

ABSTRACTING NATURE'S STRUCTURE

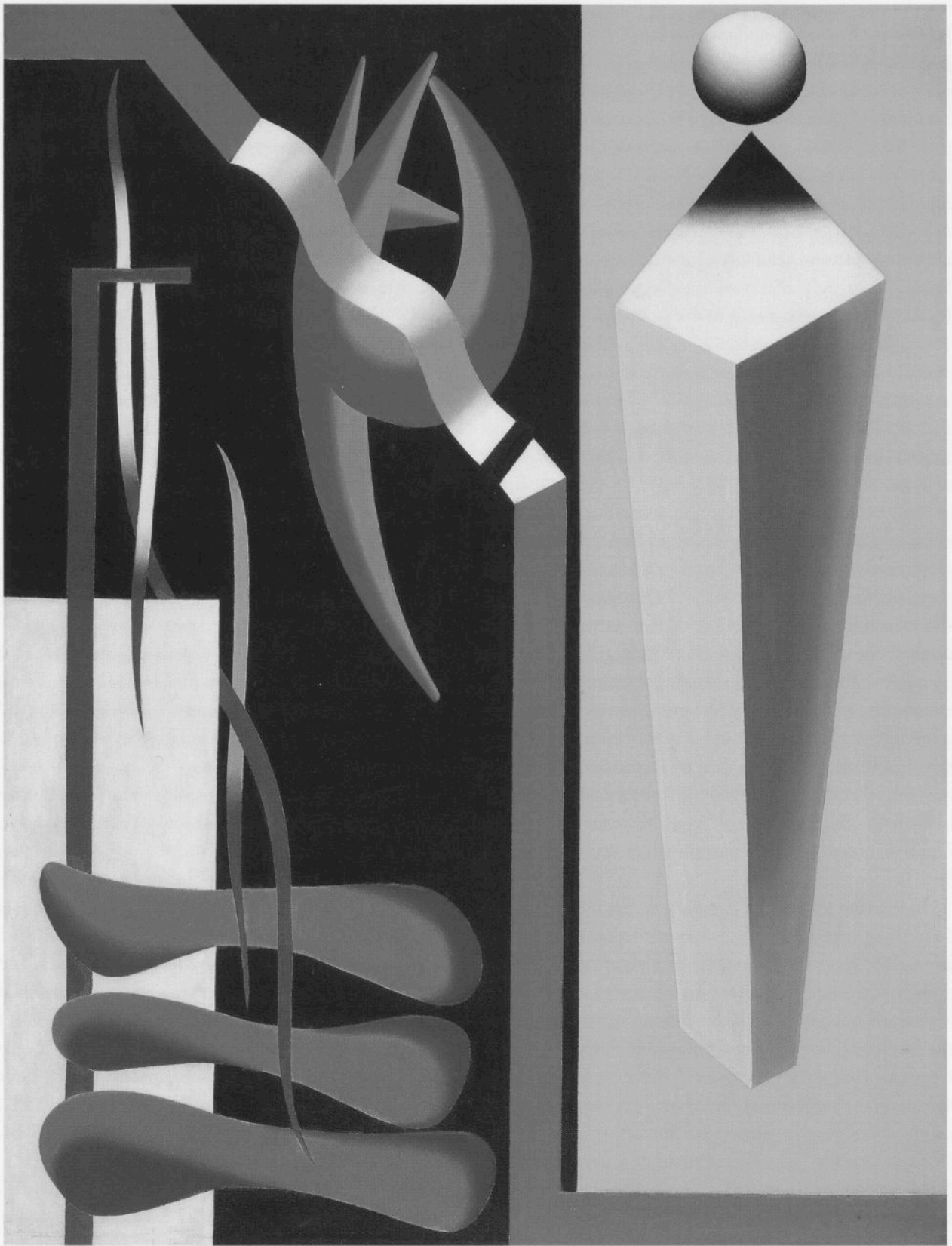
Charles Biederman's uncompromising commitment to modernist abstraction in the 1930s put him in the vanguard of American art. However, unlike many artists for whom abstraction was a means to transcend the real world and thus represent the spiritual or the unconscious, Biederman believed abstraction was best suited to rendering the natural, material world. In 1933 he wrote, "I believe, if a man could live long enough painting abstractions, he would finally end up with nature (I mean realism). He would eventually be forced back to nature, to study nature which gives the painter, I think a more complete understanding of abstraction."¹ That is, for Biederman, abstraction ultimately led to nature, and nature in turn provided the ultimate source of abstraction. However, Biederman was never interested in representing a recognizable image of nature, either on a macro- or a microscopic level. Instead, over the course of his life, he sought to create an abstract art that enabled the viewer to experience the very structure of nature.

Born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, Karel (Charles) Joseph Biederman (1906–2004) apprenticed in a commercial art studio before attending the Art Institute of Chicago School (1926–29), where, in addition to enrolling in studio classes, he studied the museum's impressive collection of modern European art.² Inspired by the post-impressionist paintings of Paul Cézanne, and with the guidance of his painting instructor John Norton, Biederman set out to represent what he called "the different forms of structural expression."³ At a time when realist and expressionist styles prevailed, Biederman experimented with abstraction, and, in so doing, often incurred the scorn of his fellow students. Nonetheless, he persisted, at first executing Cézannesque still lifes and then, after moving to New York in 1934, graduating to the style of those European modernists who had

built on the achievements of Cézanne. As a result, by the mid-1930s Biederman had absorbed the lessons of the most accomplished abstract painters of the previous decades, including Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Joan Miró, Fernand Léger, and Piet Mondrian. A number of his abstract paintings were included in an important exhibition in 1936 at A. E. Gallatin's Gallery of Living Art called *Five Contemporary American Concretionists: Biederman, Calder, Ferren, Morris, Shaw*, which showcased the work of these most advanced American modernists.⁴

That same year, Biederman visited the *Cubism and Abstract Art* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art and was inspired to travel to Paris, where he believed he would find a vibrant center of modern art. There he met the artists whose work he had studied, including Mondrian, Léger, and Miró, as well as Jean Arp, Constantin Brancusi, and Antoine Pevsner. In Paris, Biederman continued his quest for a form of abstraction that would satisfactorily render the structure of nature, but he soon concluded that the art scene in Paris was ill-suited for him to achieve his much desired breakthrough. Significantly, before he returned to the United States, he attended the 1937 Paris World's Fair, where he found himself more interested in the technology displays than the art exhibitions—a personal insight that led him to abandon painting altogether because, as he put it, "the old methods of painting and sculpting have reached the end of their usefulness."⁵ He returned to New York City, then moved back to Chicago, but in neither location did he find a supportive art community. In 1942 he settled permanently in Red Wing, Minnesota, where, for the rest of his long life he made relief sculptures in a style he called Structurism and published dense theoretic texts explaining his art.⁶

Paris 140, January 14, 1937 (1937), with its title taken from



90. Charles Biederman (1906–2004), *Paris 140, January 14, 1937, 1937*
Oil on canvas, 45 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 35 in. (116.2 × 88.9 cm)
The Harriet and Maurice Gregg Collection
of American Abstract Art, 2005.58

the place and date of its creation, is of interest for having been executed just months before Biederman renounced painting entirely. In it, the artist marshals a variable vocabulary of biomorphic forms, geometric shapes, and rectilinear planes of color. In the lower left corner of the painting, three blue, twisted lozenges float one above the other. From there, our eye is drawn upward by silver-metallic-colored filaments that extend toward the top of the canvas. At the upper left corner, a blue stripe begins a diagonal descent, alternately turning white and red as it flutters over two red biomorphic crescent forms before snapping apart. The broken stripe continues in blue to the painting's bottom edge. The right side of the composition is dominated by a prismatic or crystalline form and a single sphere. Biederman has made his forms appear volumetric by modeling them with light and shadow, and thus they seem to hover against the background of evenly painted, monochromatic planes of white, black, and yellow.

Biederman identified *Paris 140, January 14, 1937* as one of a series of paintings that served at the time as "a reconsideration of various subject and/or structural modes of expression I had explored since 1934."⁷ The biomorphic forms recall both his paintings of a few years earlier, when Biederman was under the influence of Surrealism, and those he made slightly later, immediately before he left for Paris, which also featured forms of biological origin. In these paintings, Biederman tells us, he "tried to eliminate figurative subject matter by simply using the particular formative method of nature's structuring."⁸ By "formative method" he seems to mean the kind of shapes he imagined could be found in immature plants and animals or at the subcellular level.

In the case of *Paris 140, January 14, 1937*, the spiky red form, blue lozenges, and silver-gray filaments do indeed invoke the reproductive organs of a plant or subcellular growth structures. Geometric forms, such as the pointed crystal and the sphere, recall Biederman's earlier attempt to use geometric forms rather than organic shapes "as the solution for expressive structuring."⁹ But the crystal and the sphere on the right side of the canvas, like the biomorphic forms on the left, also connote the "formative method of nature's structuring," in this case drops of water falling from the sky and mineral and geologic formations rising from beneath the earth's crust. By juxtaposing the organic and the inorganic on the two sides of the composition, Biederman suggests that nature can be created or constructed by very different processes that nonetheless coexist symbiotically.

The palette Biederman used to paint *Paris 140, January*

14, 1937 and its flat, rectilinear planes of color also call to mind the work of Mondrian. While in Paris, Biederman met the Dutch artist and increasingly came under the influence of the principles of De Stijl, an informal collaboration between Dutch artists, architects, and designers that originated in the late 1910s and had its roots in the philosophical principles articulated by M. H. J. Schoenmaekers.¹⁰ In *The New Image of the World* (1915), Schoenmaekers attributed primary significance to horizontal and vertical lines and the primary colors yellow, blue, and red. He stated, "the two fundamental complete contraries which shape our earth are: the horizontal line of power, that is the course of the earth around the sun and the vertical, profoundly spatial movement of rays that originates in the centre of the sun."¹¹ When it came to color, he wrote: "The principal colours are essentially yellow, blue and red. They are the only colours existing. . . . Yellow is the movement of the ray. . . . Blue is the contrasting colour to yellow. . . . As a colour, blue is the firmament, it is line, horizontality. Red is the mating of yellow and blue. . . . Yellow 'radiates,' blue 'recedes,' and red 'floats.'¹² Mondrian translated these principles into *de nieuwe beelding*, often called Neoplasticism, but best translated as "the new structuring or forming."¹³ By employing a vocabulary of yellow, blue, red, white, and black rectilinear shapes, Mondrian and other artists associated with De Stijl sought to create paintings that were "the equivalence of reality," without relying on age-old techniques of illusionism.¹⁴

Although Mondrian intended his abstract paintings to possess spiritual content, and therefore were not exactly the kind of model Biederman was searching for, the principles of De Stijl did offer the American artist potential tools from which to formulate a new art, one that invoked the structure of nature. In *Paris 140, January 14, 1937* we can see him working with these tools. The background of flat planes of pure color create emphatic verticals and horizontals, which could be interpreted as suggesting the primary vectors that organize the universe, just as here they create the backdrop that organizes Biederman's universal forms. By using a palette consisting of only yellow, blue, red, white, and black, the primary colors and values, Biederman is also able to suggest the foundations of all colors, since from the primary colors and the values of black and white all hues can be created. Nevertheless, soon after completing *January 14, 1937*, Biederman relinquished painting for the creation of relief constructions that projected his new vision into three dimensions. [KM]

90. CHARLES BIEDERMAN, *Paris 140, January 14, 1937*

1. Biederman, 1 November 1933, quoted in Leif Sjöberg, "Charles Biederman's Search for a New Art," in *Charles Biederman: A Retrospective* (Minneapolis: The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1976), 13.

2. The following biography of the artist is drawn from *ibid.*, 11–20; *Charles Biederman: A Retrospective Exhibition with Especial Emphasis on the Structurist Works of 1936–69* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1969), 14–17; and Neil Larsen, "Charles Biederman: A Brief History," at <http://www.charlesbiederman.net/biography.html> (accessed 9 December 2004).

3. Biederman, quoted in Sjöberg, "Biederman's Search," 13.

4. For a discussion of Biederman in the context of modernist abstract painting in America, see Susan C. Larsen, "Charles Biederman and American Abstract Modernism," in *Charles Biederman* (Minneapolis: Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, 1999), 2–7. See also *Abstract Paintings and Sculpture in America, 1927–1944*, ed. John R. Lane and Susan C. Larsen (Pittsburgh: Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, 1983). Incidentally, two of these five artists included in *Five Contemporary American Concretionists*, George L. K. Morris and Charles Shaw, became members of American Abstract Artists, a group formed in 1937 dedicated to promoting abstract art in the United States. On the American Abstract Artists, see Susan C. Larsen, "The Quest for an American Abstract Tradition, 1927–1941," in *Abstract Paintings and Sculpture*, 36–39.

5. Biederman, quoted in *Biederman 1969*, 15.

6. Discussions of Biederman's Structurism are included in Sjöberg, "Biederman's Search," 21–27; Jan van der Marck, "Landscapes by Whatever Name," in *Biederman 1976*, 57–65; Donald B. Kuspit, "Charles Biederman's Abstract Analogues for Nature," *Art in America* 65 (May–June 1977): 80–83. For Biederman's explanation of his approach to art making, see especially Biederman, *Art as the Evolution of Visual Knowledge* (Red Wing, Minn.: Charles Biederman, 1948). For a complete listing of Biederman's publications, see the artist's website, <http://www.charlesbiederman.net> (accessed 13 February 2005).

7. Biederman, in *Biederman 1976*, 51.

8. *Ibid.*, 47.

9. *Ibid.*, 46.

10. For a discussion of Biederman's interest in Mondrian and De Stijl, see Jan van der Marck, "Biederman and the Structurist Direction in Art," in *Biederman 1969*, 9–11. A concise history of De Stijl can be found in Paul Overy, *De Stijl* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991). For the philosophical origins of De Stijl, see H. L. C. Jaffé, *De Stijl, 1917–1931: The Dutch Contribution to Modern Art* (Amsterdam: J. M. Meulenhoff, 1956), 53–62.

11. Schoenmaekers, quoted in Jaffé, *De Stijl*, 58.

12. *Ibid.*, 60.

13. Noted in George Heard Hamilton, *19th and 20th Century Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (New York: Prentice-Hall and Harry N. Abrams, 1970), 240.

14. Mondrian, quoted in *ibid.*

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