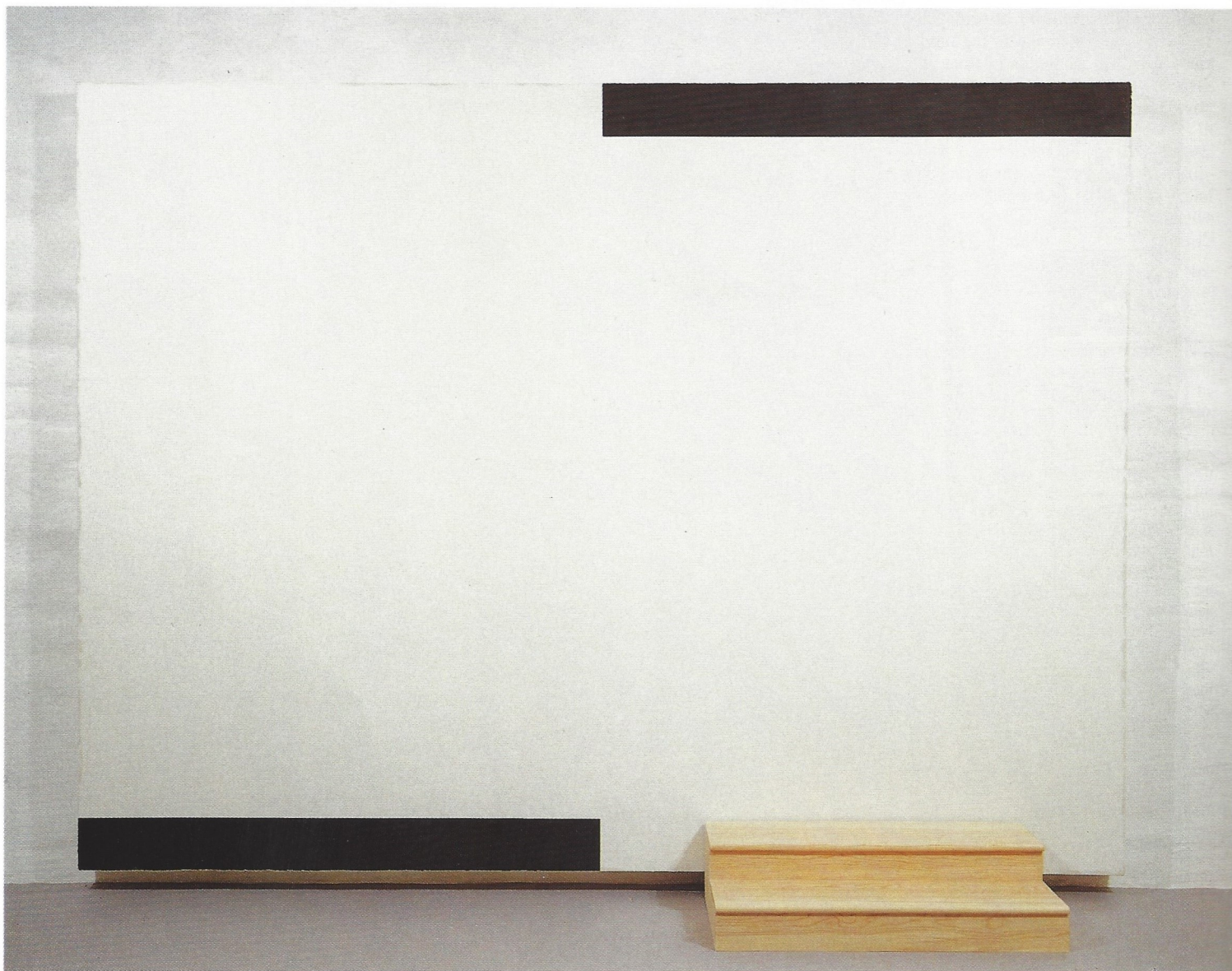


Figures of Thought



Allan Graham: Sixth Passage, 1991, oil on canvas, wood, 90 by 120 inches; from the "Cave of Generation" series. Panza di Biumo Collection.

BY KATHLEEN SHIELDS

Over the past 10 years, Allan Graham has set aside the constraints of a single medium or individual style in the pursuit of what he calls "nondescriptive understanding." He nonetheless conveys consistent and fundamental concerns through his handling of paint, wood, language and found objects. Exploring the relationship of the known to the unknown, the physical to the metaphysical, he seeks to gain access to that which lies beyond objects and words. He is an avid reader of poetry, particularly that related to non-Western

In his current exhibition titled "Cave of Generation," Allan Graham combines reductive abstract paintings with adjoining sets of wooden steps. Graham's pieces are here seen to deal with the elusive connection between contraries.



Installation view of mud has its place, 1990, vinyl on chromed steel. Panza di Biumo Collection.

thought, and he has deep regard for the indigenous cultures of the Southwest.

Graham's decision to settle in Albuquerque in the early '70s has availed him of a physical isolation that coincides with his taste for introspection and simplicity. During the following years his painting evolved from large, heavily impastoed grids to more open compositions which featured sweeping, arm-length linear elements and patches of tight herringbone patterning. In 1983 Graham abandoned the traditional painting format and began to build large, eccentric-



Installation view showing Ninth Passage, 1991 (center), and Eleventh Passage, 1991 (right). Photo Brian Forrest.

ly shaped constructions whose paint-spattered wooden armatures were left exposed or whose canvas surfaces were pasted over with pages from the dictionary, the Bible and other books. Ignoring the usual boundaries between painting and sculpture, conflating text and texture, obscuring what is usually visible while bringing into view what is normally hidden, these works initiated Graham's subsequent explorations.

In other 1980s works, Graham used shaped and bowed stretchers of laminated wood as supports for supple, undulating canvases whose smooth, matte, monochrome surfaces of built-up layers of oil

paint both loom as solid forms and sink away into a void. By the late '80s, Graham began to place such canvases in installations that activate the space of the room and stimulate the viewer's awareness of his or her physical presence. *Mudra* (1988) splits our attention between two irregularly circular blue-black canvases, each with a white fingerprint at its center, hung on opposite walls. In *Song of no mind* (1989), two cairns of layered flagstones and books—symbolizing what Graham calls “our descriptive knowledge of the world”—lead up to a structure inside of which is a hexagonal room where we find ourselves surrounded by six glowing yellow canvases.¹

Graham's paintings are subdivided into rectilinear areas of color. The graphically simple compositions of these works belie their spatial complexity.

In 1990-91, using the pseudonym "Toadhouse," Graham published several books of short poems and exhibited a group of rechromed automobile bumpers, each mounted on the wall and bearing a poem in the form of a bumper sticker. The poems are simple and concise, the words laid out on the page or sticker in specific configurations:

life and death
form,
a
space

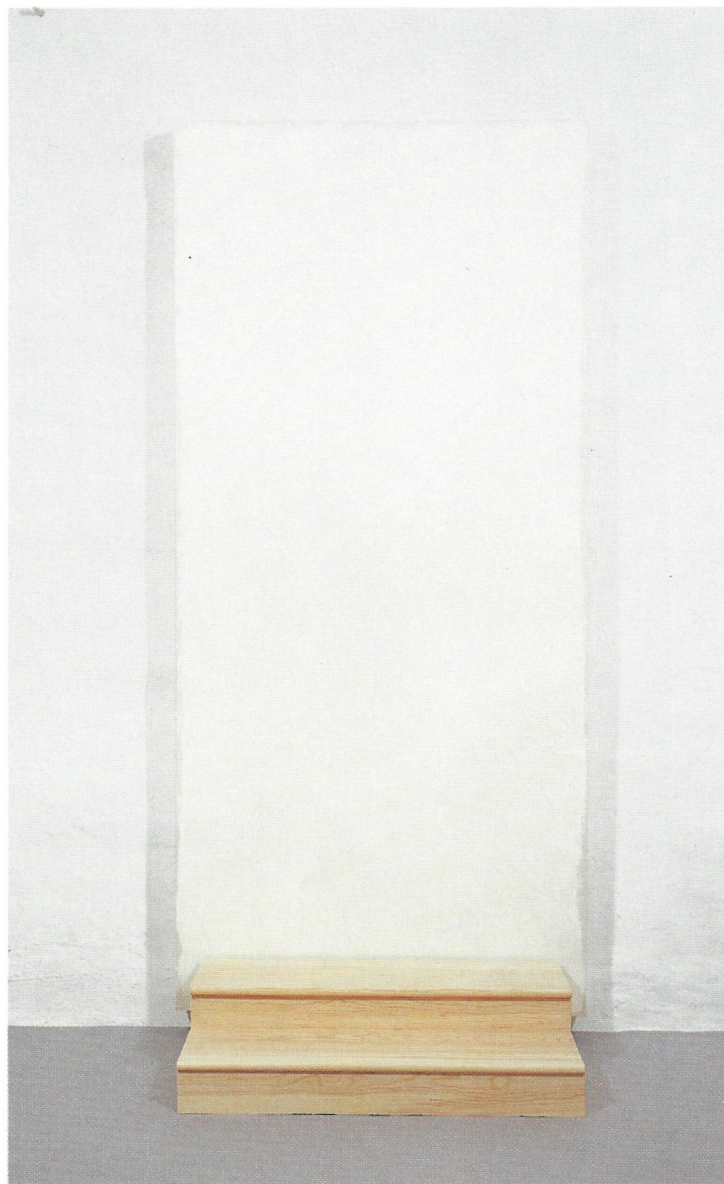
Yet within each poem we find dualities of place, double entendres and figures of speech that turn on implicit absence. Seeming to have no meaning yet holding much meaning, each poem invites us to enter the space between words, between words and things, and between words and meaning. Like the words on the bumper stickers, the bumpers themselves are detached from their mundane reality and given over to pure, abstract form. Casting reflections onto the wall and back into the room, they take on an ethereal presence that belies their cold, hard substantiality.

Although the Toadhouse bumpers recall the smooth, bowed, monochrome surfaces of Graham's earlier shaped canvases and his wall constructions collaged with book pages, they introduce into his work a shift in the significance of form and words. Previously, text had been used more concretely, as pattern and texture. With the Toadhouse poems and bumpers Graham asks us to see beyond the tropes of language and the forms of art to the "figures of thought" that underlie them.²

Graham's most recent work advances still further in this direction. "Cave of Generation"—shown in part in February at Angles Gallery in Santa Monica and currently on view in its entirety at the Fisher Landau Center, Long Island City—is conceived as an extended visual poem. It is composed of a numbered sequence of 16 "passages" bracketed at beginning and end by two "refrains," each work consisting of one or sometimes two abutting canvases in front of which is placed a set of wooden steps with two risers. The canvases—varying in width but all 7½ feet high and 4½ inches thick—are covered with multiple layers of thin oil paint, built up with a knife to a subtly textured plane. Properly lit and viewed head on, these surfaces tend to slip out of focus, dissolving into an ambience of pure color—lead white, black, gray and pale-yellow ocher. Even the undefined reflections of the steps or of direct lighting appear *in* the surface as much as on it. In a few canvases, a thinner, more factured paint application leaves bare some patches of the canvas. Generally, though, the paintings are subdivided into rectilinear areas of color that are demarcated with hard edges, yielding graphically simple compositions whose reductive formal clarity belies the works' spatial and perceptual complexity.

It is the addition of the steps, however, that gives these works their most remarkable aspect. Meticulously crafted of different species of pine, they are positioned on the floor before each canvas so as to contribute to the overall composition. While they initially seem to imply access to the space of the painting, they are, of course, nonfunctional; they figure instead as abstract elements.

Perhaps more like a stage set than a painting or sculpture, each

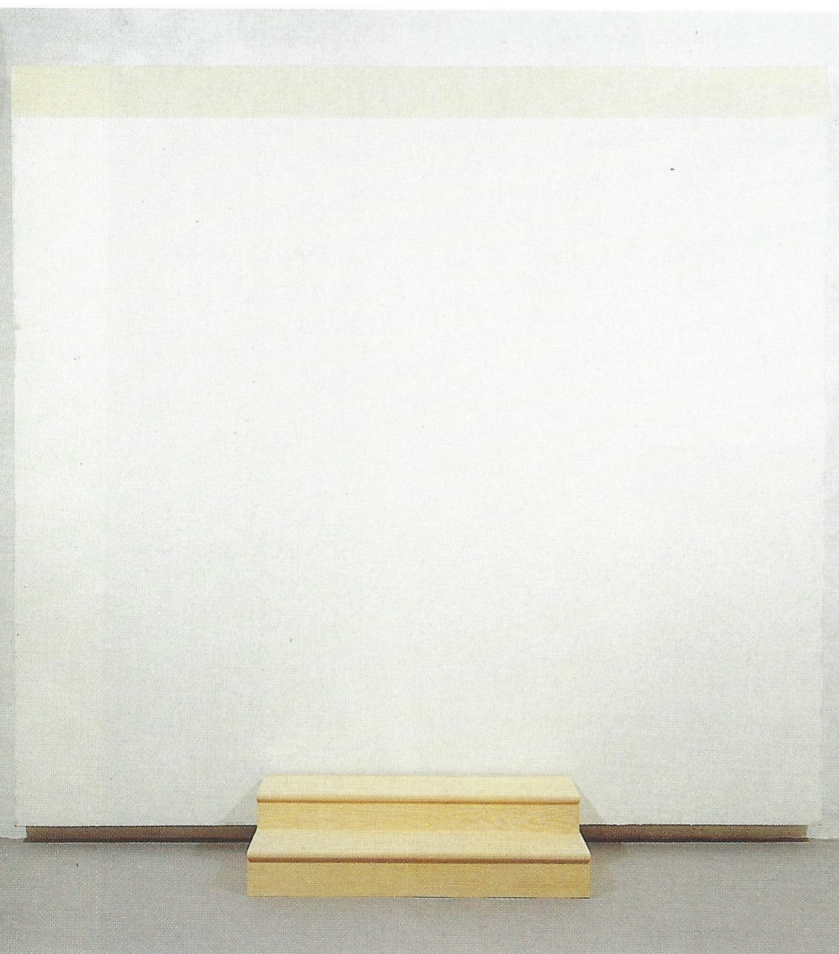


Sixteenth Passage, 1991, oil on canvas, wood, 90 by 42 inches. Collection Emily Fisher Landau.

work from "Cave of Generation" implies the presence of a human figure imaginatively climbing the steps and crossing into a different luminous realm. In *First Passage*, the steps are centered on the vertical line where a white rectangular field to the left meets a much broader black field to the right, presenting us with an encounter of opposites. In *Seventh Passage*, a black bar is painted across the top of the canvas like a heavy lintel, seeming to threaten our passage across the threshold.

The later "passages" in the sequence are generally more subtle in tone and value than those at the beginning. They play on our

"Cave of Generation" refigures, in a surprising contemporary form, the myth of the spirit's passage through the gateways of birth and death.



Fifteenth Passage, 1991, oil on canvas, wood, 90 by 96 inches. Collection Emily Fisher Landau.

memory of the earlier ones, which prepare us for subsequent moments of recognition and reflection. *Fifteenth Passage*, while almost identical in composition to the *Seventh Passage*, entices us into a warm light that seems to issue from beyond its even, scrimlike surface; a bar of ocher spanning the painting's top edge serves almost as a beacon drawing us toward the center's soft glow. The final numbered work, *Sixteenth Passage*, is a luminous off-white vertical canvas, completely without contrasting internal elements except for the almost imperceptibly exposed edges of raw canvas. These physical reminders seem all but lost, however, in the pure

radiance that appears to emanate from beyond the translucent surface.

The 14-foot-wide canvases of the opening and closing "refrains" seem to expand laterally before us like vast seas, the deep blue of their surfaces flickering with muted reflections of light. The steps at the center of these vast expanses beckon us to enter the inky darkness that seems to fold around us. A strong awareness of one's own body is countered by a simultaneous sense of release from physical constraint. We feel ourselves *here*, in this place, yet envision ourselves *there*, beyond the threshold of what is both wall and doorway.

Considered as a whole, "Cave of Generation" suggests an entire course of experience, prompting us to imagine a journey that is both intimate and universal. This epic quality is reflected in the text from which its title is derived. *On the Cave of the Nymphs* is a 3rd-century A.D. Neoplatonic discourse by the philosopher Porphyry, which Graham read while working on the series. In a commentary on the passage in the *Odyssey* that chronicles the return of Odysseus to his native Ithaca and his encounter with Athena, the goddess of wisdom, near the Cave of the Nymphs, Porphyry evokes the soul's descent into the "cave of generation"; he likens this journey to a "passage over the sea of time and space" in search of the soul's "native kingdom."³ Porphyry's "cave of generation" has two entrances: one for mortals, those about to be born, who enter through the gate of desire; the other for immortals, those returning to their sacred source through the "gate of the gods."

Although "Cave of Generation" is not illustrative of Porphyry's text, it may be seen as representing, in a surprising contemporary form, the ancient myth of the spirit and its continual passage through the gateways of birth and death. Graham's work evokes such mysteries by inviting us to attempt the elusive passage between contraries, between words and things, between what is known and what is felt, between physical and spiritual being. His work asks questions but provides no answers. It points the way to a place without form or temporality, but does not take us there. For, as A.K. Coomaraswamy has pointed out, such a realm is, "in the last analysis, not any where or when, but within you."⁴ □

1. *Mudra* was first exhibited with other works by the artist at Craig Cornelius Gallery, New York, and is currently in the Panza collection. *Song of no mind* was shown publicly for the first time this spring in an exhibition of works from the Panza collection at the Museo Cantonale d'Arte in Lugano, Switzerland.

2. "Figures of thought" is a concept used by A.K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) throughout his book *Traditional Art and Symbolism*, Roger Lipsey, ed., Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1977. Graham's work gives new form to some of the mythic "figures of thought" that Coomaraswamy has described as structuring our sense of being in the world. These include the "active door," a motif found in many cultures, whose two jambs stand for the pairs of opposites between which one must pass in the pursuit of wisdom; and the "Symplegades," which Coomaraswamy designates as the symbol for the perilous passage from the temporal to the eternal, from the known to the unknown.

3. See Kathleen Raine, introduction to Porphyry, *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, trans. Thomas Taylor, Grand Rapids, Mich., Phanes Press, 1991, p. 12.

4. A.K. Coomaraswamy, "Symplegades," in *Traditional Art and Symbolism*, p. 530.

Allan Graham's "Cave of Generation" can be seen at the Fisher Landau Center in Long Island City, N.Y., until late summer.

Author: Kathleen Shields is a free-lance writer living in Albuquerque.



*First Passage, 1991, oil on canvas,
wood, 90 by 66 inches. All works,
except on page 93, are from the
"Cave of Generation" series.*

*All photos this article courtesy
Angles Gallery, Santa Monica.*