ARTFORUM
DECEMBER 1970

By Robert Pincus-Witten

Richard Van Buren has had a great deal of exposure in the last two years, and one begins to formulate a view of his work, isolate problems, equivocate over the relative merits of certain pieces. I take the present exhibition to be his strongest to date, an opinion based on the fact that in these new aggregates Van Buren is more cogently expressing those sculptural aspects which may be regarded as traditional, particularly that part of his work which drifts toward a sharp, craggily modulated relief. Moreover, Van Buren's coloristic thrust has intensified and he more insistently binds together individual elements through a constantly rung coloristic oneness and color association.

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The kind of pictorial focus to which Van Buren's sculpture alludes has built into it several inescapable conundrums for, as the jagged, grainy-edged floor pieces are transferred to the wall, the being in it of the artist's experience and his method of working is replaced by the looking at it of the traditionally based figure-ground problem inherent in the collage tradition of which pictorial sculpture is but one extreme manifestation. Inescapably, the wall upon which the piece is hung becomes the ground of which the work itself is the figure. Apart from the environmental clues of such a shift, the artist must now also be considerate of the shaping of the wall between the elements of his piece. Van Buren gives much evidence of struggling with this dilemma and his struggle suggests many of the issues connected with organizational problems in Robert Duran's painting. Earlier this year, at Paula Cooper's, for example, Van Buren's elements were arranged along parallel diagonals, a method now rejected perhaps because of its obviously decorative basis. This kind of organization has been replaced by a surer, more traditional sense of measure and justness of position which rejects in toto the all-over, chance location which marked the inception of Van Buren's hangings about three years back.

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deal with the figure-ground problem (in terms of his quirky painted shapes, so similar to Van Buren's plastic ones), has resolved itself by locating the shapes on a monochromatizing ground which receives its general tonality from the color-feel of the shapes of the painting. Fn this regard, the moment at which Poons's "op" pictures began to break down in favor of a general tonalist drift (late 1966 and early 1967), ought to be remembered as a significant, if then baffling inauguration of this process.

narrative, is employed instead to combat the patness of his abstract concerns. Thus representationalism is not the problem, as the motifs do no more than define painterly areas. Guston instead points to his mode of painting itself, since a disparity exists between the altitude of the facture and the baseness of the humor. Perhaps the low humor hints that the quality of Guston's painting — I mean that stuff about the organic meaning of the way things are painted — is on the verge of faltering as well.

KENNETH HAYES MILLER was one of the eminent figures to span the period from Ash Can painting to the end of American provincialism. His teaching career began at the Fourteenth Street School and continued for thirty-eight years at the Art Student's League — when it still meant something to go to the League. According to the faithful Lloyd Goodrich — himself once a student of Miller's — Marsh, Bellows, Kuniyoshi, Hopper and Hartley, at some point in their considerably more impressive careers, passed through Miller's studio. Doubtless his qualities as a teacher overshadowed his deficiencies as a painter. Haunted by a conscientious awareness of The Beautiful, Miller's depictions of urban matrons of the 1920s and '30s today more tellingly reveal his essentially sculptural proclivities. These fulsome ladies transpose a Romanizing, rotund and noble ideal into a painting seemingly detached from emotional priorities. Yet, a certain eroticism is not absent, particularly in those works which look back to Rubens or Courbet. In short, there is a fascinating mix of artistic reference.

We are far enough away from the 1920s and '30s to no longer consider as merely funny Miller's thoroughly middle-class housewives clutching at parcels and fox fur pieces. Their fleshy forms, rendered in broad ovoid and convexly swollen surfaces, begin to appear esthetically striking. Miller's color is pedestrian, utilitarian, as serviceable as the dark tweed coats in which his corpulent subjects are wrapped. Volume is schematized, projecting surfaces are warmed and highlighted. Features are generalized so that all subjects seem devoid of idiosyncratic differences and part of the same porcine family. These glum figures, drawn by a painter unconsciously longing to be a sculptor, seem oddly frozen. Transient gestures are given the heavy permanence that only aspiring and ambitious figure drawing can conjure. Underneath it all, a dormant libido. At moments the 18th century breaks through, as in the ruff-collared figure in a tight brimless cloche *(Shoppers In the Rain)*. Cropped sleeping figures and large figure pieces presage similar solutions in the erotically surcharged work of Balthus. A painting, *Waiting For the Bus*, of 1931 (and reproduced at that time), depicts a mother and child before a dress shop, with a clothed mannequin in the background. Later amended (the date now reads 1931+) the garment was removed from the dummy to reveal the Hellenistic Venus which slumbered there all along.

The retrospective of the work of ANDRE LHOTE (1885-1962), is revealing if after a certain moment — in Lhote's case coincidental with the end of the First World War — equally deceiving. I am intrigued and instructed by the careers of painters such as Lhote who are first sustained by the vitality of a great new style, any style, and who then, when the style wanes, are revealed to be artists of dubious achievement. This is certainly a complex and painful issue as well as the central dilemma as to the distinction between modern artists and modern art as we see that speaking generally the life of a modern artist is far longer than the vitality of the ideas he is exploring. The truth is that Art is short and Life long.

Lhote gained an early foothold into the workings of Synthetic Cubism, which inspired his paintings with an intellectual rigor and quality absent from his earlier, cautious adoptions of Fauve sensibility. When Synthetic Cubism degenerated into decorative exercises of naturalistic stylization Lhote was lost. However the intervening years of about 1910 to 1917 are marked by an intelligent, at moments impressive, production. This period, best exemplified here in the *Portrait de Marguerite* (1913), is typified in suave geometrical simplifications and surface modulations which point to the strong influence of Metzinger, *Section d'Or* Cubism, and possibly even Juan Gris.

Throughout the 1920s and '30s Lhote's painting eased into formula solutions for small landscapes, touching portraits and *pièces d'occasion*. During this time, until his death in fact, Lhote was highly esteemed as a teacher and theorist. His *Traité du paysage* (1939) still must be read if only to better understand how Cubism slipped into the pettiness of what is amorphously termed The School of Paris.

In 1950 travel in North Africa oddly revived Lhote's work, opening it structurally and chromatically, a reflection perhaps of Lhote's interest in Egyptian painting. This fresher, more emotive execution reveals as well the far greater influence of the superior models established by Jacques Villon in the period following the Second World War.

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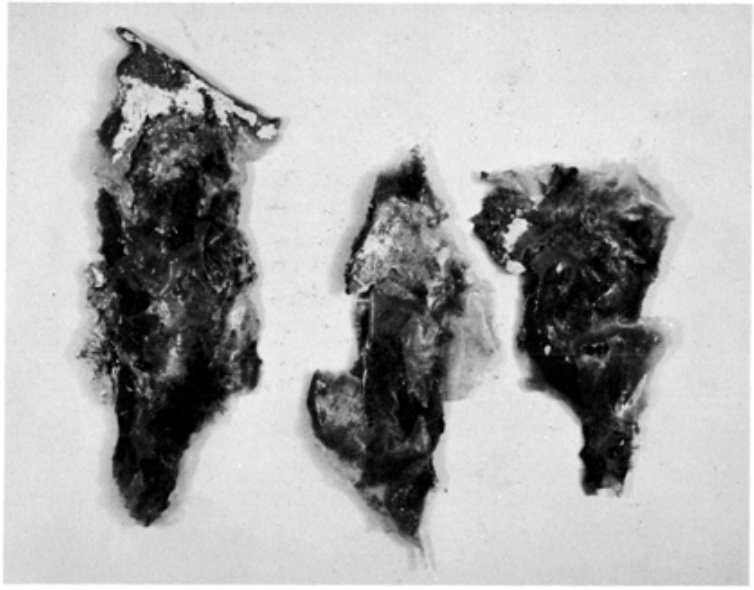
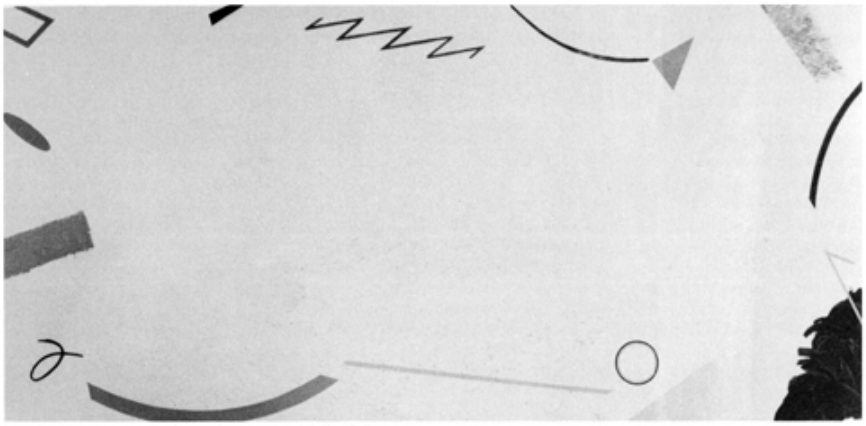
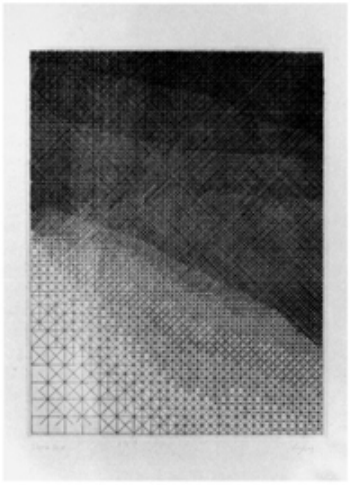


Richard Van Buren, untitled, m/m, 1970. Bykert Gallery.



William Conlon, *White Dwarf*, 10 x 20', 1970. Reese Palley Gallery.



Vincent Longo, Score, 1969. Reese Palley Gallery.

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The quality of WILLIAM CONLON's paintings is not immediately apparent. They have, however, a nagging power so that the elements of his work which proved so irksome before the paintings dissipate themselves in the memory that the works invoke. A young painter, Conlon deals in distribution-composition with a firm, designy sense. The graphic and 2D feel is the aspect of his work I most mistrust since it brings figures such as Paul Rand strongly to mind. Conlon culls his imagery from the vernacular of modern art, isolating motifs which are then blown up, exaggerated and coldly duplicated. Among them one finds, for example, Poons's ellipses, passages of blurred and superimposed color in rolled on patches typical of later field painting, hard geometrical elements — circles or dogtooth zigzags — such as one finds in late Kandinsky. These then are lyrically if sparely distributed on huge canvases, unfurling across the center, dispersed toward the edge, or turned into huge calligraphic units. All are contrasted against hard white grounds. Even the compositions then are in themselves *motifs* as they are easily traced to the marginal organizations of the mid-'60s, the hard white ground of '40s graphic design or, more recently, of Joseph Raffael or Jack Youngerman.

Be these sources as they may, what is curious about the work is not the matching game one can easily play, pairing motif to modern art history, but that a work, perhaps not ripe yet or thoroughly convincing, can be extracted from such highly identifiable visual data. This suggests that abstract painting need not only find its cue in earlier abstract concerns but that it may affiliate with a still emerging sensibility based in Pop, a sensibility which is cool, rather ironical, if still callow.

VINCENT LONGO has always struck me as an artist of technical achievement whose conceptions remained true to the high production about him. I felt this with regard to his earlier Abstract Expressionist woodcuts which came out of de Kooning and Gorky to say the very least and it still seems true of his present work which is prompted by such sensibilities as Agnes Martin or perhaps even the late John Ferren. As his expert use of the wood gouge compensated for a certain intellectual thinness, so too do the present etchings, with their simple grid formations, interrupted screen sequences, radial configurations or square into circle mandalas. These are arresting less by virtue of their "eternal" compositions than by the refinement of hand brought to bear on their execution. My favorite work begins to emerge in the later '60s and continues through the present moment. The interrupted screen and minute grid formation, each type depleted of certain structural elements, establish luminous