

MELT



SORNO

Introduction and Acknowledgements

The third in an innovative series begun in 1984, this exhibition again pursues the theme of music as visual art. Throughout art history, we have often learned with the same interest in the various branches of the fine arts. Because the tools used by painters — brushes, color, canvas — are essentially the same as those of other disciplines, the line between them often falls heavily on the side of the visual arts. The excitement of the creative process is a common experience to many creative people. It is in this way that Mel Powell's watercolors show the pure enjoyment of combining color and abstract form on paper. Inevitably, his pre-occupation with music also comes through in his images.

We are grateful to Frank O'Neal who, in his role as guest curator, provided an enlightening essay for this catalog. O'Neal interviewed Powell in the late Spring of 1987 during which time he recorded the quotations in the essay.

He monitored the planning phase for the exhibition and conceived. His collaboration was instrumental in arranging the loan of pictures from his collection and others.

Inc. have made this exhibition possible by initiating the exhibition. The lenders to the exhibition for their generosity in sharing pieces from their collection with the audience.

John H. O'Toole
Director



August 1942)

The Artistry of Mel Powell

gaining of musical talent at the uptown branch of Barney Josephson's legendary Cafe Society. Teddy Wilson was the pianist in town, and during the period from June, 1941 to August, 1942 he quickly

Edmund Hall and Sid Catlett. The only held down the piano chair with the big band and its various small ensembles, but also contributed many arrangements and original compositions to the

laying there then, handling the intermission duties. At some point in the band in that thirteen-month period. He also managed to secure a recording date for himself with

ident pianists were joined by Count Basie and Duke Ellington. The four crowded behind the piano and urged the evening's performance. That crowd's bias of so much obvious affection and respect was calculated to be inducted into the army the following day along with hundreds of other fifteen year olds. There were

men that night and on other nights throughout the summer of 1942. The Cafe Society was very current. Mel Powell was anything but an ordinary nineteen-year-old inductee; his prodigious talents were well defined by the time he became part of the

childhood. He had also heard Teddy Wilson around 1935 and had discovered it amusing to improvise on the themes of the Beethoven

as he was studying. His teacher looked on such a stray listening carefully to the work of Jess Stacy and

lines. A few years of his production to found himself playing at Nick's in Greenwich associated with that legendary jazz club.

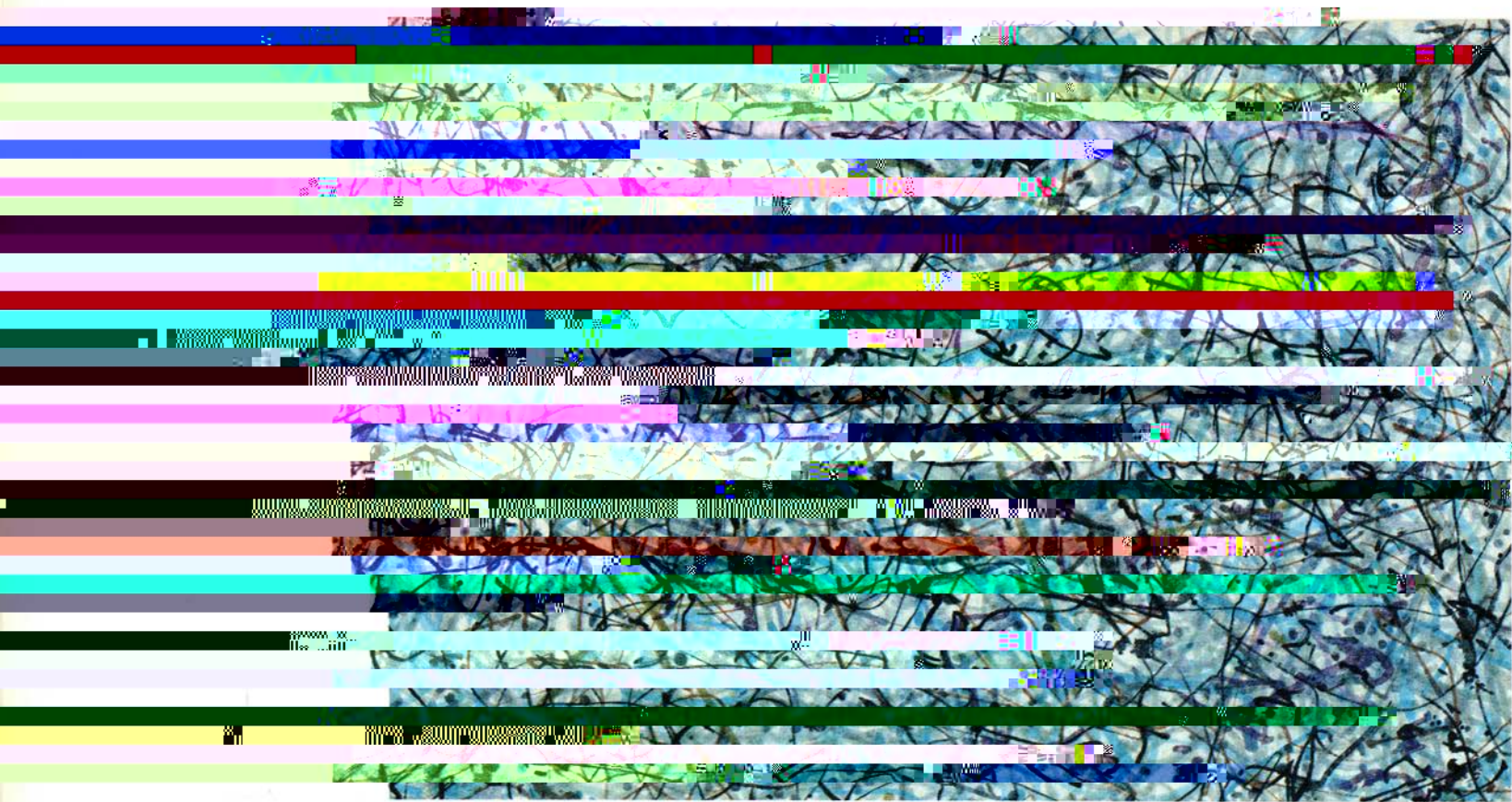
It was with the Benny Goodman Orchestra,

the period from June, 1941 to August, 1942 he quickly only held down the piano chair with the big band and its various small ensembles, but also contributed many arrangements and original compositions to the

the band in that thirteen-month period. He also managed to secure a recording date for himself with Count Basie's band. His exceptional sides were released, featuring Powell and some of his musical associates including the horns, happily participating as a sideman under the name "Shoeless John Jackson." Given Powell's status as a semi-professional baseball player, it is puzzling why he didn't name Goodman as Shoeless Joe instead of Joe. He didn't know baseball...

These months of crowded activity with Goodman led Powell to a third place finish in the Metronome All Star poll, finishing behind Jess Stacy and Count Basie, but ahead of his friend, Teddy Wilson. He had made a lasting impression, for he remained in the top five of the Metronome poll throughout the war years, even though he was part of the Glenn Miller Army Air Force band, a group which never released a commercial recording during the years it was active in various venues or even countries where the average Metronome reader might encounter it.

In 1987, Mel Powell found the highest view, one of the most profound statements of the Twentieth Century was made by the Czech composer, Ernst Krenek. Before Powell's death, he said, "What we understand no longer interests us and what interests us we no longer understand." The philosophical implications of Krenek's statement have obviously guided Powell's life for many years. In hindsight, it seems clear a simple lack of interest in the kind of



2. *Little Pollock* (cat. no. 46)

directions in which jazz seemed to be evolving
country that had not world war II interest
Goodman. Powell might have ceased being a
1942.

difficult and the skill and origins he brought to his
compositions and arrangements appear to come to
him with ease. Yet, even though it was surely an
Kingston, it was not enough. Powell's life in jazz

to accept more the same. It might have been
Marsyas but it was not a serious challenge to play
Count?

them were equally exc... Powell had easily
Bop, while... the new directions in
jazz, particularly in terms of text

modest amounts of musical substance. Where could
he go?
Powell's three years with the large... ensemble
had provided him access to many non-jazz musicians.
He... in writing modest chamber pieces for
some of these players and this experience convinced

war. Yet within a few weeks after his return to the
United States practical considerations led him back to
Benny Goodman. He remained with the Benny
Goodman band almost one year as pianist/
leader, a large part in the process managed to
his good standing in the Metronome poll.
This was however, the last time Powell spent any
music.

habbed at jazz for the next 15 years, creating a
legacy of... recordings, first for Capitol in the
and then with Vanguard in the 1950's, as well as
an exceptional 1955 concert to benefit the Lighthouse
for the Blind which was released on record by
National forays with
Goodman seemed that when his old boss had a
special project, a motion picture such as Star Is

show; Powell would not get the call and he was persuaded
to forsake academic for a... The
last time Goodman managed to do this was in 1947;
of television
dominating with one with Perry Como. This
vo decades. In that same year I heard my first Mel
Powell record and he taught his first classes at Yale.

for
he submitted a piece to
the renowned composer Paul Hindemith for his
specialization. Hindemith was... with Yale
teacher. He accepted Powell as a student; the student
and when

Powell became Chairman of Yale's
Composition Department and a full professor as well.
He remained there until the late 1980's when he was
offered the opportunity of structuring and heading the
Music Department at the newly founded California
Institute of the Arts.
The concept behind Cal Arts was stimulating to

chances might be for a composer, they nevertheless
musical thought. Some felt a good deal of compassion

decided to undertake a series of lectures.

terrible aggravation of political handholding. When

is demonic
crazy as any of them; probably that's why they wanted
me to remain as Provost.

"With that as background, I decided to give a lecture
on some very advanced music. Not many people
know very much about serious new music and I
thought I would bring

composers or what is popularly called "classical"

discuss the twelve-tone system with non-musical
listeners I could make no technical references or
assumptions.

in music. I was wondering what to do
illustrate what certain twelve-tone manipulations are

transformations of serial

to designers had devised for his

to

interact and inspire one
another in a decidedly non-ordered, un-

structured, environment. The Music
Department at Cal Arts flourished under his guidance
and he found increased opportunity for not only

become a serious amateur tennis
player as well, accumulating a sheer raft of trophies to
his credit. Then disaster. In the early 1970's various
political problems developed at Cal Arts and

Powell found himself part of an institution facing
serious vicissitudes on the brink of disintegration. No
department escaped the turmoil and in 1972, at the
urging of his peers, Powell assumed the

responsibility. He aided in stabilizing the
institution but at great personal sacrifice; he produced
no new music until 1970. The administrative
difficulties at Cal Arts had cost him nearly a decade of
composition.

This tragedy, his loss of musical expression and the
resulting intellectual frustration produced something
totally unexpected. Shortly after he became Provost,
Mrs. He

maintains he was not initially aware of what he was
doing. He is nonetheless fascinated by the work
because he didn't
understand what would happen each time he put his

brush to the paper or palette. It was just the joy of
creating. In music it was often a year or
two before he might hear his new compositions

played by others. Watercolor happened
instantaneously and he didn't have to rely on further
expression or interpretation by others.

In 1987, Powell resumed work by his beginning as a
watercolorist:

"(The real piece) began painting was a shift in my
life. I was asked to become
Provost and I accepted because the place was

for what
one should do, but I might have learned and that sort of
thing seemed to me very easy to do, but I soon found

moved from composition, removed from

chance might be for a composer, they nevertheless made it impossible to compose and sustain over an extended period of time an undistracted focus on musical thought. Some felt a good deal of compassion for me. One day someone suggested that it might make sense for me to lecture to the institute as a Provost. I undertook a series of lectures which would remind me of that time when I was being written up by painters, sculptors, composers, and architects. I probably did this because they wanted me to remain as Provost.

"With that as background, I decided to give a lecture on some very technical matters normally people don't discuss. I put serious new music and I thought I would give a lecture which would bring up-to-date the kinds of issues which interest composers or what is popularly called 'classical' music."

"The lecture was a good chance for me to talk to people who knew nothing technically. The painters and sculptors. In my music seminars I am able to discuss technical details, but if I wanted to stop with non-musical people, I would have to give references or illustrations."

"I sat at my desk in my office wondering what to do. I decided to illustrate what certain twelve-tone manipulations are. I was asked to become Provost and I accepted because the palace was teetering. I didn't know what a Provost was or what it was like to do, but I had found myself removed from composition, removed from

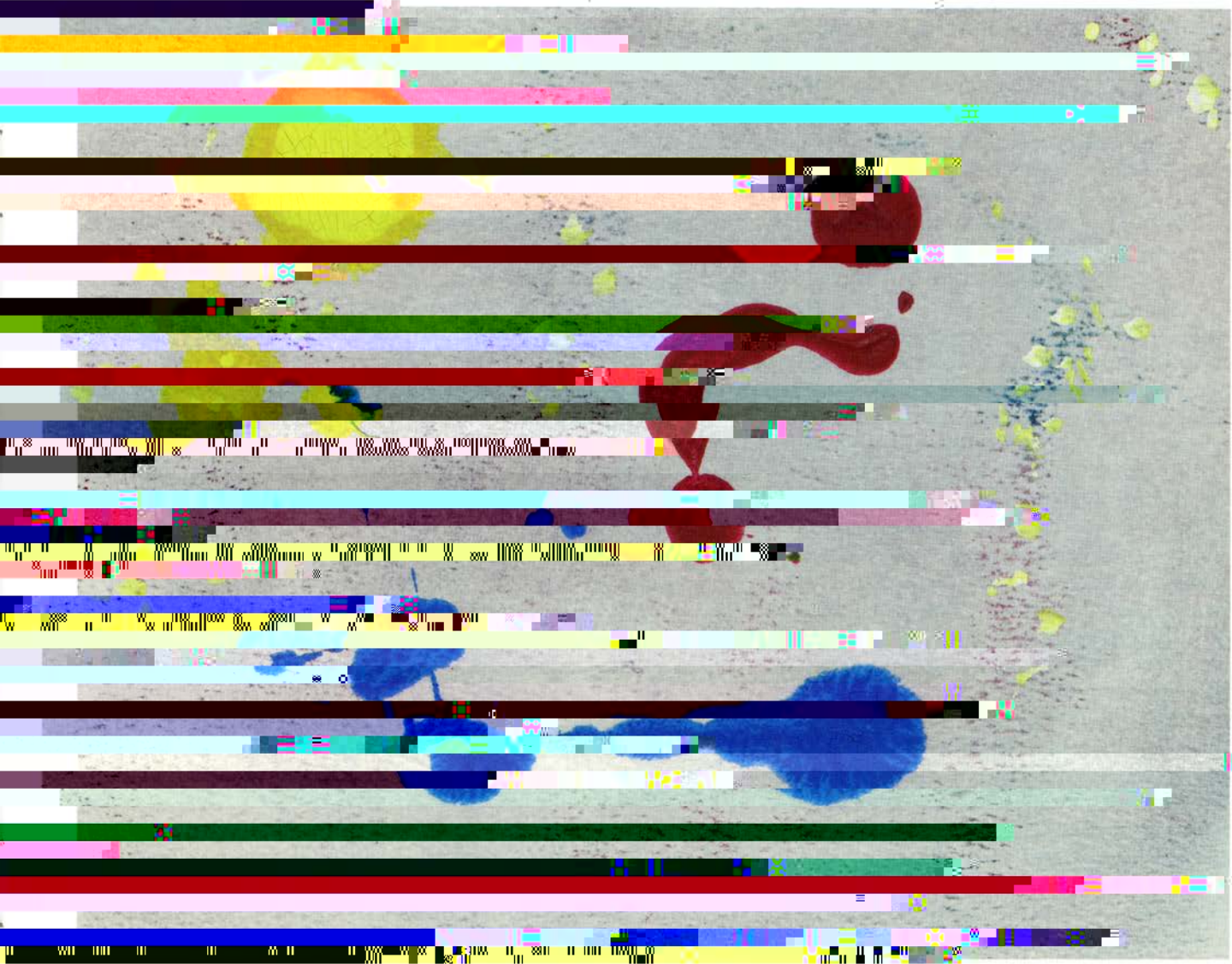
another in a decidedly non-academic, though academically structured, environment. The Music Department at Cal Arts flourished under his guidance and he had increased opportunity for not only composition but to become a serious amateur tennis player as well, accumulating a shelf full of trophies to show for his efforts. When disaster struck in the early 1970's various factors combined to bring Cal Arts and Powell found himself part of an institution facing serious difficulties on the brink of disintegration. No one could have predicted the turmoil and in 1972, at the urging of his peers, Powell assumed the position of Provost. He accepted the position at a personal sacrifice; he produced no new music until 1979. The administrative duties of Cal Arts had cost him nearly a decade of his life.

Forums, Columns, or this page are transposed.

... began to experiment. He was not initially aware of what he was doing, but he was nevertheless fascinated by the work he was creating. Perhaps it was because he didn't understand what would happen each time he put his brush to the paper, or perhaps it was just the joy of instant gratification. In music, it was often a year or two before he might hear his new compositions played by others. Watercolor happened instantaneously and he didn't have to rely on further validation by others.

In 1972 Powell summed up his beginning as a watercolorist:

"The reason I began painting was a shift in my life. I was asked to become Provost and I accepted because the palace was teetering. I didn't know what a Provost was or what it was like to do, but I had found myself removed from composition, removed from



2 Little Miro (cat. no. 48)

...The same, "What is this? It's lovely. I then looked
right, it is lovely. I was stunned because it had to do
with the structures of music. This was the beginning" (Fig. 1, cat. no. 1).

...color he used in movement. He could almost
spread his currents along the surface of the paper.
His technique and soon the frustrated
most simply for his own sake.

The small color gain to attract some
attention from the faculty at Cal Arts. One of the first
to notice the work was the painter Myrtle Shapiro.
I cared that the unassuming
needed to explain to him what he was doing. In the
class, she brought Powell a rubber plant and
suggested that he use the plant as a model and paint it
in watercolor. Shapiro later said she never saw such a
... was the extent of Powell's formal "training."

A very wise man once told me after I had prepared a
... suggests that the Department of State was allowing their
... information, that a preconceived notion
can be the most damaging influence in any intellectual
or artistic endeavor. Someone probably said the
same thing to Powell at some point, or at least he was
aware of it relative to his painting.

It is clear Powell had no particular notion that a
... of an upward order of things, within his
... of the work of many other painters, some of whom he
admired greatly. None of them exerted any particular

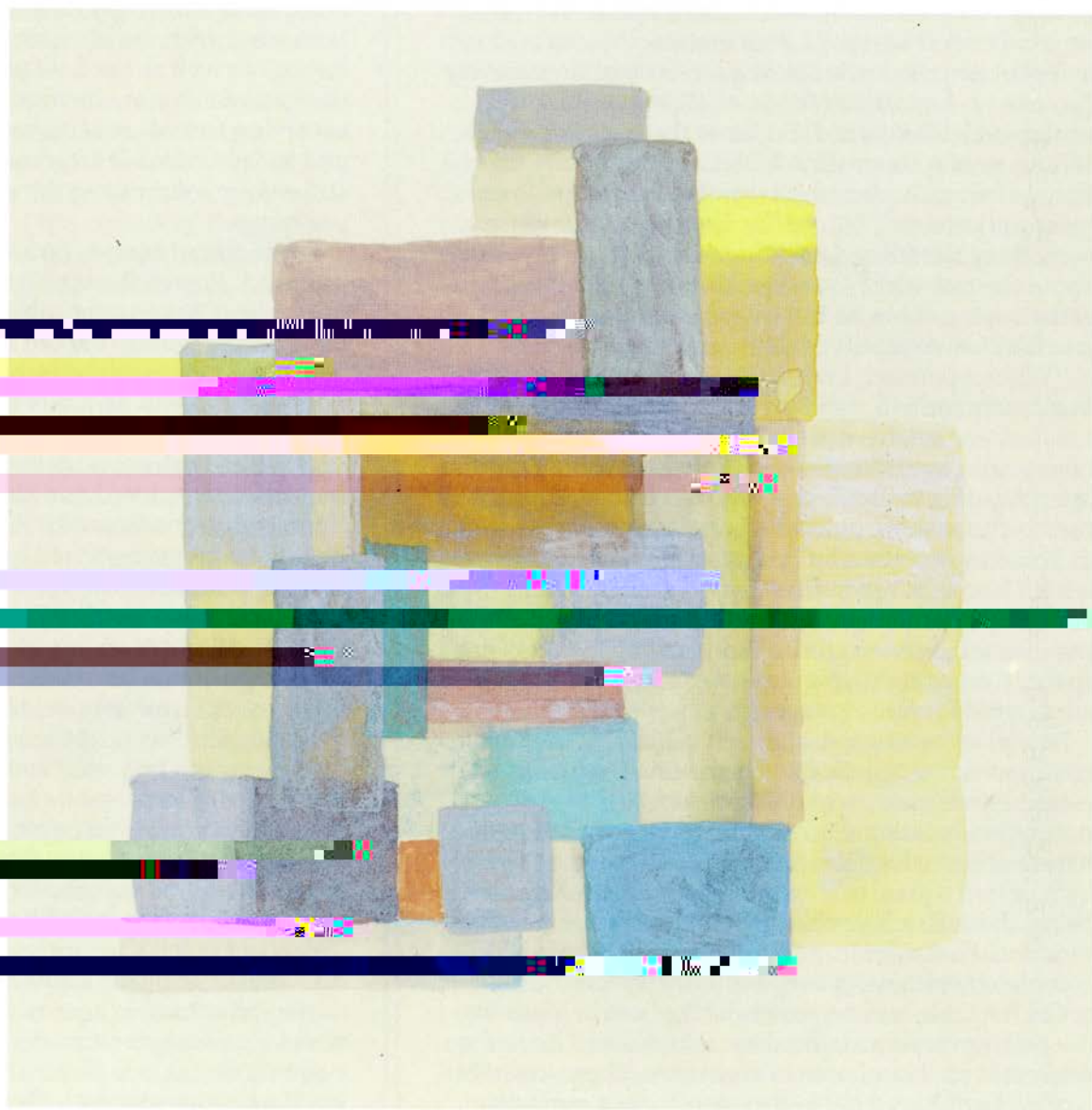
influence on him except when he chose to emulate one
"Little Pollock" (Fig. 2, cat. no. 46) or his
"Little Miro" (Fig. 2, cat. no. 40). The reality is that
his favorite painters, in addition to Pollock, are
Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Klee. He even produced
... very
... reminiscent of Klee's work in the mid-1920's, such as
"Abstract with Reference to A Flowering Tree" (1925).

... primarily the Kandinsky of 1912-14. This is, of course,
not surprising for in Powell's scheme of things, if
Rembrandt represent Mozart and
Bach then Kandinsky and Mondrian represent
Schoenberg and Anton Webern.

Powell has worn many hats. His distinguished and
happily continuing career. His many talents are
presented in a modest, often self-effacing manner.
... cause he is so many needs of endeavor, the
scope of his imagination seems limitless and
extraordinarily perceptive and whatever direction it
takes makes it difficult to consider any aspect of his
work as less than very good. Despite his

... His paintings are a case
in point. The same mind which created the musical
compositions, *Little Companion Pieces* (1979) and
Clarinade (1945), also created a body of work in
watercolor and while one person might perceive
Clarinade to be of far greater significance than *Little
Companion Pieces*, a more perceptive
person might dismiss an hour spent
drawn only to his visual work.

In his modest fashion, Powell has stated:
"The root of the word 'amateur', of course,
betokens (which, as I know, may be
practiced with no technical whatsoever). What
an amateur is in any case free from the
indefatigable requirements of professionalism; and, as a
consequence, the pleasures of an amateur's
pursury in the world, an unclouded
refreshment of spirit. Every serious composer knows



4. Klein (cat. no. 21)



5. *Here and There* (cat. no. 41)

as not consonant with
intentions. Everything that may seem to be
due to paint a piano piece
Spanish dancer
super plant experience, would not
named but
his paintings: one which he
and there (Fig. 5, cat. no. 11) and is
supposed to demonstrate a binary form in music. This
rule.

The form and flow of which is evident in
his work are equally evident in his paintings. The
sation and
of his own imagination.
tion, his imagination, is extremely
significant.

an of the struggle of the 20th century, even now in its waning years, is the
struggle to transcend the imagination. It is clear that
many of us are destined to live and work at the
threshold of the incoherent — as reasonably good
citizens addressing the epoch's crisis of intelligibility.

we welcomed a
entirely. What was published entitled *The Meaning
of Meaning?* bergson p. 34-35

reality a very high order: the moment one grasps the
principles of its organization of course it ceases to be
chaos. Henry viewing at the slow of a revision
er has gone off for the night.
er brings a program, an abstract, abstract, such and
moment at which a particular point will appear or
is that, after all, reflects an important
aspect of the random process. Still, in another point
of stability, all
in fact, reappear at

their respective positions within that square frame of
the center and edge processes is at a vast distance
land of maze,
this interaction of what is known, what is expected,
what is not known, what is not expected, what we
understand and what things we do not — this
house of mysteries is always at the heart of the
mystery, not only for the strong perception theories we
possess, but for deeper insights into the
constitutive of our notions of 'chaos' and 'order' as
they connect in all of humanities enterprises."

the time for but a casual
Within
motifs and,
as not much repetition and circular
development. His paintings, possibly more than his
musical compositions are affirmations of his belief in
the stability of the circle, always changing, always
the same and the remarkably mysterious effects of the
perception of repetition on the human psyche.

Most of his paintings were completed shortly after
he resigned as Provost of Cal Arts and he has
most of his paintings since that time. His first new
compositions appeared a year or so later, in 1979. The
paintings have never been publicly exhibited. Two
were used on record album jackets and except for

remain in Powell's possession except the handful
which are treasured by the friends and relatives to
whom he has given them.

Some of the paintings have a special meaning to him
and often these are casually displayed in his California
home. The one some call *Jelly Roll* (Fig. 6, cat. no. 12),
is formally affixed to a
wall in his bedroom with a double-faced tape; the
"little Pollock" leans on the wall in his study; one
such as the abstract painting (Fig. 7, cat. no. 60) is
casually on a wall in a small
viewing room, mixed in with posters and



ward, related to Martina Scott's distinguished painting career. Others could have been so good about his music and art, but most of the paintings are kept in a large envelope, mixed in with musical scores and not forgotten, but they are at least ignored, a part of his life as but an interesting creative sidestep when the doors leading to other surprising most of the paintings are usually out of the past nor does he seem particularly concerned about it as a creative present is far too stimulating and anticipation of the future is more than enough. Will there be more paintings? Powell is ambivalent sometimes he thinks yes, other times he feels no but, well, maybe. He has already had an idea and probably doesn't completely understand his own idea but he is painting and perhaps this is why he continues to be fascinated about his future. An interesting thing is now happening to Powell. In 1986, he agreed to play jazz for the first time in almost 20 years and suddenly reappeared in October 1986 aboard the S/S and performed with old friends like Ruby Braff and Buddy Rich and some "old" friends like Lesberg and Mel Lewis. Some younger new friends also gathered around his piano, Dick Hyman, Makoto Ohtsuka, and others. He was so good that he was astounded with his exuberant, brilliant playing. In a matter of seconds he proved he could go home and play like a piper, have a happy public trailing after him. The ink spread from these

snubboard concerts in the Caribbean across the United States in all directions, to the Far East and Europe. It was the first time since the death of a major personality after almost forty years of limited appearances, or none at all. There was nothing like it in the history of jazz; after all, when Bunk Johnson was brought back before the public he had only been absent about twenty years and, unfortunately, was unable to play at anything approaching his best. But here he was, playing better than ever. One noted that even Duke Ellington, even prepared a piece for *The New York Times* magazine entitled "What Ever Happened To Mel Powell?" Powell simply elected to do something he wanted to do, something he had to do. It was a puzzling decision to make, made even more complex because of the fact that he had been playing music with the most sophisticated and discerning jazz oriented listeners, while perhaps unfortunate, was of the opinion that he had made a mistake. The decision nor is it a reconsideration today. The same is true of the fact it appears he suddenly began painting, produced an extremely interesting body of work and then suddenly stopped. The fact is, nothing particularly mysterious happened, but, rather, a decision was made in progression. It is, of course, a fascinating story and one which is still unfolding. It is an interesting story to watch it unfold. Powell's decision to do it was almost all his own. He had the direction of composition, but public adoration can often lead one astray, particularly if one enjoys being led astray. His experiences in 1986 are a good example of that. Powell has decided to dabble in painting and has agreed to a number of public performances in October. He finds it difficult to turn his back on so many smiling faces no matter how dedicated he is to his composition. The same thing happens when he is painting and public

exhibition may cause him to rethink his decision to
abandon watercolors. He is certain far more people
can derive pleasure from looking at his painting than
listening to his recent woodwind quintet because it is
psychologically far easier to look at a
non-representational painting than it is to listen to

all it takes to shift a
tiny percentage of his time in the direction of
watercolors.

If Powell elects to never paint again, he has already
done his work. If he chooses to never
play another note of jazz, he has already produced an
extraordinary body of compositions and

performances. To what he has
created in either field, we will all be enriched by that
decision.

Neal
New York City
July, 1987



Mel Powell (1987)

Checklist of the Exhibition

(Checklist items precede width. All works
 in inches unless otherwise noted.)

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| 1. <i>12 Tones</i>
Watercolor, 14 × 11 | 13. <i>Untitled</i>
Watercolor, 12 × 11 | 25. <i>Jazz House</i>
Watercolor, 10 × 7 ³ / ₄ |
| 2. <i>Untitled</i>
Watercolor, 11 × 12 ¹ / ₂ | 14. <i>Untitled</i>
Watercolor, 12 × 14 | 26. <i>Untitled</i>
Watercolor, 6 ¹ / ₂ × 7 |
| 3. <i>Lilly Bell</i>
Watercolor and ink, 8 × 8 | 15. <i>Untitled</i>
Watercolor, 14 × 11 | 27. <i>Untitled</i> , 1975
Watercolor, 7 ³ / ₄ × 5 ¹ / ₂
Courtesy of Jill Williams |
| 4. <i>Untitled</i>
Watercolor, 11 × 11 | 16. <i>Untitled</i>
Watercolor, 11 × 11 | 28. <i>Untitled</i>
Watercolor, 4 × 9 ¹ / ₄ |
| 5. <i>Untitled</i>
Watercolor, 21 × 11 | 17. <i>Untitled</i> , 1974
Watercolor, 5 ¹ / ₂ × 11 | 29. <i>Untitled</i>
Watercolor, 7 ³ / ₄ × 11 |
| 6. <i>Untitled</i>
Watercolor, 8 × 11 | 18. <i>Untitled</i>
Watercolor, 11 × 11 | 30. <i>Untitled</i>
Watercolor and ink,
12 ³ / ₄ × 12 ³ / ₄ |
| 7. <i>Untitled</i> , February 1974
Watercolor, 11 × 10 | 19. <i>Untitled</i>
Watercolor, 12 × 12 ¹ / ₄ | 31. <i>Untitled</i>
Watercolor, 2 ¹ / ₄ × 2 ³ / ₈ |
| 8. <i>Untitled</i> , 1974
Watercolor, 11 × 10
Courtesy of Mary Powell | 20. <i>Untitled</i> , March 1974
Watercolor, 9 ¹ / ₂ × 9 ¹ / ₈ | 32. <i>Untitled</i> , March 1974
Watercolor, 6 ³ / ₄ × 7 ¹ / ₄ |
| 9. <i>Untitled</i> , 1975
Watercolor, 11 × 15 | 21. <i>Untitled</i> , 1975
Watercolor, 8 ¹ / ₄ × 9 ¹ / ₂ | 33. <i>Untitled</i> , March 1974
Watercolor, 8 × 8 ³ / ₈ |
| 10. <i>Untitled</i>
Watercolor, 7 ³ / ₄ × 7 ³ / ₄ | 22. <i>Untitled</i>
Watercolor, 3 ¹ / ₄ × 2 ³ / ₄ | 34. <i>Untitled</i> (colored drawing)
Watercolor, 4 ¹ / ₂ × 6 |
| 11. <i>Untitled</i>
Watercolor, 11 × 14 | 23. <i>Tango Dancers</i>
Watercolor, 5 ¹ / ₂ × 4 ¹ / ₈ | 35. <i>Untitled</i>
Watercolor, 8 ¹ / ₂ × 12 |
| 12. <i>Untitled</i> , 1974
Watercolor, 5 ³ / ₄ × 5 ³ / ₄ | 24. <i>Untitled</i> , 1976
Watercolor, 6 ¹ / ₂ × 7 ¹ / ₄ | |

36. *Untitled*

Watercolor, 10³/₄ × 9⁷/₈

37. *Untitled*, 1974

Watercolor, 10¹/₂ × 14³/₄

38. *Untitled*

Watercolor, 10¹/₂ × 15

39. *Untitled*, 1975

40. *Untitled*

Watercolor, 8¹/₂ × 6¹/₂

Courtesy of Hank O'Neal

41. *Untitled*, 1974

Watercolor, 12 × 16¹/₂

Courtesy of Hank O'Neal
and Shelley Shier

42. *Untitled*

Watercolor, 5³/₄ × 4¹/₈

Courtesy of Hank O'Neal
and Shelley Shier

43. *Untitled*

Watercolor, 12¹/₄ × 12¹/₂

Courtesy of Hank O'Neal
and Shelley Shier

44. *Untitled*, 1975

Watercolor, 5¹/₂ × 3¹/₄

45. *Untitled*

Watercolor, 5 × 7⁵/₈

46. *Little Pollock*

Watercolor, 4¹/₂ × 6³/₈

47. *Untitled*, 1973

48. *Little Mirr*, December 1973

Watercolor, 12 × 7¹/₄

49. *Untitled*

Watercolor, 10 × 9³/₄

50. *Untitled*

Watercolor, 10 × 7

51. *Untitled*

Watercolor, 13⁷/₈ × 10¹/₂

52. *Untitled*, 1974

Watercolor, 8¹/₂ × 11

53. *Untitled*

Watercolor, 9⁷/₈ × 7⁵/₈

54. *Untitled*, 1974

Watercolor, 8¹/₂ × 11³/₄

55. *Untitled*

Watercolor, 16³/₄ × 12¹/₈

56. *Untitled*, 1974

Watercolor, 12¹/₂ × 11⁷/₈

57. *Untitled*, 1974

Watercolor, 11⁵/₈ × 15

58. *Untitled*

Watercolor, 6¹/₈ × 10¹/₈

59. *Untitled*

Watercolor, 15 × 21

60. *Untitled*, March 1974

Watercolor, 13³/₄ × 14³/₄

61. *Untitled*

Watercolor, 19¹/₂ × 14¹/₂

62. *Spanish Dancer*

Watercolor, 12¹/₂ × 14¹/₂

63. *Untitled*, 1974

Watercolor, 22 × 30

64. *Untitled*

Watercolor, 17¹/₂ × 30

Art Gallery
1987-88

Chairman
Judith E. ...

Christopher N. Breiseth, Ph.D.

Deane Berger

Richard F. Charles

Aleta Connell

Mary Lee Cuscela

Virginia Davis

Donis F. ...

Friedman

Oscar Jones

Ann Marie Kennedy

Susan Kent

Charlotte Lord, Ph.D.

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