

ARTFORUM

APRIL 1970

ROBERT DURAN

By Emily Wasserman

ROBERT DURAN's transformation to loose, lyrical color paintings began to occur around the time of Duran's last show (see *Artforum*, Dec, 1968, p.53) when he got interested in spraying the separate flat slabs and square posts of his compactly organized sculptures with very pictorial cloudy films of color. What was most vital about this work for me was not the positive forms of the solid units, but, instead, the more freely circulating labyrinthine channels created between and around them. Geometric mystical diagrams familiar to the art of India, China, or folk cultures throughout the world often illustrate these qualities of dynamically energized space. Likewise, the use of surface color and the floor plan arrangements that Duran utilized sought to catalyze certain negative energies around the three-dimensional integers. They trace his efforts to quicken what had become by then, a fairly closed way of thinking based on geometric grids as organizing factors, or on methods of construction premised on precision and angularity. The restlessness which the artist felt vis-à-vis these habitual and carefully evolved approaches to his sculpture is seen in some earlier unexhibited pictures which were a direct jump from the three-dimensional work to the dimensions of painting.

In these bare, unpainted fields invisible grids were filled out by soft puffs of pastel stains. Gradually Duran broke away from this reticent, still somewhat restricting pattern; the look of the current work is a result of the freedom he subsequently allowed himself both with fluid color and with a more random distribution of many small jigsaw puzzle forms. It is worth remarking here, too, that Duran's awareness of and involvement with the changes which the work of the sculptor Richard Van Buren had done through during the past year has also had some parallel bearing on his own painting. As Van Buren has been able to deal with the materiality and non-linear aspects of his sculpture in terms of freely poured vehicles for color/light and density, Duran too has shifted his frame of reference to corresponding pictorial terms of color, light, and translucency conveyed by spontaneous forms. Slow or interrupted time had become one of the basic issues with which both artists found themselves dissatisfied in their previous work. Finding the way through one of Duran's more complex layouts of slabs and posts could get somewhat cumbersome—just as Van Buren had noticed that conflicts between the tinted polyester resin coatings and the wood sub-structures resulted in a problematic viewing of his work.

Duran's new paintings are single or coupled rectangular panels whose richly soaked fields of fruity oranges, brownish blue-greens and purples mixed

with yellows are punctuated by staccato fragments. These roughly key-like or jigsaw shapes seem to shine through the ground colors with an effect which reminded me of the glow which is obtained from India ink scratch boards underlaid with crayoned rainbow hues. The drifting fluidity of both the fields and the smaller, casually drawn units they contain are not wholly as lyrical or spatial as the description might suggest. The space is kept at a shallow level—while the painted areas jostle and flow toward the borders of the fields, they are then deliberately arrested by a white border which separates them by one-half inch from the actual edges of the canvas. It is as if the heady liberation which paint and sensuous chromatics have afforded the artist must still undergo the controls of the sculptor's customary constructive disciplines. But it is still good to see that the impasse which Duran had formerly felt in his sculpture has found such a joyous outlet, one which is allowing him to push at the boundaries of his own sensibility and talents.

Next to Duran's carnival colors, Brice Marden's sets of drawings and his two dryly scrubbed paintings looked chaste indeed. The built-up, then scraped-out surfaces of these canvases with their neutral uniform coloring and infinitesimally varied strokes show Marden to be working within the limited areas he has established and maintained for himself during the past few years. The white drippy strip at the bottom of these pictures has now virtually disappeared, thus obscuring or minimalizing even the briefest overt record of the process by which the picture surface has been covered. The drawings are involved with similar minute overall variations of texture, opacity, and sheen, also based on a uniformity of value. A number of them are grid-ruled sheets smudged with many layers of heavy black graphite, which shines and reflects as well as absorbs exterior lighting. Another drawing contains two white square panels covered with smooth white pencil marks which differentiate them from the rougher weave of the paper only after extended viewing.

—Emily Wasserman

one which is allowing him to push at the boundaries of his own sensibility and talents.

Next to Duran's carnival colors, BRICE MARDEN's sets of drawings and his two dryly scrubbed paintings looked chaste indeed. The built-up, then scraped-out surfaces of these canvases with their neutral uniform coloring and infinitesimally varied strokes show Marden to be working within the limited areas he has established and maintained for himself during the past few years. The white drippy strip at the bottom of these pictures has now virtually disappeared, thus obscuring or minimalizing even the briefest overt record of the process by which the picture surface has been covered. The drawings are involved with similar minute overall variations of texture, opacity, and sheen, also based on a uniformity of value. A number of them are grid-ruled sheets smudged with many layers of heavy black graphite, which shines and reflects as well as absorbs exterior lighting. Another drawing contains two white square panels covered with smooth white pencil marks which differentiate them from the rougher weave of the paper only after extended viewing.

FRANK ROTH used to paint volumetric automobile-part shapes in oddly jutting perspectives. Although his newer paintings are also concerned with such spatial effects, they are of a more abstract and more delicate nature. The basic idea of these paintings is to create a subtle impression of receding, corridor-like spaces which are realized by geometrically subdividing the field and surrounding some of the units with soft halations of color. The divisions suggest the orthogonal projections of perspective diagrams, but they lead from the corners of a field (sometimes rhomboidal, sometimes square or rectangular in format) inward toward a smaller, centralized door-like square or rectangle which is the focus of the receding space. In one picture, *The Stutterer*, two such centers are ranged on either side of a dark grey and black field, so that one space may seem to advance slightly while its pair may recede. Occasionally these internal units are placed off-center, evoking a more disjunctive sense of space. However, no particular adjustment in color value or emphasis is made to compensate for this shift of focus, which may account for the failure of these experiments to my

eye.

There is something essentially dilettantish about the work, although the pictures are competently painted. Roth has hit upon a pattern which he can vary slightly in the guise of serial solutions, but he only shifts his combinations of color felicitously to achieve the look of progression. He seems to have given up the more difficult peculiarity of his earlier work for a rather shallow and decoratively pleasing production which falls short of the risk or originality of his previous paintings.

—EMILY WASSERMAN

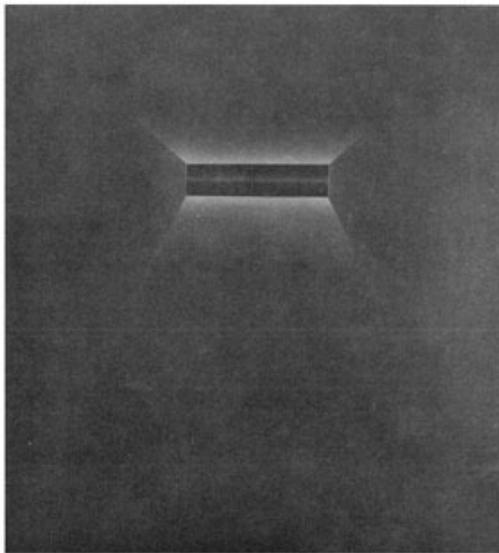
THE NEGLECTED 19th CENTURY, H. Shickman Gallery; THOMAS HART BENTON, James Graham and Sons; ROSEMARIE BECK, Peridot; DAVID ALFARO SIQUEIROS, Center for Inter-American Relations:

As the catalog to the exhibition explains, THE NEGLECTED 19th CENTURY is not a comprehensive survey: the paintings in it are taken entirely from the gallery's stock, and the result is the spotty and miscellaneous kind of show one nearly always finds when New York dealers attempt to cover important areas of art. It is

likely that the title of the show does it an injustice in another way, too. The fact is that very few of these painters are "neglected," unless perhaps by people whose opinion is not worth very much—in fact, many of them have come in recent years to be rather fashionable—and the result is that the visitor is in danger of going to it in hopes of seeing revelations that are simply not to be found. Of the 49 paintings in the show, only the Dufeu, the Latouche and the Vibert provided anything unfamiliar; but none of them, even the Vibert, generates more than a mild interest. Finally, even what coherence a dealer's stock might have is lessened by some odd inclusions (of painters who are very far from being "neglected," as it happens: Prud'hon, Daubigny, Jacque, Jongkind). But to be honest, these reservations are as confused as the show. Let's say that, all in all, what is in the exhibition (except for the Prud'hon) is anything that was not done by one of the Great Names, whether of neoclassicism, romanticism or the modernist movement.

Actually, I think it is good that the show was so heterogeneous, since in my opinion the usual idea of the relation of the modernist movement to the academic group is altogether false. In fact, there were no such monolithic factions, whether in respect of style, subject matter or what can be called the politics of the art world—the activity of an artist as an artist but outside his art. What has happened is that modernist painting has been studied in the light of the modernist ideology itself, which is to say that a certain conclusion has been imposed on the 19th century rather than elicited from it. The modernist ideology tends—or until very, very recently has tended—to regard important works of art as being created in reaction to, outside, indeed above a (prevalent) context; its origins are to be found in a romantic view of history as something that is made by isolated individuals, whose projects run counter to and rise above the general trends of the time. But obviously to study artists according to this bias is not to study them historically.

On the basis of the present show, it is of course only possible to illustrate this point haphazardly. Still, one can see very clearly that painters like Fromentin and Gérôme form a kind



Frank Roth, *May*, acrylic, 72 x 66", 1969. Martha Jackson Gallery.



Gérôme, *Portrait of Mlle. Duvergier*, oil, 50 x 34". Shickman Galleries.

ple, yellow, pink, and other decorative colors which dominate the majority of the pictures, this one canvas resolves Parker's lack of certainty with less startling effects, rather than with a merely superficial chromatic brightness. The impact of his color is not to be denigrated, but my view is that it only serves to bolster what are essentially inconclusive abstractions. Even the most luscious color cannot survive without an effective vehicle for its transmission. Whatever Parker intends in the rhythmic, free dispersion of his shapes, they are never meant to be disembodied (their hard contours and flat coloring deny such a reading), and they require a more forceful embodiment to affect as the assertive pictures one yearns for when faced with their ambitions.

In his new works at the Pace Gallery, LARRY BELL seems to be retrenching, returning voluntarily to the intimate scale to which he had been limited in his earlier glass cubes, but which he appeared to have transcended in several glass "wall pieces" shown outside of New York last year.

The glass is still treated by Bell's elaborate optical lens coating machine, so that evanescent spectrums of rosy, smoky hues slide over the surfaces of the fragile, mirrored pieces. They are extremely narrow strips (three to six inches wide by about six to nine feet long) attached to the wall at waist height like glass ledges or shelves. There is a definite minimizing of one's bodily response to these lovely, precious slivers, since one is led to view them from a single side (that is, from above, or from one end, but not from a variety of vantage points, as with the boxes or walls). Further restrictions are sensed in the rather incidental addition of opaque frosty bands which border

the longitudinal edges of each strip. Only the central areas are gradated with fluid runs of the spectrum ranging from deep purple through green and yellow to an iridescent transparency. The overhead lighting passes through the ledges, and is reflected up and down by them so that an aura of colored light surrounds them on their backing surface. Although they are certainly very attractive works, the sense of fullness and the mysterious, demanding complexities of viewing the earlier cubes seems to be lacking here. Instead, an elegant, speedy stripe of light and reflected color hugs the wall in a way which suggests recession from the spectator, rather than an engagement on the more perplexing mental, visual, and physical levels.

ROBERT DURAN's transformation to loose, lyrical color paintings began to occur around the time of Duran's last show (see *Artforum*, Dec. 1968, p.58) when he got interested in spraying the separate flat slabs and square posts of his compactly organized sculptures with very pictorial cloudy films of color. What was most vital about this work for me was not the positive forms of the solid units, but, instead, the more freely circulating labyrinthine channels created between and around them. Geometric mystical diagrams familiar to the art of India, China, or folk cultures throughout the world often illustrate these qualities of dynamically energized space. Likewise, the use of surface color and the floor plan arrangements that Duran utilized sought to catalyze certain negative energies around the three-dimensional integers. They trace his efforts to quicken what had become, by then, a fairly closed way of thinking, based on geometric



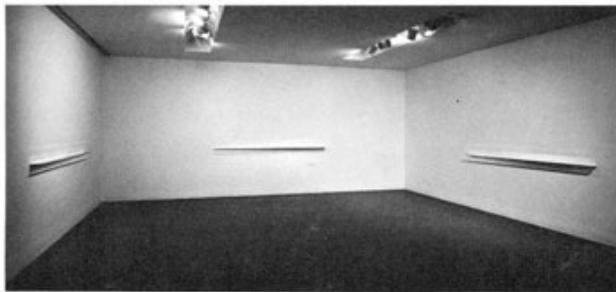
Robert Duran, untitled, liquitex, 7 x 9', 1970. Bykert Gallery.

grids as organizing factors, or on methods of construction premised on precision and angularity. The restlessness which the artist felt vis-à-vis these habitual and carefully evolved approaches to his sculpture is seen in some earlier unexhibited pictures which were a direct jump from the three-dimensional work to the dimensions of painting.

In these bare, unpainted fields invisible grids were filled out by soft puffs of pastel stains. Gradually Duran broke away from this reticent, still somewhat restricting pattern; the look of the current work is a result of the freedom he subsequently allowed himself both with fluid color and with a more random distribution of many small jigsaw puzzle forms. It is worth remarking here, too, that Duran's awareness of and involvement with the changes which the work of the sculptor Richard Van Buren had gone through during the past year has also had some parallel bearing on his own painting. As Van Buren has been able to deal with the materiality and non-linear aspects of his sculpture in terms of freely poured vehicles for color/light and density, Duran too has shifted his frame of reference to corresponding pictorial terms of color, light, and translucency conveyed by spontaneous forms. Slow or interrupted time had become one of the basic issues with which both artists found themselves dissatisfied in their previous work. Finding the way

through one of Duran's more complex layouts of slabs and posts could get somewhat cumbersome—just as Van Buren had noticed that conflicts between the tinted polyester resin coatings and the wood substructures resulted in a problematic viewing of his work.

Duran's new paintings are single or coupled rectangular panels whose richly soaked fields of fruity oranges, brownish blue-greens and purples mixed with yellows are punctuated by staccato fragments. These roughly key-like or jigsaw shapes seem to shine through the ground colors with an effect which reminded me of the glow which is obtained from India ink scratch boards underlaid with crayoned rainbow hues. The drifting fluidity of both the fields and the smaller, casually drawn units they contain are not wholly as lyrical or spatial as the description might suggest. The space is kept at a shallow level—while the painted areas jostle and flow toward the borders of the fields. They are then deliberately arrested by a white border which separates them by one-half inch from the actual edges of the canvas. It is as if the heady liberation which paint and sensuous chromatics have afforded the artist must still undergo the controls of the sculptor's customary constructive disciplines. But it is still good to see that the impasse which Duran had formerly felt in his sculpture has found such a joyous outlet,



Installation view, Larry Bell exhibition, Pace Gallery.