



FIGURE 1.1
Untitled (PDN 176), 1980
Oil on linen
24 × 18 inches

The Sound of One Hand

He was not of his time.

Porfirio DiDonna's ambition was to be a religious painter. He had no miraculous conversion, decisive moment of change, or charismatic spiritual teacher. His extraordinary mother, a devout Catholic, was an important influence on him. Raised in the Church, he entered the art world during a time of secular emphasis, in the early 1960s. It never occurred to him that a religious pursuit might be a difficult or elusive path; he was reared by his parents to expect hard work and long odds.

He lived at home with his parents until he was thirty-seven, an oddity among his friends, next to the Red Hook Houses, the large housing project in Brooklyn. He learned to box in the Police Athletic League, showed talent for the piano, loved sports, and hated to lose at anything. In his later years, he rarely had much money, and he never opened a bank account. He had few possessions because they were unimportant to him. With his high aspiration, it was difficult for him to think about anything except his love of painting.

"He was very shy, or appeared to be, at first," remembered Rebecca Massey, who as a curatorial assistant at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts had interviewed him about his painting in the museum's collection. But once he started to talk about his work, "his words began to flow out one after another in excited succession."¹ Recalled his friend the painter Medrie MacPhee, "He had no hierarchy about what was or was not interesting to think about, so it seemed that everything was full of potential and would expand the world again."² The poet and critic William Corbett spoke of DiDonna appearing to possess a rare kind of innocence.³

Yet DiDonna's quiet, courteous demeanor disguised a hard street education from growing up in one of the toughest neighborhoods in New York

City. He had a strong temper that erupted if he felt deceived or manipulated. He could make inscrutable judgments about human vanity and was very aware of his own proclivity for self-delusion.

I vividly remember the first time I saw his work. The art dealer Nina Nielsen, whose gallery in Boston I had begun to frequent, had mentioned an artist named DiDonna whose drawings were on the studio walls of many artists she visited in New York. When I saw an advertisement for his show at New York's OK Harris Gallery, I decided to make the trip.

It was three days before the Blizzard of '78. I walked into the exhibition and thought, "I've never seen work like this before; who could this person be?" The paintings were large, filled with taut horizontal-vertical dots, dashes, and stroke marks. The light marks upon dark ground suggested a primitive ritual performed within the limits of rectangular space (fig. 1.2). Instantly I was reminded of a classic story about a young Zen monk.

A master had given his student the traditional koan, "Two hands clap and there is a sound; what is the sound of one hand?" For three years, the young monk studied diligently and unceasingly this koan. After three years, the student went to his Zen master with the news that he had to return home.

He stood before his master, in tears, explaining that he still could not grasp the meaning of the koan. The master said to him, "You must postpone your departure for a week."

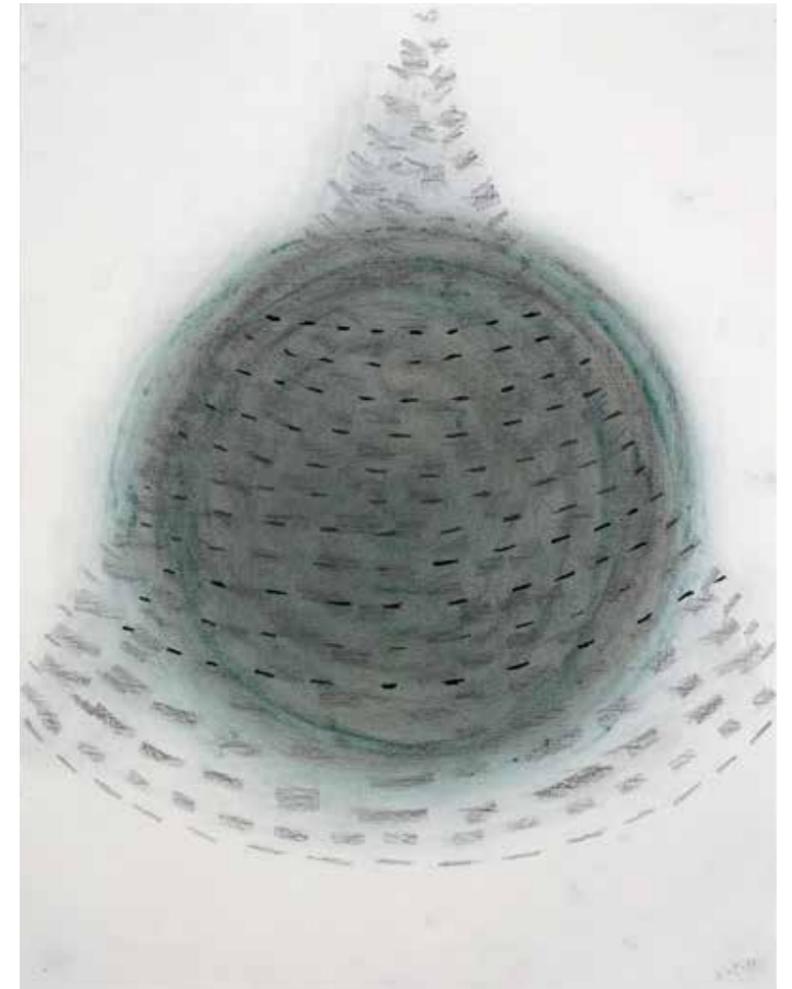
After a week the monk had made no further progress and was deeply discouraged. The master directed a second delay, and then a third. Finally, the master said to his student, "Five more days of intense concentration and then you can return home." The monk came back in tears after those five days.

The master said: "You must try for three more days but after that time, if you have not solved the koan, you must die." The young monk left in terror. For the first time he identified the words of the koan with the terms of his life. He realized that the five words were inseparable from all the irresolvable conflicts that he had ever experienced.⁴

The challenge of the Zen koan might seem odd in connection to DiDonna's paintings. But I sensed a form of meditation in DiDonna's mystical yet highly disciplined efforts. The rhythms of his unfrivolous lines and dots vibrated as would a repeated incantation. Their presence was so pure they seemed out of place in a commercial gallery.

Nothing is simple when it comes to religion. Curator Alexa M. Johnston pointed out that "traditional religions" are usually considered too "suspi-

FIGURE 1.2
Untitled (Chicago), March 9, 1978
Charcoal and wash on paper
23¾ × 18 inches



cious, narrow, or inflexible" by contemporary artists.⁵ She argued, however, that the questions often addressed by artists, such as "Who am I?"; "How do I relate to the world around me?"; and "What is the reason for my existence?" are fundamentally religious questions. Yet, what standards can we use to determine whether a painting has meaning?

For most of us, the idea of a contemporary artist as a religious seeker is quixotic. How do we judge whether an artist or painting is motivated by religious spirit? For DiDonna, that ambition translated into the goal of seeking what he called the "non-arbitrary." I suspect that he thought, initially, that the non-arbitrary might be some perfect state, perhaps with kinship to the Catholic liturgy. But soon he realized that what was non-arbitrary was fluid and active, and related to living up to his high personal standards. He would not allow himself to be limited by any fixed code

or rule; what he stood for had to be open, honest, diligent, and ethical. He committed himself early on to an abstract path where formal structure, line, color, and mark together created the integrity of a painting. His concerns with formal structure were so consuming that he often failed to notice allusions, such as a chalice or cruciform, emerging from his abstract efforts.

I only began to understand DiDonna's passion for the "non-arbitrary" after his mother asked me to help catalogue his estate after his death. Among his few possessions was Ananda Coomaraswamy's *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, an examination of religious painting in the East and West.⁶ The book discusses Indian and Chinese aesthetic theory along with the writings of the fourteenth-century German mystic Meister Eckhart. Since I knew DiDonna read very little, I was curious to know why he had this volume.

He had underlined several passages of a long discussion about the differences between intensity and originality in Eastern and Western art. Coomaraswamy had observed that post-Renaissance European artists developed a fascination with "things as they are in themselves"—in contrast to artists of the East, who entrusted to "things more nearly as they are in God, or nearer to their source."

This philosophic distinction between things "in themselves" or "as in God" is crucial, declared Coomaraswamy. It is the difference between trying to embody one's own moment or attempting to know the source of all moments. Those who seek to understand the world as it is "in God" must merge and transcend all distinctions between the knower and known. The intensity of the artist's feelings, not originality, is critical in this ambition. It is of little importance whether the subject is new or old because it is the artist's personal intensity that is the crucial determinant in whether the work is alive and the "art lives."⁷

DiDonna identified with the yearning of artists who sought divine order. But how does one develop enough intensity in one's art for such an encompassing aim? Coomaraswamy advised, "To worship any Angel in truth, one must become the Angel."⁸ In letters to his brother Theo, Vincent van Gogh had voiced an equally elusive challenge: "The best way to know God is to love many things"; and "One must love with a lofty and serious intimate sympathy, with strength, with intelligence, and one must always try to know deeper, better, and more."⁹

To know something "deeper, better, and more" could have been DiDonna's mantra in his art. Although unfamiliar with van Gogh's letters, he was

deeply moved by his work. The 1984 van Gogh exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art was immensely important, and he attended it several times, talking excitedly about how he suddenly saw van Gogh's use of drawing as a way of establishing a place for his brush marks and color. He was pleased because it reinforced what he had lately realized about his own work; his goal in recent efforts had been toward "making a place" for his marks.

Yet what did DiDonna honor through his art? Having known him, having studied his art for over thirty years, I can only speculate about the full implications of his undertaking. When I would occasionally ask him about his intentions, he rarely had a good answer; his work was too bound up in feelings impossible to articulate. Fortunately, he saved almost every scribble and doodle he made during his career. This has allowed me to examine, like an archaeologist, everything he explored, even some of the paths he rejected. I have found myself approaching his work like a monk listening for the sound of one hand. In the end, his art speaks for him. I can only hope to convey how his art speaks to me.

But I do remember him recalling, with a little embarrassment, a public statement that he had made about his work when he was young. He was on a panel speaking to students at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. He had said nothing during the entire discussion when the moderator, just before concluding, asked him if there was anything he wanted to say about his goals. "I just want to push painting back two thousand years," he had blurted out. Years later he laughed, "I was so surprised to hear those words coming from my mouth. But when you look back, I guess that has been my basic approach in everything I've done."¹⁰