

ARTS MAGAZINE

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FOUR VIEWS

By Leonare Goldberg

Despite the known risks and expected consequences involved with assembling the Whitney Biennial exhibition, the tiresome criticisms of vacuity and variety hour mentality deny the considerable interest of many works shown there. The limitations in group shows of this order—too much ground covered, too many works assembled in too little space, the perplexing viewpoints which must be intuited from the mounting—are indeed present in this one. Questions of selection—why some strong painters seem to be represented by particularly timid paintings—should also be leveled. Nevertheless, the positive value seen in attempts such as this show, is sufficient to make criticism in that vein seem an evasion of the more central issue, the work.

Although the show contained over a hundred paintings and an almost equal number of sculptural works, it was the variety of moves into, onto, and back through the canvas that consistently held my interest. Through the overlapping moves and attitudes toward marking and organizing the surface, a strange set of bedfellows formed.

Actually the two major viewpoints seen here fell mainly between a neo-cubist structuring (Duran, Noland, Stella, Novros, Davis, et al) and a more expressionist response toward paint application.

The Duran acrylic (*Untitled*) watered, painted in an almost interlocking off-the-square jigsaw of forms and colors contained an ideation of surface construction that seemed to develop from an orphist-synchronist divisionism, a grid out of a 1912 Robert Delaunay painting. The implications of this attitude, an additive construction of flat color planes that activate the picture back and forth in space, contrasts with the disjointed association of the same planes—depending on the initial plane of the canvas for brilliance of color, flash and wit. The tension that results—each color asserting its identity, the variation of surface and so of depth reading possible within each stained area pulls against a solidified reading of the surface. A pulled apart patchwork of color planes that hang together in a rhythmic construction—edges picking up a linear movement that continues another edge, group and regroup.

While it is certainly true that not every grid is automatically a cubist construction, Louis Fishman's *Victory Garden of the Amazon Queen* shows distinct sympathies along those lines. Four tacked up squares, subdivided four more times are scratched into and fingered, blue, green, and browned-down red acrylic. Muddy and brushed back they seem to be concerned with a multiple view of a coherent space. Each square has a different density, a different

color and different division, all pull together into a unified composition where their connection is felt rather than stated.

The Frank Stella painting, *Kamonika Strumilowa IV* approaches a more synthetic cubist construction. Shooting lines dissect and define forms that are independently colored, textured. Variations on a continuing formal theme, carefully controlled, the absorptive, reflective planes of this maroon, green, orange, and blue picture announce physically and by visual weight their spatial positioning. It is a multifaceted approach which solidifies the image rather than destroys it.

Sun Bouquet, Kenneth Noland's painting seemed to almost fall apart but for the vertical bands at the right hand edge. A built up stain, hazily glowing yellow, pulses, what must be admitted, a magnificent purple stripe and another metallic gold one. But they are unable to pull up the very weak chartreuse stripe which practically drops that part of the canvas out of sight. The picture appears unequal to the weight of paint along its surface.

Jabberwocky (Gene Davis) and *Nares Plains* (Larry Zox) shared structural similarities with the Noland. *Nares Plains*, seemed almost like a green-stained Mondrian. It is this neo-plastic basis which unifies the three just mentioned painters. Zox's painting however, seemed to operate on the assumption that a color presented in large areas is bound to appeal sensuously: it doesn't always.

The elegant adjustments and divisions of David Novros's *Untitled* painting, a measured shifting palette of cool browns and blue are strongly allied to an outgrowth of neo-plastic cubism. This three part picture is a compression of horizontal moves between the up thrusting bottom and the bearing down top. Changing the expression of his painting by repositioning repeated shapes, small sized rectangles of color, Novros's piece pressurizes the fluctuating planes into a more stable format.

The other distinct move toward surface which is seen in this show is the built up, encrusted overlay of expressionistically thrust, thrown, pulled, and bubbled color.

Larry Poons' #4 acrylic on canvas, is a one, two, three move of color which at first simply seems splashed on, is actually used to structure the surface as it moves from drip, splash, to crusting up. Brown and purple slashes into a brushed out area. This leads to a repetition of the same sequence divided three ways. Like the David Diaio painting, (a wet-look, baked on enamel of acrylic plastic, like a Fred Astaire tap dance, easy looking yet incredibly masterful), the Poons works with the paint in a way that lets variation, of thickness, of drawing, of color have great play. Building from the picture plane, out, his painting is not nearly as unstructured as first appears.

Milton Resnick's *Pink Fire* and James Starrett's *Tuhelo* make an interesting, contrasting pair. Resnick's, a built up tissue, like old deflated balloons and Starrett's reined-in obsessive calligraphy, green writing into pale ochre, approach an all-over textured surface from opposing ends of the scale. *Pink Fire*, a rough, tough paint tube to canvas application, envelops the viewer. The large scale and the physical assertiveness of the glowing pinks and confetti colors counter what could otherwise down into precious manipulation of surface. Similarly, *Tuhelo*, counters what would ordinarily become overly delicate by injecting momentum and tight control on his free, flowing strokes. The first one creating a literal surface and the second creating an illusion of similar surface activity.

There were in addition several paintings that were almost commentaries about picture making. Jack Tworok's repeated brush marks, drips, intervals of color, gestures of paint, activate a masterful construction—a ghost like grid moving from pale yellow to gray. Pat Steir and Joan Snyder's pieces, close in their painterly delight and flash, extend a variety of images and paint identity across canvases, obliquely referencing other painters in the process; (*Womanchild*'s notation of some early Lynda Benglis wax posts for example).

The figurative paintings in the show disturbed me for their removal, post minimal disinterest and negative feelings toward the body. The Alex Katz, a wolf-like grinning portrait counters this with the ferocity of the flat image. The Sidney Goodman, (out of early Matisse), *Room 318* was a solid picture, a positive engagement with his seated woman.

In between these painters were many others, filling gaps, heading in other directions.

THE WHITNEY BIENNIAL

Four Views

Despite the known risks and expected consequences involved with assembling the Whitney Biennial exhibition, the tiresome criticisms of vacuity and variety hour mentality deny the considerable interest of many works shown there. The limitations in group shows of this order — too much ground covered, too many works assembled in too little space, the perplexing viewpoints which must be intuited from the mounting — are indeed present in this one. Questions of selection — why some strong painters seem to be represented by particularly timid paintings — should also be leveled. Nevertheless, the positive value seen in attempts such as this show, is sufficient to make criticism in that vein seem an evasion of the more central issue, the work.

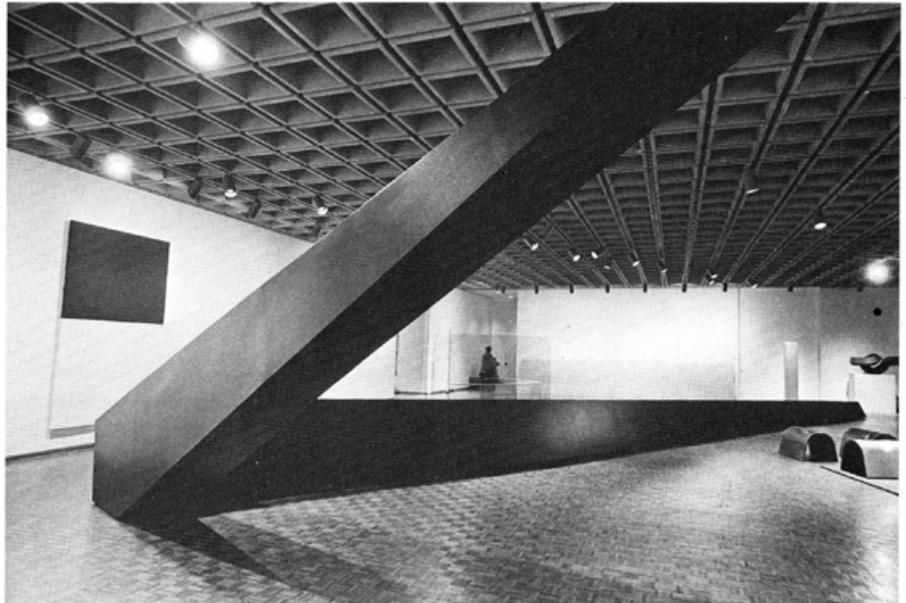
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Whitney Biennial (1973) and Floor. The works of Ronald Bladen with, from left to right: Ellsworth Kelly, Silvia Stone, Mary Miss, Ann Truitt and Clement Meadmore.

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