EDWARD PERRY

Between Canvas and Frame
at the Hyde Gallery
August 20 – September 19, 2014

Constructions
at Rust Hall, Alumni Gallery
August 15 – October 3, 2014
Edward Perry’s work and his story embody everything I love about great art and artists. We are taught not to believe stories of eccentric, eclectic geniuses who isolate themselves and produce a body of great work, then reject the commercial art world and refuse to show it. We are told it is a cliché that after death, their work is discovered and recognized for its greatness. Ed Perry’s life and work is exactly that mythic story that is ostensibly impossible. Perry was very real and his story is fact. He isn’t the exception that proves the rule. He is more important than that. He is the exception that proves that anything is possible and that we should doggedly pursue our highest ideals. My first exposure to Ed Perry’s work was the work itself and only the work. When I first set foot in A2H where it was hanging and looked around, I was floored. Becky Askew came out to meet me and as we spoke I kept looking around and thinking, “Wow, this stuff is great!” As we talked and I kept looking, I said to Becky, “Wow, this stuff is great!” Ever since, I have told everyone that I know, “Wow, this stuff is great!” I have before had the rare experience of walking into a show and within minutes being taken by a body of work created by someone completely unknown to me. It is an indescribable feeling of wordless understanding. No artist statement, no research was necessary. My first exposure to Martin Puryear’s work was another such instance and I feel the same way about Perry’s work as I do Puryear’s. That is good company to keep. The most amazing thing about Perry’s constructions is the consistency and cohesiveness of the group. I’m sure there are many examples of largely unknown artists whose work was re-discovered, including a few pieces that are genuinely great. The difference here is that Perry’s constructions are a mostly resolved body of over sixty complex wood/canvas pieces that seemingly dropped out of nowhere, whole and complete. Ed Perry’s work and his story are unlikely, but when it comes to making artwork, the bottom line is, you either do it or you don’t. Ed Perry did it. Making art was his calling and he answered on a daily basis (in many different ways). He worked hard. He worked obsessively. He gave himself to his work. He made it happen. No theory, no jargon, no hype, no art world conventions apply. Nothing can stop the creations of the determined and committed individual. But, just because that is true, there is no guarantee that greatness will result. Things went right for Ed Perry in that regard because this work is truly great. It is, I believe, a world-class body of work that stands with any visual art of the later half of 20th century. That may sound overblown, but I believe the quality and importance of Perry’s work will eventually be recognized despite art market protocols and the limitations of those who can’t see because they won’t see. For those that will see, there is in Ed Perry’s work, great skill, great beauty, and the deepest expression of human aspirations.

— Remy Miller
Dean and Vice President of Academic Affairs
Memphis College of Art

Cover Edward Perry, CX, 1991-1995. Mixed media, canvas 16\(\frac{1}{2}\) × 16\(\frac{1}{2}\) in., overall dimensions 98\(\frac{1}{2}\) × 28\(\frac{1}{2}\) × 7 in. Collection of Gordon Alexander, and Keith and Jerene Sykes. Photo by Glenn Kremer
Edward Perry Acknowledgment List

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Edward Hagan Perry was born July 18, 1947, in Louisville, Kentucky. Between 1959 and 1963 he trained as a figure skater in Lake Placid, New York, where he knew Olympian Peggy Fleming and legendary coach Gustave Lussi. He attended the University of Louisville and Paducah Junior College between 1965 and 1967 prior to his matriculation at the Memphis Academy of Arts (now Memphis College of Art) during the Fall 1967 academic semester. At MAA, Perry studied with Burton Callicott, Henry Easterwood, Ted Faiers, John McIntire, Ron Pekar, and David Rocha among others. He graduated from MAA in May 1972 with a BFA in painting. Perry was known as a quiet, but well-liked student. During the 1969-70 academic year he was MAA Student Body President. He was also a recognizable character around MAA, often seen wearing a surplus World War II helmet while riding a Triumph motorcycle through Overton Park.

While a student at MAA, Perry also took classes in physics at Southwestern at Memphis (now Rhodes College). He developed a love of science and engineering and a particular aptitude with lasers. After leaving Memphis, he went on to once again study at the University of Louisville between 1972 and...
1974, to participate in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Center for Advanced Visual Studies programs in 1973, and eventually to study art at the University of Cincinnati where he received his MFA in 1975. During the mid- and late 1970s he also worked in laser laboratories, both at the University of Louisville and at the University of Cincinnati Medical Center. At UC he worked under a pioneer of laser medicine, Dr. Leon Goldman, and published photographs in scientific publications on dermatological and gynecological laser surgery written by Goldman and other doctors and researchers in the UC Medical Center Laser Laboratory. Occasionally, he was even credited as a co-author of these studies. Perry and Goldman also shared an interest in laser art.

Perry’s work both as an artist and as a laser engineer/laser safety advisor brought him into contact with Rockne Krebs (1938-2011) during the 1970s. Krebs, who had a BFA in sculpture from the University of Kansas, was largely known for his urban-scale laser installations that were commissioned for sites all over the United States. Krebs hired Perry frequently during the 1970s as an artistic and technical assistant for laser installations and exhibitions, and Krebs and Perry often traveled together to sites. Krebs’ permanent home was in Washington, D.C., and in the early 1980s Perry also moved to the District, living and working in an apartment/studio in a building owned by Krebs and the artist Sam Gilliam (born 1933). It was during this time that both Krebs and Perry acquired parrots as pets. Krebs’ animal was named Euclid while Perry’s companion was Jake. Jake may be seen perched on Perry’s hand in period photographs, and now continues to live comfortably with friends in Memphis.

Perry worked and lived in Washington until about 1985/86, when he moved back to his parents’ farm near Louisville, transforming an old barn into a studio and residence where he constructed many of the works on display in Edward Perry: Between Canvas and Frame and Edward Perry: Constructions. A few years later, after the deaths of both his parents, Perry bought a residence in the small community of Stephensport, Kentucky, where he lived and continued to make paintings, sculptures, highly political mail art, fish and duck decoys, birdhouses, weathervanes, and model boats until his death from a respiratory ailment in 2007.
Between approximately 1984 and 1993, Memphis College of Art alumnus Edward Perry (1947-2007; fig. 1) produced a remarkable, unnamed group of constructed artworks that play with the traditional boundaries between painting and sculpture, two- and three-dimensionality, “high” art and “folk” craft, luxury materials and detritus, abstraction and figuration, solids and voids, and the image on a canvas and its surrounding frame (e.g., S4, 1988-89; fig. 2). These works, the basis of the exhibitions Edward Perry: Between Canvas and Frame at the Memphis College of Art Hyde Gallery in the Nesin Graduate School and Edward Perry: Constructions at the Memphis College of Art Alumni Gallery in Rust Hall, demonstrate Perry’s profound talents as an artist. Perry created most of this series during a productive and quasi-reclusive period while he was living in Kentucky, first at his childhood home in a suburb of Louisville and later in the rural town of Stephensport, located on the Ohio River between Louisville and Owensboro. Shunning the corporate art world, Perry refused to exhibit his works and rarely, if ever, sold any. Consequently, prior to his death, these works had been seen by only a tiny circle of friends.¹

The Memphis College of Art exhibitions and a related class at MCA called Curatorial Practicum: The Art of Ed Perry held during the 2014 spring semester, mark the first instances of devoted academic study of Perry’s work. The works themselves — both their striking visual qualities and the surprising, unseen backs that are heavily annotated with technical, historical, and personal notes written by Perry (e.g., C93, also known as Roll On Big River, 1991-93; figs. 3 and 4)—as well as a few surviving documents serve as the primary evidence for this analysis.²

An understanding of Perry’s intent in the creation of the constructions can be garnered from an artist statement that he included on a price list dated November 1996, apparently for an exhibition in which he had planned to participate, but suddenly pulled out of at the last moment. These canvas paintings have shared the continuous expanse I started doing in the mid-sixties; that is, the interval between canvas and frame has become a dependent transition space, each relying on the other. Each enamel, spray-painted canvas is supported and surrounded by many various hard woods: mahogany, walnut, cherry, oak, maple, beech and redwood. All follow the same motif except the electronic pieces that do not have canvas centers.³

The short statement proposes primarily formalist purposes and meanings for the constructions, and suggests two particularly interesting aspects worthy of consideration here. First, that the works have both personal and historical connections to mid-twentieth century painting trends. Although unnamed by Perry, such trends seem to include both the sculpted figurative paintings of Memphis artist Ted Faiers who was Perry’s professor at the Memphis Academy of Arts (now the Memphis College of Art), and mid-century painting of the type usually classed with post painterly abstraction (also known as color field painting) practiced by artists including those connected to the Washington Color School with whom Perry worked in the 1970s and 1980s. Second, that Perry used the traditional language of canvas and frame to describe this series, even though in many of Perry’s works the small painted canvases seem to be absorbed into the sculptural surrounds of heavy, ornately constructed wooden reliefs so that canvas and frame become one unified mixed media construction (e.g., CX, 1991-95; Cover).

In his statement, Perry explicitly connected the constructions from the 1980s and 1990s with works he had made some twenty years earlier, suggesting that he was associating the later pieces with paintings he was making while still an undergraduate student at Paducah Junior College (1966-67) in Kentucky and the Memphis Academy of Arts (1967-1972).⁴

Framing Edward Perry
Ellen Daugherty, Associate Professor of Art History and Chair of Liberal Arts, Memphis College of Art
A small number of Perry’s paintings from these periods are known, and only one, *Untitled (T8) (1968)*, seems to relate directly to the imagery of the constructions.\(^5\)

*Untitled (T8)* is a small spray paint on paper image of bright circles optically appearing to float in a speckled field of color, all bounded by a turquoise line that forms an internal border demarcating the space between the central image and the outer matte and the simple wooden frame.

Perry’s time at the Academy was spent as a painting major studying primarily with professors David Rocha and Ted Faiers. Faiers’ work in particular seems to have had a formative impact on Perry.\(^6\)

Faiers is perhaps most widely known for his cubism-inflected abstractions from the Indian Space Painting movement of the 1950s.\(^7\) By the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Perry studied with him, Faiers was producing brightly painted, even kitschy, acrylic figures on sculpted canvases. These canvases, built out from behind through the use of specially constructed stretchers, and from the front by attachments affixed directly to the surface of the paintings, defied the absolute flatness of the abstract images Faiers had earlier embraced, and mixed the traditional genres of two-dimensional painting and three-dimensional sculpture in a manner similar to Perry.

Faiers’ sculpted paintings vary in format and are often extremely playful both in terms of their imagery and the relationships he established between the paintings and their frames. For example, *Big Girl* (1969) depicts a static, frontal, and symmetrical image of a cartoonish, scantily clad red-headed woman. Her nose, lips, nipples, and groin all project from the flat surface of her painted body, all built out from the back of the canvas. The figure of *Big Girl* herself is cut out like a paper doll, pieced together with visible seams at either arm and across the waist, and installed in a shallow frame. With overall dimensions of 77 × 36 inches, the work is indeed big, and the *Big Girl* herself stands with feet planted on the floor in a shallow frame.
the bottom edge of the frame, her body mounted so that she seems to float above the flat background behind her like a pneumatic twentieth-century Birth of Venus. The frame, edged on the bottom and both vertical sides with scalloped decoration, is too small to contain her, and her head sticks up above the top horizontal boundary, breaking the perfect geometry found in a typical rectangular frame.8

Whereas Faiers introduced three-dimensionality into his painted works through the sculpting of the canvas, Perry used the opposite approach of integrating completely flat canvases into large, dominating sculptural frames. His use of this technique seems to have developed over time. Constructions that Perry began in Washington, D.C. including #3-B (Halley’s Comet) (1984-86; fig. 5) tend to have large canvases set within intricately built but narrow, more traditional frames. The canvas of #3-B (Halley’s Comet) measures 39 ⅜ × 28 ⅝ inches and is set into a frame with overall dimensions of 63 × 48 ⅞ × 1⅛ inches.9 Later works that Perry completed largely or entirely in Kentucky almost always have small canvases within colossal frames. In the case of RRS (1989-93; fig. 6), for example, the canvas (12⅝ × 9⅞ inches) is very small in proportion to the overall dimensions of the frame (71 ⅞ × 25 ⅝ × 3¼ inches). Perry also often recorded the weight of his works on their backs—he logged RRS at 47 pounds, a massive construction whose tiny canvas probably contributes only a scant few ounces to its overall heft. The shift toward larger and heavier frames and smaller canvases may have been a response on Perry’s part to his move to Kentucky where he established a permanent studio space and tended to use scavenged materials. From accounts given by Perry’s friends, in the later years of his life he frequently had very little money to invest in art supplies. Thus, he salvaged and repurposed materials from a variety of sources including the Amish communities near Stephensport and wood from his own property.10 Often, found materials are obvious to the viewer including in many works such as AB (1989; fig. 7) and K2X (8 of Diagonals), (1988-91; fig. 8) that utilize neatly matched turned spindles or balusters taken from chair backs or other similar pieces of furniture. Perry frequently noted the sources of his salvaged materials on the backs of the frames. The spindles in AB are, in fact, marked with the information “old chair” on the verso, while Perry tells us on the back
of MJ4 (1990-92) that an attractively grained piece of wood at the top is actually a “wood panel from old TV console” and the unstained and heavily weathered wood used on the intricate interlocking constructions at the left and right edges is “oak fence board from our farm, 40-50 yr old wood.” As in his use of the fence boards, combinations of “high” and “low” materials are ubiquitous in these truly mixed-media works. Beautiful fine woods including purpleheart and mahogany are combined with colored laminate veneers over chipboard, metal flashing, plastics, circuit boards, light bulbs, and canvas painted with spray paint from a can.

The manner in which Perry used found and salvaged materials in his sculptures brings to mind the well-established twentieth-century high art practice of assemblage, as in the work of such varied artists as Joseph Cornell, Robert Rauschenberg, John Chamberlin, and, perhaps most saliently, Louise Nevelson. Yet many of Perry’s relief frames also have a distinct folk aesthetic despite his extensive formal training in art. The works seem intuitively built and visibly betray traces of his experimentation. The t-shaped construction SKR (Shaker) (1990-91) includes not one but two notations on the reverse that suggest that Perry was learning to construct the frames as he went: “This frame was extra hard . . . different levels + Ts thinness” and “This frame took a very [long] time to build cause [sic] of the multi-levels! I should do this more!” Interestingly, a tag written by Perry affixed to the back of this work indicates that an alternate title is Shaker, as though SKR is a cryptic abbreviation for the more significant term. The Kentucky Shaker communities at Harrodsburg and South Union, like the Amish who still build furniture in the area of Kentucky where Perry lived, were known for their carpentry and woodworking. Such folk carpentry inspirations are probably not far-fetched for Perry because, in addition to the constructions under consideration here, he was also simultaneously producing meticulously built and painted duck and fish decoys and remarkable models of boats and river craft, including a large replica of a nineteenth-century paddleboat.

Salvaged materials and heavy sculptural framing come together with abstraction in almost all of Perry’s constructions, including the previously mentioned RRS (see fig. 6). In this unusual work, beveled corners turn the overall shape into an irregular octagon. In the interior, a repeating series of wooden ribs project inward at both the left and right edges. Near the top and bottom, the ribs join two halves of an industrial foundry pattern, a found object originally from the Henry Vogt Machine Company of Louisville, repurposed by Perry. RRS, like most of Perry’s pieces, is almost bilaterally symmetrical. Within the exterior octagon, the ribs and foundry pattern pieces come together to form a perfect rectangle, enclosing a central rectangular zone that is then focused around the canvas. Painted as a geometric abstraction, this canvas depicts a rectangular gradient of color that changes from red at the top to purple at the bottom, which in turn optically seems to float above a series of diagonal stripes also painted in the manner of a gradient in alternating candy-striped colors of red and cream.

Perry’s paintings on canvas, or in some cases electronic circuit boards and lights (e.g., EE-3, 1993-94; fig. 9), are constant central elements throughout his constructions. They form the core or heart of each piece, responding to and extending the visual themes found in the wooden frames. Photographs of unfinished works at Perry’s Kentucky studio (fig. 10) seem to suggest that in many cases he probably built the frames first, only later fitting them with custom-sized canvases that were built to fit the often peculiar dimensions of the openings that he had left in the frames, as in NM7 (1990-91), which has a canvas that measures an odd 40 \( \times \) 12 \( \frac{1}{2} \) inches. These studio photographs show fully built frames in various stages of completion, sometimes fitted with unpainted canvases. Perry almost certainly then
Edward Perry, #3-8 (Halley’s Comet), 1984-86. Mixed media, canvas 39 ⅓ × 28 ½ in., overall dimensions 63 × 48 ¼ × 1 in. Collection of Gordon Alexander, and Keith and Jerene Sykes. Photo by Glenn Kremer
finished the canvases to harmonize with the frames as in K2X (see fig. 8), which is probably the work that can be seen at the far right in the photograph of his studio reproduced here. Eight floating, diagonally striped rectangles are spaced precisely so that their midpoints line up with the series of tripartite wooden blocks edging either side of the canvas. Perry noted on the back of K2X that this was “the first painting which looks like a ‘card’—8 of diagonals.” Others from the same playing card series including SX3 (1990-91), which has a canvas similar to K2X but is painted with only six diagonally striped rectangles, are also visible in their unfinished states in the studio photograph. Perry’s methods of integrating the canvas and the frame can be seen brilliantly in AB (see fig. 7). In this work, the canvas has a primary motif of two zones of diagonal stripes rising from left to right, and a secondary motif of horizontal bands that both delimit and separate the diagonal zones and run through (or perhaps behind) the diagonal lines. Both motifs are also present in Perry’s frame. On either side of the canvas, Perry used diagonal strips of wood that neatly join the painted diagonals of the canvas to create an extended down-up-down chevron pattern. Likewise, Perry continued many of the horizontal stripes into the construction. Most striking, however, is the way Perry extended color from the canvas into the frame. First, we can see how Perry used blue and pink paint that moves seamlessly from the painted diagonals on the canvas to the painted sculptural diagonals of the frame, ebbing gradually in color intensity toward the outer edges of the work. Second, Perry used colored structural materials in the frame, particularly laminated chipboard of the type used in cheap veneered countertops. In AB, the canvas seems a bit too short (perhaps intentionally) for the central framework that Perry built to hold it in place within the larger construction, so narrow strips of grey-blue laminate above the canvas and bright red below it both extend the painting visually into the sculpture, and help to hold the canvas in its internal frame.

Much larger rectangular zones of grey-blue and dusty pink laminate above and below the canvas integrate even more color into the relief, unifying canvas and frame into one interdependent whole.

Because the sections of Perry’s constructions are seemingly so interdependent, it can be hard to see the built elements of Perry’s works simply as frames for the optically complex paintings within them, although the terminology of canvas and frame is precisely what Perry used in the previously quoted 1996 artist statement and repeatedly in annotations on the backs of the works. Historically, beginning around the seventeenth century, most picture frames in the European and American artistic traditions were thought of as boundaries that signified to the viewer both that the painting contained within them was finished and complete in and of itself, and that the image inside was isolated and different from its surroundings. The frame was a window into a realistic, perspectival alternate universe that was art, not reality. Frames were inviolable presentation devices whose designs and decorations could enhance the images they contained, but were not actually integral to the image. Indeed, as a piece of furnishing or interior decoration, original frames were often discarded and replaced as they moved from one owner to another, or even from one era to another as decorative styles changed. Only in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries did avant-garde artists including James McNeil Whistler, Georges Seurat, and Robert Delaunay begin to regularly create frames that were coextensive with the pictures inside them. In addition, practitioners of non-objective imagery such as Piet Mondrian began to rethink the cove frame as a mode of display, since their pure, abstract paintings were no longer intended as windows into other worlds. By the middle decades of the twentieth century, many large, rectangular abstract expressionist paintings were hung without frames or with frames so minimal as to be almost unnoticeable, while a variety of mid- and late-twentieth century
artists such as Frank Stella, Elizabeth Murray, Robert Mangold, and the previously discussed Ted Faiers worked with shaped and sculptural canvases, and some painters such as Sam Gilliam eliminated stretchers and frames altogether.

Perry, too, may be placed within the history of experimental framing and display modes. In the constructions, Perry played with and often seemed to purposefully disrupt the conventions of the historical rectangular frame. For example, many of Perry’s constructions include a frame within a frame motif. This type of design suggests that Perry’s sculptural constructions do not simply bound or delimit the outside world from the image on the canvas, but rather that the frame itself is part of the image. Two differing examples of this tendency can be seen in MS6 (1990-91; fig. 11) and PC8 (1991-92; fig. 12). MS6, a horizontal work, includes a lovely outer enclosure that looks quite similar to common picture frames. Made of alternating strips of wide dark wood and narrow lighter-colored wood that meet and match neatly at their beveled corners, the outer frame suggests an inlay effect that draws the eye toward the interior zones of the construction. Immediately inside the outer frame, a broad transitional section consists of wider boards of various woods, matching turned spindles mounted into constructed niches, thin strips of colored laminate, and pierced sections where Perry intentionally left the construction open, thus allowing the wall on which the work is mounted to show through and contrast with the solid areas of wood and flatly painted canvas. This section then gives way to a third interior zone of concentric squares that frame one another and in turn collectively bound the small square canvas at the center. In this work, Perry also seems to be intentionally witty, calling attention to the status of the entire sculptural construction as both a single frame and a series of telescoping enclosures, by embedding what seems to be a found, gilded picture frame into the structure of his own concentric squares.

In contrast to the tight, pure geometry of the outer boundary around MS6, PC8 is shaped in an unusual way. The top and bottom edges are no longer simple straight lines, but are notched and bumped out in the center,
forming a shape that is roughly like the top of a cross or plus sign. The left and right sides of the frame are also disrupted; they are literally cut away and indented into niches housing matching turned spindles. The overall shape of PC8 is not unlike very early Renaissance depictions of the Crucifixion painted on cross-shaped panels, some of which also include remarkable relief elements such as a projecting halo around the head of Christ in the famous Croce 432 by an unknown artist (c. 1175-1200) in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy. In PC8, the cross-shape is enhanced through the use of concentric, alternating bands of wood that Perry used to construct the outer frame. These repeating stripes also reinforce the idea that we are looking at frames within frames, as does the interesting canvas at the center of PC8. Painted in vibrant shades of green, yellow, and blue, the canvas image presents multiple optical illusions, one of which is a tightly painted rectangular line that bounds a series of alternating blue and yellow diagonals. This painted boundary line is very similar to the one Perry used in the previously discussed Untitled (T8), but is further enhanced in PC8 by an illusionistic “shadow” created by black spray paint all around its edges. The shadow creates a trompe l’oeil effect suggesting that the diagonal image is a separate painting with its own depth, mounted on top of and projecting away from another painted canvas, this time a simple green color gradient—a framed canvas within a canvas within a constructed series of frames.

While it may be easy for us to see that Perry used the complex, heavily built, and often dominant sculptural constructions as both frame and image in these works, it is also worth investigating Perry’s canvases independently from their surrounds. The paintings suggest multiple influences probably deriving from the 1970s when Perry worked with medical lasers and made laser art in Cincinnati and elsewhere, and his time spent during the 1980s in Washington, D.C. as an assistant to Rockne Krebs and as an artistic acquaintance of Sam Gilliam.

Perry’s fascination with lasers, physics, and engineering dated at least to his time in Memphis, where he took physics classes, participated in laser workshops, and worked in the Atmospheric and Optical Physics Laboratory at Southwestern at Memphis (now Rhodes
College). Multiple handwritten notations by Professor David Rocha on Perry’s official MAA transcript indicate an interest in emerging artistic fields and the merger of art and new technology. Rocha remarked in Fall 1969 that Perry, “Works mainly in images and electrical devices, not painting medium,” and again in his final Spring 1972 semester Rocha noted, “Most of effort in lasers at Southwest’n [sic] workshop.” After leaving Memphis, Perry worked in an optical physics laboratory at the University of Louisville from 1972–74 and participated in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Center for Advanced Visual Studies program in 1973, an experience that included an “Audio-Laser Installation” project. Perry received an MFA from the University of Cincinnati in 1975 while also apparently working concurrently in the University of Cincinnati Medical Center Laser Laboratory under Dr. Leon Goldman. Goldman, a dermatologist known as the “Father of Laser Medicine,” performed the first ever laser surgery on a patient with melanoma in 1966 and was also a practitioner of laser art. Perry seemingly found a kindred spirit in Goldman, and both men apparently experimented with various forms of laser generated imagery including diffraction photography and holography. Laser diffraction techniques allowed Perry to produce photographs of rippled, often symmetrical, and usually abstract patterns. The similarities between these laser photos and the canvases of his later constructions are striking. In fact, a significant portion of Perry’s overall oeuvre uses abstract designs of this type, including a group of large paintings that incorporate ripple patterns resembling topographical or tidal maps (e.g., Untitled, also known as 77-79, 1977-79) and humorous works of short-term environmental art in which Perry mowed lawns belonging to friends in concentric or repeating patterns that he then spray painted.

Perry’s work with lasers and optics was certainly important to his career and his self-perception as an artist. On his résumé, he labels himself an “Artist and Electro-Optics Engineer” and on his 1996 price list
he uses the particularly wonderful moniker, “Visual Engineer, MFA.” Certainly Perry’s knowledge of lasers and optical laser engineering technology was professionally fruitful—in the mid-1970s Perry began working as an artistic and technical assistant to Rockne Krebs, a Washington, D.C.-based artist whose works in large and even urban-scale laser installation and sculpture were cutting edge at the time. Perry worked with Krebs on some high-profile installations, including *The Eye of Atlantis* (1973-76), a sun and laser installation at the Omni International Complex in Atlanta, Georgia; a short-lived laser sculpture installed on the St. Petersburg, Florida pier called *Starboard Home on the Range, Part VI* (1975); and *Still Green* (1979) at the Disneyland Hotel in Anaheim, California. Perry’s work with Krebs eventually led him to move to Washington, D.C., into an apartment/studio at 1428 U Street, N.W., a building in which Krebs and the important painter Sam Gilliam shared studio space. Perry’s presence in the building shared by Krebs and Gilliam, who were extremely close colleagues and friends at the time, provides evidence that Perry must have interacted with both men, although Perry’s professional and personal relationship with Krebs was undoubtedly closer. However, Gilliam, born in Tupelo, Mississippi in 1933, like Perry grew up in Louisville and their mutual link to that city seems significant. In addition, notations that Perry made on the backs of some of his constructions specifically mention Gilliam, and in some cases indicate that Perry had received materials from Gilliam. For example, #3-B (*Halley’s Comet*) (see fig. 5) includes handwritten statements on the back relating to the construction of the work, including: “Canvas by Sam Gilliam ‘83” and “Washington, D.C. 20009.” The first note may suggest that the canvas was stretched by Gilliam, or at least had once belonged to him in some form, although the painting itself is clearly by Perry. The second note most likely indicates that this very early construction was completed while Perry was still working or living in Washington at the U Street address.
Interesting resonances between Perry’s art and Gilliam’s are useful to consider here. Gilliam’s history is connected to that of the Washington Color School, a loosely affiliated group of artists including Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Thomas Downing, and Gene Davis, who emerged in the District beginning in the 1950s and painted in abstract styles that the influential critic Clement Greenberg would term color field painting or post painterly abstraction. Gilliam has often been discussed as the “best” member of the Washington Color School’s second (or possibly third) generation, even though many of his works that are now considered most significant are far different from Washington Color School techniques and aesthetics.

The colorful spray-painted canvases Perry used in his constructions look remarkably like styles practiced by many of the artists associated with post painterly abstraction and also, to some extent, optical (op) art. In particular, most of Perry’s abstract canvases focus on color and color relationships as primary themes; use hard-edged, repetitive patterns, particularly horizontal and diagonal stripes or chevrons as in CR1 (1990-91; fig. 13) that were probably painted freehand with spray paint from cans using the aid of stencils and masking techniques; and include complex optical illusions as in X1 (My Little Person) (1988-89; fig. 14).

Yet the similarities between Gilliam’s works and Perry’s extend beyond a simple shared affinity with Washington Color School-type abstract paintings. Gilliam, like Faiers and Perry, has made many works that combine two- and three-dimensionality. Gilliam is perhaps best known for his sculptural canvases, especially those from the 1960s and 1970s referred to as Drapes. In these extremely large-scale acrylic on canvas works, Gilliam entirely discarded stretchers and frames and installed them so that they loop like pulled-back curtains on the wall, billow like banners in vast open spaces in museums, hang suspended from the ceiling, or occasionally drape over a sawhorse or simply lay in piles on the floor of a gallery. Visually and practically, the works are both paintings and
sculptures, as are many of Gilliam’s other mixed media works from the 1980s. These later works, such as *New Orleans #2* (1982), provoke comparison with Perry’s constructions because they hang on the wall like reliefs, project away from the wall because of the use of materials with differing thicknesses and textures, and combine multiple media such as acrylic paintings and collage on stretched canvas with aluminum. *New Orleans #2* is an asymmetrical work, although its centrally placed painting is almost perfectly rectangular. Pieces of aluminum cut in geometric shapes and colorfully painted, “punctuate the perimeter of the canvas support, functioning like something of a frame,” according to art historian Jonathan Binstock, a description that sounds like it could apply to a work by Perry.

Perry’s constructions, like Gilliam’s mixed media works, integrate the traditional flatness of abstract painting with a strong sculptural sense. Yet a striking difference between Perry’s works and those by Gilliam is Perry’s constant use of symmetry, centrality, repetition, and balance within each construction. Typically long vertical rectangles, frequently bilaterally symmetrical, and often pierced with orifice-like holes, many of Perry’s constructions are distinctly figural. Such an observation is clearly supported by Perry’s own designations for some of the works. For example, on the reverse of a narrow vertical work titled X1 (*My Little Person*) (fig. 14), Perry writes “My Little Person.” He also uses this or similar phrases on the backs of other works (*N1*, 1988-89; and *MS6*), and in one notation seems to suggest that many or perhaps all of the vertical works that he created during the period between about 1986 and 1990 were part of a series called “My Little People.”

With that in mind, it is relatively easy to see the two squarish holes and their projecting frames in the lower half of X1 as eyes, the rectangular hole and its frame in the upper half as a mouth, the repeating interlocked wooden pieces at the left and right edges as ribs or teeth, the two projecting blocks at the top edge as ears or even feet, and the canvas itself as the internal organs. Perry’s figures are not anatomically correct or realistic. Indeed, they often look like arrangements or rearrangements of bits and pieces of a body, not necessarily in bodily order. Like many indigenous mask traditions or cubist reinterpretations of these same indigenous masks by artists such as Pablo Picasso, simplified or exaggerated geometries stand in for the organic shapes of a real body, as in the heavily framed rectangular eyes, rectangular canvas nose with horizontal pierced nostrils, and curving bottom edge mouth or chin in Perry’s *Untitled (EB-88)* (1988-89; fig. 15). This work, and its companion *Untitled (EB-89)* (1988-89), are probably the most mask- or face-like constructions in Perry’s series, while the works with electronic centers and colored lights (some of which Perry wired so that the lights would flash in a timed sequence; see fig. 9) are like little abstract robots.

Perry’s constructions are at once both abstract and figural, painting and sculpture, frame and non-frame. Their complexity rewards careful looking with the recognition of unexpected materials and methods, like the use of mirrors to reflect hidden light bulbs; tiny squares of colored Formica punctuating patterns constructed primarily of wood; almost completely hidden pieces of framing that have been painted on the interior edges so that the color is barely noticeable; a canvas that plays optical tricks as different sections seem to advance or recede before your eyes.

Perry’s self-chosen anonymity within the art world seems extremely unfortunate in 2014 because his abilities in so many areas of artistic endeavor were impressive and reveal a unique vision. The organizers of *Edward Perry: Between Canvas and Frame* and *Edward Perry: Constructions* hope that these exhibitions will begin to bring Perry some of the recognition, although belated, that he rightly deserves.

2 Perry wrote on the backs of most of his constructions, often making notes on the canvases and all over the frames. Some of Perry’s annotations may be characterized as technical, including those that assign dates to specific parts of each construction or those that are notes on materials and techniques. At other times Perry treated the backs almost like diaries, making notes about historical events that he was interested in such as the appearance of Halley’s Comet (1985-86), the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), the launch of the Hubble Space Telescope (1990), the Gulf War (1990-91), and the Great Mississippi River Flood (1993). Quite unique are the notes that discuss personal matters such as paying his taxes for the first time in twenty years (C93, fig. 4). In general, his writing is very legible and, like a draftsman, he used all capital letters. For the ease of readers of this essay, I have intentionally rendered quotes from the backs of Perry’s artworks using standard English capitalization rules. On occasion, I have separated phrases with forward slash marks (/) for clarity. For original annotations, see .tif of the backs of Perry’s works in the Perry Archive.


5 Some additional drawings, paintings, and sculptures from Perry’s time at the Academy are preserved in photographs and slides, copies of which may be found in the Perry Archive. Two works likely dating from Perry’s Paducah Junior College days have also been identified in a private collection in Memphis. Photos of these works are available in the Perry Archive.

6 Veda Reed, Professor Emerita of Painting, Memphis Academy of Arts, made this observation. AH428 Curatorial Practicum: The Art of Ed Perry, oral history interview with Veda Reed and Murray Riss, May 1, 2014, Perry Archive.


8 For many helpful examples of Faiers’ work, see the website for his estate, maintained by the David Lusk Gallery in Memphis, accessed June 24, 2014, tedfaiers.com. Perry seems to have begun a number of his constructions when he was living in Washington, D.C., but then completed them after his move back to Kentucky.

9 Based on the very specific chronology Perry wrote on the back of #3-B (Halley’s Comet) it seems that this work may have been made entirely in D.C. Some works such as Untitled (EB-89) (1988-89) include notations indicating that only the very early stages of the work were accomplished in D.C.: “Parts made: Dec 1986 Wash, DC./ Feb-March 88 KY. bottom grill/Nov 89 KY. top section.”

10 Oral history interview with Keith Sykes and Gordon Alexander, Perry Archive. Similar statements have been made in personal conversations among Keith Sykes, Jerene Sykes, and the author.

11 Perry noted the use of the same wooden fence in BBS (1988-90) and XB (1988-90). Perry also noted on BBS “oak fence #4 of 5 88-90.”


13 Images of many of Perry’s decoys and boats may be found in the Perry Archive.


15 Early works started in Washington, D.C., such as #3-B (Halley’s Comet), were almost certainly completed in a more traditional order: canvas first and then frame. This is made obvious by Perry’s annotations on such works, which carefully record the chronology of their creation. Later pieces created in Kentucky seem to be those for which Perry may have made the frames first. These works have less clearly articulated chronologies on their backs, although on most Perry obsessively wrote dates on various different parts and sections. A very careful accounting of the dates written on the backs of these works may be able to confirm which were made frame first. Other clues that suggest Perry painted many of his canvases after the frames were completed include notes on the backs of a few constructions that suggest interchangeable canvases, such as the note on CRI (1990-92), “Canvas painted in 1992 RCR1 or 92 will fit.” Also, a note on the back of BP-2 (1988-98) states “purple canvas,” but the canvas currently in this frame is distinctly green with no purple in sight.

16 Price List. Perry used the terms “canvas” and “frame” in notations on the backs of many of the constructions. In particular, handwritten white tags affixed to the backs of some of the works list information including the title, the weight, Perry’s address, the dimensions of the overall work, and the description “Painted Canvas + Wooden Frame.” Examples may be found on the labels affixed to AB, MS6, PC8, among others. Some labels include separate dimensions for the canvas and the frame, for example, NM7 and XB (1989-92). However, Stephen Frietch, a friend of Perry’s from his Washington, D.C. period, recalls that Perry called these works simply...


18 Transcript.


20 Oral history interview with Keith Sykes and Gordon Alexander, Perry Archive. Photographs of Perry’s lawn works may be found in the Perry Archive.

21 Résumé and Price List.


24 Another direct reference to materials received from Gilliam may be found on the back of X8 where Perry wrote, “Hangers from Sam Gilliam, Wash, DC. 1962-1985” and drew an arrow pointing directly toward a piece of hardware at the right side of the frame. On the back of X2 (1987-89), Perry wrote “Nov 20 89 Saw Sam G. + Steve F. at Univ. of Lou. – Tom Lear has sculpture piece now at the [illegal];” The abbreviated names almost certainly refer to Gilliam and his longtime studio assistant Stephen Frietch. For more information on Frietch as Gilliam’s assistant, see Glen Elssasser, “Stretching the Canvas: Painter Sculpts his medium to new arenas of expression,” Chicago Tribune, February 18, 1997, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1997-02-18/news/970218613_L_sam-gilliam-art-institute-traditional-canvas; and Binstock, 119, 133, and 163. Tom Lear was a Louisville-based sculptor whose public work Big Red stands outside the University of Louisville College of Business. According to the University of Louisville Library, the work was installed December 20-21, 1989, so Perry’s notation may be incorrectly dated as November. See the online record for Caroline Daniels (photographer), Big Red undergoing refinishing, 2012, University of Louisville Archives and Records Center, accessed 19 June 2014, http://digital.library.louisville.edu.


26 Binstock, 20.

27 A note on the back of CR1 provides a clue to Perry’s low-tech stenciling technique for these canvases: “Diagonal Lines – I used window blind strips for stencil on canvas.”


29 Perry wrote “My Little People” on the back of N1. On the back of the rectangular work MS6 Perry discussed the historical trajectory of the formats of works in this series: “First horizontal piece in 4 yrs after Wash, DC. All of those were horizontal. KY pieces are vertical, til Nov/79?’50 KY. Some are 20” x 8’/ ‘My Little People’”. Perry also included an arrow pointing from the words “My Little People” to a small drawing of a narrow rectangle. One possible interpretation of this note is that all of the vertical works he created in the first few years after he moved back to Kentucky can be understood as “My Little People.”