

I wasn't ready for Hans Hofmann's paintings when I first saw them in American art magazines in the late 1960s. I remember thinking they were too strident, too muscular, and that I didn't like them.

A few years later I saw some in a Cork Street gallery; I stayed a while to have a good look. They seemed powerful, and although still shocking in their rawness, they were inviting, more accessible; I was able to read them, move around in their spaces, entering, re-entering. Painter friends were discussing them, Geoff Rigden in particular, and Alan Gouk was writing about them. I sought out more after that in New York and Toronto, and by 1988, when John Hoyland RA curated a great show at the Tate, 'Hans Hofmann: Late Paintings', I was a full convert. Colour as form, the potential for colour relationships to make light, space and temperature, structuring a world, culminating in the vitality and *aliveness* of a painting, or as Hofmann put it, The Real. It made sense, visually, emotionally and intellectually. It related to my growing adoration of Matisse, whose paintings showed how intelligence and the senses could be in accord.

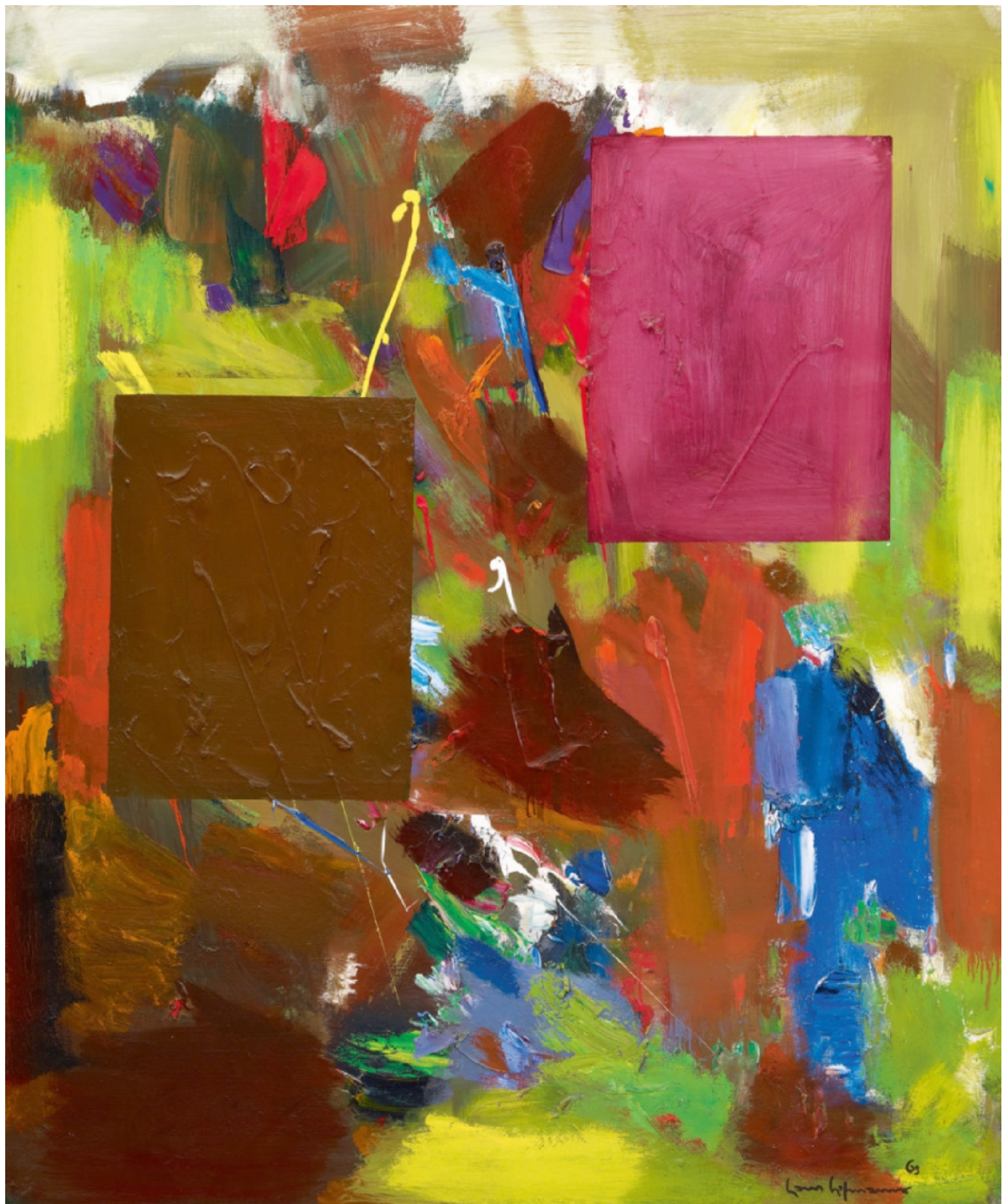
Hofmann's life is terrific to read about – a European arriving in America in the 1930s, the schools he set up in New York and Provincetown (many of the artists in the RA show were his students), his theory of painting, evolved from observing the world and analysing the Old Masters, and his sheer, galvanising, gutsy energy. Combining the lessons of Cubism with pure colour structuring took some nerve, some determination. When he gave up teaching, aged 78, there was a great outpouring of work, tender, raucous and everything between.

The title of the painting (pictured), the later of two in the exhibition, is a kind of summation: *In Sober Ecstasy*. It was painted in 1965, the year before he died, aged 85. The confrontational rectangles are familiar devices, but they appear always in new roles, in fresh pictorial dramas. These two relate closely to each other, in dark-toned hues, earthy, rosy. They anchor the eye then slowly shift in and out of a painting space that is chopped and churned by touches and traces and flashes of light. These look impulsively applied in a fast and furious way, but their rhythms and relationships are as precise, inventive and necessary as in any great composition, in any language; Miles Davis and Beethoven both come to mind.

Mali Morris RA

Hans Hofmann, *In Sober Ecstasy*, 1965.

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Correction: written before paintings in exhibition had been confirmed - there are in fact two by Hofmann on show, one early, and this late one.