

Notes from the Road

David Pease: Notes from the Road

Essay by Jessica Helfand

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Foreword

As director of the Koerner Center, I have annually hung a small exhibition of works from my collection in the director's office. Then, for my first formal exhibition in the Koerner Center, I ventured to introduce the work of a non-fellow artist — our namesake, Henry Koerner. But the Koerner Center tradition is of exhibitions of the art produced by Koerner Fellows. My inaugural fellow's exhibition was by Daniel Rosner, a chemical engineering colleague who studied art before engineering and now seems to be replacing engineering with art. This is now followed by an exhibition of the work of Koerner Fellow David Pease, who has spent most of his life studying, teaching, administrating, and making art. And at some point, he "began to think more about paintings as a narrative timeline." I want to thank David for sharing his art, Jessica Helfand for her essay for the catalogue, Lesley Baier for editing, Chika Ota for design, Mateusz Zechowski for photography, and John Gambell for managing the printing of the catalogue.

Gary L. Haller, Director

David Pease: Visual Memoirist

Jessica Helfand

One day some years ago, David Pease was swimming off the coast of Tortola when it occurred to him that he'd dropped his hotel room key in the water. This was back in the days when a key was still a key—not a slim plastic card, but an awkward and clunky thing, attached by a brass ring to a slab of heavy plastic. This particular key had gone missing, Pease quickly realized, by becoming dislodged from his own swimsuit pocket, which hardly bears repeating except that a day later—while swimming in the same spot—he found it.

That this became the backstory from which a painting (*Key Incident*) would later emerge is part of a much bigger story. It's a story of how logic meets chance, how memory engenders narrative, how observation seeds curiosity, cues language, and sparks form. It is a story of collections and obsessions, of discipline and method, about imagination, investigation, improvisation—and perhaps most of all, about connecting a lifetime of dots.

David Pease makes work that is controlled by accuracy, but thrills to the promises of chance. He is principled, but playful, at once focused and far-ranging in his appeal to the unusual reference. A checkerboard-branded burger franchise. The title of a song by Fats Waller. An impromptu spray of oyster crackers randomly spotted in a bowl of chowder. In these paintings, there are magical gestures of illusion and deft sleights of hand. There are nods to history, odes to memory, references to moments of delight

(meals logged as celebrations of color) and sadness (cemeteries rendered as sober rectangles of white). There are hints of compositional precision and geographic allusion, gestures of wit and grace notes of whimsy. And throughout it all, there is a deep and abiding determination to tell a story.

Pease's stories locate themselves at the nexus of time and space, linking memory to method, form to content. Symbols reflect critical observations—some of them rational and direct, others more cryptic and coded; and the process by which such details reveal themselves becomes its very own kind of journey. The work is architectonic but never didactic: indeed, to pierce the veil separating looking from reading is to enter into a deeper substrate, a narrative complexity that rewards the viewer with added dimension and delight. (The titles of some of Pease's earlier exhibitions—*The Geometry of Memory*, for example—hint at the humanity in this work, serving to both frame the narrative and orient the viewer.)

In an interview in *The Paris Review* in 1967, the Russian émigré Vladimir Nabokov offered a trenchant observation about his own work. "The pattern of the thing precedes the thing," Nabokov noted—and indeed, the same might be said about the paintings in this exhibition. In them, David Pease has devised a visual lexicon that frames his own experience: to decode the paintings is to excavate not only meaning but narrative—a schedule, a series of events, the bright purples of a garden (*Wild Iris*) or the captivating reds in a historic home (*Master Lawrie's Room*). There are palettes that echo their physical territory (*Great Plains, Western Swing*) or their visual vernacular (*Land of Lincoln, Painted Houses*); and occasionally, there are subtle hints of more mysterious peregrinations (*Midnight Gin, 3 Ladies from Antioch, Lock Out*). Recurring activities are represented

by repeated icons — the black double-stripe of the open road, the silver rounded nose of an Amtrak cab — while more peculiar details are referenced more subtly and are, consequently, a bit trickier to parse. But it is precisely the simultaneous presence of the universal and the unique that gives these paintings their power. Individually and collectively, they are hieroglyphs, at once narrative and abstract, a visual tapestry of one artist's impeccably rendered tales of the episodic moments that mark our days.

* * *

Over a career that spans more than six decades, David Pease has built a body of work that is anchored by a methodical studio practice. Collections are ordered. Supplies are labeled. Folders — meticulously documenting the trips that provide the essential source material for the paintings in this exhibition — are date-stamped and alphabetized. There are lists (places lived, trips taken), not to be confused with inventories (postcards by category, sketchbooks by number), making his studio at once a cabinet of curiosities and a laboratory for experimentation. His interests are broad — from literature to architecture, bridges to baseball, A.J. Liebling to E.B. White — making everything, in a sense, grist for the mill. Pease's studio walls provide an active surface for displaying both found and fabricated elements, inviting studies in parallel form and comparative juxtaposition — a Krazy Kat cartoon, a vintage color chart — observations that play out in delightful and perpetual flux. Here, the studio wall becomes a kind of kinetic canvas all its own, a seedbed for ongoing investigation, interpretation, and play.

The studio is also home to a collection of sketchbooks that are, without question, worthy of their own exhibition. Dating back to the 1960s, these sketchbooks are deep repositories of visual

ideas, tracking the artist's evolution as a thinker and observer, educator and reader, collector and maker. Packed with meticulous detail, they're also graced by a series of curious numerical codes, evidence of something Pease readily identifies as a "chance operation" —a nod to the sorts of experiments first introduced by Marcel Duchamp and later adopted by artists like John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, and others. For Pease, "chance" translates to using assorted game pieces (a roll of the dice) to randomize and, in a sense, de-ritualize certain formal decisions. (The destabilized positioning of the tumbled slots in *Katrina*, for example.) As befits his orderly studio method, the results of these experiments are recorded in the sketchbooks with astute, laboratory-worthy precision.

It is here, in the sketchbooks, that many of the artist's formal vocabularies are introduced and developed, and where the grid as an armature for study first becomes apparent. Pease somewhat humbly refers to his years as a dean at Yale, a time when the organizational imperatives of an administrative position obliged him to keep calendars and schedules which he insisted on creating by hand. (This is not a man who imports spreadsheets.) All of which became *more* grist for the mill: these handcrafted checkerboards became, over time, part of a rich visual grammar that would reveal itself in his sketchbooks, gradually evolving into this particular body of work.

Pease occasionally paints "samplers" as studies (or, in his own words, "souvenirs") for these larger works, crafting a smaller-scale preview of the larger painting still to come. In addition to questions about form, color, scale, and representation, he's looking at time—speed and slowness, day into night—and considering how the individual moment meets the orbit of the broader journey. Here, form and content circumnavigate the

artist's recollections, creating a framework with a very particular visual gestalt, a graphic system that combines geometric certainty with chromatic variation, merging simplicity with serendipity, the constant with the variable.

Many years ago, Pease had the idea to locate a linen postcard on a larger ground, whereupon he would extend the image outward onto a larger field. These postcard paintings drew their distinctiveness from a simple juxtaposition: they reconciled a moment in time (the postcard) with a larger visual purview (the painting), thus challenging the physical boundary of the primary image. (This is pure Pease: take the thing, challenge the thing, create a new thing.) But there's a more subtle intervention at work here. How do the boundaries of memory frame perception? How can a painting recalibrate our sensibilities, reframing the temporal against the actual, cementing the moment to the memory? Arguably, the postcard paintings may have foreshadowed the slot paintings in their focus on merging the anecdotal moment (time, place) with the formal gesture (paint, space). Then as now, the artist looks closely as well as aerially—at history and at the future—reducing the complexities and removing the deviations that stand between memory and reality, painter and viewer. The result is a magical orchestration of keen observation, subtle recontextualization, and superbly rendered detail. Pease is a visual memoirist with a finely tuned sense of how to tell a story. He is also, it must be said, an excellent editor.

In my own memory, I have a strong image of a studio, the smell of turpentine, the sweet rewards of graham crackers smeared with honey whip served with tall glasses of frosty milk. As a very young child, I lived across the street from David Pease, and his two daughters were my closest playmates. Many years

later, when I was a graduate student here at Yale, he became my thesis adviser, and it was under his tutelage that I began, in earnest, to integrate my collecting interests with my writing and studio practice. Today, as I consider my next chapter, I look at David Pease's work and consider what it means to spend a lifetime in the studio: to look and see, to travel and remember, to coordinate the dots that frame our own peculiar odysseys. In the end, all of us have our own "Key Incidents": our travels marked by the sporadic recollection, recorded through the enduring, if not always reliable, prism of human memory. If we are lucky, such reminiscence is paired with reflection, the reflection itself a catalyst for making work, which is—it must be said—a reward in itself. David Pease agrees. "It's not only what you have to do," he observes with a dry, knowing smile. "It's what you *get* to do."

Jessica Helfand (B.A. 1982, M.F.A. 1989) is Senior Critic in Graphic Design at the Yale School of Art and a member of the faculty at the Yale School of Management.

Checklist of the Exhibition

Paintings: Gouache on paper, 30 x 22½ in. (sheet)

Key Incident (1994)

13 Days / 2 Cemeteries (1996)

Southern Comfort: Blues Highway (1996)

Childhood Revisited (1998)

Heatwave (1998)

3 Ladies from Antioch (1999)

Western Swing (1999)

Painted Houses (2004)

Grand Hotel (2004)

A Handful of Keys (2005)

Iowa Gothic (2005)

Katrina (2006)

Great Plains (2006)

Yankeetown (2008)

Midnight Gin: Where the Southern Crosses the Dog (2009)

Master Lawrie's Room (2009)

Samplers: Gouache on paper, 12 x 16 in. (sheet)

Shiloh: 8 Meals (2005)

High School Reunion (2005)

Land of Lincoln (2007)

13 Oyster Crackers: Norfolk (2009)

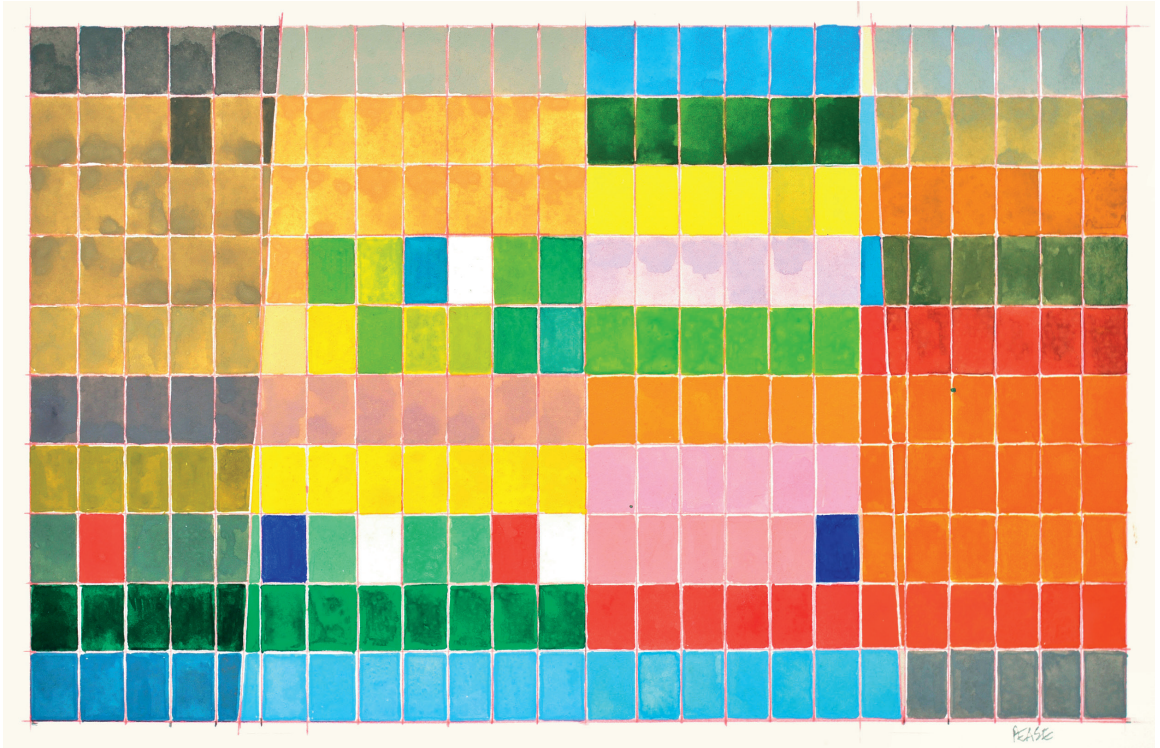
Notes from the Road

KEY INCIDENT (1994)

The paintings in this exhibition were triggered by an event on a trip to Tortola in 1994. I had gone snorkeling in the bay in front of the resort where we were staying. When I got out of the water, I realized our room key had fallen out of my swimsuit, so I went to the office, explained the situation, and received a replacement. The next day I went swimming. Realizing I must be near the area where I had lost the key, I looked down on the bottom, and there it was.

Later that day there was a photo shoot on the beach, and one of the models was wearing a spectacularly red bathing suit. I started keeping track of other events, incidents, and “color” experiences that occurred on the trip. When I got back to my studio, I did this painting in which I recorded color “stand-ins” for the duration of the trip. There are ten rows (ten days) and twenty-four columns (hours in a day).

Two years later, I began to think more about paintings as a narrative timeline. A calendar of selected events. A way of tracking and recording memory.



CHILDHOOD REVISITED (1998)

A ten-day trip in July of 1997. I flew to St. Louis, rented a car, and drove through Illinois and Wisconsin revisiting every house I had lived in and schools I had attended. I drove those sections of the original Route 66 that still exist in Illinois and visited Adlai Stevenson's grave in Bloomington, where I was born. I also had lunch nearby at the original Steak 'n Shake (a fond memory of growing up in the middle west) in Normal, Illinois.

Later on, in Wisconsin, I visited a summer camp I had gone to, as well as the University of Wisconsin, my alma mater.

The shape of the painting was dictated by the fact that the town I lived in through grade and high school (Streator) was built on a bluff on the Vermilion River in north-central Illinois.



A HANDFUL OF KEYS (2005)

This painting combines two separate, but related, trips. The first was to Key West in January, the other to Key Largo in February. Each trip was five days in length, and each column records the activities or events of a single day.

Key West is a place I have always found interesting: good food, a favorite place to stay, and no need for a car. Also, I had just started reading Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan's *De Kooning: An American Master*, and what better place to read a 700-page book?

When I began working on the painting there didn't seem to be, to paraphrase Gertrude Stein, enough "there there." I needed more. About that time, I received a call from a good friend who was going to be participating in a croquet tournament in Key Largo in February and invited me to attend.

The title of the painting is taken from a 1929 Fats Waller song.



KATRINA (2006)

Katrina is the only painting in this body of work that was initiated by an event, rather than in response to a trip taken: the event being Hurricane Katrina in August of 2005 and the devastating effect it had on New Orleans and the people who lived there. Formally, the painting was influenced by the vast number and diversity of photographic images available. Through the use of chance and arrangement, the painting attempted to capture some sense of the displacement of the event and its aftermath. A sinister game board arranged by chance.

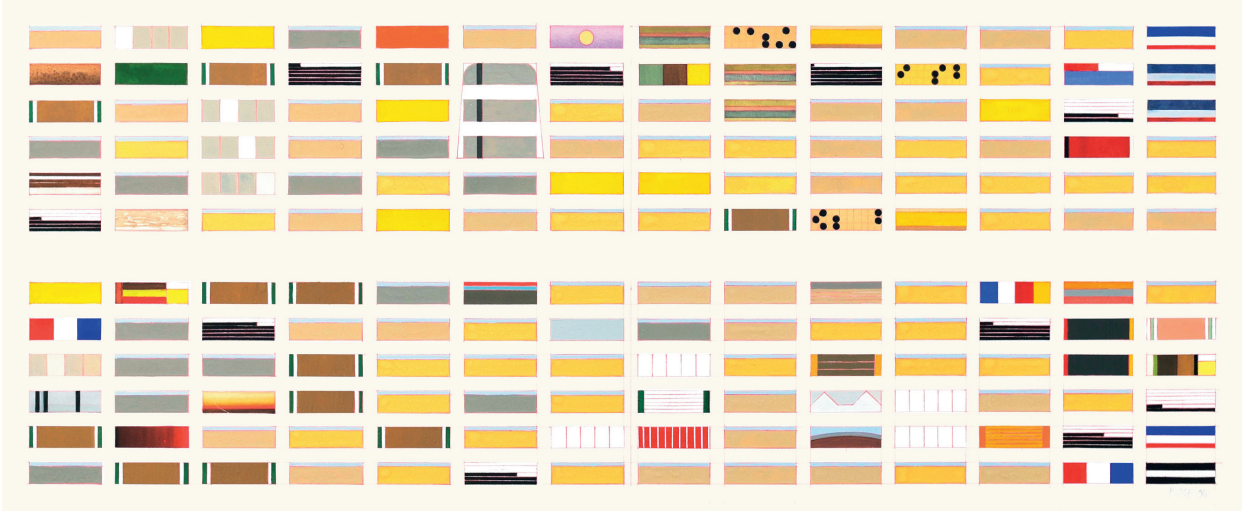
The colors that form the bulk of the painting, the background, were taken from the diversity and changing depictions of the floodwaters. The “content” images (those that break the grid) were taken from a number of previous trips to New Orleans.



GREAT PLAINS (2006)

In September of 2000 I flew to Omaha, rented a car, and drove west across southern South Dakota into Wyoming, then back to Omaha by driving east across Nebraska. As in some of the other paintings, the shape of the painting reflects the shape of the trip. The top part of the painting (South Dakota) moves and can be “read” from right to left, while the lower part (Nebraska) moves from left to right. The dominant colors are those of the landscape in mid-September.

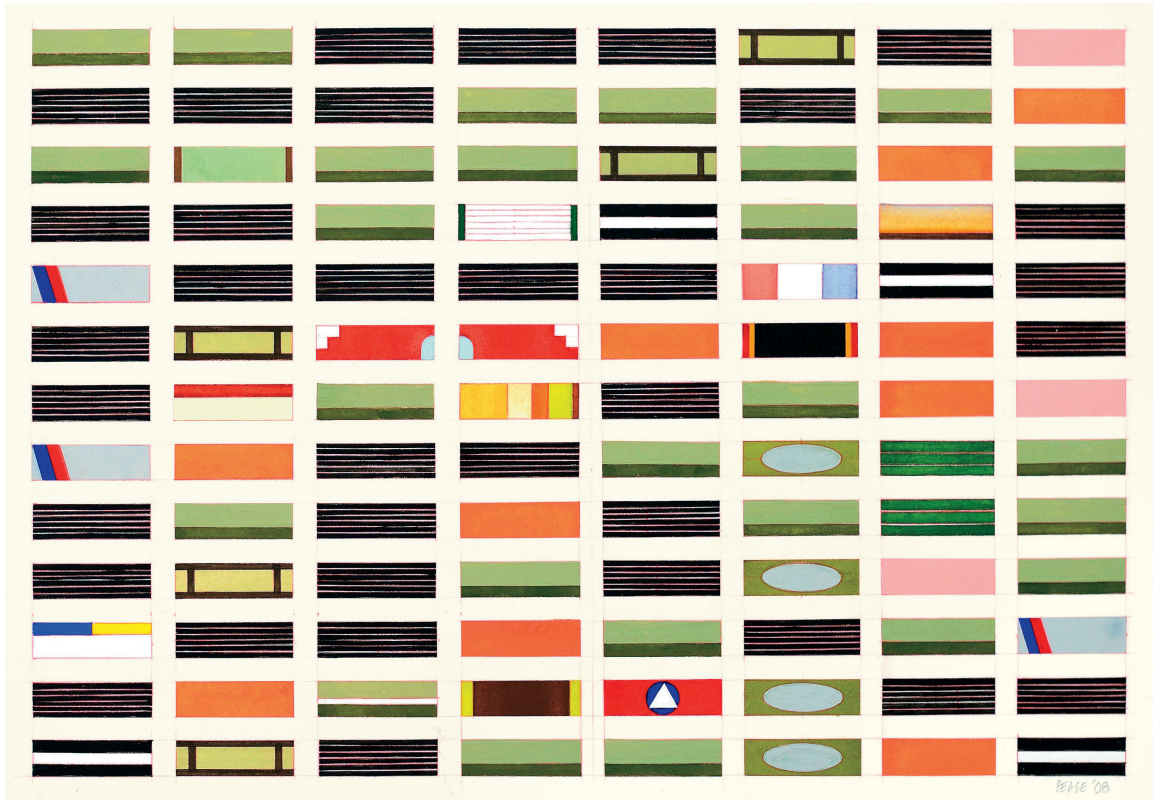
Highlights of the trip were: the Corn Palace, the Badlands, Mt. Rushmore, Fort Laramie, Scott's Bluff, Chimney Rock, Buffalo Bill Ranch (“Scout's Rest”), Robert Henri's house in Cozad, Nebraska, the SAC Museum near Ashland, Nebraska, and the Western Heritage Museum in Omaha. This was my longest driving trip: ten days, 1,879 miles.



YANKEETOWN (2008)

Yankeetown is a small (very) town on the gulf coast of Florida about midway between Tampa and Tallahassee. The primary commercial activity in Yankeetown, at least in March of 1995 when I stayed there for five days, was the Izaak Walton Lodge. It opened in 1924 as a fishing and hunting lodge and has gone through a number of changes since. It continues to have a strong sense of the “old” Florida.

The Lodge, a predominantly clapboard building painted black, is located on the Withlacoochee River and had recently been refurbished. The color of the building, as well as the green of the surrounding landscape, became important in the subsequent painting. It was done in 2008, thirteen years after my trip to Yankeetown. Among the other aspects of the painting that interested me was the effect of time on incidents remembered.



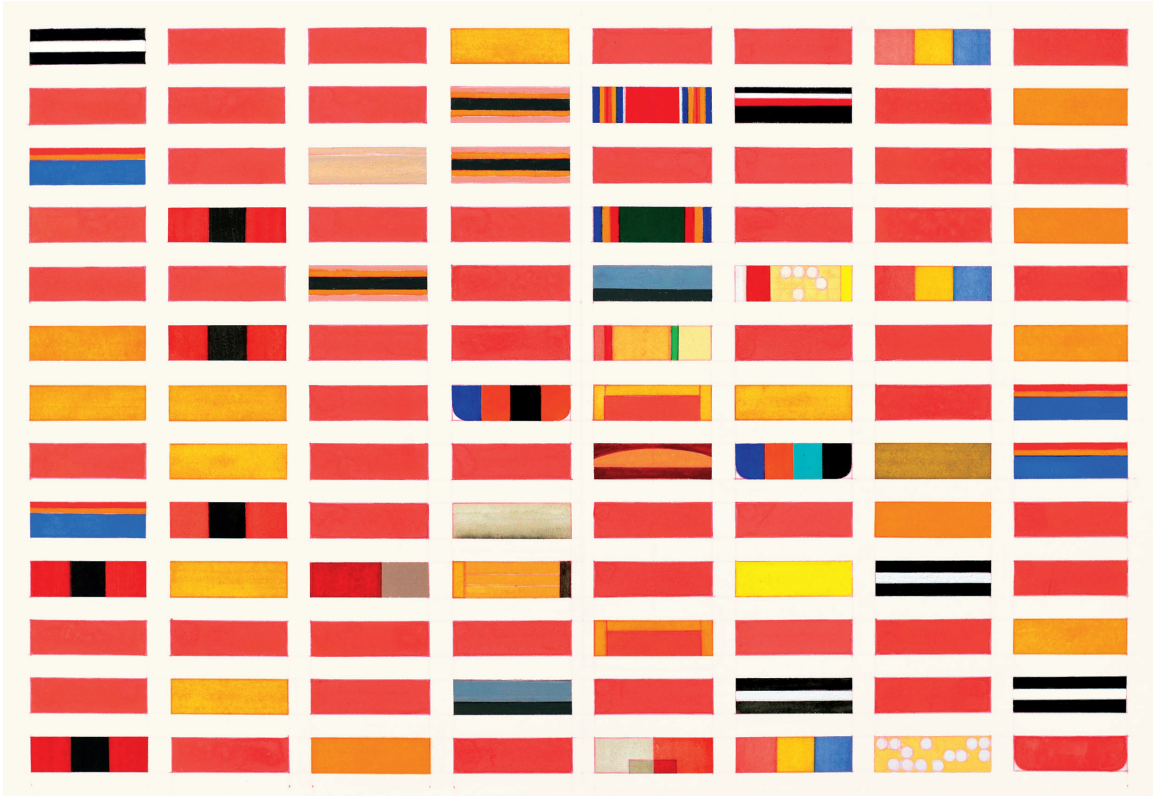
PERSE 08

MASTER LAWRIE'S ROOM (2009)

A short trip in July of 2008 to Norfolk, Virginia, to tour the *U.S.S. Wisconsin* and to visit the Chrysler Museum of Art. One of the subtexts of a number of these trips was visiting historic World War II ships and aviation museums.

While looking for a place to stay I discovered a bed and breakfast near the Chrysler Museum that had a room named “Master Lawrie’s Room.” When I looked at the picture of the room, I was immediately struck by the color: an intense, but muted, red orange. Doing a painting where that was the dominant color interested me. I called, got the room, and spent three days in Norfolk.

A frequent first response to this work is that the individual units, what I think of as “slots,” look like military ribbons. This is the only painting in which one of these units—fifth column, second row—*is* a depiction of a specific military ribbon: the World War II Victory Medal awarded to the *U.S.S. Wisconsin*.

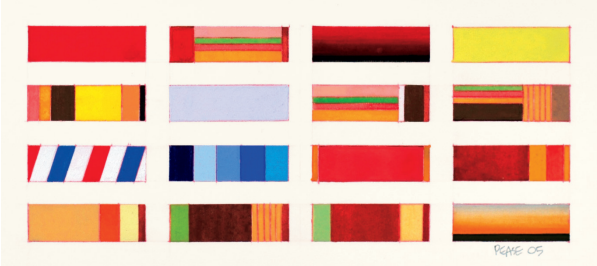


SHILOH: 8 MEALS (2005)

The sampler paintings are small versions of related larger paintings. They are sometimes used as a place to try out specific configurations, a place to practice. At other times they may be used, after the completion of the larger painting, as a summary or “sampler.”

The sampler *Shiloh: 8 Meals* refers to a larger painting, *Shiloh (Spring)*, not in the exhibition, that documents a trip to the site of the 1862 Battle of Shiloh in Tennessee. After visiting the battlefield I spent roughly five days driving through Mississippi, Arkansas, and back to Memphis. Along the way I ate at a variety of exceptional southern restaurants, and these meals—or more specifically, what I had—became the primary “subject” of this painting. Among the restaurants visited were, in Mississippi, Doe’s Eat Place (Greenville), Ajax Diner (Oxford), and the Crystal Grill (Greenwood); and in Arkansas, Little Chef (Stuttgart) and Craig’s Bar-B-Q (De Valls Bluff).

The part of the painting (first column, three down) that looks like a barber pole on its side was, in fact, a painted horizontal pole above the door of a barbershop in Corinth, Mississippi, and looked *exactly* as it does in the painting.



Sketchbook Pages

Pencil, ink, and gouache on paper, 14 x 11 in. (sheet)

Lock Out (1997)

Wild Iris (2004)

High School Reunion (2005)

Katrina (2005)

4.24 (Thursday)

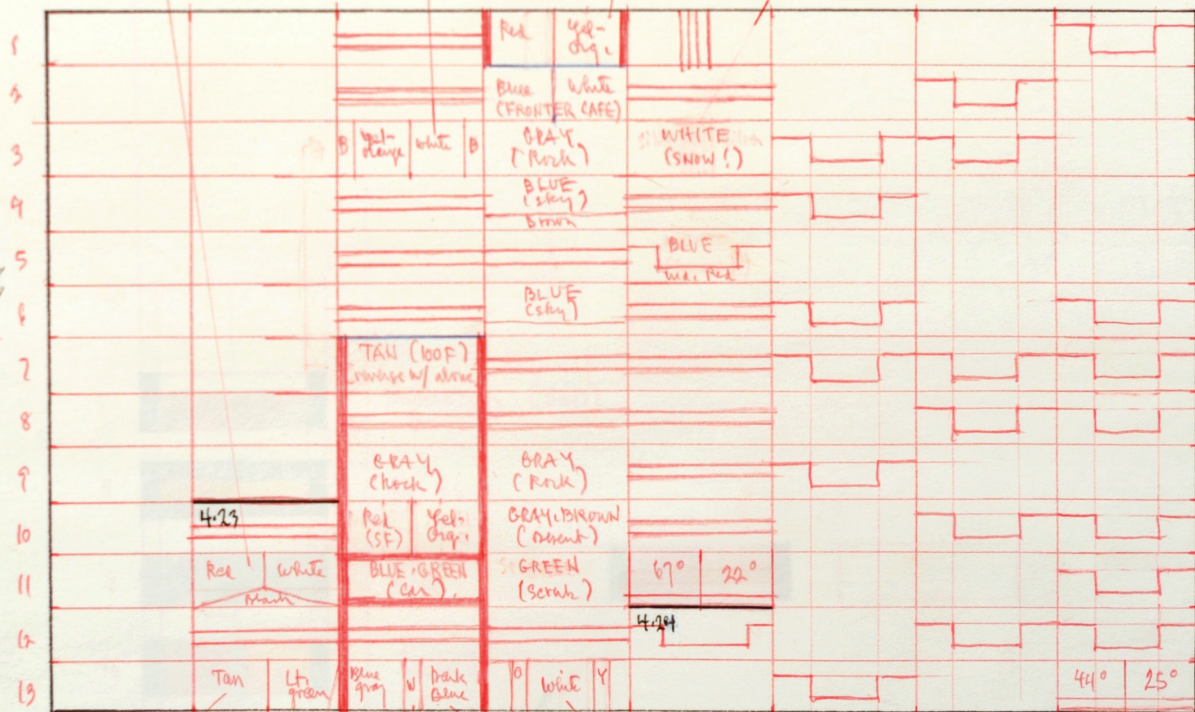
see note below

ARK top motel (K)

Volkswagen "BUS"
(But Waldmire)

Santa Fe

BWB
Constellation
(McA)



Study 2: Map #2 (K. / Rt. 66 - Grant Canyon)

K. billboard JUN 8 1997

(locked out)

MM 87.88

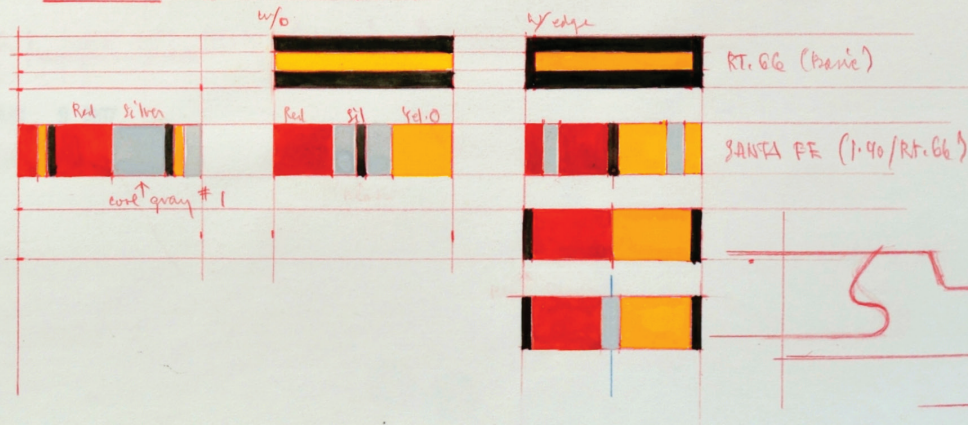
Snow Cap Drive-In

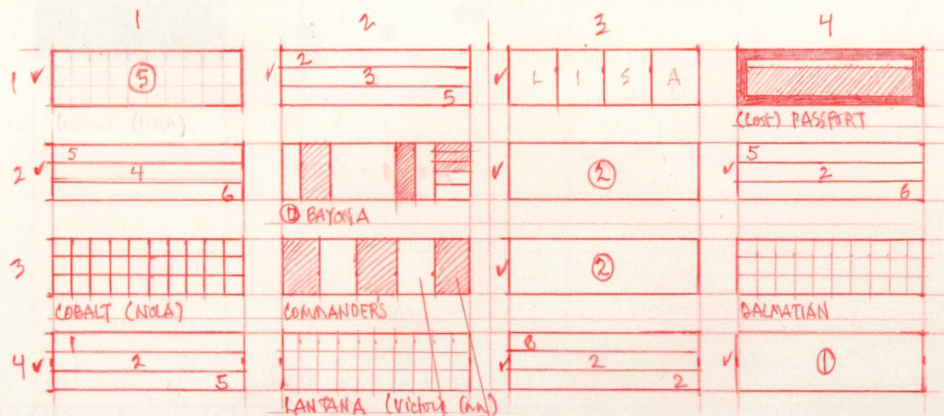
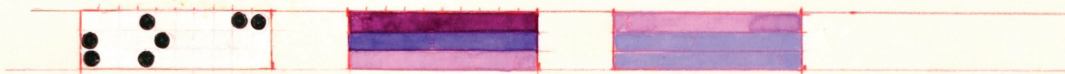


LOCKED OUT: (7-3 from 1-4: 8 slot)

FACTORS: car (Blue-green) Desert / Rock, Railroad (Santa Fe),
Red-yellow-black (Silver).

BLACK "EDGE" K 11 AM - 2 PM = lock out





WILD IRIS (Lisa) : Study 1

white

April 6-12, 2003 (Lafitte)

DEC 6 2004

(for USA)

1A	2A	3E	4A	5A	6E	⑦	8E	9E	10A
2/4	2/1	4/4	1/2	4/3	1/1	1/3	3/3	2/3	4/1
5	5		2	6					1
2	4	①	3	2	⑤		②	②	2
6	6		5	2					5

IRIS "slot" (10) : 1/4 A = B E = solid

1	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z

Spectrum Violet

white



white

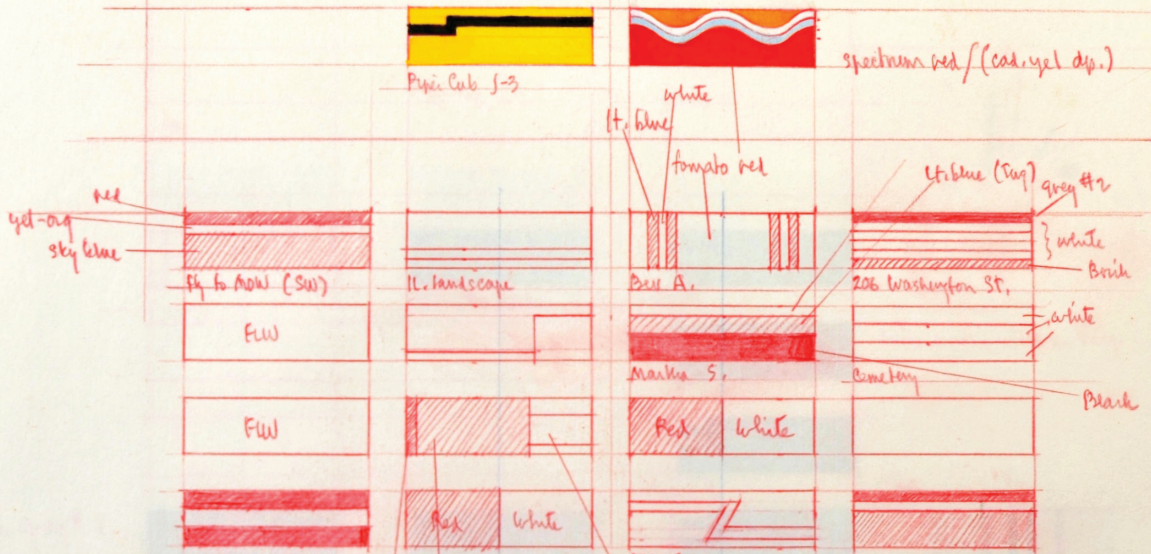
Spectrum Violet



1	2	3	4	5	6

3	4	1	1	3	2	4	3	3	5
3	2	3	4	4	5	2	2	1	4
5	2	3	4	2	1	2	4	3	5

B	L	U	E	S



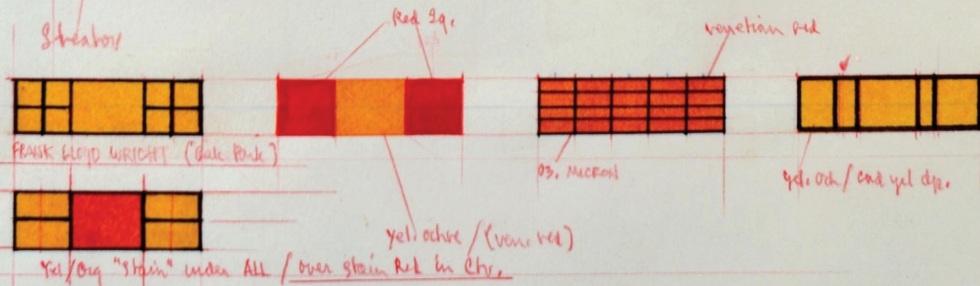
Revision (Shtator): Sampler study #1

June 30-July 3, 2005

DEC 1 2005 red tea pork tenderloin banana cream pie

1	Fly to NOW (SW)	9	Revision (B. Anderson)
2	FW ? (Oak Park)	10	Revision
3	FW ? (Oak Park)	11	S.H.S. (Red/white)
4	DRIVING (to St. Park)	12	Alight (Piper Cub)
5	IL landscape	13	206 Washington St.
6	Starved Rock	14	Cemetery
7	Country Cupboard	15	Fireworks
8	S.H.S. (Red/white)	16	Fly a DRIVE 7/3

6/30
7/1
7/2
7/3
Plot 311



⑤ Seafood store: East Christiana /

② Painted House (gull)

② Grey Beaman color

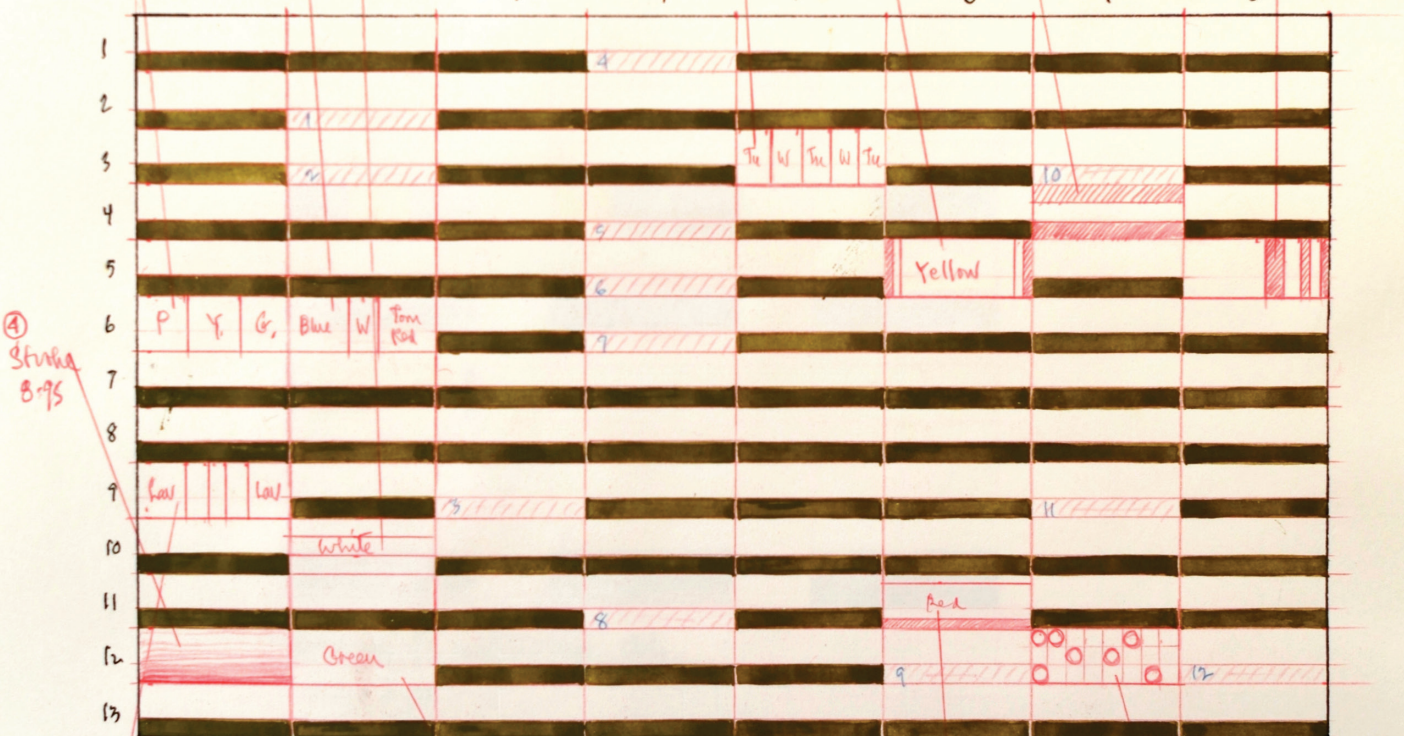
⑦ Metavir Cometary

⑩ Faulkner House

⑬ Commander's

EX Bear tick

②④ RITA'S : New Orleans (L)



③ Indian Plg. (Mure)

LOCATION Study: Water/Content.

KATRINA: Aug/Sept 2005

② Lantana : lafitte

w/o 12 "evaluate" slots
SEP 16 2005

⑧ Beach (in free) St. Charles

① ACME Cyster Bar

Col.	4	4	4	8	7	8	3	2	2	3	7	2	1	4	2	3	4	2	2	2	6	4	4	2
Row	4	8	5	12	3	12	3	2	9	9	9	8	13	6	5	10	1	10	6	3	4	11	12	4

"WATER" (slots to be eliminated vs: content slots) is (24) = 18%

* NOTE: 12 of content slots will replace (in loco) "note", - which eliminates those locs.
∴ only need to select / elim. (2) other slots.

[illegible]

David G. Pease

David Pease is an artist, teacher, and former arts administrator who studied at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, earning a B.S. in art (1954), an M.S. (1955), and, following service in the U.S. Army (1955–57), an M.F.A. in 1958. He has taught at Michigan State University (1958–60), the Tyler School of Art, Temple University (1960–83), and Yale School of Art (1983–2000). He served as dean of the art schools at both Tyler (1977–83) and Yale (1983–96) and retired from Yale as Street Professor Emeritus of Painting in 2000.

His work has been exhibited in more than 250 exhibitions since 1953 and is represented in the permanent collections of, among others, the Whitney Museum of American Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Yale University Art Gallery, Penn State University, and the RISD Museum. Honors received include a Guggenheim Fellowship (painting), a William A. Clark Award from the Corcoran Gallery of Art, a Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching, and a Distinguished Alumni Award from the University of Wisconsin.

He formerly served on the boards of the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation (New York) and the Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts in Old Lyme, Connecticut.

Yale

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