

AMERICAN ABSTRACTION: FOUR CURRENTS

Curated by Peter Frank

Ellen Banks
Elaine Lustig Cohen
Carol Cramer
Richard Cramer
Bruce Cunningham
Eric Erickson
Christian Haub
Charles Christopher Hill
Patrick Hogan
Linda Levit
Vered Lieb
Richard Loving
William Morehouse
Mary Obering
Haynes Ownby
Marc Pally
Robert Perillat
Mary Ann Peters
Timothy Porges
Richards Ruben
Duston Spear
Marianne Van Lent
Don Voisine
Stephanie Weber
Mary Beth Welch
Dick Wray

December 7–28, 1985

LOUIS K. MEISEL *gallery*

In the spring of 1985 we began a series of exhibitions organized, curated and cataloged by curators independent of the gallery. The first, "Abstract Painting Redefined" was very well received and is still travelling to a series of museums.

This is the second of what we will attempt to make an annual or semi-annual event in our continuing commitment to Abstract painting. "American Abstraction: Four Currents" exhibits 26 artists who have not been seen extensively in New York. They are divided into four groups as per Mr. Frank's essay.

Louis K. Meisel

AMERICAN ABSTRACTION: Four Currents

For much of our century, the discourse of art—especially as it filtered down to those only casually engaged in aesthetic concerns, but even as it bore on artists and their supporters—turned on a very few fundamental issues. Prime among these was the contraposition of representation to abstraction—that is, art that reifies observed reality to art that does not rely on—that in fact eschews—the depiction of recognizable imagery. The latter kind of art might have depended on the exterior world as a springboard towards formal and/or spiritual essence, towards a clarification of metaphysical concerns through either or both visual and spiritual vocabularies; but it was still freed of retinal reiteration, proposing the artist's allegiance only to formal essentials (however the artist might understand those) and of those essentials' resonance in human perception. Artists working in such abstract modes were constantly opposed by artists still involved with the depiction (or at least the approximation) of what the eyes normally see. An often ideological chasm separated the two groups: while many artists in the modernist period actually proposed substantive syntheses of the two antithetical positions, the lines were clearly drawn and doggedly maintained between the protagonists, and their dicta concerning the meaning, role, and source of art were based on this opposition.

That dialectical relationship, of course, has itself reached synthesis. Indeed, our understanding of many artists' participation in the now-moot argument between representation and abstraction is colored by our recognition that the rendition of naturalistic subject matter is a conceptual abstraction—a manipulation of materials away from their inherent properties—while the formulation of non-"realistic" imagery can actually be *real* in its total avoidance of veristic imagery.

Furthermore, some modernist figurative painting, aimed at elucidating and experimenting with physical and retinal properties of pigment (e.g. Pointillism), has been driven by non- (even anti-) illusionistic purposes, while non-figurative painters like the Abstract Expressionists have insisted even as they formulated their methods that all art has, and is fundamentally *about*, its subject matter (whether that subject matter is clearly delineated or simply intuited). The contextual conditions of an artwork, no matter what their sources, now serve to mute the differentiation between representational and non-objective formulation.

This is not to say there is no effective differentiation between the two states of imagehood, but only that that differentiation is not at issue in contemporary aesthetic reasoning. There is no need to argue for or against figuration or abstraction, any more than one has needed (at least since the 15th century). The two polarities now exist simply as alternate modes—available for cross-breeding. Abstract methods can be used essentially to stylize reality, and realistic methods can be introduced, collage-like, to undermine the formal purity of abstraction without undermining its visual coherence. Aesthetic concepts located in figuration or in abstraction are of interest not because of their location, but regardless of it.

The current resurgence of essentially abstract painting, supposedly now replacing the figuration that has predominated for the last half-decade, is not a case of abstraction simply replacing representation, but a broader matter of artists' attention shifting back to formal concerns, to the potential for provocative ambiguity in non-specific visual devices. Meaning, as conveyed in the neo-pictorial work of the last few years, was a rather quick fix; in the thinking now reasserting itself

(although long emergent), meaning evolves more slowly, and art-work maintains attention by being gradually revelatory, and ever oblique. Once again, the viewer (as per Duchamp's dictum) completes the work of art—and at a remove from the stylistic and societal preconditions, no matter how ultimately unavoidable.

It must be observed, however, that like much recent painterly figuration, a good deal of current abstraction does conjure previous art history—and not by accident. If figure-focused painters have returned to the techniques (and, at best, attitudes) of bygone periods and places, many non-objective painters have likewise reawakened the methods (and, again, at best the attitudes) of others.

Neo-constructivism can be posited vis-a-vis neo-expressionism as much as it can vis-a-vis other tendencies in present day American (and, in fact, non-American) abstraction. But, even more so than neo-expressionism (whose practitioners have too often struck a pose of overweening self-consciousness), neo-constructivism treats its source movements—De Stijl, Russian abstraction, post-Cubist developments in France, Art Deco and International-Style streamlining—simply as formal languages and points of view whose potency has not yet been exhausted. While certain neo-constructivists in this exhibit have gone out of their way to suggest the grace, elegance, and subtle wit shared by the pre-War art and design styles lumped under the "constructivism" rubric, the sense one gets from the work here distinguished as "neo-constructivist" is basically that the formal tenets renewed by these artists are eminently renewable—precisely because no artists here (not even the most cunningly archaic) merely reiterates the formal achievements of the past. Antecedents can be identified, but comparison emphasizes differences as clearly as it does continuities. This is true for the old expressionism and the new, too, of course, but a comparison of old and new constructivists—while admittedly yielding no utopians, mystics, or revolutionary pedagogues among the latter-day geometricians—dispels rather than aggravates fears of aesthetic degeneration.

The nostalgia-laced opulence of Carol Cramer's art, for example, is free of the awkwardly self-conscious imitativeness weighting so many other current historicist developments; her neo-Deco stylizations explore a clearly historic mode not in a spirit of campy irony, but in one of true interest in that mode itself, an interest in its insouciant refinement, not in its antique vintage. Likewise, Elaine Lustig Cohen does not simply don old clothing by exploring and developing a kind of neo-cubist abstraction, but demonstrates the continuing pertinence of the aesthetics promulgated by generations of Parisian painters, from the Orphists and Synchronists to the *Cercle et Carré* group. Like Cramer's painting, Cohen's evokes past eras and masters not simply by aping (or mocking) them, but by understanding them as still-valid postulates and possibilities. A more idiosyncratic geometricism is evident in Christian Haub's work, but its roots in the visual rationalism of the constructivists is unmistakable—more so, in fact, than other of those latter-day abstractionists whose use of geometric forms combines with an ongoing dependency on the energetic formal organization inherited from Abstract Expressionism.

In the interest of constructivists in exterior rational systems also maintains in current neo-constructivism, whether in the neo-plastic formulations of Ellen Banks—whose architectonic arrangements are in fact systematic translations of pre-extant musical scores (e.g. by Bach, Beethoven, Villa-Lobos)—the diagonal-grid schemes of Haynes

Ownby—who actually roots his painting in the parameters, and often the actual playing, of a complex board game he has invented—or the multisegmented structures of Mary Beth Welch, structures etched with contrasting linear systems bespeaking mathematical deduction. But the visual principles of constructivism have current application as well in realms of expression rather removed from such rationalist methods, as can be seen in the relief of Timothy Porges; the eccentric, vaguely funky imagery into which Porges molds his networks of crisply defined vectors hints coyly at the real world without nearing even a cartoonish version of figurative imagery.

The suspicion of some observers that neo-constructivism is simply neo-minimalism is clearly unfounded. The constructivists are involved with complex pictorial constructs engaging geometric vocabularies, and are not especially interested in the phenomenological appositions and confrontational drama of high-dudgeon Minimalism. Interestingly, though, another group of current abstract painters is quite willing to consider these aspects, believing them still viable more than a decade after their prevalence. This group of painters cannot be labelled neo-minimalists either, however, as they are concerned first and foremost with very specifically painterly issues, issues which the original Minimalists seemed eager to avoid. Better to call these new painters Elementarists, positing as they do distinct, simply described elements on visually supportive, relatively uninflected fields. In a sense these painters return to the figure-ground theories exposed by Hans Hofmann, reworking them into contemporary visual argots and amplifying the sensual pleasure and visual vigor of forcefully-worked paint—especially in palettes and on scales unmistakably inherited from Hoffman's Abstract Expressionist cohorts and students.

One aspect of this elementalist approach, to judge from the representative sampling of artists in this show, emphasizes the figure-ground contrast; another aspect introduces linear as well as (or as opposed to) planar figures, involving somewhat more intricate structural concerns and even suggesting drawing. Employing vivid coloration, "loaded" brushes, and lively, sometimes comically bumptious forms, painters like Vered Lieb, Richards Ruben, and Bruce Cunningham manage to inflect this simple formula with distinct personality, even nuance. Ruben's freely brushed shapes hint at objects in the real world in ways so knowingly coarse and rudimentary that viewers must make tentative, fugitive associations yielding no certain identification. Lieb puts her more limited formal vocabulary in dramatic operation through schematic concerns: sizing—the relative volume occupied by figure against ground—frequency of figure repetition, and positioning, in terms both of figures relative to one another and to the field. Cunningham works with a wider range of more rigidly devised forms, thus suggesting somewhat closer ties to Minimalism—and especially to the pre-Minimalism of 1960s Hard Edge painting—then do Ruben's and Lieb's painting. Cunningham's canvases derive their interest not only from formal variety, but from often exaggerated scalar considerations and most particularly from a color sense displaying a taste not only for high keys (as do Ruben's and Lieb's) but for saccharine, sour, or otherwise harsh—yet oddly compelling—tones and combinations.

Elementalist painters engaging linear devices diverge similarly, ranging from the distinct line-as-figures formulae of Linda Levit, with its evocations of African and Native American decorative geometrics, through the narrowed color planes and milky supporting

grounds of Don Voisine—the grounds often inflected with what seem to be penitentiary evincing the artist's process of composition—to the emphatic but never ponderous visual assertions of Eric Erickson, open grids and boxes whose supporting fields are also marked with drawing-like figures. Unlike Voisine's, Erickson's drawing-like marks suggest not just prior displacement, but initial formulation; Erickson's paintings in effect contain their own sketches. Robert Perillat's striations read at once as figure *and* as ground, and the painterly interest of the solid-color areas bracketing those horizontals also point to what amounts on Perillat's part to a full synthesis of the linear and painterly directions in the Elementalist mode.

One aspect of this elementalist work that should be readily apparent is the respect the painters have for, and even the delight they take in, the physical properties of their pigment-bearing media. Such a celebration of paint's sensual qualities suffuses throughout Elementalist work, adding luster to its formal power. A more wide-ranging haptic investigation of materials characterizes what might be called Materialist abstraction, made by artists who engage non-traditional substances in the fabrication of artwork that in format and in context extends basically painterly concerns. Sculptural properties have also been absorbed into the Material abstractionist's purview, of course—specifically the concerns evinced by the process-oriented sculpture that emerged as an extension of *and* countervale to Minimalism at the end of the '60s. Labelled Anti-form sculpture here in America, Arte Povera in Italy, and other monickers in other places, such work proposed that materials have their own inherent aesthetic interest, interest around which substantive artwork—substantive in the figurative *and* literal senses—could be realized.

This practice has had particular currency on the American west coast, so it is no surprise that three of the five artists representing the materialist current here are from Los Angeles or Seattle. Patrick Hogan's dense networks of rope painted with acrylic and suspended in translucent gel exemplify succinctly the gritty, untidy but handsome qualities sought in this style. Mary Ann Peters' plaster surfaces, part painted on and part etched into, conjure associations with uses of such material in industrial and building construction—giving the images she inscribes on those surfaces the poetic *frisson* of contemporary petroglyphs, Lascaux-cave signs appearing in housing developments. Similar working of construction material is seen in the work of Duston Spear, one of the two New Yorkers among the cursory selection of Material abstractionists here. Spear's painting on weathered wood, enhanced by quasi-sculptural incisions (including holes which reveal inner sources of form and color) are less suggestive than Peters', but focus even more on the painterly possibilities of non-paint materials. Charles Christopher Hill, the third Westerner, subjects gridded tapestries of paper to a sequence of weathering processes, displaying the results unframed and instretched. These results normally clarify rather than obscure the multilingual newspaper sources of such grungy textile, the nature of the decaying agents (from damp soil to mild acid), and the strangely comforting allure of the myriad colors and textures that have resulted. Marianne van Lent, the other New Yorker, also works with paper, employing cast-paper techniques. Such techniques have become widespread, but van Lent's involvement in them, however, points at material process more than does most paper-pulp work, as the ragged surface are, like Hill's, inflected with a spectrum of enticing color. If Hill's art

is nominally painting because of the painterly concerns it addresses, van Lent's is a thoroughgoing painting-sculpture hybrid—although, again, little actual paint is involved.

The Material abstractionists' exploration of process would seem to argue for an aesthetic of abstraction fixed on the art object itself, on its factual presence rather than on its referentiality. But Peters' slabs, Hogan's entwinements, Hill's rags, Spear's carvings, and most especially van Lent's totemic crossbow-like objects provoke associations beyond their stuff as well as focusing attention on the stuff itself. No matter how self-referential non-objective art is, it cannot but elicit metaphorical response. The painters in one current of American abstraction, in fact, seek to expand the metaphorical resonance of their imagery, evoking spaces as well as things, and even hinting at motion and metamorphosis. These "Numinous" abstractionists work with soft, expansive forms set in ambiguous space and rendered with a wealth of glowing color. Hence the convenient name, "numinous," punning as it does on the words "luminous" and "nuage" (French for "cloud") but also a word in its own right, meaning (according to Webster's Seventh Collegiate) "supernatural: mysterious," "filled with the sense of the presence of divinity," and "appealing to the higher emotions or to the aesthetic sense: spiritual." While aspects of these definitions may seem ambitiously exalted for the work here, on balance the five examples of Numinous abstraction do exhibit a diffuse aura, a sense of wonder and portent transcending their obvious, luscious beauty.

This sense is the most subtle and restrained in the work of Dick Wray, appearing as the work does as a kind of extended doodle built on webs of meandering lines. These occur against, and through, fields of vigorously brushed or softly diffuse color—not fields, exactly, as they change too often and abruptly, but rather like portions of atmosphere in their contrasting modulation. A single field, itself modulated throughout, is the backdrop of ambiguous space for Marc Pally's much denser yet more brittle imagery, spiky, fiery objects and organisms apparently seen through a prism giving them a cubistic crystallinity. Pally's working of his surfaces pushes these otherworldly forms back into their supporting ether, lessening their threatening presence without entirely compromising their fierceness. Softer in color but perhaps more brittle in form, Richard Loving's images seem at once to be performing on (and before) a stage and to be submerging into the play of sugary, aqueous light that floods the proscenium. Plant-like forms of startling urgency—almost sexual force—frequently occupy center stage with a simultaneously comic and frightening obduracy. Various kinds of plant forms—buds, leaves, branches—weave in and out of Stephanie Weber's pictures, too, accompanied—or perhaps confronted—by different lively forces, both animalistic, or even humanoid, and entirely non-suggestive. Loose, vigorous brushwork combines with a restrained linear emphasis in Weber's pictures to impart a sense of purposeful but not rapid motion. In William Morehouse's canvases, by contrast, bulbous and crisply linear forms comport themselves gravely so that they formulate almost iconic symmetries—only to be thrown off balance by the introduction of other shapes. The suggestivity of both iconic and non-iconic forms never becomes prosaic, as the forms never take on particular reference, nor do the surrounding brightly painted and vigorously brushed fields allow them the security of rigid, static contours. But the same drifting motion, soft, billowing presences, and

tebriile glow are there in Morehouse's painting, linking it distinctly to Weber's, Pally's, Loving's, and Wray's.

Something of these qualities are also found in Richard Cramer's painting, but are oddly and artfully compromised by an underlying geometric rhythmicity, a highly balanced—one could almost say contrapuntal—formal disposition that nearly locks the drifting shapes into a pattern. The basic large shapes—remarkably precise against vivid grounds—play against a forest of darting lines, insisting on their own slow, numinous color and motion and on their raggedly geometric shape while advancing against the ground as primary elements. By endeavoring actually to tell a rather picaresque story (about a being named Buzz—always the same shape in the various paintings—and his travels through Pennsylvania factory towns), Cramer hits on the Numinous, Constructivist, and Elemental currents at once. Likewise, Mary Obering, reducing the compositions of noted paintings (e.g. Titian's *Venus and Adonis* to simply delineated but still complexly arranged schemata, partakes of Elementalist figure-ground relationships and the finely-honed geometric balances of the new Constructivists. Incorporating several types of precious metal leaf for coloristic and textural effect—effect, by design, both seductive and irritating—Obering also speaks of the Materialist tendency. Thus, at least two artists in "American Abstraction: Four Currents" ride more than one of the four currents traced in the show.

Observers could not be faulted for finding that other participants in "American Abstraction" course in more than one current as well. The four currents identified here, after all, are not distinct artistic movements, but simply tendencies discerned by someone exercising categorical discretion on the current abstract practice of various artists who by and large don't even know each other. The four currents presented here are certainly not the only tendencies prevalent in American abstract painting; the artists displayed here are not the only exemplars of these currents; and these currents are not the only stylistic contexts in which any of these artists needs to be considered. Indeed, the connection of at least a few of these artists to other painters—and artists in other media—working with representational imagery could itself not be disputed too fervently; there are more than a few referential shapes lurking in the work of Carol Cramer, Marc Pally, Tim Porges, or Richards Ruben, to name just four.

As observed before, abstraction and figuration are no longer diametrically opposite, entirely segregated modes—if they ever were. The resurgence of abstract painting in America follows on the heels of the resurgence of figural painting not as a contradiction so much as an extension of the figurative painters' own pictorial reasoning—an intricate yet all-absorptive reasoning characteristic of picture-making in the post-modernist era. The four currents and 26 talents presented here as American Abstraction are presented not as necessary models but as admirable accomplishments, their modes available to any other artist or group of artists. Ultimately, the four currents and 26 artists propose not dialectical these but only discursive postulates, to be understood, accepted, and used at will.

Peter Frank New York September 1985



Richard Loving
Sexual Gospel, 1985
 oil on canvas, 92 x 68"
 Courtesy Roy Boyd Gallery, Chicago

Richard Loving

Born 1924, Vienna (Austria)
 Lives in Chicago

Education

Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson,
 New York, 1943-4
 Cornell University Medical School,
 New York City, 1945
 New School for Social Research, 1946

Solo Exhibitions from 1980

1981
 Jan Cicero Gallery, Chicago
 1982
 Lerner Heller Gallery, New York City
 1983
 Roy Boyd Gallery, Chicago
 School of the Art Institute of Chicago
 1984
 Roy Boyd Gallery, Los Angeles
 1985
 Roy Boyd Gallery, Chicago

Mary Obering

Born 1937, Shreveport, Louisiana
 Lives in New York City

Education

Hollins College, Roanoke, Virginia, 1958, B.A.
 Radcliffe College Graduate School,
 Harvard University, 1959
 University of Denver, 1971, M.F.A.

Solo Exhibitions from 1980

1980
 Interart Gallery, New York City
 1981
 Ben Shahn Gallery, William Paterson College,
 Wayne, New Jersey
 1983
 Julian Pretto Gallery, San Juan, Costa Rica

Mary Obering
V & A, 1983
 egg tempura, gold leaf, silver leaf, and copper
 leaf on masonite, 48 x 63"
 Courtesy of the artist, NY

