

Jenn and Tonic



My interest in Abstract Expressionism began on a high school field trip to New York City in 1971 when I was psychically jolted, quite unexpectedly, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Our teacher took us to the Met to view a retrospective exhibit of the history of painting from the Renaissance through Surrealism and Modernism. We were not art students, and we did not want to go to the museum. We were in New York to see Broadway – Elaine Stritch in *Company*, Lauren Bacall in *Applause*, the original cast of *Hair*, Melba Moore in *Purlie*, and several other shows! I walked hurriedly through the exhibit with my high school friends, anxious to get to the end so that we could go to pizza lunch at Mama Leone's. As we made our way into the final gallery, a huge canvas covering an entire wall startled us. The canvas was filled with swirls of color, random drippings, and splashes of paint. We all laughed at this mess, and we mused aloud why it would be included in a major art exhibit. We rushed to the exit to meet our chaperon for lunch.



72" x 60" acrylic on canvas

As I reached the turnstile, a magnetic pull from the painting caused me to freeze. I realized that I had to go back into the gallery and investigate this strange painting; I asked my teacher to let me stay in the museum. He agreed, but my friends urged me to come out. The tug-of-war ended as I sent them ahead and returned to the painting. I walked alone and stood face to face with myself before Jackson Pollock's painting *Autumn Rhythm*. The intensity of the emotions of this artist touched a nerve in my adolescent confusion. I sensed the pain of the artist's suffering which seemed to parallel my own inner turmoil. Pollock's frustration with social structures reverberated with my own indignation about the Vietnam War, racism, and social injustice. Pollock's battle with alcoholism permeated the canvas and caused me to reflect on my father's struggle with this disease. I felt the artist's despair and a premonition of my father's suicide which was not unlike Pollock's tragic death. Questions of sexual identity and subliminal eroticism were buried in the layers of paint. I did not know Jackson Pollock at that moment in 1971; and, in fact, I had never heard of Pollock in my lifetime. But I intuitively experienced his life emotions as

I encountered *Autumn Rhythm*. My connection with Pollock was visceral and not intellectual. Just as knowing in biblical literature refers to sexual intimacy, there was a bond of emotions that intensified as I stood before Pollock's painting. I became the artist through his painting as his journey and my journey were united in a syncretical moment. I was overwhelmed. I jotted down the name of the artist and the painting so that I could read about it when I got home to New Orleans. Hundreds of people must have passed through the gallery while I spent an hour or more in silent awe. Time stood still for me. I was not a painter yet, and my formal study of art would come later in college. When I reluctantly left the museum and caught up with my friends, I could not explain the mysterious events that occurred as I stood before *Autumn Rhythm*. I experienced a phenomenological moment of revelation and personal understanding at the Met in 1971 that, like the beauty and intensity of nature in autumn, defines my life. Jackson Pollock became my muse on that day. He has inspired my life and my art for over 40 years. Studying the techniques of the abstract expressionist style of painting or the biography of Jackson Pollock could never have replaced my syncretical experience in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. However, following my encounter with *Autumn Rhythm*, I began to devour every biography, text, and film available on Pollock, Lee Krasner, Willem de Kooning, Elaine de Kooning, Wassily Kandinsky, Franz Kline, and other abstract expressionists. A central dimension of my work insists that the experience of gentle breezes, hurricane force winds, disturbance, perturbation, contemporaneity, and syncretical moments inspire us to explore our identity and ignite a passion for proleptic understanding. The aesthetic dimension of my work began at the Metropolitan Museum of Art standing in awe before Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm*. The meaning of art is not logically ordered and waiting to be discovered, rather it is constructed in experiences of the whole body. The intellect may raise all kinds of questions — and it is perfectly right for it to do so — but to expect a final answer from the intellect is asking too much of it, for this is not in the nature of the intellect. The answer lies deeply buried under the bedrock of our being (Suzuki, Fromm, and DeMartino, 1960, pp. 48-49). *Autumn Rhythm* did not provide answers to my intellect, rather it touched the bedrock of my being and initiated a search for meaning and understanding, not only about art history, abstract expressionism, and Jackson Pollock, but most significantly about the purpose of life, the reason for suffering, the tragedy of alcoholism and suicide, my sexual identity, and the relationship between inner confusion and external turmoil. My visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, it turns out, was not simply a retrospective art history lesson. The experience, in John Dewey's sense, was a border crossing, a seminal moment, a gestalt, and a syncretical event that initiated a lifelong journey into the realm of contemporary art and postmodern living. This experience created a context within which my future paintings would emerge. My postmodern sensibilities, ironically, were nurtured in an encounter with the apex of modernism. In this playful spirit I titled the painting *Jenn and Tonic* because my student at Texas A&M Jenn Milam helped me to install the painting after it was complete. While we were installing, she asked about the title of my new painting. We had been drinking Gin and Tonic at a party earlier in the evening, so I said "Why not, *Jenn and Tonic*." The whimsical title stuck, and I think of Jenn (now a professor in Ohio) and all of my students when I look at this painting.