Paul Frets
A Retrospective
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Paintings
Prints
Drawings
Sculpture

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I first met Paul Wiley Frets in 1993, when I came to Radford University to serve as the Chair of the Art Department. For the next three years Paul and I were close colleagues (although he often accidentally called me “Art Smith” instead of “Art Jones”). As we got to know each other better, I often visited his painting studio in downtown Radford, where many afternoons were spent discussing art—particularly his then ongoing series of Silent Earth paintings, which I jokingly referred to as his “dirty pictures” because they were built up in thick layers of indigenous Virginia earth suspended in acrylic medium. This nonrepresentational series intrigued me as I became mesmerized staring at walls filled with closely spaced canvases of various sizes. Because these original paintings were created out of the most unpretentious and oldest of materials, local soil, they revealed the artist’s commitment to the idea of building paintings literally from the ground up. They also expressed his belief that the “natural stuff” has a life of its own.

It has long been Paul’s view that meaning is implicit in form, or put another way, that all material reality has a core of inner meaning. Although “silent” in many cases, for Paul this core reality is still adept at revealing nourishing glimpses of the immaterial. The primeval concept of creating through undivided and focused energy, and forming—shaping matter in order to reveal the unity of the immaterial and the material—has been the artist’s sincere intent.

Aside from his Silent Earth paintings, every other area of Paul’s studio was crowded with earlier works, some of them even extending back to his childhood. One day I took the liberty to comb through his enormous studio, where his entire life story in art unfolded—from talented child to emerging young artist, from experimental art student to lifelong artist and teacher. It was at this moment that I first envisioned a Paul Frets retrospective, which has come about more than a decade after its initial spark.

The exhibition provides a comprehensive overview of an artist’s emergence through the various stages of his development. It includes examples of paintings and drawings, as well as sculpture, which he
also has occasionally produced. Over the years Paul’s range of styles has been extensive because he has at times explored naturalism as well as nonrepresentation. While his major emphases in painting have extended from abstract expressionism through tighter geometric abstraction and neo-expressionist figuration, he is also fully capable of rendering extremely realistic subjects—although the latter has rarely interested him.

The Artist’s Life and Career

Paul Frets was born in Rector, Arkansas, in 1935. At the age of two, his family moved to Detroit, Michigan, where Paul attended elementary and middle school. His interest in painting began during his childhood in Detroit, where he was awarded a scholarship to the City Art Program for the Gifted. After his family moved back to Arkansas, Paul completed high school and then entered Arkansas State University. Not surprisingly, he majored in art, but was also involved in varsity baseball. The latter interest grew so intense that in 1957 he dropped out of college during his junior year and signed a professional baseball contract. Shortly thereafter he got married, and was then drafted into the army until being honorably discharged due to a knee injury. In 1958 he re-enrolled in college and, after receiving his bachelor’s degree in 1960, became a high school art teacher.

By 1963, as a father of three, Paul sought more advanced artistic training. After graduating with a Master of Arts degree in art from the University of Missouri in 1964, he was hired to teach painting and drawing as an Assistant Professor at Radford University. The early years in Radford, from 1964 to 1969, were prolific as Paul began to exhibit his works regionally and nationally. During this period he first met New York artist Dorothy Gillespie, a Virginia native who gradually developed strong ties with Radford University, which now owns the largest institutional collection of Gillespie’s art. Over the years Paul got to know Gillespie as a mentor and friend because she became a frequent visitor to the Radford campus.

In 1969, Paul received a professional development leave from Radford University and was awarded an Andrew Mellon Fellowship to pursue a Doctor of Art degree in painting at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. There he met New York painters Elaine de Kooning (1920-1989) and Gandy Brodie (1925-1975). A close relationship between the three artists soon followed as Paul worked as de Kooning’s and Brodie’s studio assistant. Frets learned a lot about the technical and philosophical aspects of art, as well as about the New York art scene, from these two mentors. After completing his D.A. degree in 1971, Paul returned to teach at Radford University, where he was promoted to the rank of full Professor.

Through his association with nationally acclaimed artists he had met in Pittsburgh, during the 1970's Paul began to develop connections with New York galleries and received other opportunities to show his work nationally. The death of his former mentor Gandy Brodie in 1975 prompted a series of abstract paintings, entitled Gandy Trees, as a eulogy. Meanwhile Elaine de Kooning continued to have a strong impact on Paul’s art as his mentor. She also became his close personal friend—a relationship that endured until her death.
During the period of the 1970's through the mid-1990's, Paul continued to work at Radford University. When he retired in 1996, Paul was awarded the status of Professor Emeritus of Art. Throughout his career as a professor, he had exhibited throughout the United States and his works received numerous awards. His works were also acquired by museums and galleries, as well as by public, corporate and private collections. Since his retirement from teaching, Paul has continued to have opportunities to show his paintings in New York and Virginia.

Recently Paul undertook the huge endeavor of relocating his Radford studio—and all of the works contained within it that account for his life spent in art. After renting the second floor of a downtown commercial building as his studio for nearly three decades, he was forced to relocate after his landlord sold the building. In 2001, he purchased an unfinished shell building and has spent three years in additional construction to finish his new studio space. Many more paintings are expected to follow.

— Arthur F. Jones

Frets on a visit to Brooklyn, New York, in the early eighties.
Paul Wiley Frets

1935  Born July 1 in Rector, Arkansas, to Paul William Frets and Marie Wiley Frets.
1937  Frets family moved to Detroit, Michigan, where Paul attended elementary and middle school.
Mid   First art teacher and influence was Mrs. Kaplan.
1940's
Late  Awarded scholarship to the City Art Program
1940's for the Gifted.
1949  At age 14 moved back to Rector, Arkansas.
1958  Enrolled at Arkansas State University. Son Kyle born July 23. Taught elementary school in Rector, Arkansas.
1963  Enrolled at the University of Missouri at Columbia in summer. Studied painting with John Weller. Awarded Graduate Assistantship in Art Department to work in University Gallery.
1964  Graduated from the University of Missouri at Columbia with an M.A. degree in art. Hired as Assistant Professor of Art at Radford University, Radford, Virginia, teaching painting and drawing.
Frets with paintings from the Silent Earth series in his downtown Radford studio, circa 1998.

Had first two-person show at the University Gallery at Radford University.

1968 Met artist Dorothy Gillespie who became a long-time friend and mentor.


1974 First New York show at Saint Peters Church Gallery, New York, New York, with “Passage” series Paintings.

1976 Summer group show at David Findly Gallery, New York, New York.

1982 Continued showing regionally and nationally. Started the “Gandy” series of paintings

1983 Exhibited the series of paintings “Gandy Trees” as a eulogy for Gandy Brodie. The series was shown in several regional museums and galleries. Began experimenting with formulations of paint from natural materials found in his immediate environment.
Associate producer with Jerry McCarthy and WBRA Channel 15, Roanoke, Virginia, of *EdeK a Portrait*, a profile of artist Elaine de Kooning. Exhibited at Elaine Benson Gallery, Bridgehampton, New York: *Elaine de Kooning’s Inadvertent Collection Exhibition*.

1984 Associate producer with Jerry McCarthy and WBRA Channel 15, Roanoke, Virginia, of *The First of May*, a profile of artist Dorothy Gillespie.

1985 Associate producer with Jerry McCarthy and WBRA Channel 15, Roanoke, Virginia, of *Feminist Perspectives* about Mary Beth Edelson and May Stevens with overview by Donald Kuspit. WBRA Channel 15 produced *Scenes from Within*, a profile of artist Paul Frets.

1986 Received second sabbatical. Began the series “Energy Motion and Color.” Paintings shown at the Art Museum of Western Virginia and many regional galleries. Made many trips in spring to East Hampton, New York, assisting Elaine de Kooning.

1987 Curator for show of Elaine de Kooning’s paintings at the Flossie Martin Gallery, Radford, Virginia, in winter.

1989 Temporarily stopped painting following the death of Elaine de Kooning. Started new group of paintings entitled “The Silent Earth” in her memory. This series marked a continued involvement with paint formulated from regional pigments.

1994 Met Roger Ricco of Ricco/Maresca Gallery, New York, in spring. Invited to take paintings to gallery in summer.

1995 Studio visit by Roger Ricco in spring. Included in summer group show at Ricco/Maresca Gallery.

1996 Retired from Radford University as Professor Emeritus. Later that summer included in group show at Ricco/Maresca Gallery.

1997 Ricco/Maresca Gallery group show.

1999 Carilion New River Valley Medical Center purchases painting *Crockett*, from the “Silent Earth” series.

2000 Sale of building requires all paintings and studio materials be put in storage.


2004 *Paul Frets: A Retrospective. Paintings, Prints, Drawings, Sculpture* shown at Flossie Martin Gallery, Radford University Art Museum, Radford University, Radford, Virginia.
1. Untitled · 1949 · Oil on shoe box lid · 15 x 6"  

2. Untitled · 1949 · Oil on Celotex · 14 x 12"  

3. Red Lantern · 1954 · Oil on Canvas Board · 20 x 16"
5 Self Portrait • 1954 • Oil on Canvas Board • 20 x 16"

4 Red Roof • 1953 • Oil on Canvas Board • 16 x 20"
7 Still Life • 1962 • Oil on Canvas • 40 x 30"

9 Blue Sweater • 1963 • Oil on Board • 24 x 20"
10 Untitled • 1963 • Oil on Board • 18 x 24"

11 Once Upon a Horse • 1964 • Serigraph on Bristol Board • 24 x 18"
19 Night Light • 1977 • Acrylic on Canvas • Diameter 42"
20 Untitled • 1978 • Acrylic on Canvas • 26 x 24"
22 Constellation Katu • 1979 • Acrylic on Canvas/Construction • 50 x 54"
27 Gandy Tree/Blue Thicket • 1983 • Oil on Canvas • 72 x 72"
28 Gandy Tree/Thicket • 1983 • Oil on Canvas • 72 x 72"

29 Gandy Tree • 1983 • Pencil on Arches paper • 19 x 19"
33 Swimmer in Rough Water • 1984 • Oil on Canvas • 60 x 67"
37 Blanket • 1985 • Oil on Canvas • 72 x 63"
39 Red Blanket • 1985 • Oil on Canvas • 67 x 60"
40 Regatta/Scott's a Winner • 1986 • Acrylic on Canvas • 80 x 64"
41 Felicia's Orchid • 1986 • Acrylic on Canvas • 90 x 81"
46 Silent Earth/Adria • 1993 • Acrylic on Canvas • 20 x 16"
Selected Exhibitions


2003  Saint Ann’s Academy, Sumter, SC: Night of the Arts, group exhibition

2001  Art Museum of Western Virginia, Roanoke, VA: 50th Anniversary Invitational, group exhibition, paintings from “The Silent Earth” series


1997  Ricco/Maresca Gallery, New York, NY: group exhibition, paintings from “The Silent Earth” series

1996  Flossie Martin Gallery, Radford University, Radford, VA: Annual Art Faculty Exhibition, group exhibition; Ricco/Maresca Gallery, New York NY: summer group exhibition

1995  Flossie Martin Gallery, Radford University, Radford, VA: Annual Art Faculty Exhibition, group exhibition; Ricco/Maresca Gallery, New York NY: summer group exhibition

1994  Huntington Museum of Art, Huntington, WV: 280 Exhibition, juried exhibition, painting from “Passage” series exhibited; Arlington Arts Center, Arlington, VA: national juried show, juror Donald Kuspit, painting from “The Silent Earth” series exhibited; Flossie Martin Gallery, Radford University, Radford, VA: Annual Art Faculty Exhibition, group exhibition
1993 Flossie Martin Gallery, Radford University, Radford, VA: *Annual Art Faculty Exhibition*, group exhibition; Scarlet Gallery, Richmond, VA: *Time and Space*, paintings on paper from the “Motion, Energy, Color” series, one-person exhibition

1992 Flossie Martin Gallery, Radford University, Radford, VA: *Annual Art Faculty Exhibition*, group exhibition; Fine Arts Center for the New River Valley, Pulaski, VA: paintings from the “Motion, Color, Energy” series, group exhibition

1991 Fine Arts Center for the New River Valley, Pulaski, VA: *New Directions*, Paul Frets, two-person show, paintings from the “Motion, Color, Energy” series; Flossie Martin Gallery, Radford University, Radford, VA: *Annual Art Faculty Exhibition*, group exhibition

1990 University of Missouri, Columbia, MO: invitational exhibition, paintings from the “Motion, Color, Energy” series; Brenau University, Gainesville, GA, *Brenau National Invitational*, group show; Flossie Martin Gallery, Radford University, Radford, VA: *Annual Art Faculty Exhibition*, group exhibition

1989 Flossie Martin Gallery, Radford University, Radford, VA: *Annual Art Faculty Exhibition*, group exhibition; Art Museum of Western Virginia, Roanoke, VA: *Art Museum of Western Virginia Invitational Exhibition*, painting award

1986 Art Museum of Western Virginia, Roanoke, VA: *Scenes from Within*, recent paintings, one-person exhibition; Flossie Martin Gallery, Radford University Art Museum, Radford, VA: *Motion, Energy, Color*, one-person exhibition; Art Museum of Western Virginia, Roanoke, VA: *Over the Blue Ridge*, invitational exhibition, painting award; Flossie Martin Gallery, Radford University, Radford, VA: *Annual Art Faculty Exhibition*, group exhibition

exhibition, painting award, Juror John Henry III, Curator, Mississippi Museum of Art; Flossie Martin Gallery, Radford University, Radford, VA: Annual Art Faculty Exhibition, group exhibition

1984 University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS: The Candy Trees, one-person exhibition; Squires Art Gallery, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA: The Genesis Series, paintings and constructions, one-person exhibition; Kent Gallery, Radford University, Radford, VA: Annual Art Faculty Exhibition, group exhibition; North Cross School, Roanoke, VA: Artemis VIII, Artists and Writers; Art Museum of Western Virginia, Roanoke, VA: 29th Biennial Exhibition, painting award

1983 Elaine Benson Gallery, Bridgehampton, NY: Elaine de Kooning’s Inadvertent Collection, group exhibition, paintings from “Passage” series; Art Museum of Western Virginia, Roanoke, VA: The Last Picture Show Invitational, group exhibition, first place painting award; Kent Gallery, Radford University, Radford, VA: Annual Art Faculty Exhibition, group exhibition

1981 Art Museum of Western Virginia, Roanoke, VA: invitational group show; Kent Gallery, Radford University, Radford, VA: Annual Art Faculty Exhibition, group exhibition

— Paul Frets with “Passage” series in mid 1970’s.
1980 Art Museum of Western Virginia, Roanoke, VA: “The Passage Series,” one-person exhibition; James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA: exchange faculty group exhibition; Kent Gallery, Radford University, Radford, VA: Annual Art Faculty Exhibition, group exhibition

1979 Roanoke College, Salem, VA: invitational group exhibition; Winston-Salem Gallery of Fine Art, Winston-Salem, NC: juried exhibition; Kent Gallery, Radford University, Radford, VA: Annual Art Faculty Exhibition, group exhibition

1978 Kent Gallery, Radford University, Radford, VA: “The Passage Series,” one-person exhibition; Kent Gallery, Radford University, Radford, VA: Annual Art Faculty Exhibition, group exhibition

1977 Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, NC: Southern Images, group show; Art Museum of Western Virginia, Roanoke, VA: juried exhibition; Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA: Irene Leache Memorial Exhibition, painting purchase award, juror Hilton Cramer, Critic New York Times; Kent Gallery, Radford University, Radford, VA: Annual Art Faculty Exhibition, group exhibition

1976 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA: traveling print show, group exhibition; Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA: Irene Leache Memorial Exhibition, painting selected for collection, juror Knaston McShine, Curator of Painting, Museum of Modern Art, New York

Frets working on his “Gandy Tree” series in 1985.
York, NY; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA: *Virginia Artists Juror’s Choice*, award of distinction, juror Lawrence Alloway, Critic and Professor of Art History, SUNY, Stony Brook; David Findly Gallery, New York, NY: summer group show; Spar Museum, Shreveport, LA: *Spar National Art Exhibition*, merit award for painting, juror Elaine de Kooning; Yeatts Gallery, Roanoke, VA: *The Passage Series*, one-person show; Donaldson Brown Center, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA: *The Passage Series*, one-person show; Art Museum of Western Virginia, Roanoke, VA: *The Passage Series*, one-person show; Appalachian Corridors, Charleston, WV: *Appalachian Corridors Art Biennial 4*, print award; The College of Emory and Henry, Emory, VA: faculty exchange group exhibition; Roanoke Fine Arts Center, Roanoke, VA: juried exhibition; Genesis Gallery, Roanoke, VA: *Paintings and Drawings by Paul W. Frets*; Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA: *Maryann Harmon and Paul Frets*; Kent Gallery, Radford University, Radford, VA: *Annual Art Faculty Exhibition*, group exhibition

1975 Appalachian Corridors, Charleston, WV: *Appalachian Corridors Biennial*, purchase award for painting, juror Gordon Mansell

1974 Saint Peters Church Gallery, New York, NY: *The Passage Series*, one-person show; Charleston Gallery of Sunrise, Charleston, WV: juried exhibition, purchase award for print; Art Museum of Western Virginia, Roanoke, VA: *Virginia Artists*, juried exhibition, merit award for painting, Virginia Arts and Humanities Council, Richmond, VA, purchase award for painting; Carroll Reece Museum, Johnson City, TN: *The Prints and Paintings of Paul Frets*, works from the “Genesis” series, one-person show


1972 The University Gallery, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Blacksburg, VA: *Shape to Color to Form*, one-person exhibition; Carroll Reece Museum, Johnson City, TN: *Carroll Reece Museum Invitational*, paintings from “Genesis” series, painting award, painting included in permanent collection

1970 Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA: student group show; Donaldson Brown Center, Virginia
Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA: *Donaldson Brown Center Invitational*, purchase award, painting included in permanent collection; Roanoke College, Salem, VA: *Roanoke College Invitational*, painting award.


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juried exhibition; Winston-Salem Gallery of Fine Arts, Winston-Salem, NC: group exhibition


1963 University of Missouri, Columbia, MO: graduate show, two-person exhibition

Paul Frets with works from his "Motion, Energy, Color" series in 1986.
Public and Corporate Collections

Museum of Western Virginia, Roanoke, Virginia
Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, Mississippi
Virginia State Department of Education, Richmond, Virginia
Hitachi Corporation, Gift to Inland Motors, Radford, Virginia
Phillip Morris Corporation, Richmond, Virginia
Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia
Saint Peter's Church Gallery, New York, New York
Colonial American National Bank, Roanoke, Virginia
Appalachian Corridors, Charleston, West Virginia
Charleston Gallery at Sunrise, Charleston, West Virginia
Carroll Reece Museum, Johnson City, Tennessee
Hart Associates, Roanoke, Virginia
Donaldson Brown Center, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia
Radford University Art Museum, Radford, Virginia
Carilion New River Valley Medical Center, Radford, Virginia

Video Productions

1985  *A Feminist Perspective*, profile of artists Mary Beth Edelson and May Stevens • Overview: Donald Kuspit, Producer: Jerry McCarthy, Associate Producer: Paul Frets, WBRA Channel 15, Roanoke, VA

1985  *Scenes from Within*, profile of artist Paul Wiley Frets • Producer: Jerry McCarthy, WBRA Channel 15, Roanoke, VA

1984  *The First of May*, profile of artist Dorothy Gillespie • Producer: Jerry McCarthy, Associate Producer: Paul Frets, WBRA Channel 15, Roanoke, VA

1983  *EdeK a Portrait*, Profile of artist Elaine de Kooning • Producer: Jerry McCarthy, Associate Producer: Paul Frets, WBRA Channel 15, Roanoke, VA