

THE EVOLUTION OF JACK BUSH*

It is usually conceded that Jack Bush "emerged as a distinct artistic personality in the late 1950's"¹ and that Bush's contact with the critic, Clement Greenberg, starting in June of 1957, was something of a turning point. Bush himself has described the impact of his first meeting with Greenberg as follows:

He said, "... what you're doing, Bush, is... just taking all the hot licks from the New York painters, which is so easy to do. Try painting simpler and thinner, as you have done in these watercolours. If it scares you — good — you'll know you are on to something that is your true self...." I tried it; I *was* scared, but I began to realize in six months that Clem was right — the paintings were better, and I didn't look back.²

The break in his development implied by Bush here was further emphasized by his retrospective, since it included only those works done after 1957. This apparent discontinuity, like Franz Kline's reputedly sudden conversion to abstraction after seeing some of his drawings enlarged by a Bell-Opticon projector, has become folklore. However, just as we know now that the reportedly catalytic experience has been simplified and over-valued in Kline's case,³ so too Bush's development can best be seen as more evolutionary and less any matter of sudden conversion than it usually is.

What, then, was Greenberg's contribution to Bush's art? For one thing, Bush was very much encouraged by the interest taken by a great critic in his work. Bush was earning his living as a commercial artist and painting part time. He had not yet chosen a definitive direction and, despite his previous positions on the executive of various artists' societies, did not feel fully accepted by the most prominent artists in Toronto, many of whom were opposed to abstraction and some of whom were programmatically parochial.⁴ As K. M. Graham remembers it, what "Greenberg did was to give him courage to paint in the face of... criticism,"⁵ which Bush had received in growing measure when exhibiting with Painters Eleven.

Greenberg further encouraged Bush to choose from the various direc-

*I would like to thank the estate of Jack Bush for permission to reproduce the words and works of Jack Bush and Robert Bush, Alex Cameron, Aaron Milrad, and all the friends and relatives of Jack Bush who have so generously given me their assistance. My thanks, too, to the Faculty of Arts of York University for the research grant that financed the travel and photography necessary for this article.

tions apparent in his work. From 1951 to 1956, Bush seems to have produced several different modes of work. One was a relatively straightforward sort of still life and landscape, influenced by Cézanne, but a Cézanne seen through the eyes of Stanley Cosgrove and others of the Montreal school.⁶ Examples are recurrent: *Melon on Red Table* 1952, *Bird on a Chair* 1956 among others. A second mode was a sort of allegorical-expressionist painting with figures in the landscape typified by aggressive gestures and despairing poses.⁷ The bulk of these pictures appears from 1949 to 1951, (e.g. *The Long Night* 1950), but a few of them, albeit impure cases, are to be found at least as late as 1955. A third mode consists of rather stylized landscapes, such as *Stuart Davis* 1954. A fourth was a type of abstract expressionism akin to that of Bradley Walker Tomlin; for example *Hymn to the Sun* 1955 or *Encounter* 1955, the latter being an impure case with admixtures of a fifth mode: more typically abstract expressionist work indicative of a certain interest in de Kooning and Clyfford Still. A number of paintings show Bush interested in several of these directions at once, and perhaps others as well; for instance, a certain "cubicizing" is sometimes apparent, and Bush has reported that for a while he had some interest in the applied cubism of such artists as Feininger.⁸ The breadth of Bush's artistic concerns at this time is remarkable, and it shows his longstanding high ambition to synthesize a number of disparate artistic traditions, as had Manet, Matisse, and Pollock (Fig. 3).

Nonetheless, at this stage of his career, Bush had not yet committed himself as to where the highest quality lay in the various traditions that interested him. Furthermore, the work is sometimes so audaciously eclectic that it remains conflicted, torn between the figurative and tactile on the one hand and the abstract and more "optical" on the other and between literary and pure-painting values. Furthermore, Bush wanted to do both colour painting and value painting, so that the surface spread of high-chroma colour and the spatial articulation of stepped values made for a jerky surface. Bush was almost certainly himself aware of these difficulties and was already simplifying a good deal in late 1955 and 1956, both in the range of his colour and the number and contours of his elements, as can be seen in *Reflection* 1955.⁹ Greenberg's preference then for the simpler of Bush's works was timely and it had the additional virtue of pointing to a surface quality in Bush's own *oeuvre* that was in keeping with both a less cluttered layout and Bush's artistic personality.

Robert Bush, who often helped his father show pictures to Greenberg says that he can recall "Clem" saying "Simplify, simplify, simplify."¹⁰ (Fig. 4)

In the years after their first meeting, Greenberg went to Toronto specifically to see Bush and his work only about three times, although he would stop off there too, *en route* to other places. In these later years, his role was basically Socratic: "He would question things," where the questions most often had to do with the final adjustment or resolution of the work: "Do you need that yellow stripe?"¹¹ Clearly another aspect of Greenberg's contribution was to enhance the self-critical faculty Bush had exercised in such paintings as *Reflection* and which is essential to any great artist. One thinks of the famous example of Matisse criticizing his own Neo-Pointillist work of 1904:

The breaking up of colour led to the breaking up of form, of contour. The result: a jerky surface... I didn't stay on this course but started painting in planes, seeking the quality of the picture by an accord of all the flat colours.¹²

This penchant for self-criticism was, of course, what had drawn Bush to Greenberg in the first place. As Greenberg himself observes:

He thought I had an eye, and he would seize any chance to try his art out on people he thought had eyes.... That was part of his very real alertness, which was also his very real intelligence. My role was crucial only at the beginning: Jack's water-colours told me who he was as an artist and I told him in turn.¹³

Both Greenberg's encouragement and his fostering of Bush's self-criticism were carefully tempered. While he would tell Bush he was becoming a great painter, his praise was nonetheless sparing. Robert Bush remembers a number of occasions when his father would be particularly confident in his current work until Greenberg would argue that the artist should be doing even better. Greenberg expected Bush to meet the highest standards of art anywhere. While Bush was self-critical, he never became self-conscious or programmatic in his work. Bush said of himself: "I'm not an intellectual painter"; "the painting lets you know when what you've done is right or wrong.... You have to listen."¹⁴

As Charles Millard has pointed out, self-acceptance is at the basis of Bush's art.

However important the changes in Bush's art may have been as a result of meeting Greenberg, there are a number of constants in Bush's work that unify his career. In particular one notes the way he continually painted from his feelings, his closeness to nature, an extensive morphological consistency and a considerable consistency in sensibility and hence also in structure.

Bush seems to have been initially stimulated by Allan Walters to work directly from his feelings. The occasion is recorded by Bush in the first of three notebooks in which he kept a running inventory of all his work since 1930:

Experimental work suggested by Dr. J. Allan Walters, and commenced in Sept. 1947. The idea being to paint freely the inner feelings and moods. Around March 1948 he further suggested starting from scratch on a blank canvas with no preconceived idea, and just let the thing develop in colour, form, and content.¹⁵

Dr. Walter's advice was to paint his semi-automatist fashion without consideration for what should be shown and what not shown, so that Bush was freed at a relatively early point in his career from any fear of doing "bad" work. He could follow his feelings with all the personal honesty that was so characteristic of him.

At first, Bush seems to have transcribed his feelings rather directly into his pictures. In one of them, for instance, he depicted a colleague from work, with whom he was angry at the time, eating out of a trash can.¹⁶ In some of the works the figures would seem to correspond to Bush himself in both feelings and situation during this period (unsure of himself in his direction, and thwarted by frustrations and barriers of various kinds), as in *Quiet Day Desert* 1953¹⁷ and, less obviously, *Adventure* 1948. In others, such as *Release* 1950, these feelings are both reversed and denied with an almost triumphant freedom that appears somewhat willful and hence not entirely convincing (Figs. 1,2).

There are a number of other examples later in Bush's career where the work relates to his feelings but in a rather more complex fashion. For instance when Oscar Cahén, Bush's colleague in Painters Eleven, died in

November 1956, Bush was driven to paint all day, starting with deep purple. When he continued the next day, the colours became lighter without the artist's willing it. Bush later observed it was "like a spirit moving up."¹⁸

Perhaps the best known example is Bush's artistic transformation of his angina pains.¹⁹ When Bush first began to suffer from angina in the late 1960's, he went to the doctor for an electrocardiogram. The image on it was frightening to him and in order to come to terms with it, Bush decided to draw it.²⁰ The eventual result was a number of works containing an elliptical shape taken from the electrocardiogram chosen to stand for the pains Bush was experiencing. There are both works on paper (the "Spasms") and such canvases as *Sudden*, *Onslaught*, and *Flutter*, all 1969 (Fig. 7). A similar example is found in *Cirr* 1974 where Bush has reported that the image was suggested to him by a doctor's diagram of normal cells interspersed with dying cells in a diseased liver.²¹

What is remarkable about all this is not so much that Bush painted from his feelings, many artists have done the same, but that Bush was so honest about them; that he unflinchingly faced and acknowledged in his art both the source of his suffering and the full range of his emotional response to it. Furthermore Bush overcame his suffering in and through his art, so that what was irregular and distressing in his heart is made over into something free and pleasurable in his work, commingled eventually with the pleasures of nature, as in *Spring Breeze*²² and *Falling Blossoms* both 1971 (Fig. 8). Again, there is an important parallel with Matisse. When Matisse went to Tahiti, he reported that he was not much inspired to paint:

Nature there is sumptuous, but not exalting.... You don't have an immediate reaction which makes you need to unwind by working.

Whereas in the United States:

This tension, the constant dynamism, can be transformed in the artist, into artistic activity by provoking a beneficial reaction in him.²³

From these and other more celebrated comments by Matisse, Flam



Fig. 1. Jack BUSH, *Adventure*, 1948, oil on masonite, 17" x 22", Jack Bush Heritage Corporation Inc. (Photo: Ontario Archives, Toronto)



Fig. 2. Jack BUSH, *Release*, 1950, oil on masonite, 24" x 30", Jack Bush Heritage Corporation Inc. (Photo: Ontario Archives, Toronto)



Fig. 3. Jack BUSH, *Encounter*, 1955, oil on masonite, 48" x 72", Jack Bush Heritage Corporation Inc. (Photo: Ontario Archives, Toronto)

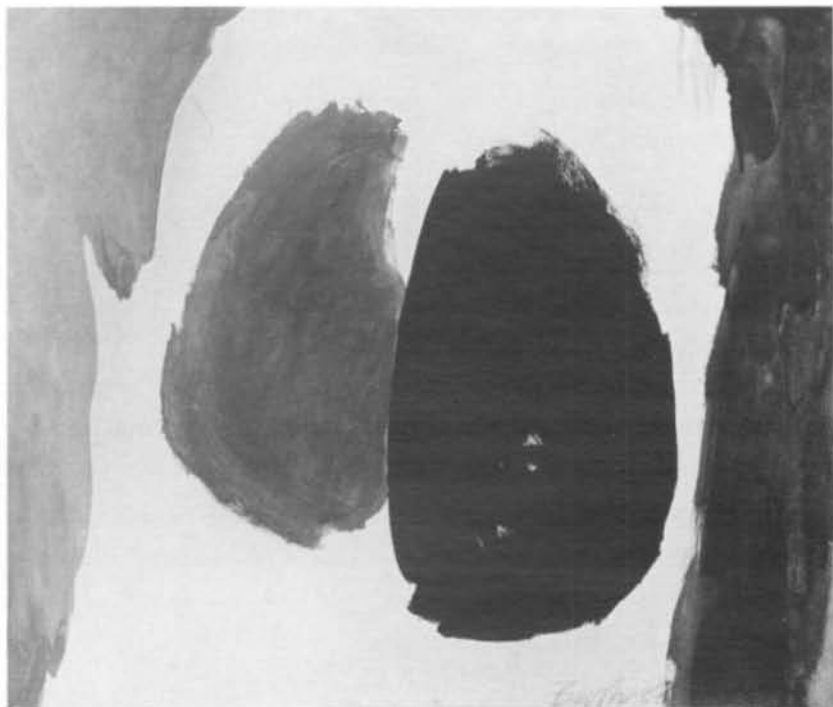


Fig. 5. Jack BUSH, *Mute Beginning*, 1958, oil on canvas, 34" x 40", private coll., Toronto. (Photo: Robinson Photography, Thornhill, Ont.)



Fig. 4. Jack BUSH, *Reflection*, 1955,
Magna acrylic on masonite,
152-1 x 101-6 cm, The Robert
McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, Ont.
(Photo: The Robert McLaughlin Gall.)

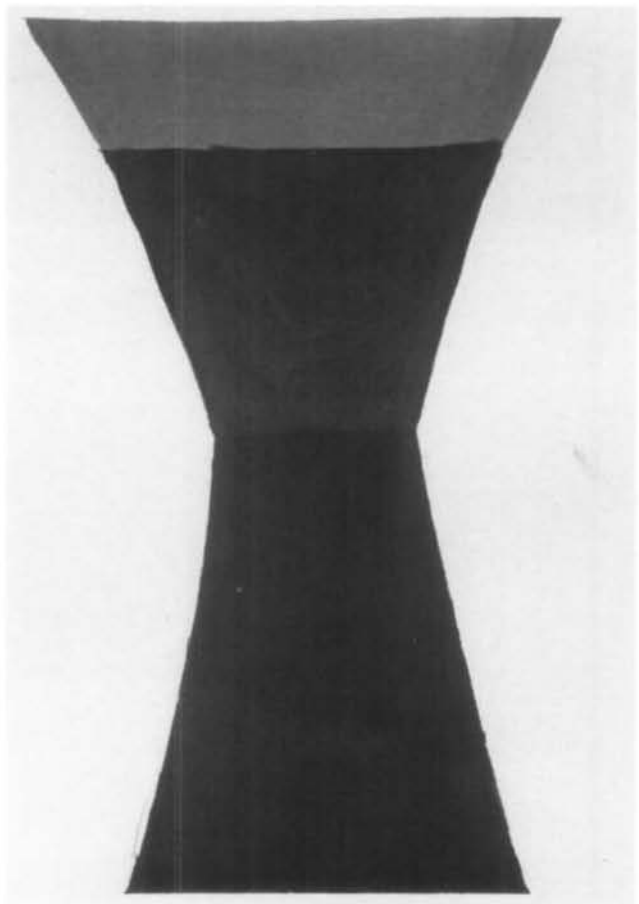


Fig. 6. Jack BUSH, *New York, Oct.*
1962, 1962, gouache on paper,
30 1/4" x 22 1/4", private coll., Toronto.
(Photo: BGM Colour Lab, Toronto)

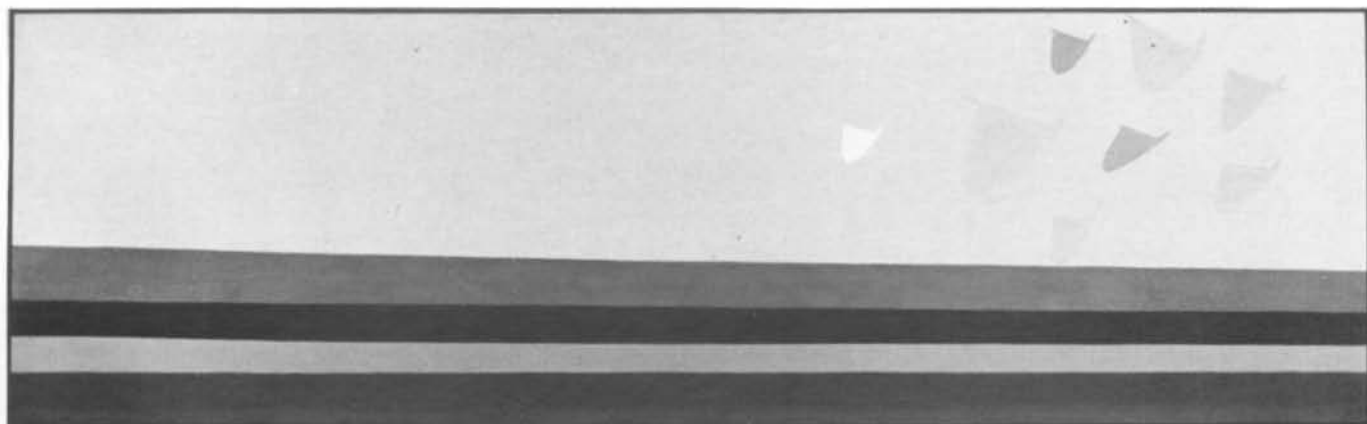


Fig. 7. Jack BUSH, *Flutter*, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 34" x 118", private coll. (Photo: Lois Steen, Toronto)

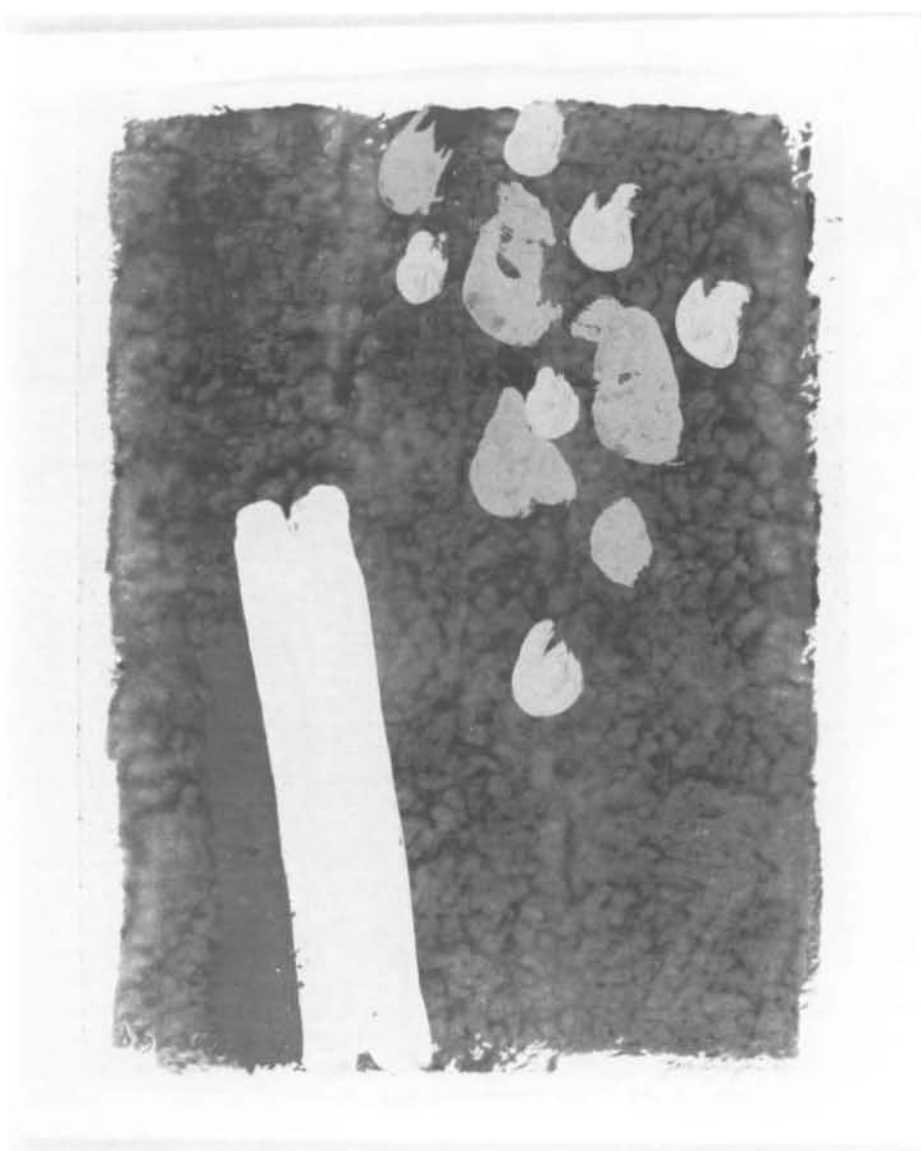


Fig. 8. Jack BUSH, *Falling Blossoms*, June 1971, gouache on paper, 30" x 22½", David Mirvish Gallery, Toronto. (Photo: David Mirvish Gall.)

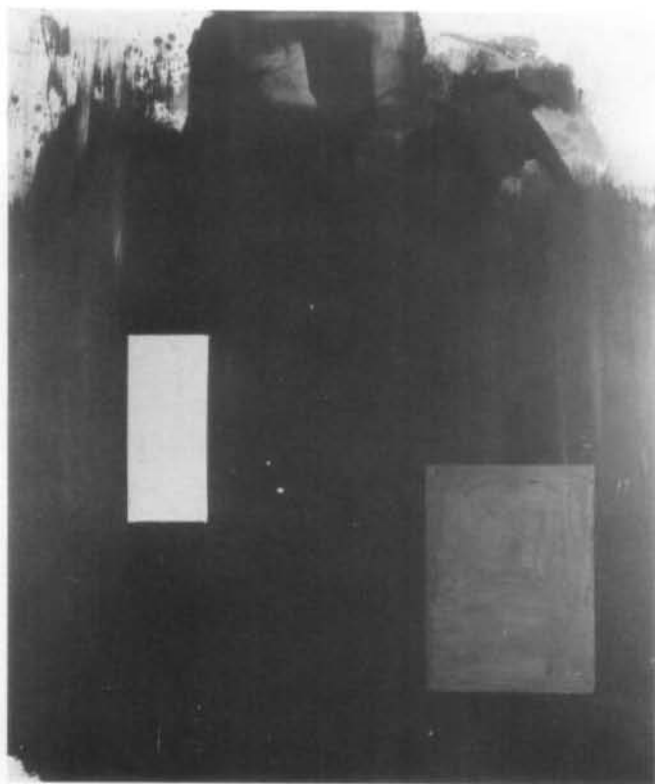


Fig. 9. Hans HOFMANN, *Memoria in Aeternum*, 1962, oil on canvas, 84" x 72½", Coll.: The Museum of Modern Art, New York. (Photo: The Museum of Modern Art, New, York)



Fig. 10. Jack BUSH, *Vic Day*, 1974, acrylic on canvas, 67½" x 37", private coll., Toronto. (Photo: Anthony Janik, Toronto)



Fig. 11. Jack BUSH, *Zheeg*, 1975, acrylic on canvas, 80¼" x 37¾", private coll., Toronto.



Fig. 12. Jack BUSH, *Hart House*, no date (mid-forties?), oil on masonite, 30" x 40", private coll., Toronto.

concludes that: "This desire to regain equilibrium in the face of tension seems to have been one of the most important psychological impulses behind his art."²⁴ For Bush too, art was inseparable from, yet also above, the cares of daily life.

Painting from his feelings seems to have been bound up for Bush with painting from nature, and indeed Robert Bush feels that his father "... always painted from something he saw." Throughout the 1930's and the first half of the 1940's, Bush painted very much in the mode established by the Group of Seven, sketching in the countryside and doing larger, more finished works in the studio from his sketches. His inventory notebooks are full of indications that various works from that time, even watercolours, were done from such sketches.

This closeness to nature persisted throughout his career. At times it was simply the colours of nature that interested him. Alex Cameron, who was the artist's studio assistant from 1972 until Bush's death, reports that to start one of his pictures Bush would often bring in flowers or leaves, and use their colours for his grounds. On one occasion he brought in Christmas wrapping paper.

Numerous fundamentally abstract works were stimulated by "possibilities"²⁵ Bush found in a variety of images from the external world. For the "Sashes," (Fig. 6) these stimuli were manifold: a dress on a mannequin, a necktie, the view looking out from a tent, part of an old Chevrolet,²⁶ and so on. Other works were suggested to Bush by what he saw looking at nature from the window of his studio or home, as in *Spring* 1974, with its clear suggestion of greenery on the snowy ground.

Clearly Bush's artistic personality was deeply stamped with certain images that were highly productive for him. Just as his creative imagination could be stimulated by anything about him, so too he could find his repertoire of shapes about him wherever he looked. This morphological consistency is at times quite remarkable. Even his "spasm" shape is to be found in numerous early works although not, as far as I know, before the crucial beginning of Bush's semi-automatism as suggested by Dr. Walters. Bush himself was quite struck by how frequently certain shapes have recurred in his work: "The only conclusion I can come to is that that's my handwriting."²⁷

Beyond any purely morphological consistency to Bush's work, there is a number of recurrent structures, so that certain mature works and even entire series of works, have their prototype in much earlier paintings.

The "Thrusts" are strikingly foreshadowed by the layout of the sky in *The Long Night* 1950. A precursor of *Island* 1972 can be found in *Sky Study No. 1* 1937. Some of the dominant configurations of the latest works can be found in details of the earliest work: an untitled still life of 1936²⁸ in the free handling within one of its flowers is a striking forerunner of *Septet* 1975. Again, Bush's insistent declaration of the axes of his mature work, most especially in the rolled-field paintings such as *Vic Day* 1974 has its precursor in *Reflection* 1955 and a few cityscapes of the same year.²⁹

One of the most important constants of Bush's art is the tendency for the elements to have a life and freedom of their own. Even in Bush's landscapes from the early 1930's through his most Group of Seven-like work, a tree, house, or hill can lean, spread, or slump unexpectedly, stretching and pulling the rest of the picture along in different ways, as so often happens in such later works as the "Sashes;" while smaller elements, parts of flowers, rocks, and so on, float free, just as the elements do in Bush's "musical" paintings (e.g. the masterpiece, *Zheeg* 1975) towards the end of his life (Figs. 11,12).

None of this denies of course that Bush's work did evolve strikingly after his meeting Greenberg. But perhaps the most important development was that Bush became an active and fully assimilated member of an international community of painters. That Greenberg was Bush's *entrée* to much of the community is clear, but Bush's ambitions had been cast in terms of world art very early in his career. In the middle 1940's, Bush was already attempting to overcome the parochial attitudes of the Canadian Group of Painters. In 1952 he began taking regular although not frequent trips to New York. Bush's work of the late 1960's and 1970's is an advance over his earlier work in its mastery of the full range of high modernism, a situation clearly inseparable from his intimacy with many of its major figures.

Bush identified and competed with Matisse, Miró, Gottlieb, Louis, Noland and others, perhaps most notably Hans Hofmann. At the time of his death Bush had a small Hofmann in his living room and as one might expect of Bush, it was quite an atypical one. While it might be thought that Bush was affected by Hofmann's palette, especially his lush pinks, Bush's colour had begun to change in a more purely Canadian setting in the early 1950's through the example of Oscar Cahén. Bush told Alex Cameron that Cahén was important to Painters Eleven because he

brought a pastel kind of colour they had not seen until Cahén showed it. More particularly the importance of Hofmann lies in his fine sense of interval. If we compare Bush's *Vic Day* 1974 with Hofmann's *Memoria in Aeterna* 1962, we see that each has a rich complex of intervals: between the canvas itself and the field, between the field and the elements, and between the various elements themselves, where each of the intervals is felt and yet not to be defined. Everything breathes in a space that seems to exist in front of the canvas but without any part of the picture losing its organic contact with the surface (Figs. 9,10).

That Jack Bush was a great artist is something that is becoming increasingly apparent. Given the rich variation within his work, the complex nature of his greatness necessarily emerges more slowly. Part of his accomplishment can be seen in his unswerving commitment to art; for Bush, art *qua* art had an importance that went beyond the value of any material success in the Canadian art world,³⁰ and his repeated advice to young artists was to ignore the appeal of the latter. Part lies in his persistent struggle with illusionism.³¹ While Bush remained close to nature, his chosen mode of mature work was high "modernist"³² painting with all its rejection of the fullness and consistency of spatial clues such as are in keeping with a tactile or more naturalistic space. It was because Bush wished to retain something of the feeling of nature but also intended to produce fully abstract, optical work that his art has the tension and vitality and also the richness that it does.

He was an artist who was concerned with sentiment but who was never sentimental in his art; an artist who was true to his feelings, as all who knew him reported, but who, in the grand tradition of Cézanne and Matisse, could overcome human limitations and suffering in his art yet without any need to merely deny them. That Bush could take advice from Greenberg, or anyone else, follows directly from the great generosity of his own personality, which in turn took as its concern the welfare of a whole generation of artists that followed him in Toronto.

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Notes:

- ¹ Terry FENTON, "Jack Bush's Recent Paintings," *Art International*, XVI, 6/7 (Summer 1972), p. 26.
- ² "Reminiscences by Jack Bush" in the catalogue for Bush's retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario, 1976 (with adjustments to the punctuation). The "Reminiscences..." were taken from a taped interview with Bush by Lesley FRY and John NEWTON.
- ³ For a reconsideration of Kline's development, see Harry F. GAUGH, "Kline's Transitional Abstractions, 1946-50," *Art in America*, LXII, 4 (July-Aug. 1974).
- ⁴ Bush once recalled that in 1944 Franklin Carmichael was irritated to see him looking at his first Picasso, the Rose-Period *Boy Leading a Horse* (conversation with the artist, Jan. 21, 1975).
- ⁵ In conversation Jan. 24, 1978.
- ⁶ J.-R. Ostiguy has recorded in a memorandum to the Bush file at the National Gallery of Canada library, dated Nov. 16, 1966, a conversation of Nov. 10, 1966, in which the artist noted his affinity to the Montreal school.
- ⁷ One of the pictures that I am calling "allegorical-expressionist," *The Good Samaritan* 1951, won the J. W. L. Forrester award at the O.S.A. exhibition in 1953 and was widely reproduced at the time. In it the various aspects of menace are confined to the background.
- ⁸ As noted by Charles W. MILLARD, "Jack Bush," *The Hudson Review*, XXVI (Spring 1971), p. 146.
- ⁹ *Reflection* was in the Painters Eleven exhibition at the Riverside Museum in 1956.
- ¹⁰ In conversation Feb. 3, 1978. Subsequent comments by Robert Bush also owe to this interview.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Jack FLAM, *Matisse on Art* (London and New York: 1973), p. 58. What I am suggesting is that in a certain sense the great artists are among the greatest critics simply by virtue of the self-critical aspect of their art.
- ¹³ Greenberg to Carpenter, March 29, 1978.
- ¹⁴ As quoted by Gary Michael DAULT in the *Toronto Star*, Nov. 14, 1975 and Sept. 18, 1976.
- ¹⁵ There is a fourth notebook in which the works held by the Jack Bush Heritage Corporation are listed.
- ¹⁶ Conversation with Alex Cameron Dec. 2 and Dec. 19, 1977. Subsequent comments by Cameron also owe to these interviews.
- ¹⁷ Conversation with Robert Bush, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁸ Conversation with the artist June 9, 1976.
- ¹⁹ This is an issue first discussed by Charles MILLARD, *op. cit.*
- ²⁰ Conversation with Aaron Milrad, Jan. 19, 1978 and with Robert Bush, *op. cit.*
- ²¹ As quoted by Jean KOENIG in the *Edmonton Journal*, Jan. 22, 1977.
- ²² For a further discussion of *Spring Breeze*, see K. Carpenter, "The Inspiration of Jack Bush," *Art International*, XXI, 4 (July-Aug. 1977).
- ²³ FLAM, pp. 61, 63.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 57. From a certain point of view, that of Adrian Stokes or Anton Ehrenzweig for instance, Flam's observation could be generalized as an essential part of the definition of art.
- ²⁵ "Possibilities" is the way the artist preferred to put it. KOENIG, *op. cit.*
- ²⁶ Conversation with Robert Bush, *op. cit.*
- ²⁷ As quoted by Virginia NIXON in the *Montreal Gazette*, June 12, 1976. Note, however, that when the "spasm" shape does occur in the earlier work it frequently still has substantial emotional freight, being associated with the sufferings of Job, murder, and so on, before it becomes more abstract in the early 1950's.
- ²⁸ In the collection of Mr. and Mrs. L. Spencer, Montreal. *Septet* was shown at the Waddington Galleries, Montreal, June 5-July 3, 1976 and reproduced on the announcement for the exhibition.
- ²⁹ The rolled-field paintings are well analyzed by John McCLEAN, "Jack Bush: Recent Paintings," *Studio International*, 188, 968 (July-Aug. 1974).
- ³⁰ Conversation with Ken Lochhead Oct. 14, 1977.
- ³¹ I owe this idea of a struggle with illusionism to a comment by Graham Peacock.
- ³² Where "modernist" has the particular meaning assigned to it in Clement GREENBERG's classic article "Modernist Painting," *Arts Yearbook*, IV (1961).