

The U.S. Elections  
**DEMOCRATIC SWEEP**

# TIMM



# ITALY IN AGONY

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## Superb Puritan

The Bauhaus, that pedagogic test bed of total design that started in Weimar 55 years ago and was shut down by Hitler in 1933, now seems almost as remote as William Morris' workshop or Verrocchio's studio. It has become part of the "golden legend" of modernism. Except for Josef Albers and Marcel Breuer, the chief Bauhaus teachers of art, design and architecture are dead: Kandinsky, Klee, Moholy-Nagy, Gropius, Mies van der Rohe. Even the ideal that hovered above Bauhaus practice—that social conduct could be purified

Dessau Bauhaus before returning to Zurich in 1929.

Bill, 65, is having his first full dress retrospective in the U.S., organized by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo. The Albright-Knox is the only museum in America to have systematically collected his work; other institutions, like Manhattan's Museum of Modern Art, have all but ignored this superb but very un-American stylistic puritan. The show is large—44 sculptures, 120 paintings and graphics—and it goes to the Los Angeles County Museum on Dec. 17, finishing in San Francisco next April. What is more, it is a revelation.

As Curator James Wood writes in his catalogue essay, "To deal with Max Bill solely as a painter, sculptor and graphic artist is to make a distinction which he never made in his work: the distinction between Fine Art and the other areas of his activity." Bill has practiced as an architect; he has designed all manner of manufactured objects, from samovars to wall clocks; he was responsible for the shape of one of the most elegantly pure prestressed-concrete structures in the world, the Lavina-Tobel bridge in Switzerland (1966-67). In design, Bill has been an acknowledged rationalizing force. So has he been in art—but mainly in Europe because, as Wood suggests, "his conscious effort to undertake all his activities within a social context, while having deep roots in the history of 20th century European art, is fundamentally foreign to the individualistic tradition in the United States." No effort, no matter how brusque, could make a Yankee-myth existential art hero of this methodical sexagenarian, enacting his work ethic in a studio organized down to the last pencil stub.

One is left with the work alone: it is highly finished, accessible and informed by a grave, singular clarity. "Many people are shocked when they see something that is clear," Bill remarked in 1972. "Works of art enable certain problems to be solved without compromise, in a world which is full of compromises and failed speculations."

So art, for Bill, has always been research; and this quasi-scientific model demands a candor about means and ends in each painting or sculpture. Every painting of Bill's is in some way a demonstration of its own making. There are no "occult" design systems; everything can be deduced from a simple grid

and from serial repetition. So in *Construction from a Theme from 1946* (1967), the five main colors make their appearance in turn: first a stripe of blue pushing out the black at the top, then a lavender stripe displacing the blue at the left, then a red behind the lavender at the bottom and finally an ochre displacing the red band on the right.

This simple addition does indeed sound elementary. But what the description leaves out is Bill's acute sense of color relationships and the cool, meticulous perfection of the skin of paint—a skin that makes the epidermis of Mondrian's geometrical abstracts seem coarse by comparison. In his exquisite judgment of value and hue, Max Bill is one of the great colorists in modern art.

It may turn out, however, that his main achievement is as a sculptor. One's sense of Bill's sculpture has been warped in America by the small steel multiples he made in the '60s, glittering machine-age *bibelots*. The larger work is a very different matter. Even more than the paintings, Bill's sculptures begin with a baldly simple form but end as mysteriously contemplative apparitions. *Construction from a Ring* (1940-41) is a fat torus or ring sliced in half and then set up with one half balanced on the other. It is a geometrical form, like the three-dimensional mathematical models that made an indelible impression on Bill when he saw them at the Musée Poincaré in Paris in the '30s. But then the bronze surface is polished and gilded to the point where the solid sculpture almost disappears in an ecstatic dazzle of light and twisting reflections; the mathematical form condenses ambiguities.

**Immaculate Profile.** What sustains and anchors this play is Bill's immaculate sense of profile. A work like *Surface in Space Delimited by One Line* might seem a routine exercise in topology but for two things: the fanatical beauty of its craftsmanship and the sureness with which that line executes its swirl in space.

Bill's originality does not simply lie in using mathematical shape—what he called "the building up of significant patterns from the ever changing relations . . . of abstract forms." Rather, it comes from his intense effort to restore mathematics as inspiration, to recapture the frame of mind in which the first developments of perspective drawing had been made five centuries before.

Mathematics renders everything visible—and visionary. So, Bill wrote in 1949, "despite the fact that the basis of the mathematical approach to art is in reason, its dynamic content is able to launch us on astral flights . . ." Overstated, perhaps; but declarations of faith tend to be, just as universal languages are more legible to their inventors than to anyone else.

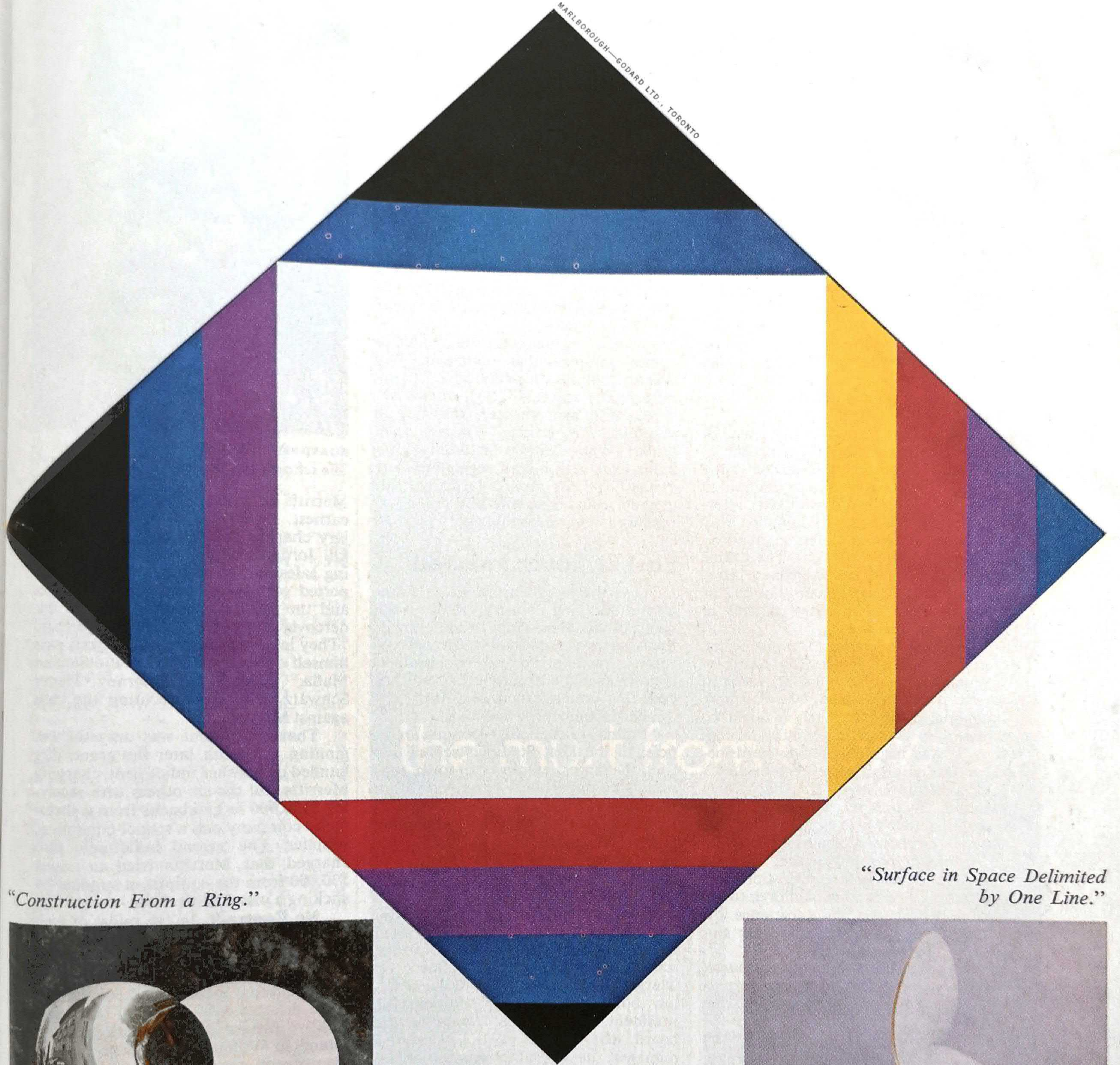
■ Robert Hughes



MAX BILL IN HIS STUDIO AT ZUMIKON-ZURICH  
Informed by a grave, clear singularity.

and made better by all-embracing design systems—now seems to have been a heroic illusion, an *ignis fatuus* of avant-garde thought: no one really becomes less wicked or more rational by living in an International Style building.

The aesthetic testament of the Bauhaus, nevertheless, is still with us. It has impregnated our whole sense of design. Moreover, it remains embodied in the work of several Bauhaus students who have turned out to be major artists. One of these is Max Bill, who was born in Switzerland and spent two years at the

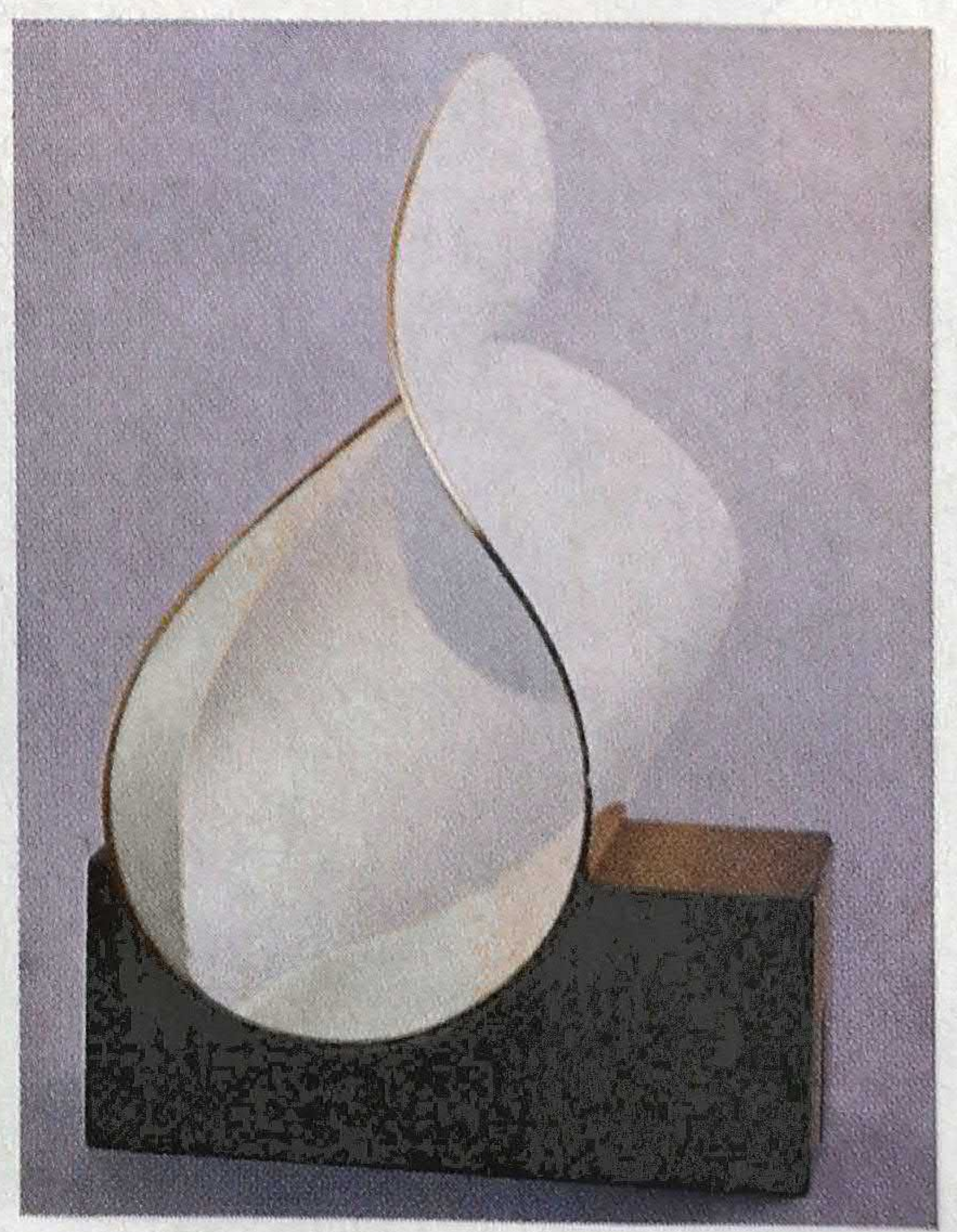


the most from it

*"Construction From a Ring."*



*"Surface in Space Delimited by One Line."*



*"Construction on a Theme from 1946."*