

# WORK STANDING UP

## THE LIFE AND ART OF PAUL FONTAINE



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# Work Standing Up, and Dad's Other Lessons for Success

Claudia Fontaine Chidester

My father, Paul Fontaine, was a painter, but he was nothing like the stereotypical image of an artist as isolated, disorganized, impoverished, and impractical. His life and art were marked by the years of the Great Depression, the harshness of war, the challenging but invigorating life of an expatriate—in countries where he had to learn, at least minimally, the language—and the unending responsibility of being a father to three daughters, all while working to establish his career. His experiences taught him lessons about the best way to live, and we children experienced, in part, the outcomes firsthand. In what follows, I have used some of his lessons as mileposts for the journey his life took; the dates indicate roughly when the idea was introduced.

OPPOSITE

6. Paul and Claudia, Austin, Texas, c.1995.



1913

## Grow up Speaking a Foreign Language

My dad had a vivid physical presence, set off by an awesome laugh and a thick New England accent. He had bushy eyebrows that shaded his baby blues better even than his floppy tennis hat; and his right forearm, twice the size of his left from playing tennis, was covered with a thick layer of blond hair—so thick that mosquitoes never got through. In the evening, he would sit with his feet up, reading aloud magazine articles he thought were interesting. He would later repeat what he learned to anyone who would listen, whether in a trailer park or his office. He asked questions from and complimented perfect strangers and joked about nearly everything. To me, he was fearless, but I know he worried a great deal.

Paul Emile Antoine Fontaine was from Worcester, Massachusetts, pronounced *wistah*, a city renowned for its unique accent. Imagine the

Kennedy accent, but draw out the *ah*'s just a little more and put a step into the last syllable of the sentence, as if you were snapping a fishing line or asking an abrupt question.

Dad was born to French-Canadian Americans, Elzear Hermenegilde Fontaine and Mary Adwilda LaPlante, endearingly known as Pepe and Mimi, two humble, eighth-grade-educated French Catholics. His father spoke exclusively French at home in Cedar Falls, Rhode Island, where there was large population of French-Canadians. In spite of strong family ties, Pepe made his way west, to Worcester, in the early 1900s.

Mimi, a diminutive redhead, was born in Worcester to a seamstress and a lumberjack. Her father abandoned her mother and her and two brothers for unknown reasons. He might have been killed while felling a sixty-foot pine

and word just never reached the family, but the results were the same: Mimi's mother could not care for the children by herself, so she temporarily handed them over to a group of nuns who ran an orphanage near Montreal. Those weren't good times for the LaPlante siblings—Mimi's brother nearly died from malnutrition and exposure. In time their mother started working as a seamstress and keeping a boardinghouse, and so was able to get her children back.

Pepe, a newcomer in the city, lived at the LaPlante boardinghouse, where Mimi played piano in the afternoons. For added entertainment, Pepe would come down from his room to sing while she played, and so the romance began. Pepe started to pursue a profession to support a family; an enterprising young man with some carpentry skills, he became an undertaker.





7. Right to left: Four generations of French-Canadian lineage: Great Grandmother Rocheleau, Grandmother Fontaine, Elzear Fontaine (Pepe), and Paul Fontaine, c. 1916.

There was steady business in taking care of the dead, and it served the family well into the Depression. Unlike other services, people always paid for burials. Three handsome boys were born, and even as each pursued his own path and passion, they were bound by the common cultural bond of the French language, learned from their parents.

Worcester, like many East Coast cities, was built by immigrants from many different cultures. There were sections of the city, wards, for French-Canadians, the Irish, Italians, Poles, Armenians, and other eastern Europeans. Dad's best friend, an Armenian named Leon Hovsepian, taught Dad about an entirely different set of cultural mores, unfamiliar food, and a tragic history. He heard firsthand about the Armenian genocide at the hands of the Turks, since Leon's parents escaped it to come to the States. In Worcester, it was common and expected for families to be respectful and tolerant of the linguistic and other differences of their neighbors, although Dad mentioned most all the boys knew how to box.

Speaking French served Dad well later in life, even with the guttural French-Canadian accent of Worcester. He enjoyed going into Parisian bookstores and negotiating a good price for books such as Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and others banned in the United States. He could communicate directly with artists who spoke only French and German. He could chat with our neighbors when we camped on the French Riviera. He lacked the classic Parisian lilting rhythm, but wherever he went, his ability to adapt and to endear himself to friends with his knowledge of a European language and European customs opened doors and opportunities. Though the son of an undertaker, he came across as someone who had had a privileged education.

# 1932

## Have a Father Whose Habits You Disdain

Pepe was a dandy. His handsome, slight build and dark complexion gave him the look of an accountant more than an undertaker. He bought a new car every year, and he wore only tailored suits. His profession required him to look respectable in order to reassure grieving widows of his soundness as a person and a businessman, but Dad was furious when he learned that the \$30 monthly salary he was sending home to help the family was being squandered on nonessentials. He and hundreds of other artists had jobs with the Civilian Conservation Corps, a federal program to keep citizens employed during the Depression, and he sent his pay home to help with his brother's school tuition. When he learned that the money had been spent on a new car instead, he stopped sending any more home.

Dad felt disdain for the Catholic Church. His family's house was across the street from the

French Catholic church on Hamilton Street, with a good view of the priests' activities. He marveled at how they drove big cars, often with golf clubs in the rear seat. The Fontaines could hear the boisterous laughter of boozy partygoers at the rectory, even during Prohibition. Somehow the priests had access to a "sanctified" supply of alcohol.

Mimi often recounted to the children the abuses she and her siblings had suffered at the hands of the nuns in the orphanage in Montreal. "We could smell the meat cooking but were only served porridge," she would tell them, instilling in Dad a deep distrust of organized religion that was confirmed by what he saw across the street. His mother's stories most likely lay behind one of his final works at Yale, which helped earn him a yearlong traveling scholarship.



8. CCC camps, c. 1935. Watercolor, 14 x 21 in. (35.56 x 53.34 cm).  
Collection Hovsepian, Worcester, Massachusetts.

OPPOSITE

9. *Fantasy..influenced by false prophets*, 1940. Egg tempera on gesso panel. Location of painting unknown.





1938

# Know What You Want to Do by Fifteen and You'll Find a Way to Make Money at it

When I was sixteen, my father and I were sitting around the table one afternoon. I recall vividly his answer to my remark that a new boyfriend had some romantic notion about taking care of a lighthouse on the coast. "So, he wants to be a light housekeeper?"

Although it was typical of him to turn someone's serious interest into a joke, he went on to explain how he arrived at his own profession. When he was eight, an elderly woman asked him to draw a picture for her. He drew an upside down car, which delighted her, and she enrolled him in the School of the Worcester Art Museum. But more importantly, his favorite uncle, Uncle Arthur LaPlante, who had left school at age nine to help support the family and ended up as a barber, insisted he make up his mind at age fifteen.

Arthur wrote him a letter, which he summarized: "If I was willing to make the sacrifice needed to be a painter, all my efforts and thoughts should be directed towards that end." He convinced my father, who already had the romantic idea and only needed a push.<sup>1</sup>

From then on, Dad remained serious about his intended profession and sought out opportunities to paint as many different subjects as possible—one of them being the trains at freight yards. He initially wanted to paint the workers, but the trains ended up being marketable subjects. He recalled in a letter a time when, halfway through a watercolor, the train he was trying to capture on paper began to move. Fortunately, he was being watched by the superintendent of the roundhouse. When he

realized Dad's predicament, he told him not to leave and then signaled the engineer to move the cars back and instead move some others. The superintendent bought the painting and then commissioned him to paint a steam engine. Dad wrote, "The following week he wanted to know where the locomotive was to pose." During the summer of 1938 he created paintings for the Boston & Albany Railroad and found his first patron, Mr. Ayres. It was his first realization that he could make money by making art.

While at the Worcester Art Museum school, he was an assistant to Umberto Romano, who had a commission to paint murals in the Springfield, Massachusetts, post office. Dad received payment for that job as well. The sketches for the murals traveled to the Whitney Museum, in New

York City, and the Corcoran Gallery, in Washington, D.C., in 1936.

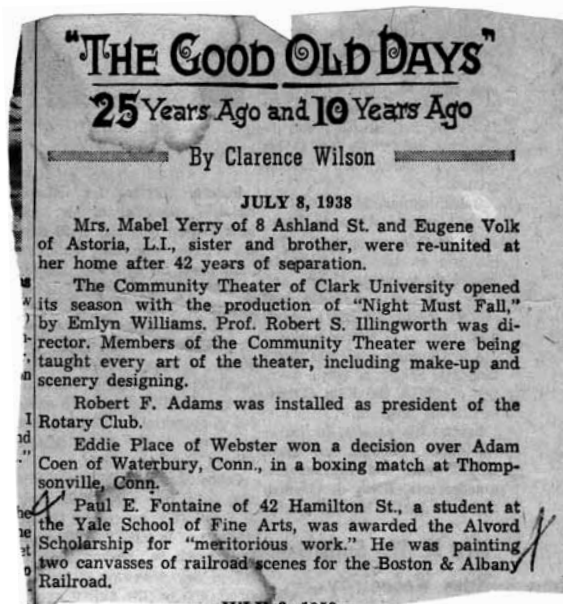
By the time he graduated from Yale in 1940, he had earned seven scholarships. The School of the Worcester Art Museum helped pay Dad's tuition at Yale, and Worcester's director, Francis Taylor, had the museum match the school's scholarship. Because of his four years of art training at Worcester, Dad needed only two and a half years at Yale to complete a BFA, normally a five-year program. During the Depression, there really was no way for middle- or working-class students to attend college except by relying on the aid provided by the endowments of established schools. As a rule, those schools that charged the most also had the most to give, so he aimed for the best.

Dad took a variety of odd jobs also: running slides for art classes, providing art critiques at local academies in Waterbury and Cheshire, giving private lessons, and later working for the Burnham Glass Studio of Boston on murals of the life of St. Thomas More for the Cathedral of St. Mary in Peoria, Illinois. He also worked at the New York World's Fair in the summer of 1939.

Between commissions, scholarships, and working multiple jobs, he was finding his own way.



10. New England landscape, c. 1935.  
Oil on board, 18 x 24 in. (45.72 x 60.96 cm).  
Collection Estate of Vera Fontaine.



11. Notice about Fontaine in the *Worcester Evening Gazette*, July 8, 1938.

1940

Marry a Woman Who Is Above  
Your Standing but Not Your Skills,  
Who Likes Taking Risks,  
Who Is as Handsome as You,  
and Sometimes Smarter



12. Virginia and Paul's wedding,  
August 24, 1940, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

My mother's story is as complicated as my dad's. They met at the Yale School of the Fine Arts, one of only two units of the university that accepted women; the other was the School of Nursing. Her father worked for her grandfather, who was an artist as well as a banker and owned a printing company in Milwaukee, the Hammersmith Printing Company. Her grandfather took her to Yale and paid her tuition. Her own mother and father were not convinced that art training was the best route for her, but it was everything she wanted to do in life. She had spent most of her summers—when she wasn't riding horses, sailing, or teaching swimming at camp—painting with her grandfather. Mother was trouble for her own mother, a teetotaler Christian Scientist. Mother was open about her smoking and too often was caught with beer on her breath.

During her first two years at Yale, Mother took full advantage of every opportunity for stimulation. She went down to New York to watch Broadway shows or see exhibitions; she attended outdoor concerts and went to parties, telling her mother with painful honesty how much fun she was having. She overlooked Dad until one day in the library. She had taken all the reference books on Greek architecture, or maybe it was Hans Holbein, and



# Becoming an Artist: Paul Fontaine's Early Years

Margaret Stenz

This chapter traces Paul Fontaine's education, from his studies at the School of the Worcester Art Museum and the Yale School of the Fine Arts through his service in World War II and the establishment of his career as a professional artist. A dedicated student, Fontaine won many awards, fellowships, and commissions. Yet, like many artists of his generation, his life and career aspirations were shaped by the Great Depression and World War II. These early years, full of successes and struggles, built the foundation for his career as a professional artist.

OPPOSITE

88. Drawing of man with turban, Worcester Art Museum class, 1934. Pencil, conté, or charcoal on paper, 26 x 19.5 in. (66.0 x 49.5 cm). Private collection.







89. Portrait of Leo Fontaine, c. 1934. Oil on canvas.  
Location unknown.

A native of Worcester, Massachusetts, Fontaine showed an intense interest in art at an early age. He began taking art classes at the School of the Worcester Art Museum when he was eight years old, and by the time he graduated from high school he was determined to pursue a career as an artist.<sup>1</sup> Fontaine enrolled full-time at the museum school at age nineteen in 1932, at the height of the Great Depression. The decision showed his commitment to become an artist—enrollment at American art institutions dropped off precipitously during the Depression, since art classes in hard times were seen as a luxury. Fortunately, Fontaine's talent was recognized early on, and he won numerous awards and scholarships that allowed him to attend art school at almost no cost. Very little of Fontaine's work from this early period has survived, but the extant examples show a young artist of great promise. Around 1934, he completed sensitively executed oil portraits of his younger brothers, Leo (fig. 89) and Russell (fig. 90). The three-quarter-length portrait of Leo, who is dressed for a game of tennis and carries a racket and a ball, is a study in blue: the dark blue tennis

pants and light blue sweater, along with a softer blue background, beautifully complement Leo's blond hair and blue eyes.

Surrounded by the Worcester Art Museum's rich collection of American masters of watercolor, Fontaine early on specialized in the medium. He later recalled that the outstanding paintings at Worcester were a huge influence on him, particularly the many great works by Winslow Homer, John Singer Sargent, and Albert Pinkham Ryder.<sup>2</sup> Worcester, which boasts notable works by Childe Hassam, John LaFarge, and Maurice Prendergast as well as ones by Homer and Sargent, has been called "one of the finest collections of American watercolors in public hands," and in the 1920s its holdings rivaled those in larger institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the Brooklyn Museum.<sup>3</sup>

While watercolor in the nineteenth century was most often associated with the "earnest efforts of ladies and Sunday painters," it underwent a reappraisal after the death of Homer in 1910.<sup>4</sup> Homer was, according to his biographer Lloyd Goodrich, "the man who more than any

other raised watercolor to the artistic level of oil."<sup>5</sup> In the 1920s, talented younger artists such as John Marin, Edward Hopper, Charles Burchfield, and Charles Demuth focused on watercolor, helping reinvigorate the medium. During the 1930s, Hopper and Reginald Marsh, as well as Regionalists such as Millard Sheets, Adolf Dehn, and John Whorf, specialized in the medium. By 1941, the *Magazine of Art* could confidently say that "ever since Winslow Homer" there have been American artists who excelled in watercolor:

*While it continues to be a favored and satisfactory vehicle for the amateur, some of our finest artists have created their best and most spontaneous work in watercolor.*<sup>6</sup>

During the Depression, artists often depicted America's traditional rural life. The dominant style of that era, Regionalism, also called the American Scene movement, is associated with images of the heartland by John Stueart Curry, Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and others. In fact, many artists across the country depicted the



90. Portrait of Russell Fontaine, c. 1934. Oil on board, 30 x 30 in. (76.2 x 76.2 cm). Collection Estate of Vera Fontaine.





91. Massachusetts farm scene, c. 1932. Watercolor, 12 x 16 in. (30.5 x 40.6 cm). Private collection.

OPPOSITE

92. Umberto Romano assisted by Paul Fontaine, Leon Hovsepian, Lincoln Levison, and Charlotte Scott, working on the mural *Aftermath of WWI and the Depression*, 1936–37. Springfield Post Office, Dwight Street, Springfield, Massachusetts.

93. U.S. Treasury Department Art Projects, Painting & Sculpture for Federal Buildings, November 17–December 13, 1936, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

94. Catalogue page for Umberto Romano assisted by Paul Fontaine, U.S. Treasury Department Art Projects, Painting & Sculpture for Federal Buildings, November 17–December 13, 1936, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

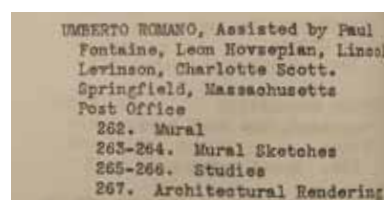
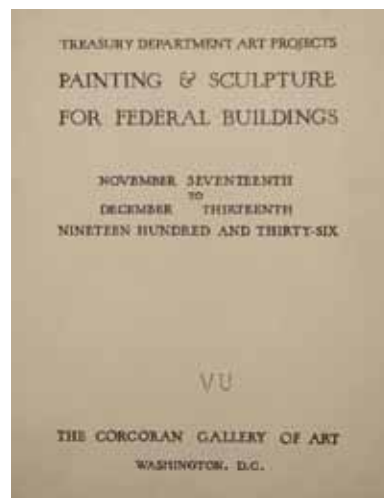
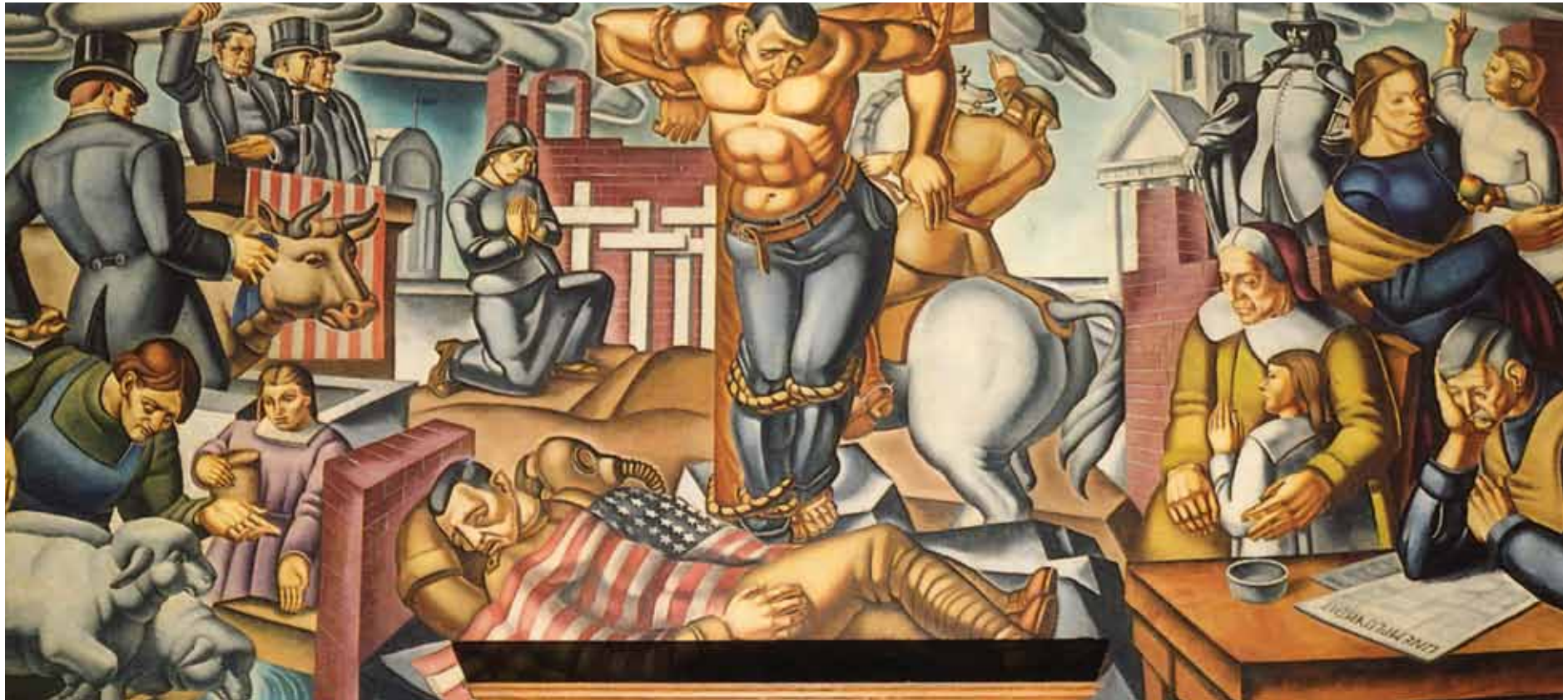
unique identity of their regions. In the Northeast, painters depicted rolling hills dotted by barns and other farm buildings, evoking the region's strong rural tradition, rugged and simple lifestyle, and ability to live off the land. Fontaine's works of this period—evocations of the landscape in his native New England—can be seen as reflecting this Regionalist context. One painting (fig. 113) shows a snowy landscape set against a vivid blue sky; walking among barren trees are the tiny figures of a hunter and his hounds. In his early watercolors, the colors are subdued—for example, an untitled scene of a small farm with a farmer and two grazing cows (fig. 91) is executed with ink wash, wetly painted, but the rich gray tones of the wash contrast with the warm ochre tones used to depict the barns and farm buildings. Fontaine's experi-

mentation with the application of pigment on wet paper is evident here in the trees, which suggest movement on a breezy, overcast day. Though Fontaine was a great admirer of Homer and Sargent, his simplified compositions, limited palette, and brush effects reveal an interest in condensing the scene to its most essential elements in order to produce a composition that evokes rather than describes a time and place. This pared-down, expressive style reappeared later in his watercolors painted in the Virgin Islands and Italy.

Along with numerous other artists of his generation, Fontaine participated in several New Deal programs designed to promote art and employ artists, including the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). In 1935, Fontaine and his friend Leon

Hovsepian, also a student at the School of the Worcester Art Museum, were awarded posts as CCC camp artists; they had been recommended for the position by Francis H. Taylor, who was the museum's director as well as the New England regional adviser to the Bureau of Painting and Sculpture of the Treasury Department.

The CCC, one of the most popular and successful New Deal programs, provided jobs to young men ages seventeen to twenty-three who could not otherwise find employment. Its workers built and upgraded state and national parks, their roads, service buildings, campgrounds, and trails; updated methods for fighting forest fires; and planted trees. Fontaine's job was to record for posterity the scenes and activities of the CCC camps (fig. 8). In an article announcing



Fontaine's appointment, the *Daily Boston Globe* described the position as follows:

*In place of the draughty garret and the meager diet of bread and cheese which romantic tradition associates with the indigent artist, these youthful wielders of the brush and pen are given warm, spotless living quarters and three 'man-sized' meals a day.<sup>7</sup>*

They also received a monthly salary of \$30 (\$25 of which was sent to their parents back home). The U.S. government planned to select and retain a number of paintings and sketches as part of a touring exhibition and as a government collection.

Soon after returning from their six-month stint with the CCC, Fontaine and Hovsepian were employed by the WPA as painting assistants to Umberto Romano, one of their favorite teachers at Worcester. Romano had won a commission to decorate the U.S. post office in his hometown of Springfield, Massachusetts, with murals depicting the town's history. Executed on heavy canvas in Romano's Springfield studio, the murals were begun in 1935 and completed in 1937.<sup>8</sup> Though Romano later worked as an abstract expressionist, his work of the 1930s reflected the classical modernist style, which melded the refinement, simplicity, and solidity of classical art with contemporary themes. Working with Romano on the commission was surely a significant experience for the young artist and likely played a major role





in his choice to continue his education at the Yale School of the Fine Arts, where mural painting was a major focus.

Fontaine enrolled at Yale in 1938. He finished the five-year program in two and a half years, having already completed many of the required courses at Worcester. Francis Taylor again provided invaluable support, securing a matching grant to pay for Fontaine's studies at Yale.

Established in 1869, Yale was one of America's oldest and most prestigious art schools, known for providing its students with a thorough grounding in traditional, academic art methods. Profiling the school in 1940, *Life* magazine noted that Yale offered "the most complete art education in the country," teaching students "everything from drawing apples to designing railway stations" (fig. 98).<sup>9</sup> Instruction also included extensive practice in drawing the human figure. (For examples of Fontaine's work in this area, see figs. 15, 95, 96, and 97.) Fontaine's future wife, Virginia Hammersmith, wrote to her mother in 1936 of her hopes that her solid grounding at Yale would lead to work as a muralist:

*The winner of the Prix de Rome will talk over the radio Tuesday night—it's sort of a toss-up between two of the boys in the tempera class. Tempera will be the greatest medium for mural painting and Yale is the best school for mural painting and that's why we win the Prix de Rome and paint the U.S. Capitol walls. Oh, well, I'll be doing something worthwhile yet.*<sup>10</sup>

It is likely that Fontaine, with his mural experience, was thinking along those same lines. Virginia's letters also mention her work on Beaux Arts projects, in which teams of students



OPPOSITE

95. Drawing of seated man from the back, knee raised, 1938. Pencil on paper, 25 x 19 in. (63.5 x 48.3 cm). Private collection.

ABOVE

96. Drawing of back of man, 1938. Conté on paper, 24 x 18 in. (60.0 x 45.7 cm). Private collection.

RIGHT

97. Drawing of standing nude woman, Yale University art class, 1938. Conté on paper, 24.75 x 18.75 in. (62.7 x 47.6 cm). Private collection.







98. "Tradition and Technique are Watchwords at Yale's School of Fine Art," *Life*, February 12, 1940, 47. Caption: "Barbara Melendy, fourth-year student, dresses up a seated dummy in order to study the effect of drapery across its lap. Behind her is fifth-year student, Paul Fontaine." On the easel behind Fontaine is his painting of an adult baptism.

OPPOSITE

99. *Boat Party*, 1938–39. Egg tempera on gesso, 20 x 30 in. (50.0 x 76 cm). Composed from sketches made while sailing to Nantucket on an old two-masted schooner from Boston. Private collection.



# Fontaine in Germany: An American Abstract Artist Abroad

Mary Brantl

The study of abstract expressionism has followed two paths. In one, American abstract expressionists, often equated with the New York School, are posed in contrast to the more humanistically subjective Europeans. Countering that divisive reading is one that treats abstract expressionism as a universal language, a concept rooted in early twentieth-century abstractionists from Kandinsky to Malevich, though it is fundamentally challenged by those who view abstract expressionism through a Cold War lens.<sup>1</sup>

OPPOSITE

119. Solo exhibition, Frankfurter Kunstkabinett, June 1950.

*Left to right:* Godo Remzhardt (art critic), Hanna Bekker, Paul Fontaine, two unidentified persons, Virginia Fontaine.









120. Exhibition with Alexander Calder and Louise Rösler, Frankfurter Kunstkabinett, February 1953.

OPPOSITE

121. "Art trip to Dusseldorf to see the French show, Spring 1950." Back, left to right: Alo Atripp, Mrs. Otto Ritschl (Dora), Mrs. Ottomar Domnick (Greta), Vicki Noonan, Tom Noonan, Ottomar Domnick. Front, left to right: Virginia Fontaine, Hanna Bekker, Otto Ritschl.

## The Years in Germany

The postwar years saw Fontaine in transition. Initially stationed in Paris, he continued to travel there throughout his years in Germany, exhibiting in 1949 at the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles. Soon after he and his family settled in Germany, Hanna Bekker vom Rath's Frankfurter Kunstkabinett became his central venue, its founder and director both a friend and supporter. Kunstkabinett exhibitions gave Fontaine exposure and positioned him in a context of other abstract voices—most notably in 1953 with Alexander Calder (fig. 120).

If Fontaine's time in Germany divides biographically into the years in Frankfurt (1945–53) and those in Darmstadt (1953–70), artistically a far more meaningful marker is 1947, when his acquaintance with German painter Willi Baumeister (1889–1955; fig. 124) began. It was Virginia Fontaine who, meeting Baumeister in the summer of 1947, saw in him someone Paul would like, as she reported to her mother:

*Paul and Baumeister hit it off fine—conversing in French—and they were pals in no time. Paul is a novelty over here as he is the only abstract American artist the modern German painters have a chance to meet.<sup>2</sup>*

She described Baumeister as the lone artist left in Germany from the "great Bauhaus": "He is 56,

In this context it is little surprise to discover an expressionist artist whose geography challenged the norm by slipping between the cracks. One such case, much to our loss to date, has been Paul Fontaine. American born and raised, Fontaine worked on WPA-sponsored art projects, as did contemporaries such as Mark Rothko and Arshile Gorky, but his postwar career with the military and *Stars and Stripes* and, more so, his continued residence in Germany ensured Fontaine's marginalization outside the central thrust of the American abstractionist movement. Concurrently, his

acknowledged status in Germany as an expatriate American artist proved equally problematic.

One of the rewards of postmodern studies in acknowledging the constructed nature of the historic master narrative is to open our eyes to those left on the margins. It is in this context that we are granted a long-overdue opportunity to recover Paul Fontaine as both the artist he was and the challenge he remains to our historiographical modeling.



plump, & jovial—a real ‘old master’ who turns out a mountain of work himself” and is “the greatest single influence on the young painters in Germany today.” He was perhaps the greatest single influence on Paul Fontaine as well.

During this period, Fontaine came to know pivotal German dealers and artists (fig. 121 and fig. 31 offer a who’s who). Contemporary painters such as Otto Ritschl and Ernst Wilhelm Nay, as well as earlier expressionists—among them, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Emile Nolde—grew in his regard, especially those who had managed to

work, despite being forbidden to do so, through the Nazi years.<sup>3</sup> Hans Hartung, who arrived unexpectedly at the Fontaines’ home with the collectors Ottomar and Greta Domnick early in 1949, reappeared the two days following, reportedly getting on famously with Paul.<sup>4</sup> Hartung, whom Virginia described as “one of the finest abstract painters in all of Europe,” was “all the rage of Paris . . . completely non-objective and very good.”<sup>5</sup>

In the late 1940s, Fontaine’s aesthetic became increasingly articulate. For him, modern

art shared two characteristics: “emphasis on the beauty of order and of the materials themselves, and absorption in the drama (that is the expression) of the individual creator (be he painter or sculptor) whose intimate expression commands an equally intimate response from the spectator.”<sup>6</sup> Fontaine acknowledged diverse sources of inspiration, everything from nature to formal elements such as color or pattern as well as the tendency of such sources to work in multiples: “one idea giving birth to another, a color suggesting a form, a line disintegrating into a tone, forms added onto forms, one idea expanding into another” until a moment when “nothing more can be added without becoming trivial.”<sup>7</sup>

The watercolors done during the war years reflect a growing energy and abstract quality in Fontaine’s work: smudges suggest forms, lines invite the eye’s movement across the space of the paper. But while watercolor continued to play a critical role in preparatory sketches, in Germany Fontaine worked increasingly in oil, soon in water-based casein (supporting his “wet” aesthetic) and, once available, acrylic. His process—from initial drawings to increasingly large canvases—remained consistent.<sup>8</sup>

The transition to abstraction was not an easy one. One of the most telling letters surviving in the Fontaine Archive is a transatlantic missive to “Dearest dear beloved Paul” from Virginia. After noting that they were “in for a humdinger of an adjustment period” as she prepared to join her husband in Europe, she went on to talk about the direction of his painting. Although she had previously suggested increasing the degree of abstraction in his work, she pointed out that it was not a demand for change but a recognition of his abilities:



*My deductions were: you have a very natural beauty in your work, you have better variety in color range, your design is very sound but—lacks the violence of convictions; I wonder if the continued softness in your brushwork is reflecting your mild easygoing disposition too obviously? . . . So, if I am criticizing your work, I am actually speaking of you and your mental outlook . . . To me, abstract form is more basic in expressing fundamentals and far more direct, and the natural form is a crutch for the undeveloped creative mind . . . So the natural step in progress is to reduce one's work more and more to fundamentals.*

While affirming that Paul was “one of the finest watercolorists in the country,” Virginia encouraged him to make “a more positive statement.”<sup>9</sup> Paul

thought that Virginia’s arguments were “sound,” noting, “I’m not satisfied with any of my work.”<sup>10</sup>

While Fontaine was finding his own voice, no artist was more significant to him than Willi Baumeister.<sup>11</sup> For example, Baumeister commissioned a series of lithographs from Paul for publication, and also made efforts to promote Fontaine’s work.<sup>12</sup> Wrote Georg Gusmann in a 1961 review of the *Organon* ’61 exhibition in Leverkusen:

*Currently living in Germany, American Paul Fontaine is inspired and influenced by Willi Baumeister without simply following Baumeister’s way of ciphers and totems. He is more geometric than his German counterpart, his color palette more nuanced and on occasion*



FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT

122. *Composition*, 1949. Oil on board. Exhibited in 1949 at the Salon de Réalités Nouvelles, Museum of Modern Art, Paris. Location unknown.

123. *Yellow Shield in Black (Dog Days)*, 1948. Oil on board, 32.5 x 21.5 in. (82.6 x 54.6 cm). Private collection.

124. Willi Baumeister in his studio, Stuttgart, c. 1947. Photo by Virginia Fontaine.



125. *Untitled*, 1947. Watercolor, 14 x 21 in. (35.5 x 53.3 cm). Private collection, Boston.



*sublime, unbound, such that the representation always proves conclusive.*<sup>13</sup>

By the time Fontaine met Baumeister, the German's art had moved from his mechanistic figures of the 1920s (see, for example, his *Apollo* [1922], Galerie Valentien, Stuttgart), seemingly colored by contemporary friendships with Fernand Léger and Le Corbusier, among others, and from his cubist-inspired *Wall Paintings* (for example, his destroyed *Wall Painting with Segments II* [1920]), into the increasingly textural *Tennis Players* of the early 1930s and the abstract, symbolic, and even mythic works represented by *Ideogram* (1938; Baumeister Archives) or the pictographic *Africa I* (1942; Baumeister Archives). Works of the later 1940s,

when Fontaine first came to know Baumeister, were once again moving from strong, linear studies exploiting the full extent of the canvas—for example, *Slight Movement* (1952; Kulturekreis der deutschen Wirtschaft im BDI e.V.) and his so-called *Metaphysical Landscapes*, such as *Cheerful Landscape* (1949; Frankfurt am Main Städtische Galerie im Städelschen Kunstinstitut) or the works seen behind him in figure 124—to large, still fields of color often dominated by large areas of solid black, as in the Montaru series of the early 1950s.<sup>14</sup> Virginia described Baumeister's evolution thus:

*His early work was easily recognizable for his flat non-objective shapes on a plain field, usually black on white or tan, and his abstracted figure*

*compositions where his awareness of Schlemmer and Léger was felt. Today, there is far more use of varied textures and color in his work and his canvas is filled with a continually moving design from edge to edge.*<sup>15</sup>

Baumeister's presence is most apparent in early Fontaine abstractions such as the untitled work seen in figure 125, its composition reminiscent of the Baumeister abstract "landscapes" seen behind the artist in figure 124. Yet whatever Baumeister's influence, Fontaine never committed to the symbolic, at times pictographic style characteristic of the German artist. Fontaine's *Yellow Shield in Black or Dog Days* (1948; fig. 123) may initially recall the gestural strokes of a late-1930s Baumeister, but on second glance



offers looser brushwork and a ragged edge quite contrary to the style of the German artist. In the center of this image, Fontaine plays with the surface of the picture plane, and that same spatial playfulness is found in other works of the late 1940s, notably the *Composition*, [1949; fig. 122], a work shown at the Salon de Réalités Nouvelles, and—enhanced by mixed media—an untitled work of 1948 (fig. 126). Similarly, Fontaine's *Rhythm in Black and White* (1947; fig. 127), though momentarily recalling Baumeister's *Ideograms*, is all too much about the picture to participate in the latter's suggestive symbolism.

Fontaine's development from the 1950s to 1960s saw a shift from centralized forms such as that seen in figure 130, a work shown in the Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contempo-

rary Painting of 1951 (at the Carnegie Institute), or the more landscape-oriented *Green Spot* (1951; fig. 129). Similarly, this period signaled a move away from the half-curved shapes that anchor a number of his early abstractions: the untitled works in figures 126, 128 and 131 (c. 1952), and, to a lesser extent, *Green Spot* (fig. 129). These paintings were, wrote the noted art critic Will Grohmann, "expansive" and "symphonic" in their effort "to draw connections with rhythm and music."<sup>16</sup> And Fontaine's compositions took on greater mobility than before: figure 132 (1950) offers fragmented forms spatially energized by suggestive thin lines; in *August*, [1953; fig. 146] forms are inscribed calligraphically across the surface; and a similar but far



FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT

126. *Drawing*, c. 1948. Oil crayon and gouache on paper, 15.7 x 20.0 in. (39.9 x 50.0 cm). Collection Domnick, Nürtingen, Germany.

127. *Rhythm in Black and White*, 1947. Oil on board, 13.8 x 10.0 in. (35.1 x 25.4 cm). Collection Estate of Hanna Bekker vom Rath, Germany.

128. *Untitled*, c. 1952. Silkscreen, 13.9 x 24.6 in. (35.2 x 62.4 cm). Example of print given to W.J.H.B. Sandberg, director of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

OPPOSITE

129. *The Green Spot*, 1950. Oil on board, 30.5 x 39.4 in. (77.5 x 100.0 cm). Property of Cornelia Ebeling, Wiesbaden, Germany.









130. *No. 25*, 1951. Oil on board, 28.7 x 27.9 in. (73 x 71 cm).  
Collection Estate of Vera Fontaine. Exhibited at the  
Pittsburgh International of Contemporary Painting,  
Carnegie Institute, 1951.



131. *Untitled*, c. 1952. Oil on board, 21.3 x 31.5 in. (53.9 x 80.0 cm). Private collection. Three other paintings evolved from this idea; see, for example, fig. 169.



132. *Untitled*, c. 1950. Oil on board, 17 x 21 in. (43.2 x 53.3 cm). Private collection, Boston.

# The Cosmopolitan Modernism of Paul Fontaine

Robert Linsley

At first meeting, the art of Paul Fontaine seems easily placed in period and manner. That it is also unique and distinctive is the occasion for this essay, but how it can be both typical and stand apart is the problem that has to be faced, not least because it opens onto a central dilemma of abstract painting.

In modern art, originality is the highest value. There are some who wish it were not so, and there are some who believe that if their work has the look of the generic or universal, they will approach a truth unavailable to the individual ego. But theories don't avail. The demand for originality is stronger than any individual—even those who want to remove the individual and particular from their work will have to do it in their own unique and exceptional way in order to make a mark.

OPPOSITE

164. *Acarono*, 1988–95. Acrylic on canvas, 46 x 56 in. (116.8 x 142.2 cm).

Private collection.





Fontaine





Where does this demand—that the work of art appear unique and original—come from? It may not be wrong to say that in order to be noticed in a vast market, a work has to stand out, and that the only way it can do so is to be different from all the other goods for sale—and although that explanation may not be wrong, it hardly matters. Although an analysis of the ocean might be interesting to a fish, it won't help the fish swim or catch its lunch. So those who claim that originality is an illusion, or an ideology, may be correct in theory, but it is a kind of theory that can't help us make art. Still, art may have to face the paradox that it must be original in a world where everything, even art, is produced in mass. There are more artists today than there ever were, but the same was true in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and it is still true as the art world continues to grow, as it has since

World War II. As a member of his generation, that of the abstract expressionists, Paul Fontaine benefited from the growth of interest in modern art during the postwar period, just as his work necessarily reflects the problems characteristic of that period. For art, and most pointedly for abstract painting, the difficulty is that to be seen at all, it has to give viewers something they can recognize. Originality cannot be measured but against the familiar, and so abstract painting necessarily becomes reliant on conventions—that is, customary techniques and practices—and increasingly becomes a matter purely of convention. As it happens, Fontaine himself was very aware of these questions. In a talk given in Germany in 1951, he began with a comparison between American and German artists:

OPPOSITE

165. *Untitled*, 1969. Acrylic on canvas, 37 x 49 in. (94 x 124 cm). Private collection.

LEFT

166. *Tortoise*, 1982. Acrylic on canvas, 41 x 61 in. (104.1 x 154.9 cm). Private collection.

*Baumeister could easily change places with Stuart Davis, or Motherwell with Fritz Winter, or Uhlmann with Calder without causing any stir. This could sound alarming, when forms appear so similar and thinking so regimented (conditioned) that vast geographic distances are not sufficient to effect any fundamental change of style.*"<sup>1</sup>

To our ears today, this is a strange observation, for the demand for uniqueness and individuality is so strong in the art world that we take it for granted, and all efforts are directed at sustaining and emphasizing the differences between artists. But Fontaine is acknowledging the facts, namely, that there is a certain generic quality to abstraction. We can call it universality, which he is doing, but that is to put a positive spin on what is more truly convention.





The struggle with and against convention is the drama of postwar art and the deep narrative of its history, a history that is usually presented as a progression of styles. If art has a style, then it follows that the movement of art is a matter of fashion. Actually, this is true, and it has been 150 years since the poet Charles Baudelaire pointed out the importance and necessity of this fact. Sadly, in our culture today there is still a heavy

moral weight on the concept of fashion, and it is widely assumed that great art must have a lasting quality that elevates it above “mere fashion.” I wish that more people would read Baudelaire and understand that the ephemeral fluctuations of taste are of the essence of modern art, most especially of abstraction, which in a certain sense has little else to work with—and that is quite apart from the fact that fashion itself is

hardly a trivial thing. Paul Fontaine’s work in the 1950s was completely of its moment, but later it followed a path apart from the main tendencies in abstraction, in the 1960s dominated by the American artists who succeeded his own generation. It became distinctly unfashionable. My purpose is not to find value in timeless qualities, but rather to understand how the particulars of Fontaine’s art illuminate the general situation,



OPPOSITE

167. *Three Heads*, c. 1968. Acrylic on canvas, 37 x 59 in. (94 x 150 cm). Private collection.

ABOVE

168. *Positano*, c. 1972. Watercolor, 15.5 x 22.0 in. (39.4 x 55.9 cm). Private collection, Harlingen, Texas.

and along the way we will become more attuned to the pleasures it offers.

According to those who knew him, Fontaine constantly stressed that he was interested above all in composition and color. Whatever images arose, whatever associations the viewer might make, were incidental to the main effort, which was to design a good picture. Once Fontaine hit his stride, all his pictures were of the same high

quality, and as a continually productive artist he left behind a body of works that cannot be easily subsumed under one heading. Many pieces, such as *Untitled*, 1969 (fig. 165), or *Acarono* (fig. 164), are simply abstract and don't recall anything else in the world; others, such as *Tortoise* (fig. 166), *Three Heads* (fig. 167), *Positano* (fig. 168), *Composition in Blue and Yellow* (fig. 169), *Sarabande V* (fig. 170), *Laetare III* (fig. 172), *Untitled* (fig. 173),

*Altaflores* (fig. 174) verge on the recognizable. Yet all his works are images, they all have figures and grounds—they don't follow a purely formalist direction in which color and shape are only color and shape and there is no way to distinguish a part from the whole. Yet since the power to read into an image and see its resemblance to things in the world belongs to the viewer, the question of how far a work comes toward or departs from the universally recognizable is exactly the measure of how it engages the problem Fontaine himself mentioned above—that of the conventionality of abstraction. And the importance of that lies in the fact that convention is the flip side of originality. At the conclusion of the same talk, Fontaine expressed his belief in the value of modern art this way: "The art of today, having no parallel, will be outstanding for it's [*sic*] outstanding uniqueness, integration and originality." So having explained that modern art all looks the same, and that artists are interchangeable, Fontaine tells us that the product of genuine inspiration is a self-evident originality. This is not a contradiction—though I could easily point out that the capacity to sustain contradictions in thought without needing to resolve them is one of the markers of true talent; it is simply an honest and clear-eyed description of how things are. As an artist who experienced his own originality as a constant flow of fresh ideas, compositions, and painterly arrangements, Fontaine necessarily had an acute sensitivity to the conventional, wherever it appeared. But the question that we can't definitively answer is whether originality is best registered by an approach to a universally understandable meaning or by a movement away from it. To the extent that this is still an open question today, Fontaine's work remains valid and alive.



Fontaine claimed that his pictures should be looked at in the same way that one looks at nature, a normal position within modernism.<sup>2</sup> But from the late 1950s onward, the most experimental and advanced painters, the generation that followed the abstract expressionists, felt that any image would prevent a painting from being apprehended as a thing standing apart in the world. For abstraction as it developed, any kind of meaning supplementary to the object itself was a failure, so images had to be avoided because they could too easily acquire meaning.

Today, in a very different artistic and social context, Fontaine's willingness to accept images, to stray over the line into a kind of semiabstraction, looks attractive. It has a period charm. Especially after his move to Mexico in 1970, most of Fontaine's works stay on the abstract side of the line: they give pleasure simply as arrangements of form and color, and this is what he wanted. Yet his unwillingness or inability to hold the line and stay out of representational territory poses a problem. As I have mentioned, the standard view is that images themselves are the trouble—they

can't be kept abstract. But there are other currents present in the art of the second half of the twentieth century that help move things along.

For artists of Fontaine's generation, the way to handle images, whether bidden or not, was to keep them symbolic. Here it is important to understand that though in everyday life the term "symbol" is used in many ways, in art or poetry it means an image without a clearly definable meaning. In fact, even the artist can have no complete idea of what it stands for. A circle becomes a sun, but the sun itself is a symbol of



OPPOSITE

169. *Composition in Blue and Yellow*, 1995. Acrylic on canvas, 39 x 59 in. (99.06 x 150 cm). Private collection. Fontaine often took inspiration from earlier compositions; see fig. 131 for the predecessor to this work.

RIGHT

170. *Sarabande V*, c. 1983. Acrylic on canvas, 44 x 59 in. (111.8 x 150.0 cm). Private collection, Austin, Texas.



poetic creativity, of the origin of life, of cosmic energy—finally, even of God. It is characteristic of all these meanings that they avoid the particular and exist in a realm of generality and universality that makes them hard to define. Vagueness comes with the symbolic territory. A simple and natural form such as a circle, for example, may start out (with the artist) with no particular associations, but will inevitably acquire them on its journey toward the viewer. A circle may recall the sun, a face, the earth—any number of familiar and universal things—and as it does, it

acquires the character of a cliché or a flat sign such as one sees in children's art (fig. 167). Such an image becomes a symbol in the artistic sense through the adroit orchestration of less schematic elements such as color, surface, edges, shape (which doesn't have to be geometrically perfect), and the combination of more than one form in the same work. For example, a circle may become a face if other elements—some stray lines, a variation in tone—allow it. The point is to keep the work abstract, to avoid any particular meaning or association, but to let it signify, to

have a meaning, and when a form becomes a symbol it can have very many meanings. The need, felt as much by Fontaine as by anyone, is to keep it abstract. Any too specific meaning threatens to put a limit on the work's future; for once it has acquired a fixed caption there may not be a reason for viewers to look at it any more. Ideally, meanings should continue to emerge over time, and a symbol offers the possibility of a bottomless well of suggestion. For an artist like Fontaine, who didn't want his works to have too clear a resemblance to real things,





OPPOSITE

171. *Spring*, c. 1984. Acrylic on canvas,  
47 x 59 in. (119.4 x 150 cm). Private collection.

ABOVE

172. *Laetare III*, 1984. Acrylic on canvas,  
52 x 46 in. (132 x 117 cm). Private collection  
of Casa Pericos.

whenever an image appeared it couldn't help becoming symbolic—or let's just say that there is a tendency in that direction, a tendency that was present in abstraction in general. An image may suggest many things, but those things are left for viewers to bring up from their own store of hopes, expectations, memories, and desires. In effect, the poetry of a symbol lies in the viewer's imaginative faculties. A viewer with exalted dreams will be uplifted by the vagueness of the image. But then the opposite will also occur—a more earthbound viewer will likely dwell on the character of the paint, the specifics of edge and shape, and the riches of color. The success of the work, and the length of its life in the attention of generations of viewers, will depend on the particular balance of those two aspects.

In Fontaine's case, a 1980s piece such as *Spring* (fig. 171) hits the center of the target, but appropriately without precision. The sun is very real, almost all too real, as a source of energy, but in the human imagination becomes something light enough to play with. The artist counters the etherealization of energy and matter in the symbol through the particular and real manipulation of paint. This image could be a cloud of mustard gas, or the sun inside a nebula, or a belly with navel. For an artist, poetry has to have a body.

There are a lot of ways to paint a circular form, and I do not necessarily mean by this technically different ways. Artists may use the same means, the same materials, and the same gestures and come up with circles of vastly different values and associations. To take a more or less random sample of painters whose works were encountered during a brief tour of an Austin museum: Ray Parker, Jack Boynton, Helen Frankenthaler, Fernando de Szyszlo, Michael