

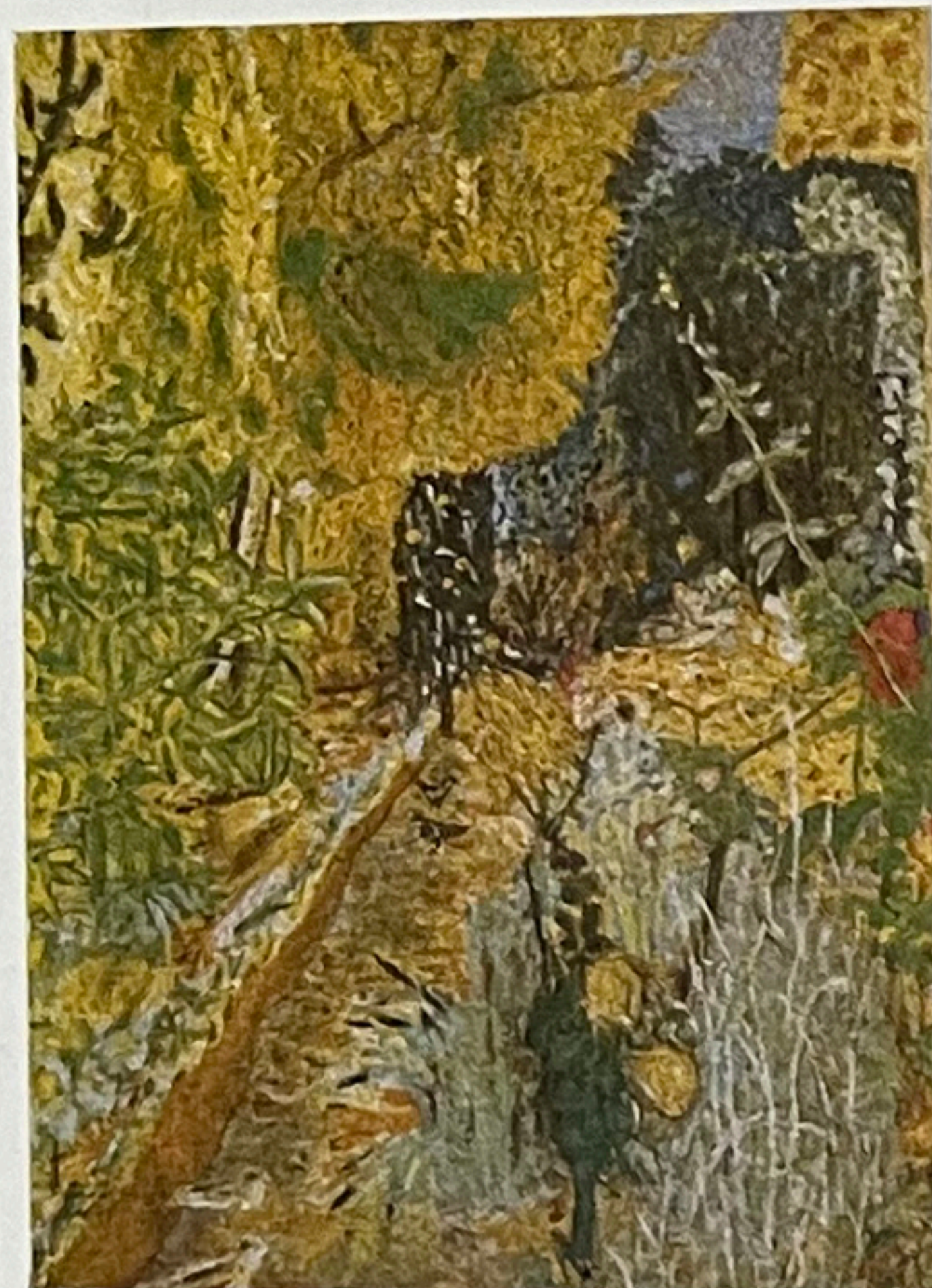
Exchange of views

Here is a group of pictures whose common characteristic is that they engage the eye from above - from a bird's eye view. The observer's eye does not fully enter the scene but is kept at a distance. The reason for this can easily be grasped when we realize that the ground has been tilted toward us until it is vertical; indeed, the artist carrying out this maneuver must take measures to stop it from hitting us, metaphorically, full in the face. For this he uses a technique that has the effect of pushing us well away from the surface of the picture.

In this new perception, the foreground, which normally serves as an anchor for the space, is moved farther off. This trick was present in the work of Cézanne, and it emerged fully with the Nabis, the Fauves, and then the Cubists. Its effect was to free the pictorial space in Western realist paintings from the rules established during the Renaissance. The exhibition of Japanese prints held in Paris at the close of the 19th century was largely responsible for this change, which opened up for Bonnard and Matisse (among others) a vision of a world where they were no longer restricted to a single way of seeing things.

We have all heard of the theory whereby the beating of a butterfly's wings in the Amazon jungle starts a chain of events that leads to a hurricane striking North Carolina. The arrival of the Japanese print supplied just such a beating of wings, for it ushered in a whole set of visual alternatives for 20th-century Western painters. For example, the Chinese panel by Wang Meng shown here, *Caves in the Forest of Chii Chii*, has a certain ambiguity to the Western eye because the ground is so ruthlessly tilted to the vertical. There are two ways of doing this: either you raise your panel as if it were on a hinge, or you act like a bird or an aviator and stare downward on the scene. In both cases the picture's elements will assume the aspect that cartographers use to indicate ground reliefs on maps.

Yet this is still not exactly what is happening in Wang's picture, or in Japanese prints. In effect, even though they have been made vertical, elements in them like mountains, rocks, rivers, trees, and houses keep their original profiled aspect.



Pierre Bonnard, *The Garden*, 1936 oil on canvas



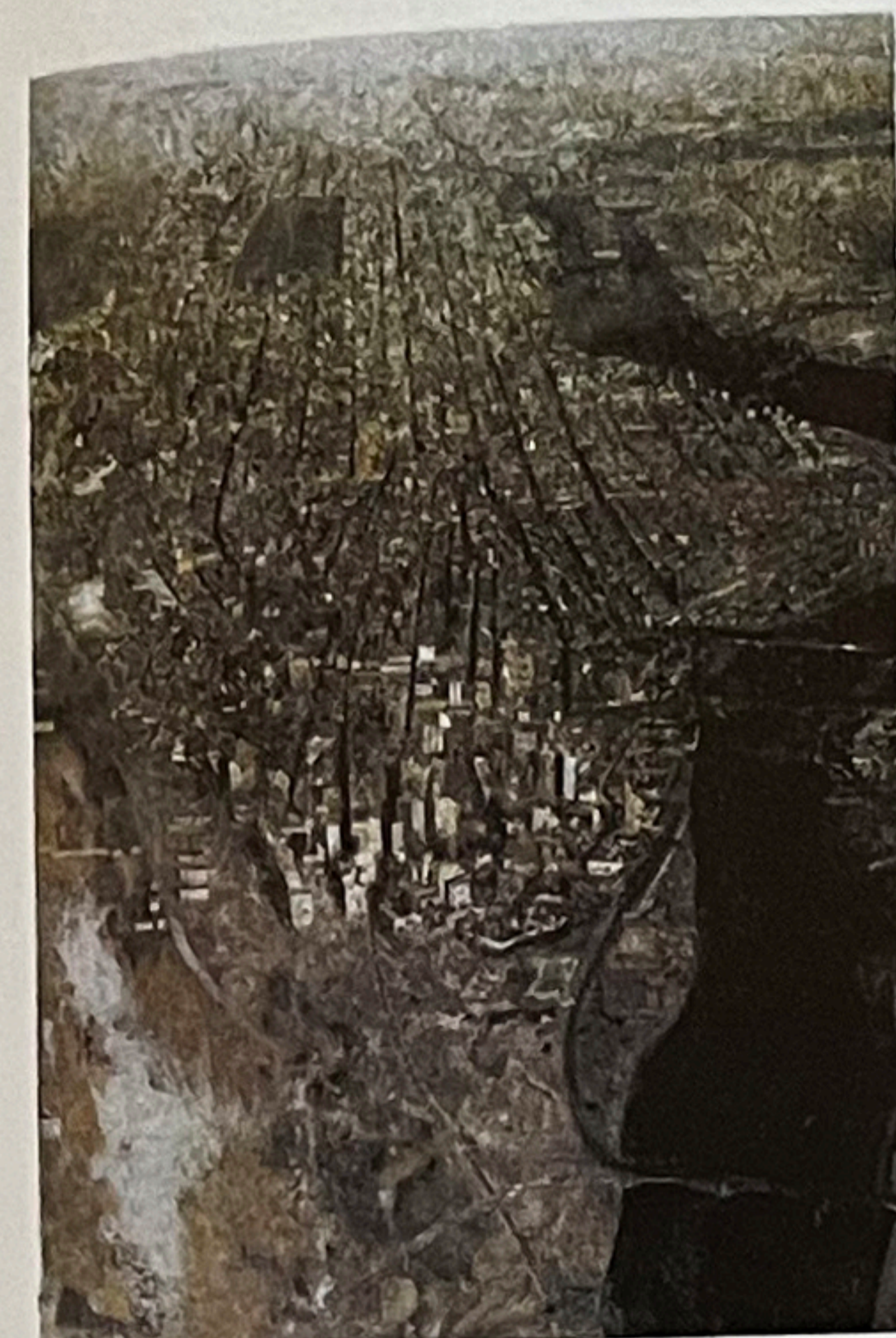
Pierre Bonnard, *The Bath*, 1925 oil on canvas



Wang Meng, *Caves in the Forest of Chii Chii*, 1369



Richard Diebenkorn, *Ocean Park no. 67*, 1973 oil on canvas



Antonio López García, *New York*, 1963 oil on canvas



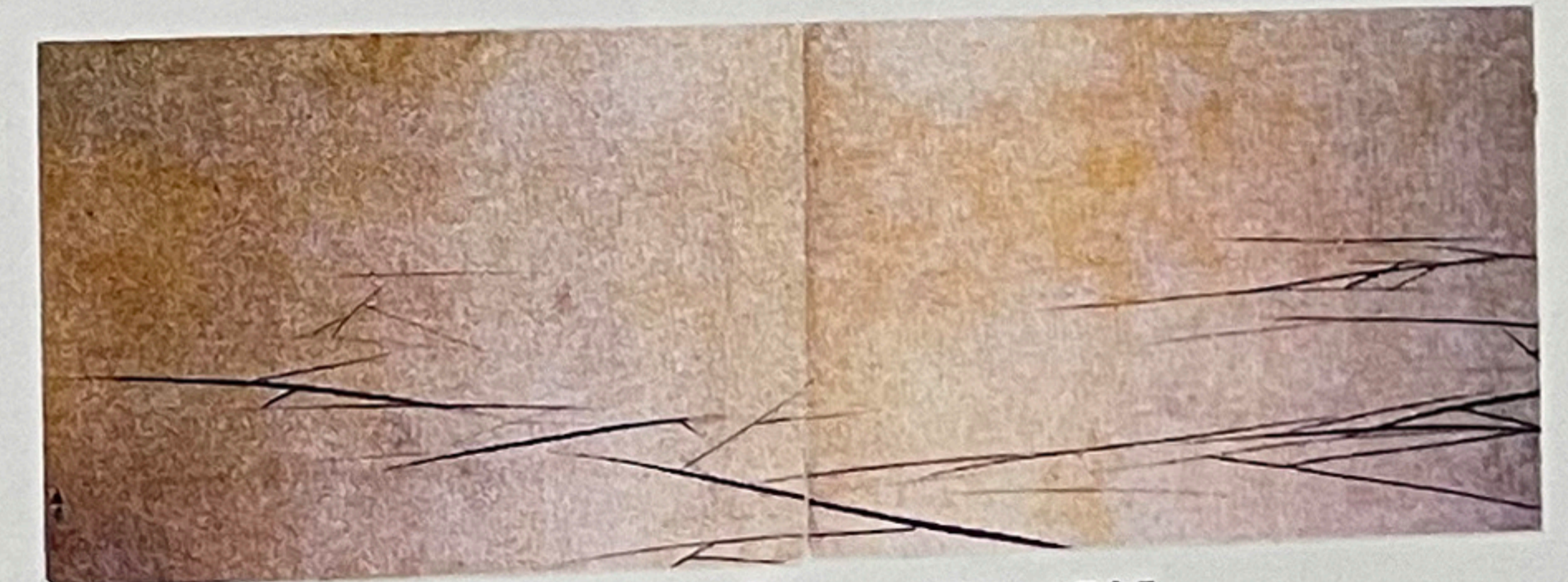
Wayne Thiebaud, *Curved Intersection*, 1979 oil on canvas

This is a double reading of the world, in which the notion of depth and a description of nature each have their place. Another approach is calligraphy, which is an ensemble of the poetic, literary, and plastic arts. Japanese prints have their roots in China; we have chosen this particular example merely because we were awed by its beauty. All the same, we do not mean to fix the art of Asia within some kind of reductive codification of its many highly original approaches to relief - far from it.

The believability of elevation in this view of Manhattan by Lopez Garcia - even though it is transposed - has to do with remembering the informal textures that reigned supreme in New York during the 1960s. In Balthus's picture the perspective is not so lofty: with Lopez Garcia we are in a helicopter, but with Balthus we are merely drifting birds. In Italian, "uccello" means "bird", which reminds us of Uccello and Poussin ("poussin" actually means "chick" in French), both of whom have given wings to this Icarus of our own time, who (thank God) has never allowed his wax to be melted by the hot sun of fashion.



Balthus, *Paysage d'Italie*, 1951 oil on canvas



Maruyama Ōkyo, *Cracks in the Ice*, 1780 Fragments of mica sprayed on paper

As a young man, Ōkyo was employed by a toy merchant to do prints and paintings using the Western techniques of perspective and vanishing point. The idea was to combine these tricks with optical devices, such as a mirror and lens, to emphasize the three-dimensional nature of images. In these panels the composition consists of a few cracks in an expanse of ice. Ōkyo makes us understand both the flatness of the surface and its vanishing nature by making his lines fade into the distance - yet, despite his mastery of Western perspective, the work remains fundamentally Japanese in character.