

AS SEEN IN THE  
JULY/AUGUST ISSUE OF



# Imaginative Realms

*Transcendental paintings and New Mexico modernism at Addison Rowe Fine Art Gallery*

**July 18-September 6**

**Addison Rowe Fine Art Gallery**

229 E. Marcy Street

Santa Fe, NM 87501

t: (505) 982-1533

www.addisonrowe.com

by John O'Hern

In a land of broad horizons, the Transcendental Painting Group was formed in New Mexico in 1938 “to widen the horizon of art” and “to carry painting beyond the appearance of the physical world, through new concepts of space, color, light and design to the imaginative realms that are idealistic and spiritual.” They strove to express the spiritual essence of a form rather than the form itself. They intended to “transcend” the limits of realist painting and were not followers of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau.

The work and the times of the Transcendental Painting Group is the subject of the second of Addison Rowe Fine Art Gallery’s summer exhibitions on New Mexico modernism.

Victoria Addison writes, “These artists wanted their art to challenge the viewer to see art differently. Their work moved away from any sense of reality into a spiritual arena. They used unnatural colors in their paintings to express the spiritual and physical realms of their work. The group played with the chaotic forms of the German expressionists and created a sense of order to their canvases. Their art went to an emotional level because of their

personal beliefs in the universe and the ability to put this on a canvas of strong color tones.”

The first exhibition revealed the more representational paintings of Raymond Jonson (1891-1982), one of the founders of the group (featured in the May/June issue of this magazine).

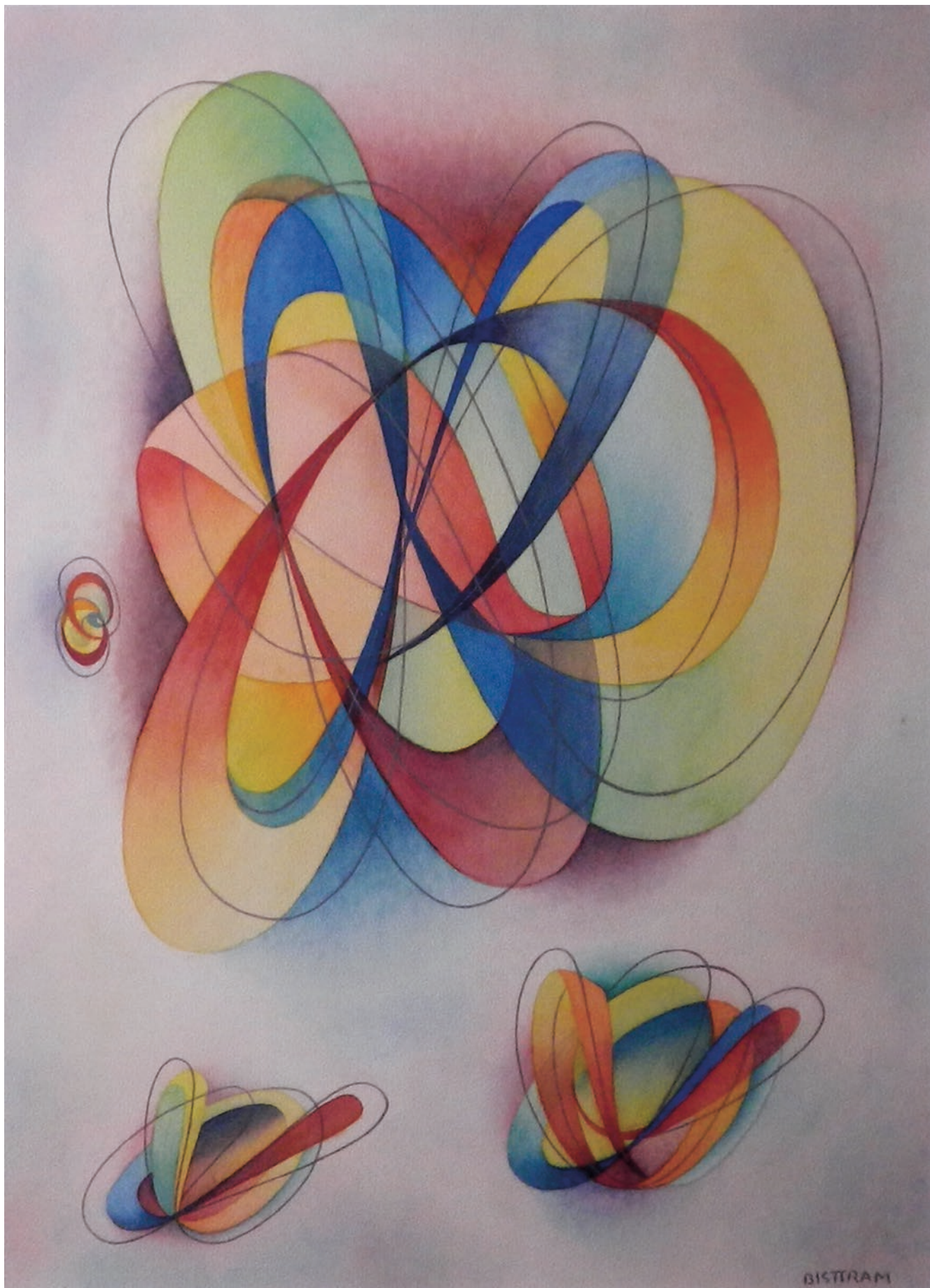
Jonson was born in Iowa, the son of a poor, itinerant Baptist minister. “It was the sort of life that put one on one’s own resources that taught self-discipline and dedication to purpose,” he recalled. His biographer and fellow

member of the group, Ed Garman, wrote, “To those who know him only through his art, Raymond Jonson stands for a particular kind of painting. To those who know him as a person, his name stands for a particular way of life, a life which has been satisfying to Jonson and meaningful to others as an example of single-minded devotion to an ideal.”

Jonson was first influenced by the modern art he saw at the Chicago hanging of *The Armory Show* in 1913 and several years later by Wassily



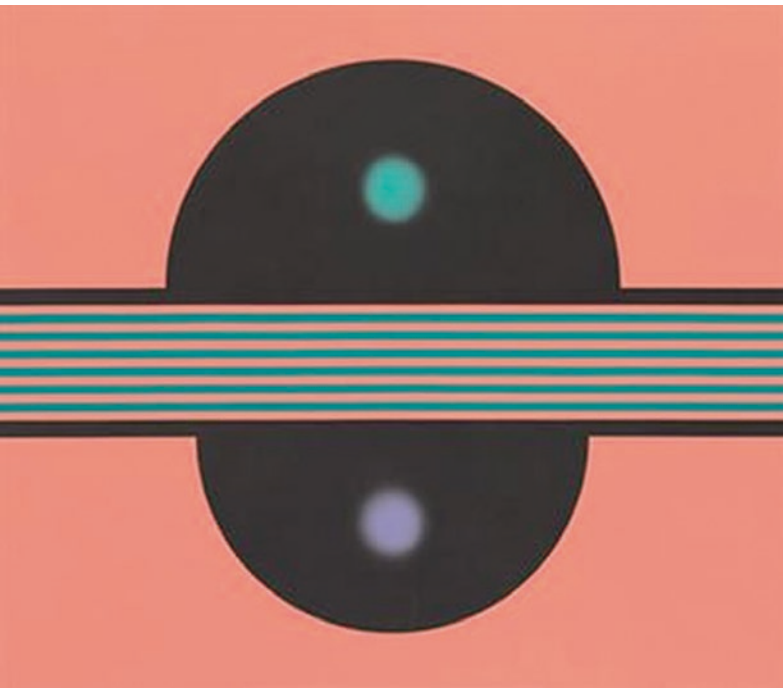
Ed Garman (1914-2004), *Transcendental Abstraction #382*, 1947. Oil on Masonite, 24 x 24 in.



Emil Bistram (1895-1976), *Musical Rhythms*. Mixed media on paper, 21 x 15 in.



Stuart Walker (1904–1940), *Afternoon*. Watercolor on paper, 20 x 14 in.



Raymond Jonson (1891-1982), *Polymer No. 1*, 1967.  
Polymer on board, 42 x 48 in.



Emil Bisttram (1895-1976), *White Noise*. Oil on board, 70 x 54 in.  
Courtesy Addison Rowe Fine Art Gallery.

Kandinsky's book *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*. Later he came in contact with the ideas of Theosophy, which taught "Behind everything seen or unseen there is an eternal, boundless and immutable absolute reality, which is beyond the range of human thought. Both matter and consciousness (or spirit) are the two polar aspects of this reality."

His early works in New Mexico began to show the abstraction of natural and built forms. In the late '30s he began to use an airbrush, a mechanical device that, ironically, allowed him to express the spirituality of color more freely. The later development of acrylic polymer paint allowed him even more freedom.

Emil Bisttram (1895-1976) was the group's cofounder. He studied mural painting in Mexico with Diego Rivera and never entirely gave up representation, adapting his style to his subject.

For Bisttram, painting was a means for gaining spiritual insight. He wrote, "It is my conviction that art...is a means to unfold the consciousness and thereby bring it to envision and experience wider horizons...an experience on a higher plane of emotion and intellectual perception without which there can be no real progress in man's development."

Even the members of the Transcendental Painting Group struggled to find terms to describe their work and gave lectures and wrote articles to explain their inspiration and

purpose.

Agnes Pelton (1881-1961) wrote, "Though art lends itself willingly to illustration of mental concepts, and presentation of human and natural forms, art within its own field can contribute to the apprehension of spiritual life, and the expansion of a deeper vision. Of all the arts, painting is the foremost in the use of color, having within its scope the possibility of the direct communication of its vibratory life and essential element in light."

Florence Miller Pierce (1918-2007) recalled that she was "trying to do the purest work I knew how. What comes to mind is the Zen word that means original mind, about emptying mind and space."

The group disbanded at the beginning of World War II. Addison notes, however, "Jonson and Bisttram, the cofounders, set the tone to push the boundaries of what American art was doing at the time." ■