

Robert S. Neuman: Under the Spanish Sun



CHILDS GALLERY
ESTABLISHED 1937



***Near the Wall*, 1979**

Oil on French Linen, 45 x 54 inches

Initialed and dated verso: "RSN / 1979". Initialed and dated verso: "RSN / 1979".

Titled, signed, and dated on stretcher verso: "'Near the wall' / Robert S. Neuman / 1979".

Robert S. Neuman's Spanish Paintings: *MINING THE MYSTICAL*

An essay by Jorge S. Arango written for the exhibition

Robert S. Neuman: Under the Spanish Sun

September 20 – November 17, 2024

“Barcelona is a very old city in which you feel the weight of history; it is haunted by history.
You cannot walk around it without perceiving it.”
—Spanish novelist Carlos Ruis Zafón

“The Alhambra is a palace of light and shadow, a study in contrast and harmony.”
—Washington Irving, from *Tales of the Alhambra*

It would be an outrageous claim to say that Robert S. Neuman had a religious, or even a spiritual, conversion when he first visited Spain on a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1956. “I was never a religious person and still am not in an orthodox way,” he asserted in a 1991 interview with Robert Brown, conducted for the Smithsonian Museum’s Archives of American Art oral history project (from which most of this essay’s Neuman quotes are drawn*). “But I was very impressed by Spain and the general mysticism in the culture and the arts and everywhere you look...The imagination, religious and mystical conditions as you see sometimes in paintings of Tàpies and many other Spanish artists, these things are close together—mysticism and imagination.”

As the paintings in this exhibition illustrate, something radical transpired in Neuman’s work that had mainly to do with this perception of Spain’s profoundly spiritual soul. In fact, one could say that this might be what attracted him to the Iberian Peninsula in the first place:

“I wanted to go to Barcelona because any place that has Gaudí, Picasso, Miró, [sculptor] Julio Gonzalez—there must be something there [that] I would like to look into a little bit on all levels—intellectual, emotional, and artistic...I was so impressed by Spain, and Barcelona in particular—the mysticism in Spanish culture is very strong. It’s in their art, it’s very deep.”

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Front Cover: *Alhambra*, 1980. Oil on French Linen, 79 x 115 inches. Initialed and dated lower right: "RSN / 1980". Signed and inscribed on stretchers verso: "Robert S. Neuman / Title Alhambra".

Back Cover: *Muro Catalano*, 1958. Oil on Linen, 45 x 45 inches. Signed and dated verso: "Robert S. Neuman / 1958".



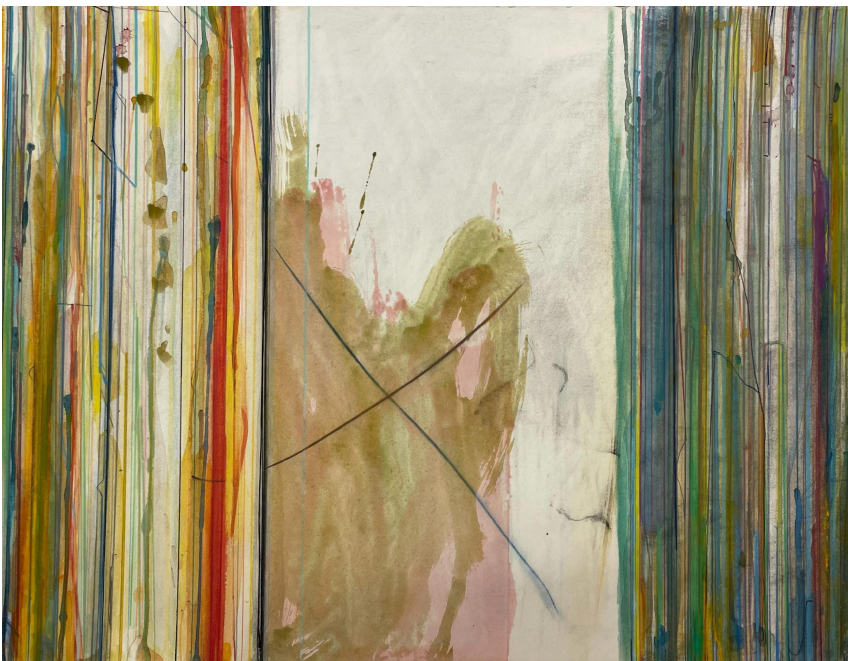
***Untitled (The Flag)*, 1959**

Oil on canvas, 40 x 28 inches.

Signed, dated, and inscribed verso: "Robert S. Neuman / 1959 / Boston".



Alhambra Drawing, circa 1985. Mixed media on paper, 24 5/8 x 38 3/8 inches. Estate stamp verso.



Alhambra Study, circa 1985
Mixed media on paper,
17 5/8 x 22 7/8 inches.
Estate stamp verso.

Enormous stylistic shifts occurred in his oeuvre during Neuman's initial visit. Yet the experience was also hypnotic enough that it compelled him to return on his honeymoon in the late 1970s—this time to Granada. What he experienced in Spain and what he was attempting to capture of the culture obviously moved him deeply. This alone makes this period of Neuman's work a worthy subject for re-examination and reappraisal.

Neuman had already come a long way from Kellogg, Idaho, a speck of acreage whose claim to fame, if it had one, was as the location of the largest silver mine in the United States. There were no art galleries, no art education in school, and the nearest museum was two hours over the state line in Spokane, Washington.

Neuman's parents ran a small hardware store. His interest in painting was completely spontaneous, arising organically as a way to visualize the shows he heard on the radio. His earliest materials were house paints from the store. After his discharge from the army, he studied graphic arts so he could parlay his developing talents into something lucrative, but Neuman eventually moved West to study fine art at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland.

During his interview with Brown, he recalled his first exposure to the work of Bay Area modernists: "Coming from the state of Idaho to San Francisco and walking into the museum, green as a cucumber, and seeing Clyfford Still for the first time, and [Sam] Francis and [Richard] Diebenkorn and all hanging there, was quite a shock. Here I'd been painting views of Coeur d'Alene Lake with mountains!"

But his horizons broadened quickly and exponentially during his years in San Francisco, followed by a stint in New Paltz, New York, where he moved to teach and, finally, accepting a Fulbright Fellowship to Stuttgart, Germany, during which he traveled around Europe. By the time he crossed the Pyrenees into Spain, he was a recognized artist with many exhibitions under his belt.

Spain, however, presented a different sort of surprise. As the English painter and writer Wyndham Lewis once observed, "Spain is an overflow of somberness, a strong and threatening tide of history meets you at the frontier." That history is one of the most tortured and burdened of the European continent, harboring the inhumanities of the Catholic Inquisition, the widespread persecution of Jews and the ousting of Muslims from Andalusia (which represented a golden age of Moorish culture, politics and architecture), brutal colonialist conquests of the Caribbean and the Americas, civil war, separatist movements and, at Neuman's arrival, the pitiless dictatorship of Francisco Franco, which was at its zenith (Franco was in power from 1939 to 1975).

Quickly the artist realized that "The light around Barcelona was very interesting. Any little thing seems to be very chromatic. I started painting with...these beautiful grays. I hadn't painted with gray before because I thought it was a neutral color, but the atmosphere and the light were such that even grays seemed to contain a great deal of color."



Robert S. Neuman in Barcelona
Photo courtesy: Sunne Savage Neuman

Neuman visited the studios of the prominent Spanish painters of the day: J.J. Tharrats, Antoni Tàpies, Albert Ràfols-Casamada and others. But it was Tàpies, perhaps, who left the most lasting impression. For one thing, Tàpies, in contrast to many of his fellow artists, was also delving into the aesthetic and philosophical possibilities of gray. “They were wrestling with canvases, using violent colors and huge brush strokes,” he said of his contemporaries. “I arrived with gray, silent, sober, oppressed paintings. One critic said they were paintings that thought.”

But Tàpies was also, by Neuman’s own admission, instrumental many years later, when Neuman visited the Alhambra and was taken with the play of light on the many walls of the palace fortress. In an essay Tàpies would eventually write for the Museu Tàpies he explained:

“...my walls, windows, or doors—or, if nothing more, the suggestion of them—stand there without evading responsibility, retaining all their archetypal, symbolic baggage....These are memories from the adolescence and early youth I spent shut in behind the walls within which I lived out the wars...All the walls of a city, which, in the family tradition, was so much my own, bore witness to the horrors and the inhuman reversals that were inflicted on our people.”**

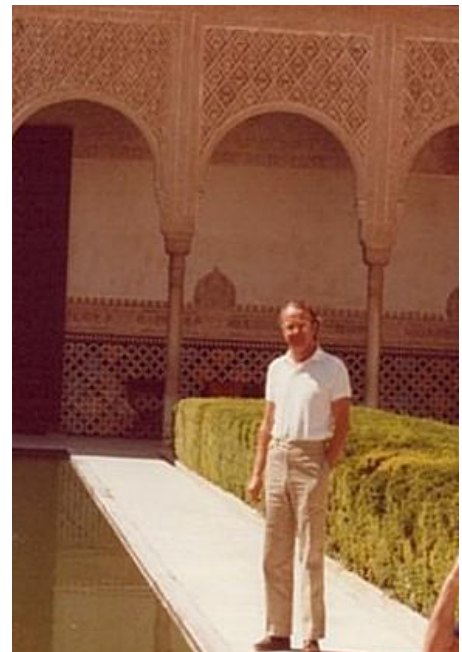
Neuman, in fact, referred to Tàpies as “the wall painter” and, as semantics would have it, the Catalan word “tàpies” refers to a specific kind of wall. The artist himself referred to his surname as “the strange destiny of a name.”

But more on the Alhambra paintings of Neuman later. The Barcelona paintings that appear in this exhibition were more about the quality of the city’s light and his brush with the mysticism of the Spanish culture. He described two experiences during the Brown interview that diverted his intentions away from the brooding, stygian Black paintings he had been creating prior to his visit. The first came to him while sitting at a café. “The sun was on the other side of the building [from] where I was, the street was so narrow that the sunlight coming through it looked like a needle, optically. It struck me as having a very interesting compositional potential.”

This is likely the genesis of what Neuman has referred to in his Barcelona series as “this central vertebrae running through the middle, vertically.” This vertebrae appeared mostly in the red paintings Neuman made. However, we can see that a form of it also materializes here in gray paintings from the period: “Calle Emancipation,” “Muro Catalano” (an early wall painting preceding the Alhambra series), “Barcelona España” and “Untitled (The Flag),” though in the latter it does not completely bisect the canvas.

The second impactful experience happened one day when Neuman was searching for a shop where he wanted to have some shoes made. “Walking down the street to get the shoes, I had some kind of a mystical experience myself,” he recalled. “Looking down the street as I walked, I thought I saw an apparition. The strangest kind of surreal experience, the only time in my life I’d ever had that kind of experience.”

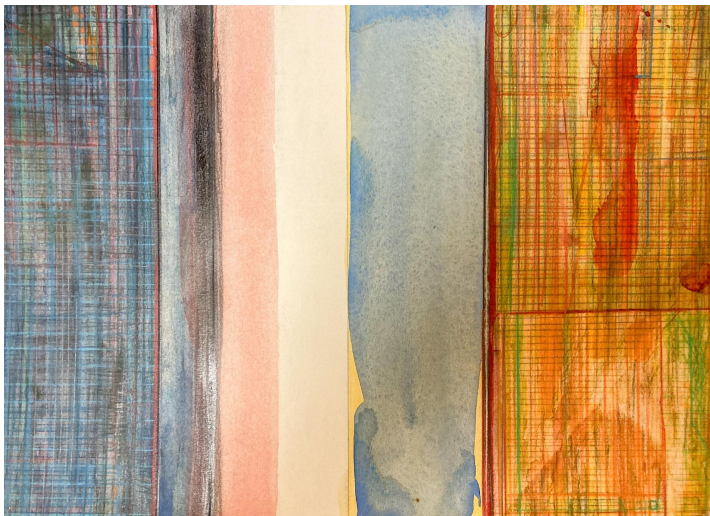
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Robert S. Neuman at the Alhambra
Photo courtesy: Sunne Savage Neuman



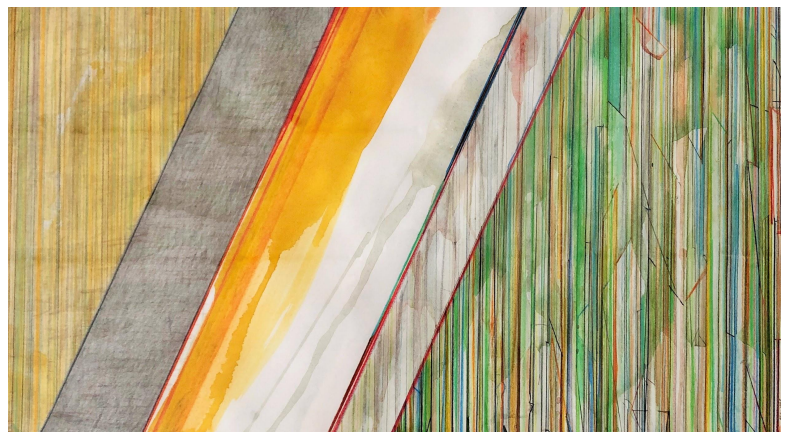
Malaga, 1980. Oil on French Linen, 55 x 77 inches. Initialed and dated lower right: "RSN / 1980".
Titled, signed, and dated on stretcher verso: "Title - Malaga / Robert S. Neuman - 1980".



Untitled Alhambra, circa 1985
Mixed media on paper, 11 X 15 in.
Estate stamp verso.



Alhambra Painting, 1981. Oil on French Linen, 57 x 58 inches. Initialed and dated lower left: "RSN / 1981". Titled, initialed, and dated verso: "Alhambra Painting / RSN / 1981".



Alhambra Study No. 2, 1985
Mixed media on paper,
12 ¼ x 21 ¾ inches.
Titled top right: "Alhambra Study -
2"; initialed and dated lower right:
"RSN - 1985".



Magpie, 1980.

Oil on French Linen, 34 x 48 ¼ inches.

Initialed, dated, and titled verso: "RSN / 1980 / Magpie".



***Alhambra Wall*, 1981**

Oil on French Linen, 40 x 46 inches.

Initialed, dated and titled verso: "RSN/ 1981/ Alhambra Wall"

Knowing this adds another dimension to the Barcelona paintings mentioned above, especially “*Muro Catalano*,” where a black area can appear as a shadowy figure—or apparition—and the horizontal reddish strokes articulate the figure’s movement through space, or possibly a fluctuation between its state of manifestation and its dissolution back into nothingness. As the great Spanish writer and poet Federico Garcia Lorca once observed, “In Spain, the dead are more alive than the dead of any other country in the world.”

“*Dos Veces en Las Ramblas*,” the other Barcelona painting in the exhibition, is more about architecture and the pace of the city as it is lived on one of Barcelona’s principal boulevards. In some ways, it is a more literal incarnation of the architectural intent behind many of Neuman’s Barcelona paintings. “They actually came from architecture, because I was looking at these tiny streets where the light filtered through between the buildings,” he conceded to Brown. “It came out of architectural context.”

What is most interesting about this diptych is the animated treatment of the surface, which, aside from ramping up the textural tactility of the work, also helps drive the sensation of perpetual urban movement. This is achieved, in part, with an innovative technique Neuman developed while on the Iberian Peninsula, which he explained to Brown this way:

“Now, in the Barcelona paintings, much of the articulation of the canvas is caused by taping. I would take some kind of tape and block out parts, rip it off and put some paint, another tape, and so on, over and over again. This was essentially a stenciling operation.”

Neuman continued to tape into other series, such as *Pedazos de Mundo*, but he would eventually abandon the technique because, he said, “I wanted to escape from the architecture of the thing after a while. It had become a little too strong an experience because I like to express myself, not put myself into an architectural structure, which is pretty tight.”

“*Dos Veces*” appears as a pair of aerial views of this bustling artery, with what seem like buildings in the lower portions and either the city’s harbor at its terminus (the blue streaks at the top of the left canvas) or a park (the earthier tones at the top of the right canvas). In between are indeterminate forms that allude to the movement of people or cars or changing light.

Returning to Spain

Upon visiting Granada, the French poet, novelist and dramatist Victor Hugo wrote, “The Alhambra is a marble poem, a dream made architecture.” Washington Irving, in his compilation of literary sketches, stories and essays *Tales of the Alhambra*, waxed similarly lyrical, writing that it was “a magical place, where the walls whisper secrets and the gardens bloom with memories.”

Though Neuman did not discuss the paintings that emerged from his honeymoon in Granada in spiritual terms the way he did with those that emerged after his first stay in Barcelona, it is not difficult to understand when we look at these works that what he wanted to apprehend and communicate with these works was equally ephemeral.

Again, Neuman came face to face with the weight of Spanish history, this time intricately—and troublesomely—intertwined with that of Muslim history. In the 13th century, Alhambra was the magnificent palatine city of the Nasrid Dynasty, a marvel of Moorish architecture and engineering. It was wrested from the last Nasrid Sultan by King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella I of Castile in 1492. Soon after, the royal couple signed an order to expel all Jews in Spain who would not convert to Christianity and then granted Cristobal Colón permission to lead an expedition across the Atlantic, essentially jumpstarting the Spanish colonization of the Americas.

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***Dos Veces en Las Ramblas* (diptych), 1960**

Oil and collage on French Linen, 76 X 48 inches. Two panels, each measuring 76 x 24 inches.

Left panel signed, dated, and titled verso: "Robert S. Neuman / Boston-1960 /

Title / 'Dos Veces En Las Ramblas' / Panel 1".

This dark history permeates many of the Alhambra works, especially in the weathered quality of the walls, which, to recall Tàpies, bore “witness to the horrors and the inhuman reversals inflicted” on the Spanish people. Neuman found the modulation of light on these walls endlessly fascinating, and he painted it with an obvious realization of light as a kind of divine presence or gift. Here, the famous colonnades of the Alhambra stimulated in Neuman an idea of light and the interruption of light that would inform the new work. Explaining it years later to Brown he recalled:

“The play of light in the buildings really influenced me...They have these columns in the Alhambra which are constantly breaking your view of this part and that part of the building...So I kept seeing this space interrupted by these vertical white things, these columns they’d put everywhere. They’re not big, they’re small but there are many of them. So, when I came back [to the U.S.] I got into that, with these larger, planar spaces of modulated high-key light almost always, then this white void or what I saw as a column of light....The idea was to try to relate to the play of light on the Alhambra walls, which are white to begin with—old, faded white—and the sunlight playing on that, and the patina of time and so on. In some ways I was harking back a little bit to my earlier stay in Barcelona and enjoyed the paintings very much of Antoni Tàpies. Of course, he’s the wall painter, so I’m not without the influence from that either. But that’s why there are these large flat planes.”

However, a critical difference between the Barcelona and Alhambra paintings is that many of the latter were painted after Neuman’s return home. Being more physically distanced from their sense of place somehow heightened the abstract nature of these works, in a way making them more abstract than the abstraction he practiced in the previous Spanish series.

One can explain the Barcelona paintings in the same light that Neuman himself described the work of Fritz Winter, a German postwar painter he admired and had hoped to study with during his Stuttgart Fulbright. (Instead, he was assigned to Willi Baumeister.) “It’s totally abstract,” he said to Brown of Winter’s work, “but it’s such that you feel that some things are the earth, or rock, or tree, or you sense that there’s nature in his paintings when you see them, yet there are no recognizable images there.”

This allowed Neuman to experiment more freely with the individual elements of his Alhambra paintings. Take, for instance, the columnar shapes that divide the planes of “Alhambra Study,” “Alhambra Wall,” “Alhambra,” “Near the Wall,” “Torre de a Bruja” and “Magpie,” as well as a much later monochromatic oil on French linen (2001) “Alhambra Painting.” In all of these, the split is perfectly vertical. Yet in the other Alhambra paintings displayed here, this axis becomes skewed.

“I took it as an image, a motif,” Neuman explained to Brown. “Then an artist has to do something with the motif, so I tilted it...I started tilting them to get a little more dynamic in the painting or drawing, because to any good artist the painting is the final word, the thing you’re after, and the source is a source, but it’s not the painting. It’s just there to fertilize your imagination.”

Thus, the columnar shape becomes a tool for more varied explorations about dynamism, density, color and light. To the uninitiated, for instance, “Alhambra Drawing No. 4” might not seem part of this series at all. Instead, the forms become devices independent of meaning, pure abstraction in the service of experimentation with wild striations of bright color, rippling textures and the layering of spatial relationships. Even the play of light on the Alhambra walls that Neuman set out to depict becomes less relevant in works such as “Alhambra Study No. 2,” “Alhambra Study” (1985) or the late “Study for Large Painting” (2005). In these, Neuman’s primary concern seems to be perception of space and its depth or lack thereof.

This growing dissociation from specific content allowed Neuman to build his compositions as rational relationships between colors and textures, something that becomes evident through his preliminary drawings for many of the Alhambra paintings. They show Neuman explicitly and precisely annotating what techniques and colors he will deploy: where to pour paint, drip it, scumble it, or how to apply it (“drip stains with undulation” reads one marginal note).

And here it seems important to recognize something fundamental to the trajectory not only of Neuman’s Spanish series, but also the broader journey of his work in general: for Neuman, painting’s primary, most axiomatic concerns were light and color, and we can view his later Alhambra paintings as some of the purest expressions of this idea in his entire oeuvre.

“Color and light is the real base language of painting,” he averred in his oral history interview. “Anything else you do to it, such as putting symbols or imagery or something else, or stylistic things, are not as base as the use of color and light....It isn’t whether the tree is six feet or four feet high, or whether it’s pine or elm; it’s what the color is there. Color and the light. This is an unbelievably strong force in painting.”

Moreover, Neuman saw these as inseparable from each other, not mutually exclusive. “I’ve come back again and again to Bonnard because some of his paintings of the gardens are practically unbelievable,” he told Brown. “And I’ve noticed that even in Pollock, when he has poured or dripped paint in many ways in order to build networks of colors, almost like a knotting of many colors together, he’s trying to get that kind of a modulation of light by the use of very difficult technique.”

“He has in mind how light will play on pigment?” Brown asked Neuman.

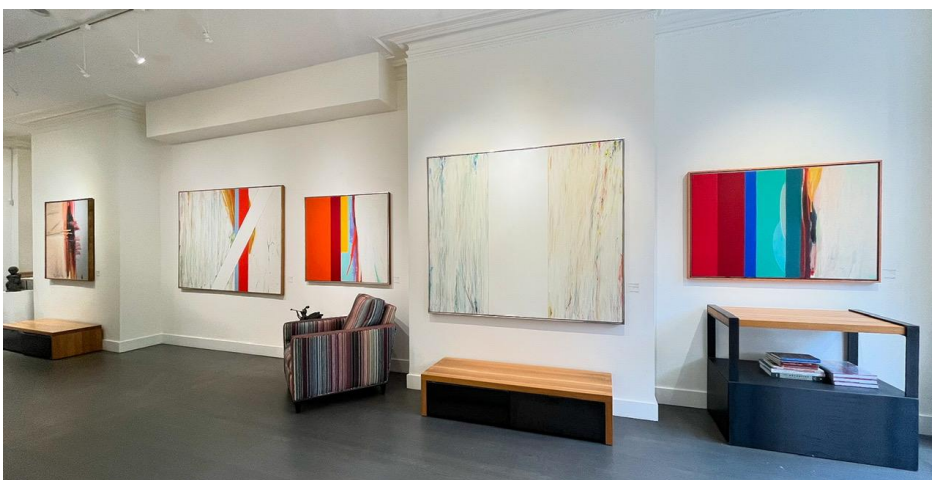
“No, he has in mind creating light with color. That’s what I mean by full color—you’re trying to create the sense of experiencing some quality of light in the painting, some quality of light which suggests emotional attitude or something of that sort.”

This is the unifying crux of all Neuman’s work, and particularly the Barcelona and Alhambra paintings: Color is light. Light is emotion. Emotion is the way we experience the spiritual currents that underlie everything. In a way, you could say Neuman needed no conversion because he was already there.

**Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Oral history interview with Robert S. Neuman, 1991 May 1-June 19, www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-robert-s-neuman-13195*

***Essay, “Communication on the Wall” by Antoni Tàpies. museutapies.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/05/Communication.pdf*

Thanks to Sunne Savage and Christina Godfrey for their openness and cooperation in providing materials and sketchbooks for this essay.



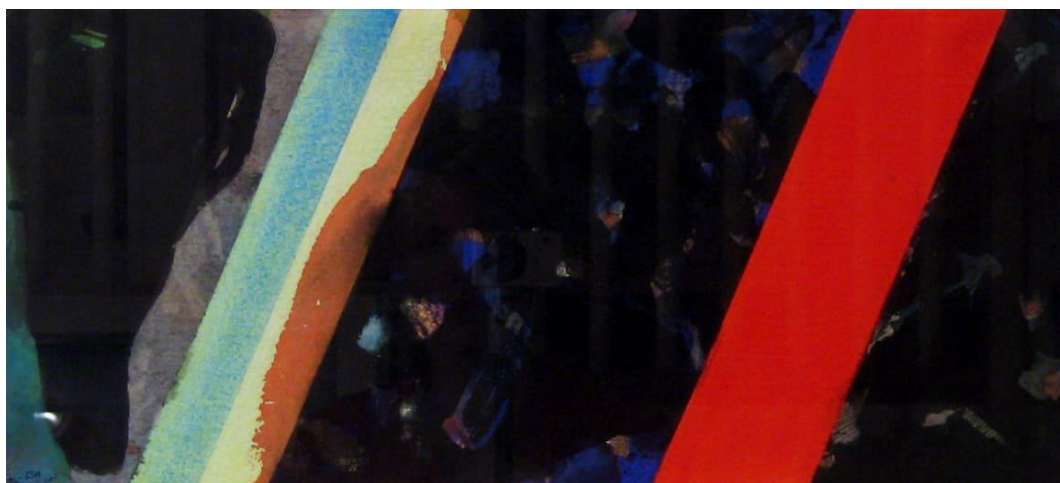
Childs Gallery
Exhibition Installation, 2024



Torre de la Bruja, 1980
Oil on French Linen, 34 x 48 inches
Signed verso.



Alhambra Study, circa 1985. Mixed media on paper, 14 x 24 5/8 inches. Estate stamp verso.



Study for Large Painting, 2005
Watercolor, 8 3/4 x 19 inches.
Initialed and dated lower left: "RSN / 2005".



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