The Jackson Five
with Mom and Pop
Canvases Brimming with Color

"Color painters," "lyrical abstractionists," "color imagists" or practitioners of "post-painterly abstraction"—whatever they are (or rather whatever art critics choose to call them), two generations of American artists are being corralled in a number of spectacular museum shows and discussed together as a new school. Their work ranges from monochrome panels and regimented rows of bright stripes to puddled stains and vaporous sprays, but its major theme is color. This hedonistic emphasis derives partly from the availability of new water-based plastic paints which blend easily and can be thinned drastically without losing intensity or brilliance. In technique, almost the only thing these painters have in common is an avoidance of visible brushwork. The paint seems to find its way onto their canvases almost without human intervention: poured directly from a can; stained or splattered; applied housepainter-style with rollers or a spray gun. The result is a dazzling display of chromatic relationships—crisp, diffuse, explicit or enigmatic, but always boldly alive with color.
One of the best-known of the "color painters" is Kenneth Noland, whose carefully spaced bands provide a seemingly simple means of relating a variety of colors. Since his Blue Nile (at left) is 15 feet wide, most viewers are unable to see it all at once in a single glance.

Looking like gigantic color chips, Ellsworth Kelly's 13-panel Spectrum V (left) isolates particular hues of the spectrum while keeping the idea of their progression. Above, William T. Williams uses frenetically colored swirls in seven-foot-high canvases whose pulsating rhythm seems even more intense when seen at an angle.
Chromatic clashes and illusory perspectives
Narrow pinstripes and wide bands are methodically regimented across the 18-foot-wide surface of Gene Davis’s Perrod’s Perambulator (left), but their colors are rhythmically clustered in harmonic and dissonant groups. The artist says: “I never plan my color more than five stripes ahead, and often I change my mind before I reach the third stripe.”

Miriam Schapiro’s emblematic Docking (left) suggests a complicated piece of space hardware. She designed the eye-fooling shape with the aid of a computer that “draws” three-dimensional objects from any angle. The colors engage in an optical tug-of-war with the geometric forms, and all are locked into place on the six-foot-high canvas by the intensely bright background.

Alan Cote’s ten-foot-wide canvas (at right) features bars of color placed in a seemingly random pattern. Because the diagonal bars are not parallel or equal in length, they hint at illusory perspectives and appear capable of moving sideways or back. But the choice of colors provides a sense of equilibrium as well as tension.
Hovering clouds of tinted mist

Ralph Humphrey's Audrey Frederick (above) is strewn with sensuous wavelets of modulated color that echo the shape of the nine-foot-wide rounded canvas.

Walter Darby Bannard blotted and splattered four different colors, one after another, across the eight-foot-wide surface of Young Phenix #1 (left), leaving lingering traces of straight edges that suggest an underlying grid of nine rectangles.

Jules Olitski used a spray gun to create vaporous clouds of color in his 4th Stride (right), which is nine feet high. The tinted mist appears shapeless and boundless but is confined by the casually drawn lines and colored bands along the edge.