



*Extrapolation, 1985*  
graphite and colored pencils  
12 inches X 12 inches



*Winds of Change, 1987*  
watercolor  
12 inches diameter



*Blue Flame, 1990*  
watercolor and ink collage  
12 inches X 12 inches

#### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Richard Hamwi received his BA from Queens College, CUNY; a MA from the University of New Mexico; a MFA at the University of California in Santa Barbara; and his Ph.D. from the Pennsylvania State University. His academic career includes teaching at the Pennsylvania State University, Cumberland College, Mansfield University, Mercyhurst College, and, currently, Albright College. His first solo exhibition was at the Parsons-Dreyfuss Gallery in New York City. Since then he has had over thirty solo exhibits. His works are in a number of important permanent collections, including: the National Museum of Art, Smithsonian Institution; the Phillips Collection; and the Italian Permanent Mission to the United Nations.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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*Convergence*, 1990  
watercolor and ink collage  
26 inches X 18 inches

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#### GALLERY HOURS:

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12 - 4 p.m.  
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#### EXHIBITION DATES:

APRIL 7 – MAY 1, 2006

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Albright College,  
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On the cover:  
*Passages*, 1993  
watercolor and ink collage  
18 inches X 26 inches



R I C H A R D H A M W I

R E F L E C T I O N S

FREEDMAN GALLERY ALBRIGHT COLLEGE

# R I C H A R D H A M W I

When looking at Richard Hamwi's artworks, I vacillate between looking for some specific content, such as a landscape, and feeling something, an abstract dance of forms. In my mind's eye, I like the movement introduced in this intimate yet expansive space. There is an ambiguity born here in an intersection between art and life; and, it is this very uncertainty that intrigues me. A playing field is exposed upon which a contest of representation and abstraction is unfolding. This duality is not an awkward test of wills; rather it is a graceful ballet, choreographed between real and imaginary space – a *pas de deux* of self-referential composition and landscape.

This evolving territory is like a floating world. While the work is influenced by landscape and art history, it is relatively unanchored by the pinpricks of classification. As a child, I used to lie on my back and watch the cloud formations changing from abstract arrays into temporal forms, a rabbit here, a sailing ship there. Now, unfortunately, my gaze is more grounded. I do, however, sometimes lie in bed and watch as patterns in wallpaper come and go, appear and recede, fluctuating between some sort of recognition and randomness. Similarly, in almost all visual things, I look for patterns, trying to order my surroundings.

At times I am even distracted by coincidental spaces, the negative space or the form of a text appearing in a book. Unlike the case of concrete poetry, where this type of form makes sense, I realize that I am inventing a reading of form where none was intended. But, Richard Hamwi's work intentionally invites this type of reading, an imaginary reinventing of space. This is not to say that the work is not carefully thought out and constructed; it is simply to suggest that it is framed within a context of liberty, inviting, allowing, privileging an interpretive reading.

There are several artists who have influenced Hamwi. One in particular was the late Richard Diebenkorn. This California painter's work fluctuated from figuration towards abstraction. His earlier *Ocean Park Series* featured figures in landscapes not unlike Mark Rothko's early paintings. Although Diebenkorn moved towards abstraction, he never completely abandoned vestiges of the figurative world; he always retained a conceptual sense of the landscape.<sup>1</sup> Rothko, for his part, eventually eliminated specific suggestions of figuration from his paintings. Rothko's belief was that to achieve the maximum potential of the sublime, the essence of an experience, one had to shed the possible limitations, the inhibitions, of figuration, and allow for a more universal plateau of contemplation. On this field of somewhat contrary cultivation, Hamwi does not sit on the fence between figuration and abstraction; rather, he creates a crop of hybrids.

The piece *Convergence* is somewhat unique in its verticality, but a corner of nature also inspired it: a tree or a shrub. Somehow the forceful elevation of the colorful collaged elements simultaneously portrays the strength and fragility of nature. As with almost all of these works, these strips of color are all collaged elements, torn from existing pieces of watercolor and pen and ink components. Hamwi essentially tears down his materials to build up a composition. The intricately layered results are so skillfully applied that it is almost impossible to distinguish the separate pieces constituting the whole. The lines are actually the transitions between one piece of paper and another; and, these lines are incredibly varied, possessing their own transitional character that is not unlike a microcosm of the fluctuation between representation and abstraction.

The end result of these artworks embraces the process of their evolution. While Hamwi has become skilled at controlling watercolor and even the interaction of inks with the watercolor medium, inevitably, there is also an aspect of accident involved here (as is the case of the torn edges of paper). It is intriguing that Richard is able to combine a sense of control, of precision, and also allow for the accidental. Lines of ripped material vary from the careful to the carefree, building up an overall perspective born of overlap; yet, even the overlaps are often ambiguous as the application of one piece of paper over another may contradict a sense of logical spatial progression. Even the drawing *Extrapolation*, with its Cézanne-like cubist construction, vacillates, vibrates between foreground, middle ground and background.

*Convergence* suggests the colorfield works of Morris Louis; and, *Distant Radiance* bears some resemblance to Paul Jenkins work. Yet, again, these two artists, while influential, also avoided the specifics of figuration. They and many of their contemporaries were in the habit of making extremely large-scale paintings. By comparison, Hamwi's modestly sized renderings seem to be able to encapsulate an amazing amount of strength in a small package. Like Paul Klee, in a work such as *Valley* there is an intimate complexity that invites close inspection, an adventure into vistas of another world. These cropped slices of life are not confined by their edges: Their central strength expands beyond such physical confines. Even a circular format, such as *Winds of Change*, seems to be a microscopic (or telescopic) view of a much larger whole – as one is drawn into reading the minute threads of color, like a fabric cord of an ancient Mayan text.

These disciplined, self-contained works of Hamwi are actually large compared to many of his earlier works. The small, more complex pieces echo his interest in Illuminated Manuscripts; and, his Arabic-American background has engendered both cultural and aesthetic values witnessed in the interwoven patterns of forms. As a child, Hamwi was surrounded by Persian rugs, screens and carvings. From these roots, there is an elegant fragility in the complicated weaving of colors and forms that is inherent in both his work and his life.

A work such as Hamwi's *Mirage* is reminiscent of Helen Frankenthaler's large stained, colorfield canvases. Yet, despite Frankenthaler's frequent selection of titles suggesting landscapes, there are no representational forms in her work. So, there is none of the flux evident in Hamwi's *Mirage*, which, while also abstract, is clearly referencing the land. In this case, the colors recall the terrain of the Southwest, or, the West Coast. Richard used to live in New Mexico and California. He has said that an important criterion for him is to live in an interesting natural environment as the landscape informs his work.

In New Mexico, Richard met Leonard Lehrer. Leonard became a sort of mentor for Hamwi. Although Lehrer's work does not bear a direct resemblance, there is a mutual interest in landscape, color, and draftsmanship. But, more importantly, there was and remains a kinship. Lehrer never literally instructed Hamwi where to go with his work, but he was a sort of spiritual guide, providing a sense of confidence in a liberating pursuit of a form of individual expression.

Richard Hamwi's artworks are not unlike himself, a peaceful, gentle soul. Yet, beyond the surface, beneath the quietude, there is also a vibrating strength. Within the stillness of an aura of solitude, these works shimmer with a sublime light.

<sup>1</sup> In fact, while at the time they were not actively marketed, Diebenkorn continued doing figurative works throughout his later, more abstract stage.



*Valley, 1992*  
watercolor and ink collage  
12 inches X 16 inches



*Island Moors, 1991*  
watercolor and ink collage  
18 inches X 26 inches



*Mirage, 2005*  
watercolor and ink collage  
26 inches X 18 inches



*Distant Radiance, 1991*  
watercolor and ink collage  
18 inches X 26 inches