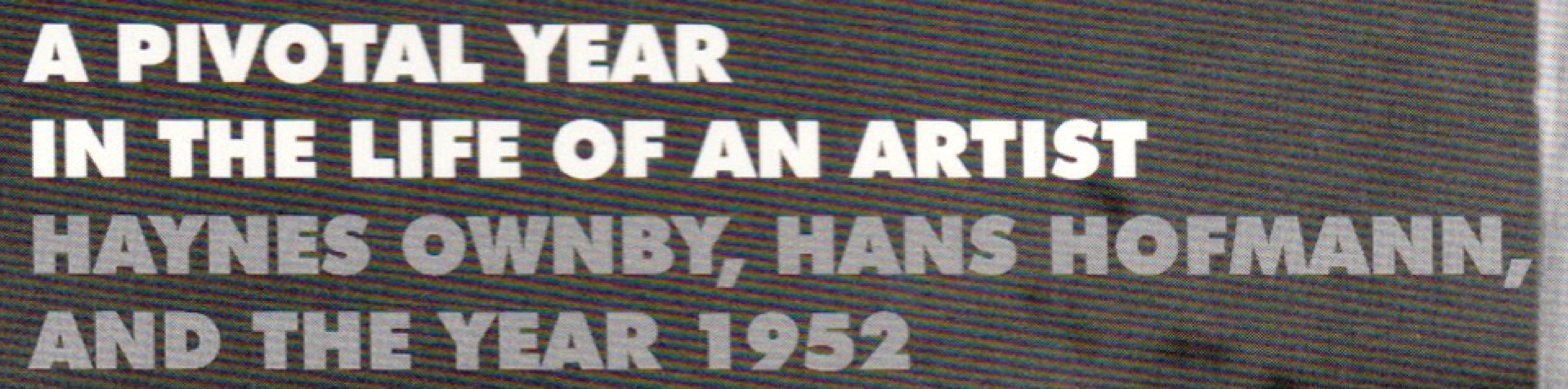

A PIVOTAL YEAR IN THE LIFE OF AN ARTIST

HAYNES OWNBY, HANS HOFMANN, AND THE YEAR 1952

by Stephen D. D'Agostino

FIGURE
1950, conté crayon on paper, 25" x 19"

In the summer of 1952, Haynes Ownby recalls, "I was able to see space in a Mondrian painting for the first time. If you can see space in a Mondrian, you understand push and pull." Push and pull was the term Hans Hofmann, Ownby's teacher at the time, used to explain the space present in the flat surface of a painting.

In that year, push and pull were present not only in the paintings and drawings Ownby worked on and studied, but also in many aspects of his life. The push to go to New York, the pull of his parents to keep him from studying art, or at least from moving from his home in Dallas. The push from Hofmann to understand abstract painting, the pull of Ownby's inexperience and reluctance, obstacles in understanding what he was seeing and hearing. The push of new experiences, the pull of gloomy New York City. The push and pull of love. Through this dissonance, however, Ownby grew in his ability, his understanding of abstract art, and his admiration of Hans Hofmann.

Haynes Ownby's journey to Hofmann started in the fall of 1949 when he attended a show of modern painters at the Dallas Museum of Fine Art, a baptism or sorts for the young artist. "I saw something in the works of Mondrian and Picasso," he says, "that I felt in the depths of my heart. There was something there. Something important and great."

However, oil, not oil paints, was the future his parents envisioned for Ownby. He spurned their wishes, and instead studied art at Southern Methodist University. While there in 1950, Jerry Bywaters, one of his instructors, urged him to enter a synthetic cubist painting ironically titled Oil Well Pump in a show in Dallas. Though it didn't win, Ownby did get some praise and gained confidence from the experience. This triumph made his parents pay attention; his interest in art was more than a stroke of fancy.

Though encouraging, his instructors did not share his enthusiasm for abstract art, uniformly feeling that this type of painting was too subjective and therefore could not be judged. The young artist agreed with their underlying notion—things totally subjective were

Opposite, Haynes Ownby in his studio at 713 Broadway, New York City, in the early 1950s.

Photo by Gene Lesser

non-communicative and therefore had no value. Yet, the works of Mondrian and Picasso had spoken to him. His instructors' opinions and gentle pressure to return to more representational painting were disheartening, but he found an ally of sorts in a fellow student, Edith Sabatino. She was familiar with New York, and of the same mind as Ownby about abstract expressionism, a movement that dominated the American art world and would soon gain universal prominence. She suggested he study with Hofmann because he might know what Ownby wanted to do. More importantly, she urged him to go to New York City, for in America in the early 1950s, New York City—certainly not Dallas—was the only place for an artist to be.

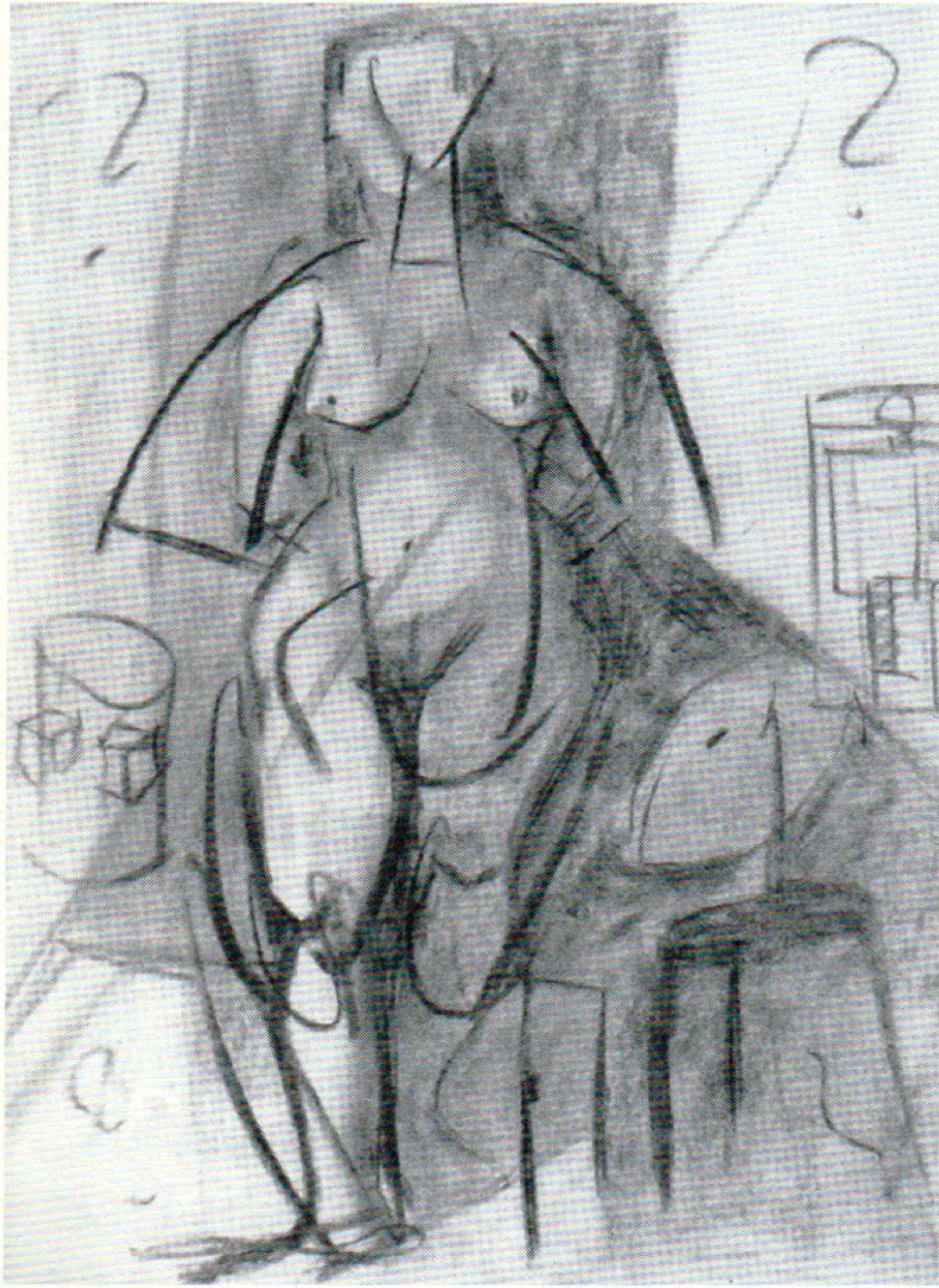

FIGURE STUDY
early 1952, charcoal on paper, 25" x 19"

This drawing shows the indications of Hans Hofmann's teaching method: three question marks and two graphic illustrations on the right and left of the figure.

Ownby learned, however, there were many roadblocks on his journey to the center of the art world. Bywaters adamantly disagreed with Sabatino's views on Hofmann. At the urging of Texas Women's University professor and Hofmann student Toni LeSelle, he had mounted a one-man Hofmann show at the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts in 1947, a show too modern and too controversial for Dallas at that time. It nearly cost him his job. Sabatino, too, was not without concern. She feared that Ownby was too young and impressionable, and that Hofmann's charm and authority might subvert the green artist.

His parents, too, proved to be a barrier. Ownby suffered from epilepsy. They seized upon this as a reason for him to stay in Dallas and to pursue a career that would provide him the money to buy his medication. Ownby, however, parlayed his condition to his advantage. "They were always concerned that I lead a normal life," he says, "and not feel like a freak, so they gave me a good deal of liberty." Liberty, he felt, to move to New York City if he so chose. His parents, though, weren't through fighting. In the summer of 1951, they urged him and his brother, John, to visit the city and also Provincetown to see Hans Hofmann. His parents viewed Dallas as, says Ownby, "a paradise on Earth," and they thought this trip would convince their son to stay put.

Ownby's first meeting with Hofmann took place on a Friday in August at his school on the corner of Nickerson and Commercial Streets in Provincetown. On Fridays, both here in the summer and at his school in New York during the fall, winter, and spring, Hofmann held public criticisms of his students' work. Sitting in on one of these criticisms, Ownby watched Hofmann use his arms to partition part of a painting. "Ah, this is a good painting," Hofmann said. Sectioning off more of the painting, Hofmann again complimented the work. He did this two or three more times. Then, viewing the painting as a whole, Hofmann announced that it was not good. Hofmann's objective appraisal of the painting bolstered Ownby's view

on abstract art. It is not subjective. It can communicate.

Despite meeting the artist, Ownby wasn't sold on him. He had seen his works in Art News and in Time and was unimpressed. "I wasn't drawn to it," he says, "It was something I was going to have to get used to." He was sold more on the idea of being part of a vibrant art scene, so on Thursday, January 31, 1952, Ownby boarded a train for New York City feeling he would become either another Picasso or Van Gogh-as rich and famous as the former, or as poor and obscure as the latter had been during their lives.

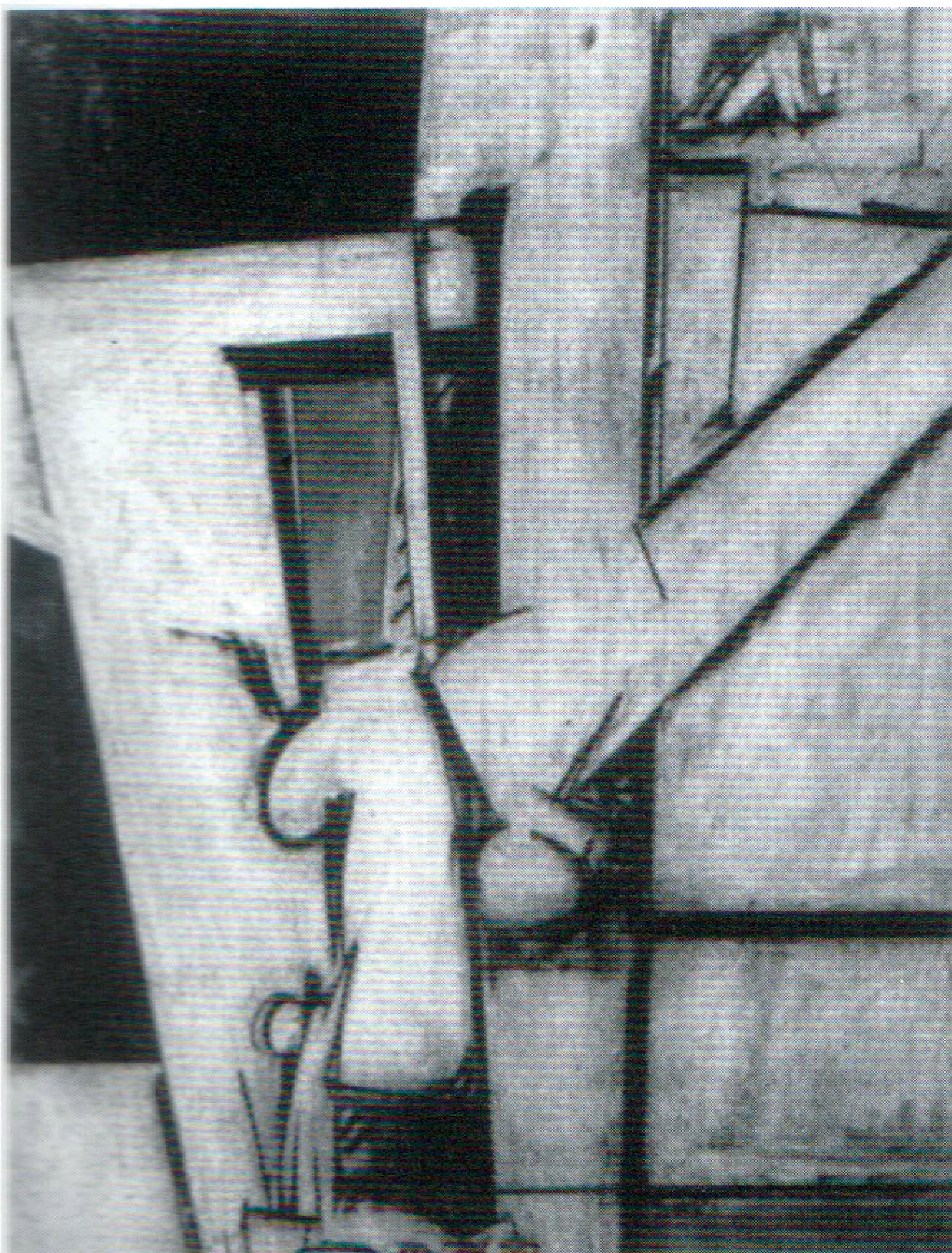

FIGURE STUDY
1952, charcoal on paper, 25" x 19"

Two days after he arrived, he attended his first class on the top floor of fifty-two West 8th Street, taking the easel closest to the door. He set up his watercolor paper, his ink, and glass of water and got to work drawing the model. The next day, Tuesday, Hofmann came into class.

"He feels the paper," Ownby recalls of his first criticism by his new instructor, "and says, 'Ah, this is very good paper. You must be a rich man.'" Ownby, already aware that he was probably better off than his fellow students, was dismayed. Sensing this, Hofmann changed the subject, ripping a piece of the paper from the sketchbook with such force that it made Ownby jump. He took a piece of charcoal and drew two vertical marks and one horizontal mark and drew in various parts of the model. He said, "This is where you start!" and moved on.

On Friday armed with charcoal and charcoal paper, Ownby faced his second critique. Hofmann noted the paper was too big and folded it around the board in a show for all to see. He then said, "You must do one of two things. You must either get a larger board or cut the paper to size so it fits the board. You must not be lazy." With that, he left Ownby again. "I was like, 'Shit, man.'" Ownby says, "'I don't want to have to do all this. What difference does it make?'"

It made a profound difference, as Ownby later learned. For the edges of the paper are, according to Hofmann, "the first four lines and the last four lines" of a painting—the push and pull of the work relies on them.

These first two criticisms were not the only ones with which Ownby struggled. In fact, Ownby's shyness, Hofmann's thick German accent, his oft-noted habit of falling into German mid-sentence, and his hearing problem—he was seventy-one when Ownby started studying with him—made culling value from his criticisms difficult. "If I asked him a question," Ownby recalls, "he'd give me the answer to another question he thought I'd asked. I spoke rather quietly and did not make clear what I was saying." To rectify this problem, Ownby listened to criticisms of other people's work,

a practice Hofmann strongly encouraged, and eventually got all his questions answered. He also saw another benefit to listening to other people's criticisms. "You had all this anxiety when he criticized you," Ownby recalls. Hoping for good comments, which Hofmann was stingy at handing out, "interfered with your listening. Seeing somebody else's work be criticized—it was not your work—you could listen." Ownby recalls that everyone in the class was so serious, wanting Hofmann to praise their work. "We were sweating blood," he says.

Ownby continued to struggle, to grow, and to learn, not primarily from his owning drawings, but by observing the works of others. Walking down Madison Avenue one Saturday, he passed the Samuel Kootz Gallery and noticed a painting in red and green in the window. On closer observation, he realized it was Hofmann's work. Ownby went up to the gallery to see other works by his instructor. "I took to them immediately," he says. "From that point on, I was really sold on him. I saw what a great painter he was. This gave what he said more force." His reluctance to accept Hofmann and his teachings was all but gone.

Shortly after this, he made a second discovery while spying the work of a fellow student—a charcoal drawing of a white triangle situated with long side down on a black background. "It was really impressive to see this thing," he remembers. "I'm not saying I liked it, but it was arresting. It was something I'd never seen before. Other people were looking at it and giggling and ridiculing it. Some people were impressed and so was Hofmann." The artist's name was Myron Stout, one of Hofmann's more famous students, and certainly during the time that Ownby's and Stout's studies with Hofmann overlapped, the most respected by both instructor and classmates. Though Stout was exactly twice Ownby's age in 1952, they struck up a friendship. "Myron was a mentor to me in just about every phase of my education," Ownby says. "He told me about books. He pointed out things he had observed in movies and nature. Things I was not noticing at this time."

From the day he saw Stout's drawing, Ownby downplayed synthetic cubism in his work and began to work instead in geometric shapes and in black and white—two colors he employed later in life in works he refers to as semi-automatic. Though less complex, geometric work made Hofmann's theories of push and pull more accessible.

During a Friday criticism, Hofmann mentioned a painting by Clifford Styll at the Museum of Modern Art. It was a predominately black painting with a white line down the near middle of the work. Hofmann noted, "One cannot say just what it is, but the way the line comes down the middle of the painting is perfect." Ownby had seen Styll's work the week before and it had not impressed him. He went back the day after the criticism, studied it for a long time, and understood Hofmann's appreciation. From this epiphany, Ownby learned to be more receptive to what he was seeing. "After the experience," he says, "I was able to see things in abstract paintings that I had not seen before. Part of it was being given permission."

Though struggling through Hofmann's classes, the twenty-two-year-old artist had other things on his mind that spring. Through a chain of relationships, Ownby was set up on a blind date. They met at the Biltmore Hotel, a common rendezvous spot for city guys and their country dates, and she introduced herself saying, "I'm Bett. Like in the horse races." Ownby laughs at this, saying he liked her response, and on that night, they began to date. She wasn't beautiful, but she had charm. "To me she was the ultimate in sophistication," Ownby says. "She knew New York."

During that spring, he fell for her. He took her to dinner and dancing or to the movies, a lifestyle Ownby, unlike most of Hofmann's students, could