

# LIGHT FALLING

by Joan Waltemath

When you first enter into James Howell's studio his paintings all appear as grey monochromes, the surfaces of which resist penetration. After a short time the greys begin to separate; one is ever so slightly darker and the other ever so slightly lighter. A series of paintings along a long wall slowly reveals a progression of greys whose subtle differences from each other teeter on the edge of perceptibility.

From the top to the bottom of the paintings lighter melts into darker. This seems at first to be an effect of light falling from the overhead lamps, as we are accustomed to seeing works of art illuminated, but as the eye begins to adjust itself to the range of subtlety that comprises Howell's vocabulary, it becomes apparent that paint is modulating this shift.

Howell creates an experience in which the eye can continue to attenuate itself in response to the subtle variations of lightness and darkness as long as the mind remains attentive. The work becomes a means to measure your response to it. These reflections on Howell's work lead to several realizations.

When Wittgenstein points out in his *Remarks on Colour* that "Grey is not poorly illuminated white." he is speaking to the incredible sensitivity of the eye and its ability to differentiate the quantity of light reflecting off of a surface from that of a shift in its color or tone. Thus, we are able to distinguish grey from a dimly lit white. Howell's paintings seek to find the limits of such differentiation. As soon as the eye registers one level of distinction another one far subtler and previously imperceptible

begins to emerge. The process continues unfolding; and after an hour and a half of engagement what emerges is what we would expect to see in the first glance upon entering an artist's studio - what the artist's work looks like.

The fact that Howell paints the modulation of greys around the edges and onto the sides of his paintings can be read as an intent to align himself with the tradition of concrete painters that established a distinction between "the painted" and the space inherent to painting's classic dialectic of flatness and depth. If Howell simply stopped painting at the edge of the plane he would create a field of illusion by providing a means within the painting itself to contrast and therefore measure the modulation from top to bottom. Not to mention that this would render the modulation immediately visible.

By painting around the edges Howell creates a work that is wholly modulation and thus communicates that his interest is not in illusion but rather through a slight movement he makes us aware of a specific relation between the body, the eye and the plane. This superb detail clarifies a relationship as finely delineated as the modulations themselves, at the same time

it sets Howell apart from many of his contemporaries. While concrete painters like Marcia Hafif or Rudolf de Crignis do not paint the edges of their paintings, Howell must.

Howell's works build significance through our experience in apprehending their inherent movement, a response to a set of carefully calculated percentages of the black, white and umber *paint* that make up Howell's grey light. It's a precisely circumscribed set of limitations. We can begin to know these works only if we stand in their presence and engage all of our senses in the experience of seeing them. They are what they are, not more or less and neither can they be something else.

Here is a world full of dialectical arabesques so simple and then similarly so complex that it's navigation demands an extraordinary level of precision. Howell creates paintings that are so nearly identical to each other that they seem at first to be reproductions, yet at the same time they are extremely resistant to reproduction.

To make clear the fact that you cannot see Howell's paintings through a photographic reproduction it is useful to consider that a camera can not make the distinction between light falling from above to illuminate the paintings and a gradation of values on the surface. A photograph will render the modulation as an illusion of light. Because photographic documentation of the paintings cannot recreate the necessary adjustments that happen in the eye when apprehending them, the slight movement, which Howell describes as his subject, is absent from the frozen frame.

We can extend the notion of irreproducibility in another way. What you first experience in Howell's paintings doesn't happen again in the same way. In other words once you know the modulations exist you see them; it's only when you don't know they are there that they emerge from the monochrome field over a period of time.

Ad Reinhardt's paintings demand something similar yet different. At first they appear to be all black, then slowly a cross or a 9 square grid emerges in deep purples and midnight indigos. The painting continues to unfold for as long as you look. If you look away for any length of time the painting will once again appear black and the unfolding process begins anew.

After we have invested the time in being able to see the gradations in Howell's work they remain within our field of vision. We look away and look back and the distinctions we have found remain visible. At the same time they keep unfolding as the visibility of their modulation continues to increase.

To remark upon this fact is to acknowledge it as a phenomenon; seeing is a function of both knowing and of time. Furthermore, by creating a work that reveals the differences in what we see when we know, Howell insists that we cannot separate knowing from seeing.

Howell's drawings give us clues about how this phenomenon is achieved by laying out a simple biaxial structure with the information in two different forms. On the left we see three columns that detail in numbers the percentages of white, black and umber

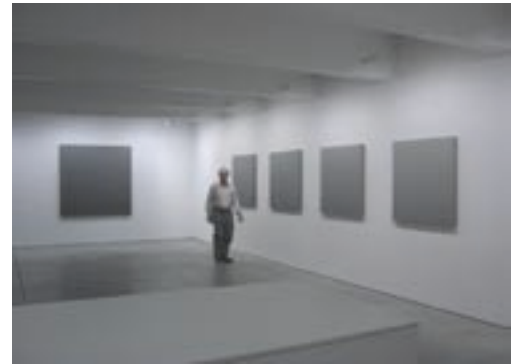
respectively. On the right two parabolic curves are framed by two straight lines. The area between the curves provides a visual rendering of how these same percentages were achieved.

Howell speaks of his techniques of modulating greys in terms that belie his extensive investment in the problem. In his search for the finest possible distinction between the 28 horizontal bands of grey that make up these paintings, Howell discovered it necessary to compensate for the relative warmth of white and coolness of black. Because as Howell explains “white is yellow and black is blue”, he began using umber to equalize the temperature difference. He has found the optimal means to calibrate a precise mixture of his three components using a series of parabolic curves based on three points that set the percentages of white, black and umber in each band so the temperature of the greys will remain constant as the shift in values unfolds.

Howell's systems are complex and heady and expand through every aspect of his artistic practice. For those with a strong mathematical inclination a delve into the magic of parabolic curves, which account for the imperceptible modulation of the paint, will no doubt reveal the genius behind this obsession with rendering light moving slowly towards a slightly darker shade.

On the other hand Howell's endeavour carries with it the unmistakable aura of Zeno's paradox, where each distance halved results in the next distance being halved in a progression that can only end in infinity. It is this rational absurdity that keeps Howell's work engaged even as it serves as a deep antipode to the mediated momentariness of our times.

New York City, 2004



48.17 - 57.04      11 Dec 03  
Acrylic on aluminium  
15.25 x 15.25 cm  
6 x 6 in

88.32 - 91.97      26 Mar 04  
Acrylic on aluminium  
15.25 x 15.25 cm  
6 x 6 in

68.70 - 78.41      16 Dec 02  
Acrylic on canvas  
63.5 x 63.5 cm  
25 x 25 in



48.17            06 Feb 04  
Acrylic on canvas  
101.5 x 101.5 cm  
40 x 40 in

68.70 - 78.41            20 Mar 03  
Acrylic on canvas  
39.5 x 39.5 cm  
15.5 x 15.5 in

96.66            06 Jun 01  
Acrylic on canvas  
101.5 x 101.5 cm  
40 x 40 in

54.18            16 Mar 04  
Acrylic on canvas  
101.5 x 101.5 cm  
40 x 40 in



96.12            24 Aug 03  
Acrylic on canvas  
167.5 x 167.5 cm  
66 x 66 in

68.70 - 78.41    20 Mar 03  
Acrylic on canvas  
39.5 x 39.5 cm  
15.5 x 15.5 in



68.70 - 78.41      08 Apr 03  
Acrylic on canvas  
25.5 x 25.5 cm  
10 x 10 in



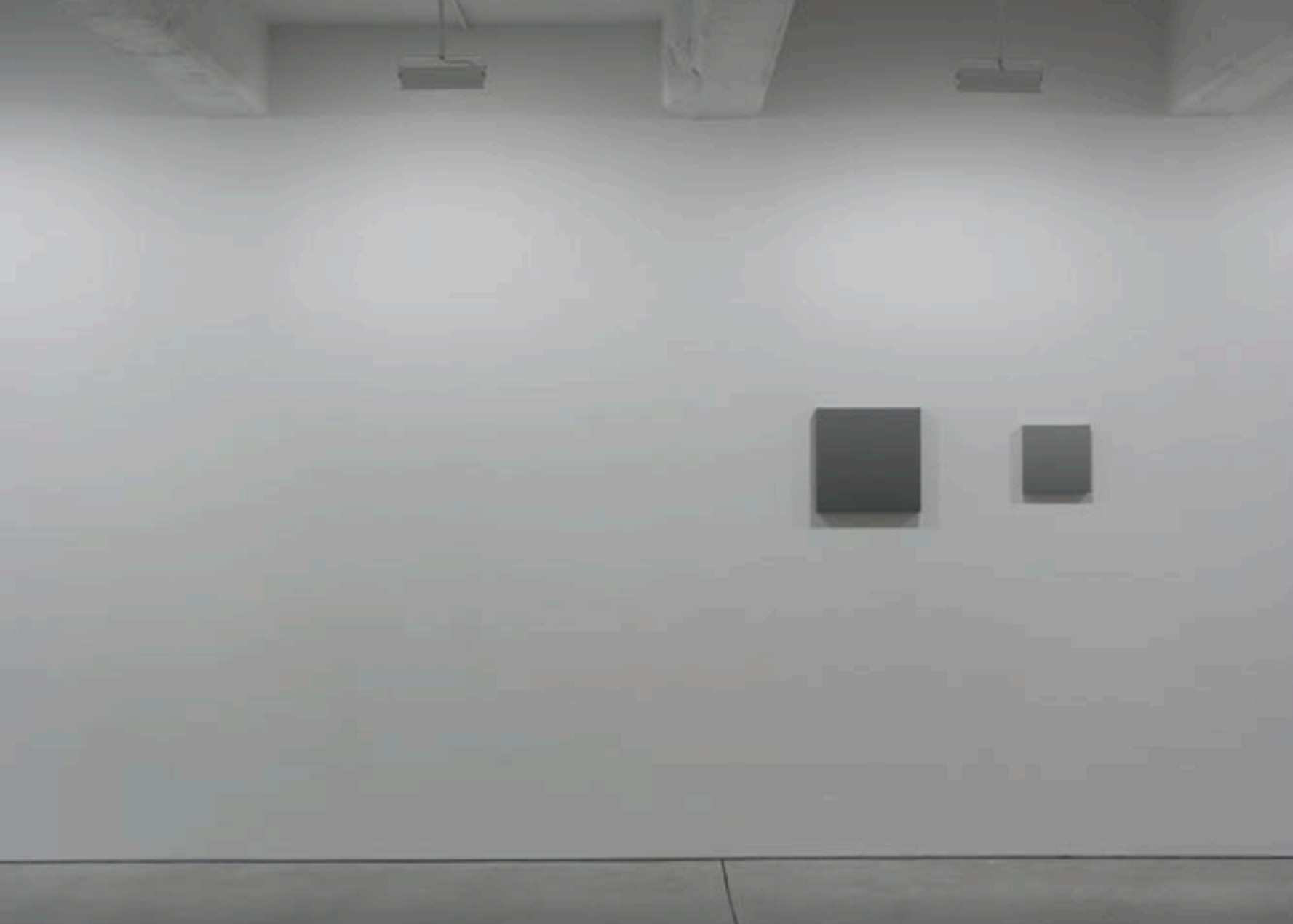
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Acrylic on canvas  
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25 x 25 in

94.75 - 96.66      19 Oct 03  
Acrylic on canvas  
167.5 x 167.5 cm  
66 x 66 in



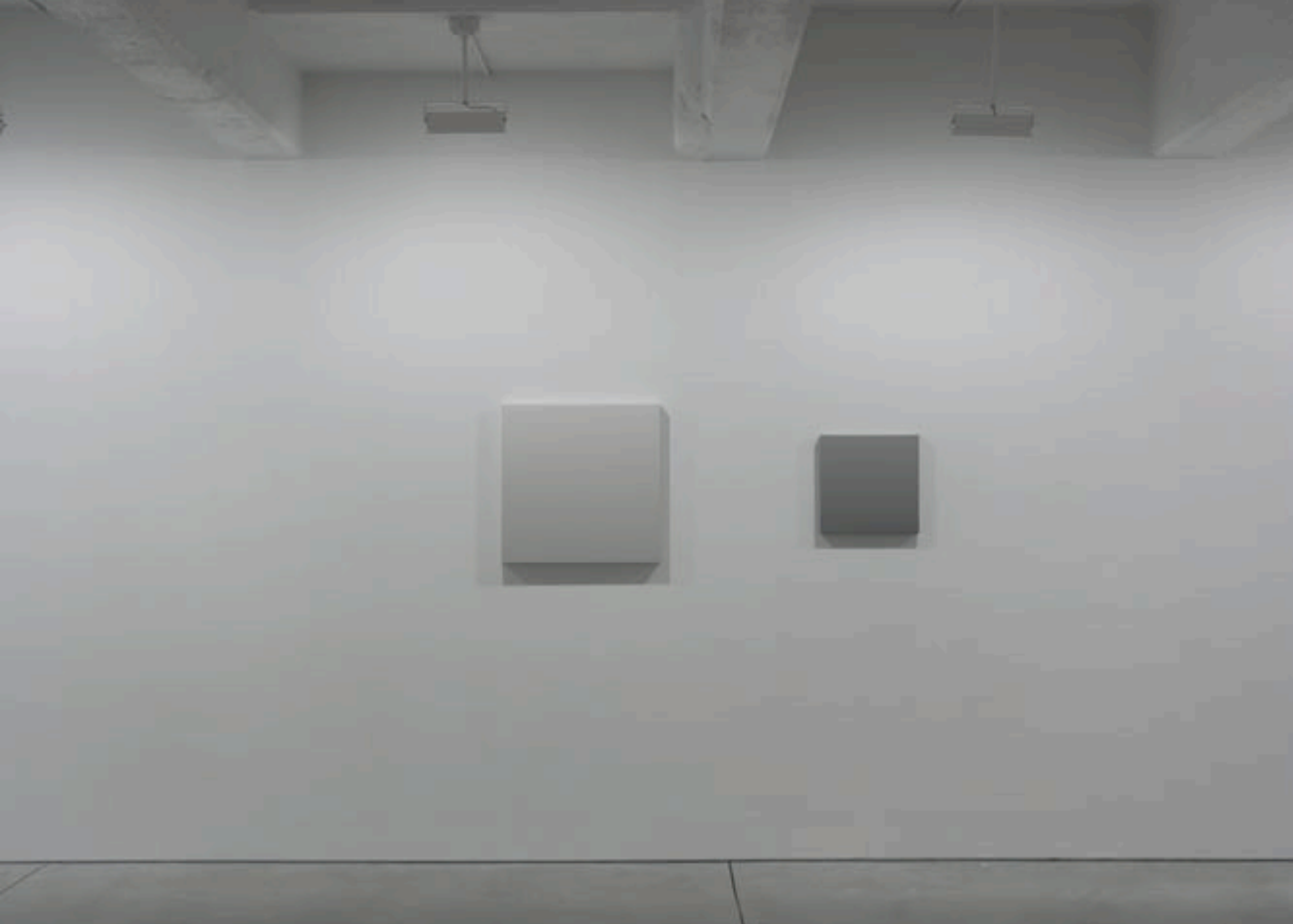
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Acrylic on canvas  
39.5 x 39.5 cm  
15.5 x 15.5 in

68.70      27 Apr 04  
Acrylic on canvas  
25.5 x 25.5 cm  
10 x 10 in



96.66      02 Aug 03  
Acrylic on canvas  
63.5 x 63.5 cm  
25 x 25 in

68.70      24 Apr 04  
Acrylic on canvas  
39.5 x 39.5 cm  
15.5 x 15.5 in



94.75 - 96.66  
Acrylic on canvas  
167.5 x 167.5  
66 x 66 in

19 Oct 03



48.17            26 Nov 00  
Acrylic on canvas  
167.5 x 167.5  
66 x 66 in

68.70 - 78.41    25 Feb 03  
Acrylic on canvas  
101.5 x 101.5 cm  
40 x 40 in



61.14            07 Apr 01  
Acrylic on canvas  
101.5 x 101.5 cm  
40 x 40 in

93.47 - 96.66    27 Nov 01  
Acrylic on canvas  
63.5 x 63.5 cm  
25 x 25 in

68.70            08 Sep 02  
Acrylic on canvas  
25.5 x 25.5 cm  
10 x 10 in



81.21            05 Nov 00  
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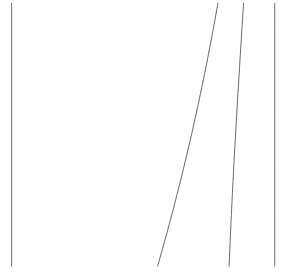
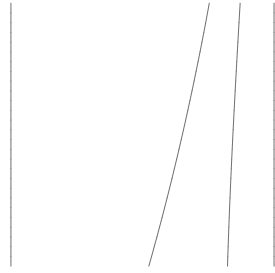
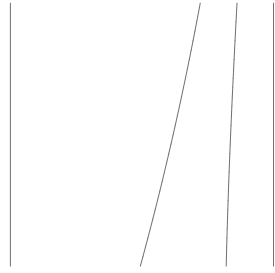
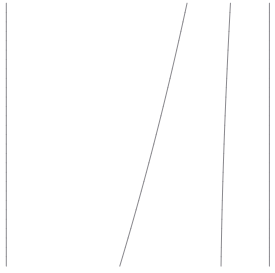
83.80 - 90.25    01 Jul 02  
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25.5 x 25.5 cm  
10 x 10 in

61.14            25 Mar 01  
Acrylic on canvas  
167.5 x 167.5  
66 x 66 in





68.70 - 78.41



## JAMES HOWELL

Born 1935 in Kansas City, MO  
Lives and works in New York City, NY

### EDUCATION

Nelson Art Institute, Kansas City, MO  
Stanford University, Palo Alto CA:  
- B. Arch (5-year Art and Architecture) 1960  
- B.A. Literature 1957  
University of Washington, Seattle, WA  
Art Student's League, Woodstock, NY

### AWARDS

1970  
Westchester Museum Annual, New York  
Juror: Dore Ashton  
1961  
Humanities Prize for the Arts, Stanford University  
Palo Alto, CA  
1953  
Art Prize, The Hill School, Pottstown, PA

### SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2004  
Charlotte Jackson Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM  
Gallery N. von Bartha Contemporary Art, London, UK  
[catalogue]  
2000  
Galerie von Bartha, Basel, Switzerland  
Charlotte Jackson Fine Art, Santa Fe NM [catalogue]  
1998  
STIL-American Fine Art, Düsseldorf, Germany  
1995  
Sharon Truax Fine Art, Venice, CA [catalogue]  
Charlotte Jackson Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM [catalogue]  
1993  
Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle,  
WA, "New Works" series  
1992  
Windows Art Gallery, Seattle, WA  
1990  
Wagner Gallery, Tacoma, WA  
1982  
Gump's Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
1980  
Foster/White Gallery, Seattle, WA  
1979 & 1978  
Kiku Gallery, Seattle, WA  
1976  
University Unitarian Fine Arts Gallery, Seattle, WA  
Keller Gallery, Salem, OR  
1974  
Linda Farris Gallery, Seattle, WA  
1971  
Polly Friedlander Gallery, Seattle, WA  
Kenady Gallery, Gig Harbor, WA

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2004  
Gallery N. von Bartha Contemporary Art, London, UK  
Albright Knox Museum Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY  
Charlotte Jackson Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM  
Galerie von Bartha, Basel, Switzerland  
Galerie von Bartha, TEFAF Maastricht, Netherlands  
2003  
Charlotte Jackson Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM  
Galerie von Bartha, Basel, Switzerland  
Conny Dietzschold Gallery, Sydney, Australia  
Gallery N. von Bartha Contemporary Art, London, UK  
Las Vegas Art Museum, Las Vegas, NV  
2002  
Gallery N. von Bartha Contemporary Art, London, UK  
Charlotte Jackson Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM  
Galerie von Bartha, Basel, Switzerland  
Florence Lynch Gallery, New York, NY  
W. H. Kramarsky, New York, NY  
Conny Dietzschold Gallery, Sydney, Australia  
2001 and 2000  
Charlotte Jackson Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM  
W. H. Kramarsky, New York, NY  
Galerie von Bartha, Basel, Switzerland  
Sharon Truax Fine Art, Venice, CA  
1999  
Landesgalerie Oberösterreich Landesmuseum, Linz,  
Austria [catalogue]  
Die Weisse Galerie, Köln, Germany [catalogue]  
STIL-American Fine Art, Düsseldorf, Germany  
Charlotte Jackson Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM  
W. H. Kramarsky, New York, NY  
Galerie von Bartha, Basel, Switzerland  
Sharon Truax Fine Art, Venice, CA  
West Greenwich Village Studio Tour, New York, NY

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STIL-American Fine Art, Düsseldorf, Germany  
Charlotte Jackson Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM  
W. H. Kramarsky, New York, NY  
Basel Art Fair, Galerie von Bartha, Basel, Switzerland  
Sharon Truax Fine Art, Venice, CA
- 1997 & 1996  
Charlotte Jackson Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM  
Die Weisse Galerie, Köln, Germany  
W. H. Kramarsky, New York, NY  
Sharon Truax Fine Art, Venice, CA
- 1995  
Sharon Truax Fine Art, Venice, CA  
Charlotte Jackson Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM  
Venice Art Walk, Venice, CA
- 1994  
Charlotte Jackson Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM  
Venice Art Walk, Venice, CA
- 1992  
Turner/Krull Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
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*James Howell*

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