

# NEW YORK TIMES

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### REBELLIOUSLY ROMANTIC?

by Lucy R. Lippard

Rejection of the unnecessary need not result in something less than the necessary, and the formal rejections made by the so-called Minimal artists are not synonymous with attrition. They are after unity, not nihilism. A six-man exhibition currently at the Bykert Gallery, 15 West 57th Street, disproves, among other things, conservative assertions that such rejections are too extreme to leave for diversity.

Carl Andre, Robert Mangold, Brice Marden, Agnes Martin, Paul Mogensen and David Novros offer various alternatives to the better known and generally more mature, work of the hardcore rejective artists, such as Reinhardt, Judd, Morris, Le-Witt, all of whom were included in a show called "Ten" held at Dwan Gallery last fall and at least partially intended to eliminate the excess baggage that clouded issues at the Jewish Museum's "Primary Structures" and the Guggenheim's "Systematic Painting" exhibitions. The Bykert show was planned at the same time, so the interest in comparing the two lies not in any prospect of novelty, reaction, or formal "advance" from October to May, but in the range of diversity indicated for rejective styles.

The work at Dwan last fall and at Bykert now is non-relational, that is, it is conceived singly, as overall or repetitive forms and surfaces rather than additively, as juggled parts in a whole. The paintings are largely mono-tonal, the structures unitary or modular. Neutral hues-blacks, whites, grays, browns-predominate, though this does not exclude a major concern with color, especially among the Bykert artists. (One need only point to the amount of art around town which, despite spectral brilliance, is notable for its lack of color in any esthetically valid sense.)

The principal difference between the two shows is, first, that the main emphasis at Dwan was on a rigorous conceptualism, on a detached, public style, a finite or regulated system. At Bykert, the general sensibility is rebelliously romantic, emphasizing a controlled but open sensuousness that makes itself felt in the starkest schemes. Secondly, attention at Dwan was centered on three-dimensional work; seven of the "Ten" structure-makers while at Bykert all but one of the participants are painters.

The prevalence of painting is significant because of the not uncommon assumption that painting has been formally exhausted, that the structure provides not only an escape from painting and from previous sculpture, but an advance beyond both. The painters at Bykert obviously disagree; they consider the abandonment of painting an evasion of the issue.

There is, however, a broad agreement on the limitations of the rectangular format. Shaped or multiple stretchers serve, like elusive surfaces and colorlight effects, to dissociate recent art from its traditional confinements. Novros's L-shaped elements open up and interlock to embrace the wall, disperse mass, and form a complex figure-ground situation that can achieve impressive scale. Though it is barely visible in the Bykert painting, he usually employs a shimmering iridescence that changes color as the viewer changes his vantage point. Mogensen's rectangle is still more fractured. It exists mainly by implication, through the placement of 16 small, serially sized and spaced canvases, which are white with a pearlescent sheen. Mangold's sprayed masonite panel is semi-circular and centrally divided, its gray plane almost invisibly modified by a change of value rising atmospherically from the curved lower edge and effectively halted by the flat upper edge.

Marden retains the rectangle, but in this show he has separated his paired canvases by several inches, and each in turn, is divided into two sections. This rich, submerged brown-gray, with its hint of luminescence just below the flat, waxy surface, stops an inch or so from the lower edge, where an accumulation of drips and spatters on an unpainted strip confirms that the surface was painted, painted by hand, and that it has absorbed elements of emotion and chance. Agnes Martin's is a conventional format, but she thinks of her soft parallel lines drawn across the slightly modulated creamy ground as a way of veiling and destroying the rectangle.

The ephemeral precision of Miss Martin's work has little connection with the rigid classicism generally associated with the rejective phenomenon. Like Andre, she was represented at both Dwan and Bykert, though she is more compatible with the present group. Andre's floor "sculpture," which has less mass than most of the paintings shown, consists of a half-inch-thick layer of steel squares laid out in an 8' x 8' grid. Its strongly mottled patina of gray, purple, blue, brown, its planar, patterned scheme, introduces color and surface effects more characteristic of painting. The effect is one both visually and conceptually provocative understatement.

Nuance, then of color, concept, and execution, is important to these artists, and that, too is a departure from the accepted mainstreams of rejective art. Yet it is as ridiculous to call Andre's work, his cryptic statements, his concrete poetry "scientific" because of their numerical framework, or to call this most personal of artists "impersonal" on a merely stylistic basic, as it would be to allow the similarities between the works in these show to eclipse the differences, which are far greater. It remains to be seen whether this commitment to painting to nuance, is forward or backward looking. In the meantime, the Bykert show stands not as corrective or reaction to the Dwan show, but as a co-existent assertion of independence from group alignments and historical determinism.

# Rebelliously Romantic?

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Carl André, Robert Mangold, Bruce Marden, Agnes Martin, Paul Mogenson and David Novros offer various alternatives to the better known, and generally more mature, work of the hard-core rejective artists, such as Reinhardt, Judd, Morris, LeWitt, all of whom were included in a show called "Ten" held at the Dwan Gallery last fall and at least partially intended to eliminate the excess baggage that clouded issues at the Jewish Museum's "Primary Structures" and the Guggenheim's "Systematic Painting" exhibitions. The Bykert show was planned at the same time, so the interest in comparing the two lies not in any prospect of novelty, reaction, or formal "advance" from October to May, but in the range of diversity indicated for rejective styles.

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Richard Saunders from Scope

Untitled painting by David Novros, Bykert Gallery  
*A belief that painting is alive*

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