



Robert Mangold

Searching for "Something In Between"

As he has matured as an artist, says Mangold, he likes "to spend more time looking at the work, thinking about the work." Here, in his studio, he contemplates an unfinished painting from his "Curved Plane/Figure" series. BELOW The artist outside his Upstate New York farmhouse.

A balmy breeze sweeps over the Hudson Valley hills. Golden bales of hay punctuate a sweep of fields, and against the cerulean sky hulks a red barn so large as to be a kind of monument to farming. A dog barks a greeting; a wind chime sends a single, wistful note out into the congenial quiet of the place.

With a baseball cap slouched over his brown eyes, Robert Mangold, 58, ambles out the back door of the 19th-century farmhouse where he and his wife, Sylvia Plimack Mangold, have lived and worked since 1975. His studio is housed inside the monumental barn, but there is very little barn-ness about it. You leave the clutter, the brawny beams, and peeling siding behind and step inside a structure-within-a-structure: windowless, gleaming white, utterly still, lit by a baffled skylight that permits no view of sky to penetrate.

In Mangold's manufactured space, there are no billowing clouds or sun-drenched fields or homey materials to divert the artist's attention. It is a truly minimalist studio, a space that allows no reference to things. The setup also mim-

ics Mangold's interest in the "ambiguity" of paintings: "It [a painting] is neither an object nor a window opening out to some other reality," he says. "It is something in between."

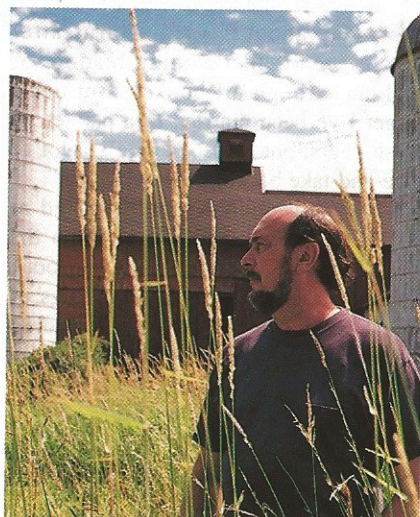
Spread around the studio is a new series of paintings that Mangold has yet to show publicly. An offshoot of the lunette-shaped paintings he exhibited at Pace-Wildenstein last November, the pictures depict a fractured lunette, in which the line (the image) disappears into a kind of "static zone," or void, at the center—and

then emerges on the other side. "There's this image that starts on the left, that is interrupted by something, and then continues beyond it. But the central portion is a very powerful part of the picture," he says. "It's an idea of incompleteness, of what's absent and what's there."

During a visit before his last gallery show, Mangold's studio was dominated by a huge, stretched-canvas lunette, broken jigsawlike into several separate pieces. It still awaited its raiments of glimmering rolled-on color but was surrounded by hints of how it might evolve. The other paintings in this series, fragments of the same lunette shape, were drenched in washes of luminous gray, acid green, Indian reds, and ochres.

Critics have noted that the colors of the lunette paintings seem to be pulled from nature—and, indeed, the palette in these pictures is visible right outside the back door of Mangold's house. "I never see something from nature and say, 'I want to paint that,'" he explains, "but nature seeps in."

While he doesn't make his pictures



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spotlight

with specific references in mind, Mangold is pleased when viewers make their own associations. The ellipses drawn onto so many of his pictures have appeared to viewers as halos; ovals as either simplified heads, eggs, or balloons. "The spectator should do that, should have a dialogue with the work," he says.

In Mangold's newest pictures, he assumes the viewer will try to complete the image that is partly obscured by the central void. "I think it's inevitable that you continue lines and you try to imagine how these lines are connected," he says.

Mangold also wants his shaped canvases to tweak viewers' very notions about what a painting is. "A painting plays an intermediate role—it is neither space nor an object," he explains. "Part of the reason you feel self-conscious in front of a painting is that it's all right there. You can't walk around it."

When Mangold finished Yale's art school in the early 1960s and moved to New York, Pop art dominated the scene. Although he was not interested in the popular imagery central to that movement, he was able to find much to apply to his particular form of minimalism: Frank Stella's new structured canvases; Barnett Newman's "structured surfaces," which "went from the center to the edge"; and, finally, the "mechanical" tools of Pop—spray guns and rollers.

Today, though, Mangold says he is looking back in time for his artistic inspiration—at medieval and Renaissance art and at Greek vase painting. "Maybe what happens when you get older is that you are less affected by contemporary things than by some obscure area of art—maybe from centuries ago," he muses.

Mangold also finds that he has become more contemplative, more deliberate as he has matured as an artist. "I like to spend more time looking at the work, thinking about the work," he says. Like Matisse, who painted canvas after canvas until he got the fresh result he wanted, Mangold makes many runs at a painting before attaining a "final" version.

Mangold's sheer, rolled-on paint and large, hand-drawn lines are put down decisively. He starts with a kind of painted drawing, working out line, color, and shape in numerous variations. Small paintings come next, leading up to the large-scale works. "I need to go through these steps to work things out for myself," he explains.

In fact, Mangold separates the planning stages from the "full experience" of the

large paintings by segregating the preliminary work in a second studio. In this smaller space, stacked with flat files and dominated by a large, cluttered worktable, Mangold works out the ideas for his next "batch" of pictures. "Somewhere out here is my next series of paintings," he says, pointing to the myriad images push-pinned around the room. "They're works I'm giving some kind of test to."

"As an artist, I have to change a lot—though it [change] is very circular," Mangold says. "But I find I have to change in fairly big ways to keep myself vital about it. . . . I can't just make another Mangold for a collector. I need to get something out of it for myself."

In many ways Mangold's world seems remote from the high-pressured New York City art scene. He and his wife left the city when their two sons were young, hoping to raise them in a more comfortable environment with better schools. (Both children now live in Manhattan. Andrew is a composer and pianist; James is an independent filmmaker.) Mangold continued to teach at Manhattan's Hunter College and the School of Visual Arts into the early 1980s; Plimack Mangold, 57, still teaches at Yale.

Although the couple drive into the city once a week or so to attend openings or see friends such as Sol LeWitt, Brice Marden, and Robert Ryman, the life they have chosen for themselves is a very simple one. Their comfortable farmhouse is homey, lived-in, and unpretentious. Like her husband, Plimack Mangold paints in two separate studios on the property; her main workplace is a building without electricity set on a windblown hill overlooking the Hudson Valley. (Plimack Mangold's traveling museum show closed last March at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts; she is represented by New York's Alexander and Bonin.)

"It is isolated," Mangold says about their life. "But it has been very conducive to work." He heads out to the studio every day about 9 A.M.; returns after lunch; spends the evening reading or looking through art books. "But don't forget I've been married to a painter all these years," he adds. "There's a lot of give-and-take between the two of us."

The Mangolds met and married at Yale, but their work differed from the start. Plimack Mangold is known today for her intensely observed paintings of trees; unlike her husband, she works from nature. "It probably has been helpful that her work and my work went in

totally different directions," he observes.

Mangold's deliberate isolation from New York allows him to avoid the ever-raging discussions of the latest art-world trend or crisis: Is abstraction passé? Are museums outmoded? Is painting dead? "Sylvia comes home from Yale and tells me what her students are talking about," he says. "And I think, 'I'm glad you're there, not me.'" But he does acknowledge that the size of the art world, the number of choices artists must make, even the financial constraints in making art have changed dramatically since he started out in the 1960s.

"It was a very small world then. You could go to a loft party in 1962 and meet almost everybody in the art world," Mangold recalls. "My experience was that it was very easy to get work out because galleries were looking for people." Alex Katz, then an instructor at Yale, "kind of plugged me into things," Mangold says. Katz introduced him to Marilyn Fischbach, who gave him his first show. After years with Paula Cooper, the artist now shows with PaceWildenstein.

Mangold's first job in New York was as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art, which meted out the coveted 11 A.M.-to-4:30 P.M. jobs to artists and writers who needed time for their own work. The Bowery was the hot neighborhood for struggling artists at the time, and Mangold and his wife found three floors of an old factory building for \$180 a month. Eva Hesse and her husband, Tom Doyle, lived on their block, as did James Rosenquist and Robert Indiana. "You could work a part-time job and make ends meet somehow," he remembers. "Today it's much harder financially [for young artists]."

Mangold's pictures now command prices in the six figures—and, in his unassuming way, he has used his prosperity to buy himself more time for developing new ideas, working on each new painting. "I don't have extraordinary, extravagant needs," he says. The life he has made for himself appears to be one of simplicity and contentment: happy family, comfortable home, serious, life-long exploration in the studio. "An artist, as long as he has something to do in his studio, is a happy person," he maintains. "You get up in the morning and look forward to what you're going to do out there."

GAIL GREGG

Gail Gregg is a writer and painter living in New York.