying a kind of Morse code poetry. From across the room, the emulsion is not legible, and all that can be seen is a row of empty plastic boxes. This slippage between visibility and invisibility comments unwittingly on Henry's own remarkable presence in New York for a short time and his subsequent vanishing act. What remains is the material life of the work.

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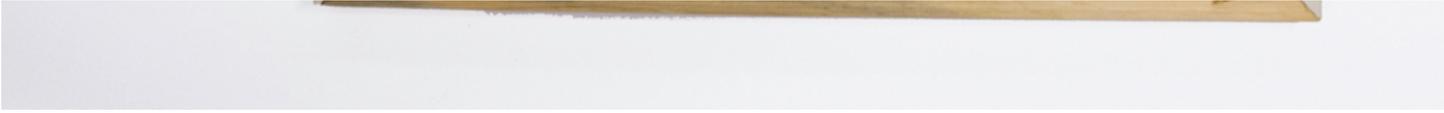
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Art Market

# Building a Legacy for an Artist Who Shunned the Art World

Benjamin Sutton   Aug 10, 2018 12:30 pm     





Dale Henry, *25*, from the series “Stretcher Bar Drawings,” 1976. Courtesy of Clocktower Productions.

“This bequest is the total of my art and comes without request or consultation. Please forgive me. You are the only person I trust who has the standards required. If you do not accept the placement of the art over a period of years, the art will be destroyed.”

With this letter, dictated by the artist Dale Henry to his attorney shortly before his death in 2011, he left the fate of his legacy in the hands of Alanna Heiss, curator and founder of MoMA PS1 and Clocktower Gallery. If she refused his request, as she had on prior occasions, his work was to be burned.

The letter stipulated that the work making up Henry’s estate—over 200 pieces ranging from monochrome and subtly but richly textured paintings to intricate Postminimalist installations—would have to be either placed in museums or gifted to individuals; anything but end up in the hands of gallerists and auctioneers. Part of the challenge of this unusual gambit was that very few people had even heard of Dale Henry.

Born in 1931 in a small town in Alabama, Henry moved around the country constantly as a child, attending 12 different schools by the time he

graduated. When he was 17, he moved to Houston, where he began taking life drawing classes at the city's Museum of Fine Arts, and then to San Francisco, where he showed his work to Howard Ross Smith, the associate director of the Legion of Honor museum, leading to a string of shows in the Bay Area between 1960 and 1968.



Dale Henry, *Primer sets of a revealingly graphic, personal history of Western Painting using the complete and throughout. Eighty pieces, ten each set of eight: Marster Buckt Tho Nitid / Makar Vanisht Oyez Fúnnee, 1972.* Clocktower Productions.

Smith encouraged Henry to move to New York, where he found peers in

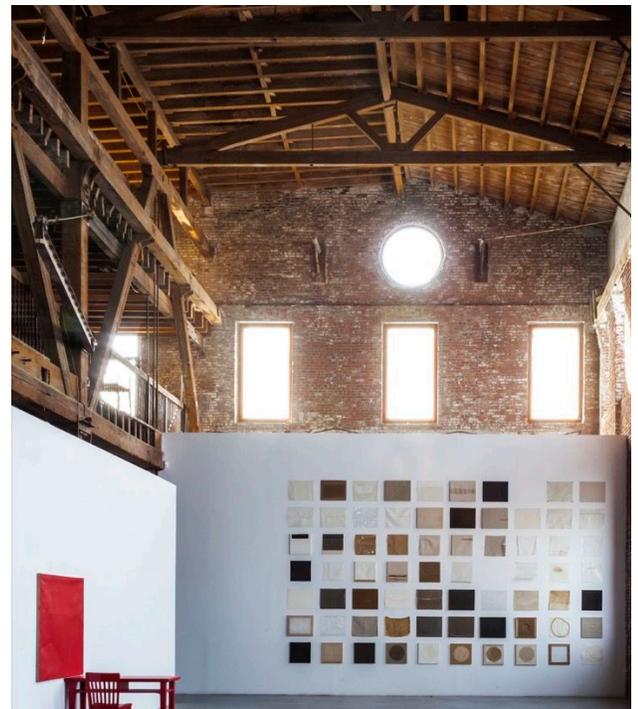
Henry encouraged Henry to move to New York, where he found peers in artists including Richard Nonas, Ron Gorchov, and Marcia Hafif. Henry's work resonated with many of his contemporaries' formal pursuits, which championed process-driven practices and pushing painting beyond the frame and off the wall, resulting in a multifarious range of works straddling Conceptual and Postminimalist art. He found some success and shows in New York City during the 1970s and early '80s, including at the John Weber Gallery and in group exhibitions curated by Heiss at MoMA PS1 and Clocktower Gallery, which is how they met.

But with the rise of the Pictures Generation and the Neo-Expressionist movement, interest in Henry's work waned in the 1980s. He became increasingly disenchanted with the art market and, in 1986, he essentially exiled himself from the art world, permanently relocating to a town in rural Virginia. After settling there, he made some new work, but he gradually became more reclusive and devoted most of his time and energy to planning how his work would be shown and circulated after he died. And Heiss, it turned out, was the perfect person to see his plans through.

Visiting Henry's home in Cartersville, Virginia, shortly after his death, Heiss recalled being struck by the works' freshness. "I looked at all the work and thought, 'Damn, if this isn't interesting,'" Heiss recently said in a phone interview. "It really was good—there's a reason I showed it in the 1970s." Last month, after spending the better part of seven years placing those 200-plus works by Henry in museum collections and gifting them to individuals,

Heiss and Beatrice Johnson, director of the Dale Henry Project, co-moderated a panel to mark the culmination of what they'd come to call “the giveaway.”

“The main challenges have been about logistics,” Johnson wrote in an email exchange after the panel—“how to propose works for acquisition by an artist no one knows and about whom no scholarly research is publicly accessible (other than what the Clocktower team has created); how to insure works that are not supposed to be appraised or have a dollar value; how to work with museum’s long timelines for acquisition, and so on.” The process involved mounting a two-part retrospective of Henry’s work, beginning at the Clocktower Gallery in 2013 and concluding at Pioneer Works the following year. These became important showcases for fostering institutional and individual interest in the work.





Dale Henry, *Cobalt Blue, Hue Deep – Stable*, from the series “Interiors,” 1978. Courtesy of Clocktower Productions.



Installation view of “Dale Henry: The Artist Who York” at Pioneer Works, 2014. Courtesy of Clocktower Productions.

In the end, more than 30 works ended up in major collections, including the Brooklyn Museum, the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, the Fralin Museum of Art at the University of Virginia, and the Birmingham Museum of Art in Henry’s home state of Alabama. And what may be Henry’s most ambitious and challenging work—an installation consisting of 80 elements retracing, more or less, the development of modern painting—was acquired two years ago by the Museum of Modern Art after the institution’s longtime trustee Agnes Gund saw the work and advocated for its acquisition.

“I, through kismet, was on the receiving end of an email written by Beatrice and Alanna offering the Museum of Modern Art a work called *Primer Sets of a Revealingly Graphic, Personal History of Western Painting...* by the artist Dale Henry, of whom I had never heard,” Laura Hoptman, a curator in MoMA’s department of painting and sculpture, said during last month’s panel. “The end of this shaggy dog story is a happy one, and that is that the Museum of Modern Art acquired the work, but as God is my witness, I will

tell you how extraordinary that is.”

Indeed, for an artist who felt so completely shunned by the art world that he deliberately took himself out of it (the exhibition of Henry’s work at Pioneer Works in 2014 was titled “The Artist Who Left New York”), to be posthumously embraced by that community is a rare reversal. More often, artists begin the process of positioning their work and developing institutional interest during their lifetimes, in hopes that their relatives and representatives will have an easier time spent preserving and promoting their legacies. In Henry’s case, the challenge faced by Heiss and Johnson was, in many ways, to build a legacy from scratch.

“I have found remarkable interest and positive reception from museums to the project,” Johnson said. “I believe this is due, in large part, to Alanna Heiss’s influential role in the art world, and the resulting interest in her projects, and trust in her vision. The other reason [is] the unique and dramatic quality of Dale’s story....Dale synthesized many artistic concerns of the time in his explorations of the medium of painting, and I think institutions are excited to contextualize his work, and the work of his peers, in their collections.”

**Benjamin Sutton is Artsy’s News Editor.**

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Dale Henry, *Red Clouds*, 1966, oil on linen, 14 3/8 x 9 1/4".

## Dale Henry

### PIONEER WORKS

There's a fine line between enigma and aggrandizement. A piece of wood placed on the wall can become an object of fascination or a facile object—it's all in the position of the thing. In poetry, meter makes the difference. Similarly, in the oeuvre of the artist Dale Henry, it's where emphasis is placed while handling material. If anyone knew what to make of fine lines, it was Henry.

"Dale Henry: The Artist Who Left New York," curated by Alanna Heiss, Richard Nonas, and Dustin Yellin, was a remarkable exhibition. (First realized downtown at the Clocktower Gallery last fall, the show moved to Pioneer Works in Red Hook, Brooklyn, this winter, when the gallery took up its yearlong residency there, and Pioneer Works founder Yellin added his assistance.) You were immediately made aware that you were inside someone's arcane system, particularly when viewing the dramatic hanging of *Primer Sets of a Revealingly Graphic, Personal History of Western Painting Using the Complete and Basic Iambus Throughout. Eighty Pieces in Eight Sets: Marster Buckt Tho Nitid / Makar Vanisht / Oyez Fúnee*, 1972, whose seventy displayed components—wispy square supports of material including gauze, plastic, and tissue paper; scrawled references to

artists; awkward circles composed from fibrous texture—were each named after text from John Berryman's *77 Dream Songs*. As when reading those poems, you're never entirely certain what's going on here, but there was a catalyzing energy in that mystery.

In a side room, one small, clumsy painting of a grid with red clouds floating on top of it was a cipher for where to begin to “read” the work: Minimalism with a strange weather front moving in, natural science eroding the edges of practiced technique. For Henry, art was a series of controlled experiments at specific sites, and his work seems to pay homage to art and literary history's long tradition of attempting to respond to the nuances of a given space, beginning with the Lascaux cave paintings—a reference heightened by the dramatic lighting of the grand, cavernous factory, especially when one visited the show at night.

The work's elusiveness is easy to romanticize in connection with the artist's personal narrative. In 1986, Henry renounced the New York art world, of which he was a vibrant part from the late 1960s through the mid-'80s—showing at the Fischbach Gallery, John Weber Gallery, the Clocktower Gallery, and P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, and teaching at the School of Visual Arts—and moved to rural Virginia. No longer producing art, he labored until his death, in 2011, to organize his oeuvre, and prevent it from ever entering the art market. Yet the work's rigor comes not from its forced-march detachment from late-capitalist culture—admittedly bold—but rather from the way in which it insistently dissects and repurposes that culture's parts.

Henry's prosodic intervention into images—shuffling their stresses—is evident in a gripping series on display, “Plan of the Uffizi,” 1973, which pairs twenty-three trapezoidal canvases with a book stand holding a guide to the Uffizi Gallery in Florence that includes slide sheets. The ghost images in the paintings—rendered in clear, reflective acrylic on raw canvas so that they appear as mysterious fragments of ancient statuary, leached of all original color—depict photographic reproductions of architectural elements and figures from works in the Uffizi. (Henry's conceptual references to memory and the mediation involved in art tourism might further signal, for anyone who has been to that mostly unclimate-controlled museum in summer, an apocalyptic future when the paint has finally melted off, leaving only an oily stain.)

My favorite works were stunning translucent drawings, also from 1973, in which subtle marks based on prosody were made in emulsion on thick slabs of Plexiglas, appearing as incisions on the surface; when lit a certain way, the indentations throw elegant patterns in gray shadows onto the back of the wall. The effect is that incised loss becomes the actual line—simultaneously an intaglio plate and its print. Some of these depict Henry's personal scansion describing the scene out his window. We can't directly understand the meter, and yet we see the view behind it.

—Prudence Peiffer

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What a Generous Gesture! But . . . : On Artist Dale Henry's Plan to Give Away His Life's Work

BY *Andy Battaglia* (<http://www.artnews.com/author/abattaglia/>) POSTED 08/29/18 9:05 AM

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Dale Henry was an artist who met with some success in New York in the 1960s and '70s—notably showing with Alanna Heiss at the Clocktower Gallery and the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center as well as with the dealer John Weber—before leaving the city in disgust and landing in rural Virginia to work in isolation for the rest of his life. When Henry died in 2011, at the age of 80 and more than three decades after having fled what he perceived as New York's market-minded preoccupations and mislaid artistic attentions, Heiss was notified that his will called for all of his work to be left to her—with the stipulation that it either be given away for free or destroyed completely. That left only museums and sympathetic recipients as prospective caretakers for hundreds of paintings and sculptures whose fate hung in the balance.

Though the posthumous request came as a surprise, Heiss took on the duty, with some reluctance, and proceeded to exhibit Henry's work, first in a tribute at the Clocktower Gallery in Lower Manhattan in 2013 (in the final exhibition there) and then the next year in a bigger show at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn. Since then, Heiss and curator Beatrice Johnson, the project director for the whole affair, have toiled to find homes for the works—many of them post-minimalist and conceptually inclined paintings made with unorthodox materials—to live on in an endeavor that recently wrapped after years of planning and execution. Among the institutions that have acquired works by Henry as a result are the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Brooklyn Museum, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, the Cleveland Museum of Art, and the Birmingham Museum of Art. Individuals who wound up with works as gifts include artists Joan Jonas, Lynn Herschman-Leeson, Robert Wilson, Dustin Yellin, and many more, including an *ARTnews* writer who was invited to take part in a Henry-related roundtable discussion convened by Heiss in July.

Among talks delivered by a varied cast—MoMA curator Laura Hoptman (who since left the museum to become executive director (<http://www.artnews.com/2018/07/31/drawing-center-hires-laura-hoptman-executive-director/>)) of the Drawing Center), photographer Todd Eberle, Dennis Oppenheim estate executor Amy Oppenheim, Lawrence Weiner archivist Kirsten Weiner, and yours truly—were spirited additions and rejoinders from an audience that included some of Henry's old friends and colleagues.

Hoptman spoke of the challenges and oddities surrounding MoMA's acquisition of a very complicated multi-part work by an artist of little notoriety. Hoptman herself hadn't been familiar with Henry prior to Heiss's recent handling of his work, but the notion of adding him to the museum's collection came about, Hoptman said, after museum trustee Agnes Gund and curator Ann Temkin had seen it and found it to their liking. The work now belonging to MoMA is a sprawling series of wall pieces, dated 1972, made with materials like sand, masking tape, thread, paintbrush bristles, marker, and pencil on supports like waxed paper, linen, acetate sheets, glass, and more—all under the collective title *Primer sets of a revealing graphic, personal history of Western Painting using the complete and basic iambus throughout. Eighty pieces, ten each set of eight: Marster Buckt Tho Nitid / Makar Vanisht Oyez Fúnnee*.



Dale Henry.  
COURTESY CLOCKTOWER PRODUCTIONS

“What does it mean to acquire a large, space-hungry work by an artist who doesn't have any name recognition?” Hoptman asked, rhetorically, at the start of her talk. “What does it mean to acquire a work that is challenging to install in the way the artist intended?” she added, mentioning Henry's meticulous instructions for hanging the work. (This one “came with a handbook,” she said.) Later on, in response to a question about caring for a fragile work that might not go on show anytime soon, Hoptman said of MoMA, “We're not just showers—we're preservers, too. Dale Henry will live as long as *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and will be treated in the same manner as van Gogh's *Starry Night*.”



Dale Henry's *Primer sets of a revealing graphic, personal history of Western Painting....*, as seen at Clocktower Gallery in 2013.  
COURTESY CLOCKTOWER PRODUCTIONS

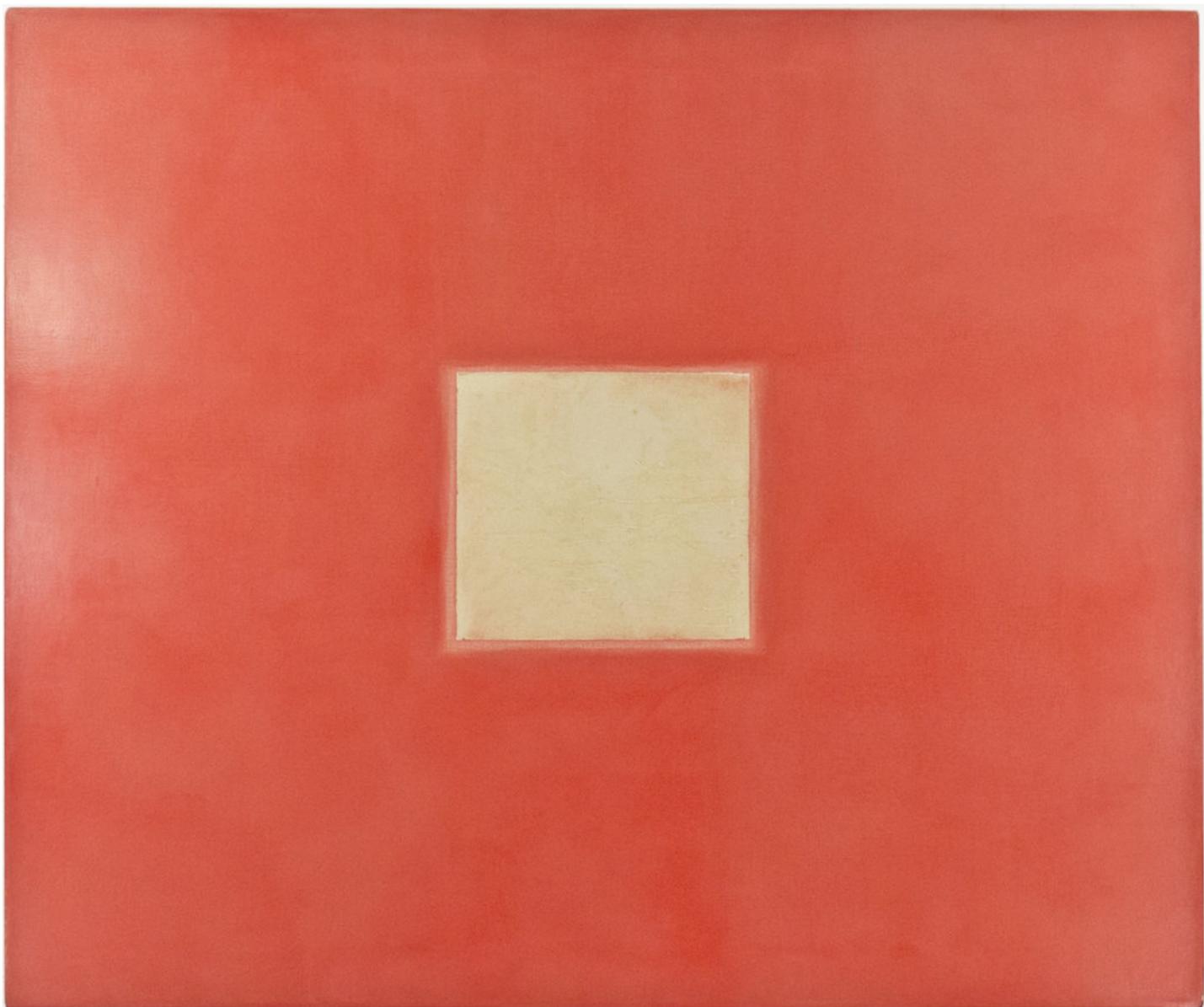
Artist Richard Nonas interjected that what is most significant about Henry, more than any single work in his oeuvre, is how he managed to make a legacy for himself after his death. “I feel like this work exists primarily and to a certain extent *only* as a conceptual, cooperative piece between you and Dale,” Nonas said, addressing Heiss. “It’s extraordinary—this notion of taking a life’s work and giving it away. For every one of these works, the main importance is that it’s part of that, and to separate it from that is to kill it. Dale knew he was creating a situation in which it was going to be impossible to look at the works without knowing the history of how they got in front of you.”

The gambit proved fruitful, Nonas suggested. “This project changed the meaning of any one of these things, as part of the great giveaway. Nobody who knew him in New York thought that Dale was a great artist—he was a good artist, a strong artist, and a representative of his time, as were 50 or 60 others. What’s really interesting is the way he closed his life up and made it into a single work.”

Heiss had said earlier, not mincing words, “By the way, I didn’t want Dale’s work.” He had proffered such an arrangement with her when she was the director of P.S. 1 (now MoMA PS1), but, as a non-collecting entity, the museum had no way to broker such a deal. But then, despite repeated refusals over the years, came the letter after Henry’s death, asking for either acceptance or doom by the way of flames, and the fate of the work was sealed. “He left instructions with his very articulate and Faulknerian Southern lawyer language to see that this happened in a bonfire,” Heiss said of the less desirable option.

Also up for discussion was a matter of biography that Henry had worked to hide from almost everyone who knew him. As Heiss had previously made known to only a handful of people in the past seven years of working on the project—and chose to divulge publicly for the first time at the event—Henry “carried a very deep and big secret his whole life that made it hard for him to think about his relationship to other artists and other people.” He was born in 1931 in a small town in Alabama—but not as a ‘he’ or as a ‘she.’” Instead, Henry exhibited qualities that might have designated him as intersex today.

Johnson, the project director, added that, as learned from Henry’s letters, the “nurse who delivered him didn’t really know what to do with him, so she just called it and said he was a girl. And that was that—that was what his birth certificate said and that was how he was raised.”



Dale Henry, *Body of Work*, 1976.  
COURTESY CLOCKTOWER PRODUCTIONS

Later on, as a young adult in San Francisco, Henry legally changed his gender status to male, underwent surgery, and started taking hormones that he would continue for the rest of his life. Fear of exposure might have been among the reasons he chose to leave New York, Heiss said—on top of revulsion over an art world that he felt had become alienating and overly commercially minded. Given his fear, Heiss said she wrestled over whether to make Henry’s secret known. “I knew it would guarantee attention for the shows and the museum part of the giveaway,” she said, “but we decided not to do it because we thought the whole project would become about that and all the articles would be written about that. The few press people I talked to about this honored the commitment.”

“At the end of the project tonight,” Heiss continued, “it’s time to share Dale’s secret in the light of day. Things have changed so much in the last ten years. It’s remarkable the world we’re looking at now, with Dale’s rising prominence in museumology and his presence in the collections of artists and friends who will treasure his work without anything to do with that. He was a man who had many, many things on his mind, and he was thinking about many, many ways in which to live and make art.”

*The following is what I read at the event in response to an invitation to talk about my experience as a journalist with the life and work of Dale Henry, including how much or little biography might matter in matters of thinking about art. It was delivered prior to Heiss's disclosure at the end, though with the prospect of that eventual reveal in mind.*

I first learned about Dale Henry from Alanna Heiss and wound up writing an article about him for another publication (prior to starting at *ARTnews*) in 2013. As a freelancer then pitching story after story with the hope that some reasonable percentage would get a green light, Dale's was a rich one—and it didn't take a lot of prodding to get an editor on the hook.

There was the tale of the artist choosing to up and leave New York, with no small amount of disdain for a city that had come to seem grotesque and alienating in a way it has made a habit for ages. Then there was the element of it that spoke to the development of the art market at a historic time when talk of such things was getting going on a larger scale—plus the resonance that has with talk of the same kind continuing now. And then there was the more personal element, which really got me intrigued, of just what it meant for Dale to leave all his work to Alanna with such specific dictates about what could and should be done with it. What a tribute! But *what* a burden. What a generous gesture! But what presumption on his part. I of course don't know much about how Dale thought about it all exactly, but learning of the story for the first time, you can't help but arrive at questions of the kind before long.

Anyhow, for the *Wall Street Journal* I ended up writing a briefer story than I'd hoped to after parts of it got cut to fit in the paper, as often happens when fitting into print is an issue. But it told the basics of the tale and had some nice pictures, including one of Alanna with her foot in a cast surveying the walls for the installation of Dale's show at the Clocktower Gallery—the final show at the space before it closed—like a soldier whose wound would not keep her down.

While working on that story, I got to attend a discussion convened by Alanna and learned more about Dale's biography—including secrets that few others knew—and his ways of working in the world. The matter of biography is one I find myself thinking about a lot as a journalist, with both a general inclination toward stories of human interest and antennae always up for situations in which that human interest can be entertained. It doesn't always or even necessarily very often gibe with my primary interests as an art viewer, as someone who goes to art first and foremost for the work and the work alone. But it's there, and always very active, in any case.

Walter De Maria is one of my favorite artists, and he was not especially enamored of biographical matters figuring into the reception of his work. He effectively gave one interview in his life, early in his career, and I think he would have taken that back if he could. I like that aspect of him a lot, but also—especially as I've come to learn more about him from people who knew him well—it makes for a certain kind of tension. There's the school of thought suggesting that mere human matters are nothing but a distraction, or at least beside the point of what art has to offer. But then there's also a strong case to be made for knowledge only adding to appreciation and the resilience of art that wouldn't—in fact *couldn't*—be diminished by any amount of awareness of who made it and how and why it was made.

But then again, I do like mystique. A few weeks ago I was in New Mexico on vacation with my wife, and we went to Petroglyph National Monument in Albuquerque, where petroglyphs—some of them 700 years old—have been painted in a kind of coded symbolic communication by Native Americans and Spanish settlers on the sides of rocks. There was signage all around the visitor center and on the hiking trails, but of a quizzical kind that seemed to want to make it known that there wouldn't be much in the way of knowing while there. The meanings behind the petroglyphs were in many cases meant to be obscure. And then some observers think the meanings only present themselves to certain people, and only some of the time. I like that idea of meaning being elusive from an observational standpoint but also from within, from the core of what might constitute meaning itself.



Dale Henry, *Blue Tree*, ca. 1964.  
COURTESY CLOCKTOWER PRODUCTIONS

One other aspect of my story with Dale Henry is that my wife and I were fortunate to be on the receiving end of the initiative to give his work away. We got *The Old Bowery*, a large green painting that is part of a group dated from 1971 to the late '90s. It hangs in our bedroom and is a prized possession of the most revered sort. As a journalist, I'm not in a position to have amassed much of an art collection, so the chance to own a painting and live with it—to look at it every day and see how it changes the more I look at it, while my capacity for looking itself changes too—has been a treasure.

So has what it has taught me so far about notions of value and time. The value of it is rich, since to be maintained in good faith, given the premise of the arrangement, is to acknowledge that it can't ever have any monetary value at all. Its value is contingent on a lack of value—that's value of a special kind.

And the time aspect of it is richer still. My wife and I got the painting not too long after we got married, which for the first time in my life gave me the ability to think in long spans of time in ways I hadn't thought much of before. All of the sudden the future wasn't a matter of weeks or months or even years but, hopefully, if the fates are kind, decades and decades more. I thought about that when the prospect of taking a painting by Dale started to become real. Given the particularity of the arrangement, I felt a sense of responsibility, and I thought a lot about what it would mean to be a custodian or a steward for a painting over time. I couldn't ever really off-load it, so I'd better like whatever work I selected. And then only time would tell how living with it would actually play out.

I didn't know Dale and so couldn't really guess as to his reasoning for passing on his work the way that he did, but if getting people to think about matters so integral to art—matters of value and time and negotiating intimate relationships with the work of artists who might wish never to be known—was part of his ambition, he met with a rousing success in me.



Dale Henry, *Untitled*, 1950s.

COURTESY CLOCKTOWER PRODUCTIONS



Dale Henry, *Orange Running, Red Standing*, ca. 1963.  
COURTESY CLOCKTOWER PRODUCTIONS

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#### ARTICLE TAGS

ALANNA HEISS  
([HTTP://WWW.ARTNEWS.COM/TAG/ALANNA-HEISS/](http://www.artnews.com/tag/alanna-heiss/))

DALE HENRY  
([HTTP://WWW.ARTNEWS.COM/TAG/DALE-HENRY/](http://www.artnews.com/tag/dale-henry/))

FEATURED  
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#### RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



FROM THE ARCHIVES: MATT MULLICAN ON HIS 'COSMOLOGIES' OF SIGNS AND SYMBOLS, IN 1989

([HTTP://WWW.ARTNEWS.COM/2018/08/31/ARCHIVES-](http://www.artnews.com/2018/08/31/archives-matt-mulligan-cosmologies-signs-symbols-1989/)



PAUL TAYLOR, PIONEERING DANCER AND CHOREOGRAPHER WHO COLLABORATED WITH ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG AND ALEX KATZ, DIES AT 88

([HTTP://WWW.ARTNEWS.COM/2018/08/30/PAUL-](http://www.artnews.com/2018/08/30/paul-taylor-pioneering-dancer-choreographer-collaborated-robert-rauschenberg-alex-katz-dies-88/)



'I JUST KEPT TRYING TO MAKE MY OWN WORLD': 'KUSAMA: INFINITY' TRACES THE FRAUGHT LIFE OF A MONUMENTAL FIGURE

([HTTP://WWW.ARTNEWS.COM/2018/08/30/JUST-KEPT-](http://www.artnews.com/2018/08/30/just-kept-trying-make-world-kusama-infinity-traces-fraught-life-monumental-figure/)



HEROES NEED NOT APPLY: AT A POINTED BERLIN BIENNALE, QUESTIONS OVER WHAT IT MEANS TO BE COURAGEOUS

([HTTP://WWW.ARTNEWS.COM/2018/08/28/HEROES-](http://www.artnews.com/2018/08/28/heroes-need-not-apply-pointed-berlin-biennale-questions-what-means-be-courageous/)