

ABOUT WARREN ROHRER

“I always am aware of the feelings I have about the Lancaster County landscape, that while it at times is very beautiful it sometimes gnaws from a different perspective--both being real responses.”

Warren Rohrer, March 11, 1993

Warren Rohrer’s early life, growing up in an agrarian Mennonite community where the emphasis on collective identity conflicted with an assertion of individuality, is the stuff of myth. Ironically, his decision to remain in the rural community of Lancaster County rather than flee to an art world that was decidedly urban and increasingly international afforded the uniqueness he so passionately desired. He discovered in his heritage the basis for his artistic originality in a modernist vocabulary.

Born in Smoketown, Pennsylvania, near Lancaster in 1927, Rohrer was raised by devout Mennonite farmers whose families had worked the land nearly continuously since emigrating from Europe in the early 1700s. Rohrer’s decision to become an artist meant flouting family and community expectations that he would become a farmer and minister. Founded on the premises of peace and nonconformity, Mennonite culture rejected engagement with the so-called “worldly world” in an effort to create an ideal Christian society on earth. Despite being less strictly separatist than the Amish, the Mennonites still cultivated a self-contained universe, disengaged from many modern customs and values. In a 1991 talk to a Mennonite audience, Rohrer explained his decision to become an artist: “The celebrated practice of nonconformity did not seem to allow me the right of individuality.”

Following his graduation with a degree in Bible studies in 1950 from Eastern Mennonite College, Rohrer took art courses at Madison College (now James Madison University), but his first formal training as a painter occurred under the tutelage of Hobson Pittman (1899 – 1972), a Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts instructor who ran a legendary summer program at Pennsylvania State College. Within only a few years one of Rohrer’s paintings was chosen for inclusion in the 1955 Carnegie International exhibition in Pittsburgh.

In 1961 he moved with his wife Jane and their young sons, Jon and Dean, to a 12-acre farm in Christiana, near his birthplace, to make the landscape of his youth his subject. Over the next two decades, working in a converted barn located between an apple orchard and a pond, Rohrer invented a distinctive vocabulary for capturing the spirit and sensations of this place. In 1963, at the age of 36, Rohrer had his first one-person exhibition at the Makler Gallery, the Philadelphia gallery presenting the work of Milton Avery, Alexander Calder, and Mark Rothko, among others.

In 1972, a group of supporters from Lancaster County sponsored a trip for the artist to live and paint in Greece, Italy, France and Holland. The trip culminated with visits to retrospective exhibitions of the work of the American painters Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris, respectively. Rohrer later described his travel as a time when he was debating “what kind of painter I want to be.” On his return, he painted only in a square format of 60, 66 or 72 inches. This change occurred at a time when the grid was a rising format among many contemporary artists, prominent among them the painter Agnes Martin.

Rohrer’s style underwent another change in 1977, after experiencing new landscapes during a summer spent as visiting artist at Emma Lake Workshop, the Saskatchewan outpost of modernist painting previously visited by Barnett Newman and Clement Greenberg. His layers of paint became more complex as he modified many of the landscape references in his work and became more concerned with the perceptual effects of a painting.

In 1984 the artist left the countryside and moved to the former studio of Violet Oakley in the Chestnut Hill section of Philadelphia, a dramatic cathedral-like space where Oakley had painted the murals for Pennsylvania’s State Capitol in Harrisburg. On a weekly basis he drove from his home to a field in Lancaster County. Over the years he made hundreds of photographs and also made sketches in this holly field by the Conestoga River, near where his ancestors had first settled. In the ten *Field: Language* paintings he made in 1990 and 1991, the artist drew upon these photos and sketches. By the 1990s, Rohrer explicitly described his life’s work as an investigation of origins,

linking the local wellspring of his painting in Lancaster to the very process of artistic self-invention.

An influential figure in the Philadelphia arts community, Rohrer was much beloved by his many students, and his work was supported by area collectors throughout his career. He taught life drawing and still life painting from 1958-1972 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Throughout his lifetime he frequently visited and brought students to see favorite works in the Museum collection, such as Rogier van der Weyden's great old master painting *The Crucifixion* (1460-64), Cy Twombly's *Fifty Days at Iliam* (1977-78), Anselm Kiefer's *Nigredo* (1984), and the paintings of Jasper Johns. Rohrer was a valued member of the faculty of the Philadelphia College of Arts, now the University of the Arts, from 1974 to 1992. He died on February 21, 1995.

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