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REVIEW: ROBERT DURAN AT BYKERT GALLERY

By Emily Wasserman

In his second one-man show at the Bykert Gallery ROBERT DURAN diverges from the look of his earlier sculpture to explore a more systematic yet strangely more open organization in the new pieces.

In several of his older works diagonal interlocks, jutting arrow-like shapes, and closely aligned axial parts often framed or forced the space into relatively defined areas. This tight spatial channeling left few possibilities for anything but the establishment of the emphatic, often blocky, gravity-bound volumes of the sculptures' components. This obdurateness and control have not been abandoned in Duran's current work, but have taken on a new role in terms of a very deliberate, almost syncopated disposition of parts which is complemented by a subtly a-rhythmic pacing of the space between these forms. The expressive tone of most of his sculpture has always tended toward something compact and dense, while the shapes themselves have often aimed for a certain kind of lightning quickness (using jagged diagonals and few right angles) which was nevertheless constrained by the closeness of the forms, or the neutrality of their colors.

The pieces exhibited this year are made of compressed wood (Novaply). They are each sprayed a different color which generally obscures the character of the material and in certain cases even weakens its sculptural mass or identity. But at the same time the new and more daring use of color has prompted Duran to work through the problems it poses in relation to a reductive vocabulary of forms in a complex format. Low slabs, squared posts, and uneven-sided right angles are arranged concentrically on a square "plan" on the floor. While the organization of these pieces maintains that almost hermetic compactness and squat density which marked his early sculpture, holding together with a subdued though taut energy (like the lines of force in a magnetic field), space can move through and between the slender solid forms in an irregular labyrinthine manner. In the most complex multi-part piece, sprayed brick red misting into grey along corners and edges, an outer fence of slabs and posts surrounds an inner rectangle composed of two sets of narrow and wider slabs. Viewed from different angles, or from above—most of the works are below eye level in height—one integer always blocks any clear passage of space through the invisible plan on which the work is set. This makes for an oddly "ornery" presence, as each expectation of unbroken spatial and material continuity or steady rhythm is blocked or deviated and both space and solid are skewed against each other. I felt that other pieces were more successful, however, since a broader, more open spacing, tended to work more fully in conjunction with the coloring rather than against it. In the red piece this coloring seemed too

pictorial or too contradictory in relation to the rigidly fixed, almost stubborn plan.

The color on each separate piece within a whole scheme is applied differently, often toning from some deep hue near the bottom up to a lighter more aerated tint, or vice versa. Although this kind of treatment can force the color to divorce itself from the solid forms it covers, or to lift the pieces from their gravitational anchoring, the color then may relate more abstractly to the fluid circulation of space and air around the blocks, slabs, and posts. In other words, it can work positively, in complement to the tightness or grid-regularity of the structural plan.

I felt the most risky and most interesting piece was the most asymmetrically designed blue work. Three of its corners are marked off by right-angled units of various sizes (all the pieces are the same height), while the fourth corner is pegged by a single post. Inside this irregular framework sit four other variegated pieces: three different slabs and another square post, creating an off-balance, open-ended though still concentric plan. Because the plan itself is not static, the gradated coloring does not distract from the whole, and even serves to add an extra measure of interest with its apparent capacity to levitate some pieces or to ground others.

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against the didactic, principle-dominated Surrealist movement. For this reason, the incursions of Dadaistic sensibility are discernible in such seemingly disparate contemporary factions as random, distribution-oriented artists and minimal structuralists. The very open-endedness of Dadaism allows a freer assimilation of its gestures by later movements. On the other hand the Surrealist tradition can claim very few, if any, contemporary practitioners of consequence other than Lucas Samaras. Chief among the governing regulations of Surrealism is, of course, the one concerned with the psychic liberation effected by the confrontation of objects coming from different spheres of experience or of unanticipated sensuous qualities. The scarcity of recent Surrealist objects of note—only Meret Oppenheim's *Fur Covered Cup* which comes belatedly from 1936—attests to my contentions. Samaras bedsacks, therefore, a prepared table. Cued by the writings of Dali (though not his paintings), Samaras's intensely sexualized common objects attest to an incredibly fertile transmutant sensitivity. Take *Scissors*, for instance—vicious enough and Freudian to begin with as are, of course, Samaras's *Knives*—the *Scissors* are soft, speckled, pictogrammatic, emblazoned, yarny, warped, plastered, cubified, dotted, roentgen-rayed. Or *Flowers*—silvered, ductvfractured, cottony, lettered; or *Luncheon Services*—goppy, aureolated, ici-plastified; or *Knives*—prickly, rainbowed, coralized, glittery, autoportraited; or *Jewelry*—cartographic, mirrored, pornographic, pebbled; or *Boxes*—horned, slithering, electrified, Medusa-like, spectrographic, balancing, pointillist. In every object our anticipated conception of the element has been violated by Samaras's seemingly sexualizing compulsions. His environmental and furtive all-mirror stairwell is even more intensely a regressive and onanistic fantasy chamber than his comparatively rococo mirror room of two seasons back. The fertility of Samaras's keen wit, and the acuteness of his sexualizations, means that no object is safe in his view, from those to which we conventionally assign a Freudian import—the so-called "phallic symbol" for example—to the most patently inane and neutral util-

itarian device. Samaras bends all of them to a genial and demonic delusory pattern. In short, I think he's crazy but great crazy.

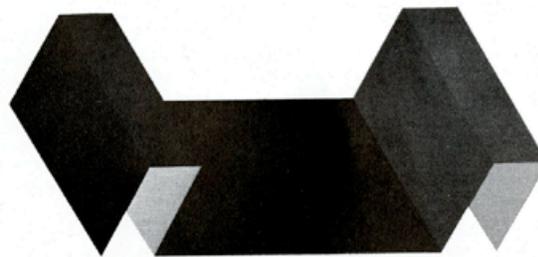
A few years back JACK BEAL disclosed a world predicated on the crowded and large 17th-century still life with its multitude of spatial subterfuges—chiaroscuro, repoussoir, diagonal recessions. Replacing the scattered goblets and lush fruits of these sensuous organizations with rotissematic nude females and cast-aside lowpoint mohair sofas, Beal began a process of attrition away from brushy, massive modulations in favor of hairline edges and honed drawing, which produce images of sharp spatial ambiguity. While perfecting the extendible webwork of these contours the color grew proportionally to be semi-tropical and dusty hues spread out against greying and neutralizing complementaries. Brushiness was suppressed, then superseded by suave, controlled modulations from hot to cold and a kind of sullen, shimmering iridescence. The forms achieve a peculiarly inflated and weightless bulk, sustained by fattened edges, pipings, and puffed, quilted, sleeping-bag surfaces.

Beal's craftiness is overriding. Whenever, for example, the contour of a bulbous and protuberant foreground element can intercept the edge of a background figure it does—the shape of knees and pillows, limbs and patterns intermeld. The result is a foxy spatial push-me pull-you which de-activates the traditional role of dense mass and solid weight. Despite the subjects, the experience of the work is foreign to the idea of a thing presented sculpturally in a lit space.

From so many intelligent paintings it would perhaps be foolish to pick favorites—yet my preference falls to a set of three female nudes (as always their gazes averted from the viewer), akimbo in the dreadful breadths of a Thurberesque chair placed in sharp obliquity to the picture surface. The colors are hot, the light modulations conceptualized and mechanical, the contours serrated into varied nexuses of tenseness and relaxation. The subliminal model of the 17th century succumbs to Cubist Miró and the sensations of a dusky sunset in the dunes of some fabulous



Jack Beal, *Girl in Armchair III*, 50 x 48", 1968. Frumkin Gallery.



Thomas Downing, *Fold Six*, acrylic, 41 x 91", 1968. Sachs Gallery.

desert waste. One would imagine that the so-called "next step" would be total abstraction were it not for the fact that Beal has already been there.

THOMAS DOWNING presents a dozen pieces of constant format, a channel with fretted folds at either side. In a movement in which manipulative personality is sacrificed to the search for one's own signature shape—Downing's contribution is a rejection of the anticipated isometrics common to a wide segment of the abstract illusionist group (another faction plays at space-annihilating permutation, i.e., illusionism versus elusiveness). Downing, deals instead in a flip-side Renaissance single-point perspective, bringing to mind by its very reversal, Ron Davis's recent Uccellesque double polyhedrons. The so-called ray lines of Renaissance space constructs converge in Downing's work to a vanishing point, be-

low, behind and to the right of the viewer. Whether or not this is a valuable fixation still remains an open issue, for apart from the folded and interesting shape—something akin to a cross section of a paper plane—my suspicion is that Downing is overcompensating for a "designy" color sense, hard cold blues and greens against ambiguous purple browns and reds. Perhaps oddest of all—despite the enormous sympathy one has for the shape—Downing's canvases seem oddly small.

—ROBERT PINCUS-WITTEN

AL HELD, *Andre Emmerich Gallery*; ELLSWORTH KELLY, *Sidney Janis Gallery*; ROBERT DURAN, *Bykert Gallery*; ROBERT MOTHERWELL, *Whitney Museum*; JOHN BUTTON, *Kornblee Gallery*;

What looked to me at first like a radical departure from his own previous work turned out to be quite in

keeping with it, and a development from the thinking which has sustained AL HELD's painting for the past several years. In his show at the Emmerich Gallery, Held's black and white canvases seemed to me peculiarly stark but emotionally complex, sometimes overly clever, though not tricky, and yet adventurous and tough. They combine elements of the dramatic Abstract Expressionist sensibility which Held still nurtures, with a calculated, stubborn intellect not given to producing easily accessible or digestible statements.

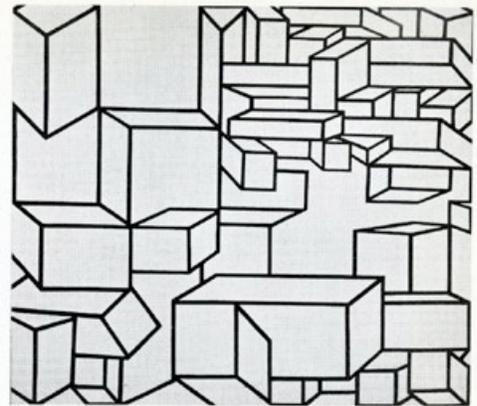
The total lack of color, the new imagery—vast floating complexes of three-dimensional cubes, wedges, blocks, and rectangular volumes seen in illusions of reversible perspective or as ambivalent orthographic projections piling and pocketing into each other—appeared to be such a rejection of the heroically scaled geometric-biomorphic color abstractions which have characterized his aims so far. But Held is a distinctly evolutionary painter who is always building on his own past work (even within a single painting). These new paintings still aspire to a kind of monumentality and expansiveness and they still retain that sense of bulging space which is so commanding in paintings like *Mao* or *Greek Garden*. The recent pictures even relate to Cubism in a very oblique but conscious way, in the manner, for example, in which the forms are made to relate discretely to the edges of the support (although balanced, tried and faired relationships are avoided).

Held does not want the viewer to see his paintings all at once—instaneity of impact is not his present goal—but the most persistent problem I find is that both viewer and painting are apt to merely get caught up on the mechanical complications of the contradicting multiple perspectives, rather than just in the pleasure or the time it takes to apprehend them. Another disturbing feature is the conflict between a gloppy, almost impastoed surface, which hardly hides a record of the revisions made in the course of the painting, and the evenly focused architectonic rendering of form. Granted, these new complications of form give and allow a certain free play to gesture in terms of the possible arrangements and rearrange-

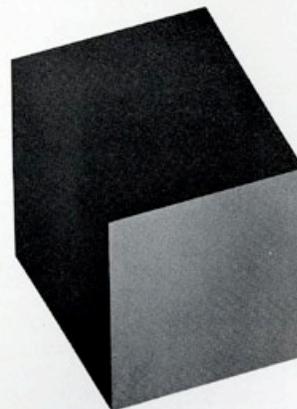
ments of the drawing, but wobbly edges and a pasty though sealed surface somehow vitiate the clean precision and unwavering assurance of the structural intentions.

Although these paintings may not be the refutation of earlier work I first thought them to be, Held nevertheless stakes out new areas of visual interest which are fascinating and challenging. They are aggressive pictures whose overlapping and clustering blocks, trapezoids, open-ended boxes, and truncated wedges seem to squeeze against each other for breathing room within their pictorial confines. They topple out against the space between viewer and canvas. The black outlining on a white field does not create positive-negative or figure-ground recessions — instead, the broad white areas seem to close off the space behind the multiple layers of space created by the chunky volumes which feed into and opaquely cover one another. The layers then seem to exist either in a curious kind of suspension in front of the picture plane, or they actively push into that frontally located space, while the forms themselves possess an ambivalent density. (None of the large paintings that were exhibited dealt with transparent structures, although one small work at the gallery done in this manner demonstrated a different order of visual tension as crossing black lines created almost coloristic "pings" at their intersections.)

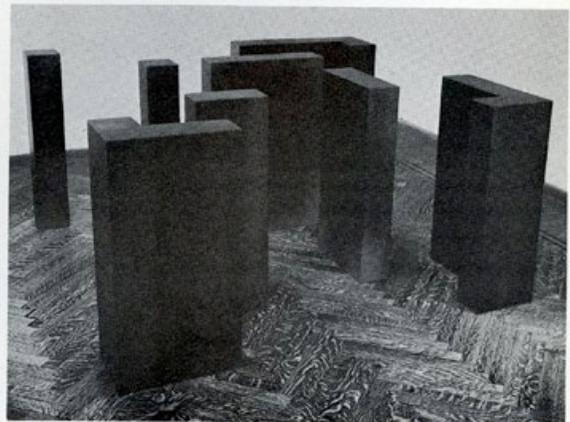
A kind of bulk space works to reinforce the contradictions between volume and the reversible illusions of projecting blocks turning into receding flaps, or truncated slabs metamorphosing suddenly into tilting origami folds. Coagulations and multiplications of forms, as in *B/W XI*, only add to this feeling of the density of the space before the plane. Another important clue to these works (operative in other ways in previous paintings) is the manner in which the black lines lying along the peripheries of the support lead into the field, mark off its actual boundaries, and simultaneously describe the contours and edges of illusionistically volumetric structures. They define these forms, but also bring them back to the flatness of the support, so that the black lines point to the artificiality of the illusions of depth



Al Held, *B/W XI*, acrylic, 10' x 11'6", 1968. Emmerich Gallery.



Ellsworth Kelly, *Black Green*, o/c, 95 x 68", 1968. Sidney Janis Gallery.



Robert Duran, untitled, acrylic on nova-ply (blue), 60 x 60 x 30", 1968. Bykert Gallery.

and volume at the same time that they work to body forth those illusions. Coupled with the structures which never do penetrate very far behind the picture plane, this ambiguous use of line is a key to appreciating and accepting these paintings. The canvas edges often crop the forms, suggesting their lateral extension beyond the pictorial whole, but the almost obsessive intensity of the telescoped constructions charges the space perpendicular to and around the canvas with a ponderous persistent weight which counteracts the feelings of two-dimensional expansion.

Held has taken great risks in these new paintings, and although he does not always meet his own heady challenge, there is a tremendously convincing formal energy and an emotional conviction to them which does not permit them to slide into the easy, the historically decorative, or the dryly conceptual—faults to which many of the second generation Abstract Expressionists had fallen prey in search of a way out of a style that had lost its élan.

At the Sidney Janis Gallery ELLSWORTH KELLY's new paintings show a greater mobility of form balanced finely by his characteristic use of high-keyed, equal-valued color. While these works are not as luxurious as the rainbow sequences he exhibited two years ago, they mark out a new but fruitfully retrospective area in an heuristic development. He is now able to work his way through and beyond some of the figure-ground problems he had encountered in earlier work. Younger artists like Charles Hinman carried some of these concerns into three-dimensional shaped canvas, although Kelly himself extended them quite successfully into his own curved and planar sculpture. He has used separate painted color panels before, but to different and more optical coloristic ends than those he is currently exploring. Separate but joined sections of canvas are now shaped to suggest volumetric structures seen in perspective.

Depth and dimension are implied in paintings like *Two Panels: Blue Green*, which initially seems to form an illusion of a green cube faced on one side with blue and viewed from above. Because the two colors are

kept at an even intensity and value and do not set up a strong optical vibration between themselves, the flatness of the separate areas of the field is secured and the illusion of depth is contradicted. The field then becomes more physically obvious and appears as a square missing two of its corners, sectioned into a green right angle and a blue square. Kelly also manages to neutralize the normal positive-negative relationships of light and dark when he joins triangular black and white panels into a square. The patent physicality of each section, and of the two joined into a whole, tends to work against the dominance of the dark half. To my eye the paintings composed of separate, contiguous canvases worked more effectively than those which were sectioned by painted color areas only. *Black Green* may read as a 3-point perspective view of a green-faced black cube, or as an irregular hexagon inflected with a green rhomboid, but the ambiguities are not as forceful, nor the volumes of color as emphatic and balanced as the separate panel paintings.

Two of the latter demonstrate the kind and quality of thinking and feeling which inform Kelly's current work—*Blue Red: Two Panels*, and *Red Green: Two Panels*. The first one is composed of two elongated trapezoidal segments joined at their narrow ends. The intensity of the bright red, abutted by an equally saturated blue, creates a kind of hovering aura along the center hinge. This combination pushes the hinge out from the wall by its sheer chromatic brilliance, but the strong overall shape and flatness of the converging panels push this visual effect back on itself and hold the surfaces of the painting to the single plane. In *Red Green* the temptation is to read the painted form as a trapezoid projecting out from the wall. However Kelly reverses visual expectations by placing the advancing hot red in the uppermost and supposedly receding panel, while the more recessive green colors the lower panel which seems to flare outward; and again, the separate identity of the two units reinforces the flat plane.

In other paintings no perspectival effects are employed, but diagonal divisions of the canvas add a volumetric dimension without resorting

to orthogonal illusionism. Though compelling at first sight I found that these works, like *Yellow Black* (an L-shaped yellow panel filled in by a black parallelogram) or *Blue Yellow Red* (a vertical parallelogram stacked with blocks of those colors), were less complex in feeling than the multi-panel paintings.

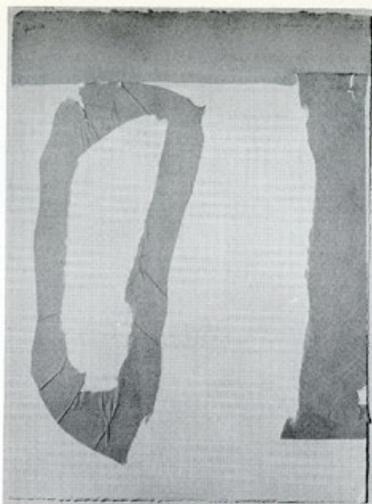
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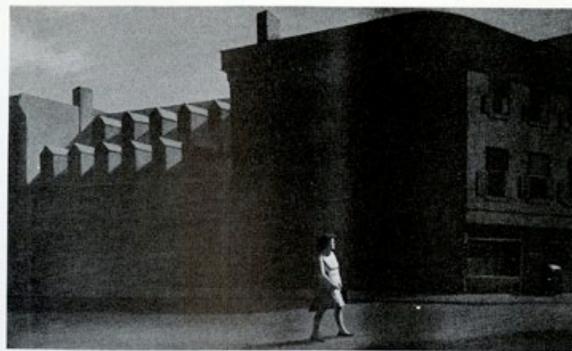
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Robert Motherwell, *In Beige, with Oval*, collage, 1968. Whitney Museum.



John Button, *Canadian Street*, o/c, 1968. Kornblee Gallery.

even serves to add an extra measure of interest with its apparent capacity to levitate some pieces or to ground others.

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The Whitney Museum exhibited 30 of ROBERT MOTHERWELL's recent collages, a series of beige figurations on white, and another group in which the artist employs Gauloises cigarette wrappers, envelopes, and bright patches of painted color, more geometrically organized than the freer torn and textured browns and whites of the former group. The Museum's director, John I. H. Baur (in a wall label posted near the collages) was truly apologetic in his explanation of the fact that the particular choice of Gauloises packets does not indicate Motherwell's "susceptibility to French influence" (rather, it is due to his preference for their ultramarine blue color, and to a friend's ready supply of that brand). Could it be that the Whitney is becoming defensive in advance of the possible criticism which the artists it exhibits might undergo?

It is almost credo by now that

Motherwell can be counted on to produce elegant and refined works, but in this case they are intimate and lyrical to a point of preciosity, with a look that is studiously tasteful, if not utterly boring. Continental or not in their leanings, for all the lush color or intelligent balance of freedom and restraint, I find that the collages are only glibly attractive. They are never ill-considered, but the beige configurations looked especially flabby and lacked the authoritativeness of some of his earlier abstractions. *In Ochre with Cobalt* is dabbed very cutely with a pair of tiny red dots over its torn brown paper and painted cobalt blue swatches, while the literary punning of *Art Bulletin Collage with Cross* does not redeem the handsome but shallow graphics. Pasted over a green ground, a page from that journal which discusses the cathedral of Chartres is inscribed with a rough painted cross hung with shreds of vermilion paper. It looks lovely, but points to the kind of retreat Motherwell has taken into the use of anecdotal devices, or superficial good looks, instead of holding on to the bold rigor which was notable in his work of the past decade.

The studied mood of romantically tinged psychological isolation which the four representational oils by JOHN BUTTON (at the Kornblee Gallery) aimed to evoke was somewhat compromised by their curiously

clumsy and sometimes hasty execution. In *Canadian Street* Button shows an empty street with an ominously silhouetted corner, the dormered and shuttered windows of its buildings blank and dark, mute to the single figure of a woman crossing the intersection. The suppression of detail, the starkness of the lighting, the Hopperesque quality of alienation expressed by the scene itself are all effective devices for the creation of the subdued though tense drama Button wants to achieve, but these careful workings are belied by the noticeably awkward rendering of the figure. (That the woman herself is an awkward personage is not excused by an evident deficiency in the rendition.)

Lake Erie, pale mauves and pinky greys with foggy reflections of factory smoke and sandbars, seems to be more in keeping with the romantic and lyrical side of Button's sensibility. This was given a fine showing with a wall full of tiny, poetic gouaches of snow and lake scenes, misty pine forests, and glowingly phosphorescent sunsets over apparitional horizons and far-off hills. The vision in these smaller works is much fresher than that of the larger oils, whose compositional severity and straining for psychological distance was weakened by their technical failure to come to grips with that conceptual effort. Compared to the

gouaches, the bigger paintings even looked a bit fussy at times. I much preferred a small study of a grey shingled sun porch, or a soft spectral clump of pines, both compositionally, and for their emotional tone, to the sophisticated measure of an oil like *Fire Island*, which for all its competence, lacked the distinct personality of the smaller works.

—EMILY WASSERMAN

THE AMERICAN VISION, Knoedler and Co., Hirschl and Adler Galleries and Paul Rosenberg and Co.:

The Public Education Association, following what is by now an established practice, has had a benefit show of American paintings divided among three galleries. The show is called "The American Vision, 1825-1875," with figure and still life on exhibit at Knoedler, genre at Hirschl and Adler and landscape at Paul Rosenberg. In a general way, it was a good show, rather more balanced than either the Whitney's or the Met's big American shows of the last few years, but it left one with more reservations about the quality of American painting than either of those two shows did. This is partly due, of course, to the simple fact that the Met and the Whitney showed better paintings, but I think it is also owing to the division of the work according to subject matter. Under the circumstances, I