

## Herbert Creecy: Paintings from the 1990s

by Debra Wolf

Vibrant color, dense patterning, and exploration of surface form fundamental aspects of the late Herbert Creecy's four decades of creating art. "Herbert Creecy: Paintings from the 1990s" exhibits more than a dozen large-scale canvases highlighting this singular voice in 20th century abstraction.

### Roots

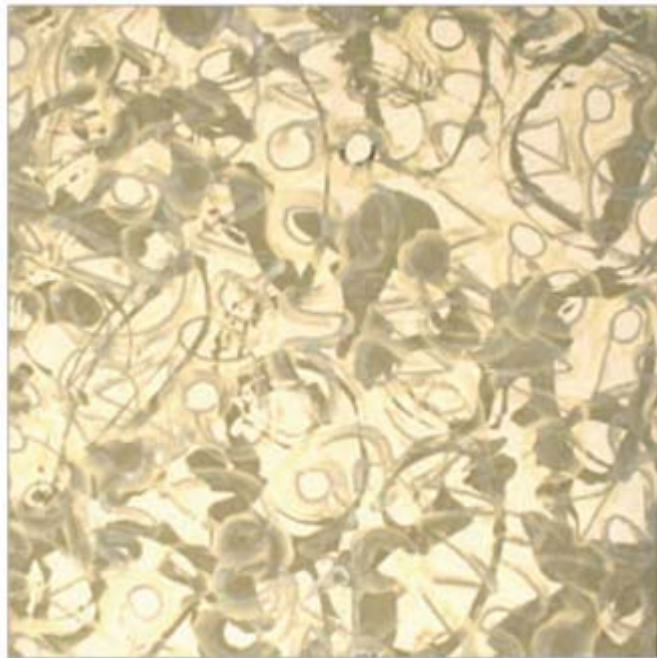
Born in 1939 in Virginia, Herbert Creecy was raised in Atlanta, Georgia. Endowed with talent and drive, he made the most of his opportunities at a young age. After attending the University of Alabama for several years, Creecy returned to Georgia to study at the Atlanta College of Art, where he received his degree in 1964, and was given an unprecedented one-man show at the High Museum of Art in the same year. Following his graduation, he received a French Government Fellowship to study at the prestigious Hayter Atelier in Paris.

The New York art scene beckoned. Creecy's paintings were acquired by museums as early as the 1970s, as he exhibited steadily in both group and solo shows, primarily in the Southeast, but also at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in New York, New Orleans, and in Europe. But the artist chose to remain in Georgia, where he painted, sculpted, taught, and eventually installed himself in the rural community of Barnesville in 1979. There, he transformed an old cotton warehouse into both residence and workplace, his home base for the next 24 years, until his death in 2003.

### Process

The Barnesville studio ideally suited Creecy's highly physical process. Surfaces told the tale, ranging from subtly layered to stridently impastoed as Creecy stroked, splattered, collaged, raked, dripped, and sprayed. His no-holds-barred gestural approach and large-scale format garnered him frequent comparisons to Jackson Pollock.

But Creecy's influences ran broad and deep, reflecting a passion for nature, an acute awareness of his environment, and examination of issues that preoccupied both modern and post-modern abstractionists. He explored space and color, pushed materials to new effects, and sought to engage the viewer both conceptually and viscerally. The unconscious, the emotive, the act itself of painting – these elements figured heavily as well, taking a cue from European surrealism and post-war abstraction, as well as American abstraction expressionism.



***Whistling Wind*** (1999)  
Mixed media, 68 x 68 inches

In the 1970s and early 1980s, charged lines, squiggling curves, and flirtations with figuration filled jazzy and lush imaginary landscapes. The artist frequently opted for bright, confectionary hues

that became part of his signature look. The physicality of his process was clearly visible. So, too, was the mix of moods he poured out onto canvas in sprawling, biomorphic forms that seemed to reveal eyes, birds, and colliding fragments of earth and sky.

Constantly revisiting his images, Creecy seemed to hold little as static or sacrosanct. By the 1990s, he was surrounded by canvases. They were stacked, stored or laid out on the floor of his studio. Many hovered in a perpetual unfinished state; Creecy was known to paint over seemingly completed works, and to slice apart others, layering bits and pieces onto newer works in process.

### Lyricism

Although his style and compositions from the 1970s and early 1980s were easily recognized and highly praised, Creecy never ceased experimenting. He tested palettes, periodically incorporated fragments of figuration, varied the sculptural quality of his surfaces, and investigated unusual ways to lay down paint.

In the late 1980s, Creecy embarked on a new direction, as curvy, all-over patterning emerged in a connective and fluid structure. This was a changing voice – more lyrical, more streamlined, but no less expressive. Its visual ambiguity was purposeful, fertile, and referential. Circular shapes rippled through these compositions, teeming like mouths and beaks, eyes and heads, cells and blossoms.



**Valley and Cloud** (1998)  
Mixed media, 77 x 66 inches

Echoing earlier motifs (in more explicitly abstracted form), these new compositions played with metaphor and perception. Swerving contours and abutting, angular passages had always been part of Creecy's visual alphabet, but now his paintings roiled with a tempered turbulence, rhythmic and sensuous, set against varying backgrounds. Areas of canvas were left raw. Chromatic choices were alternately vibrant and somber, expansive and reductive. Spiraling, at times near-calligraphic brushstrokes destabilized compositions of interlocking patterning. Formidable in scale, some of these works stretched to 12 feet wide and 9 feet tall. Their stature demanded participation from the audience, forcing the viewer to move back, approach, and walk alongside, inviting the eye to slowly navigate complex and nuanced surfaces.

By the mid 1990s, Creecy favored this outpouring of curvaceous patterning, diversified paint application, and a stunning array of irregular rings, circles, spirals and coils in a breadth of palettes. In the *Backside of Chaos* series (1991 – 1999), he focused on red, blue, and black, creating powerful studies of color and movement in imposing size and horizontal format. In *Whistling Wind* (1999), he explored an ethereal, icy palette of ivory and silvery grays with tangled forms darting and tumbling across the picture plane. Another untitled 1999 work shimmers in peach, rose, and a top surface dabbled and blown with encaustic.

One untitled 1999 painting exemplifies the mastery of color and texture achieved during this decade. It is an undulating image of positive and negative space, its looping white ribbons

streaming across a rich surface of lapis, emerald, and ruby. Its energy is joyful: the canvas is thickly layered with splatters, drips, gobs and furrows.

By the late 1990s, Creecy had perfected his technique of using an air compressor to move material, fanning circular regions of dribbled paint and encaustic into gently flaring shapes. His compositions continued to reflect emotion and vitality, but the frenetic edge seen in the 1970s and 1980s had softened.

1998's *Valley and Cloud* is a spectacular combination of papery texture, biomorphic form, diagonal movement, and electric color; Creecy's glittering jewel-toned blues, violets, and greens are punctuated with washes of yellow and red in a composition that is animistic, organic, and jubilant.

Evoking a dramatically different mood, an eerie and elegant painting from 1999, also untitled, conjures a geological formation. Creecy's pocked and liquid circles blend with subtle linear elements in what appears as an exquisite exercise in slow motion. Charcoal and gray predominate, flecked with mossy tones and red. There is no exuberance here; rather, there is weight – archaeological, atmospheric, and psychological – yet another example of the artist's versatility.



**Untitled** (1999)  
Mixed media, 90 x 72 ¾ inches

earlier periods. Yet in these later canvases, we see the continuing development of his ideas and approach. We sense the passion of an intuitive, sophisticated and savvy painter whose abstractions moderated energy with restraint, and emotion with process. While history has yet to write fully the story of this fiercely independent artist, one thing is certain – his legacy is luxuriant.

### Legacy

Herbert Creecy's works are displayed in public and private collections throughout the U.S. and abroad. His paintings are included in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia in Atlanta, the Indianapolis Museum of Art in Indianapolis, and the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Florida, among others. He received numerous awards and honors throughout his forty-year career.

Creecy charted his own course during his lifetime, eschewing the New York art scene. He created what he wanted, where he wanted. He produced a vast, varied and undeniably beautiful *oeuvre*, still to be fully studied.

Herbert Creecy's paintings from the 1990s are often overlooked in favor of more familiar imagery from

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