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May 1970

MANNY FARBER, O.K. Harris Gallery Studio Exhibition; JIM DINE, Whitney Museum and Sonnabend Gallery; KEITH SONNIER, Castelli; AD REINHARDT, Marlborough Gallery; DAVID DIAO, JOEL SHAPIRO, Paula Cooper Gallery; MELVIN EDWARDS, Whitney Museum; EDWARD AVEDI-SIAN, Robert Elkon Gallery; PETER STROUD, Max Hutchinson Gallery;

MANNY FARBER has mounted one of this season's most important one-man exhibitions in his scurvy-walled yet freshly painted white studio on Warren Street. The white scruffiness, grey painted floors and iron columns add much to the exhibition's strong effect. One should have gathered from last year's Whitney Annual—in which Farber showed a pinkish skin-like oval painting push-pinned directly to the wall—that Farber was up to something challenging. The maturity of his work is amazing and, although the pictures shown in Warren Street are the product of only the last three months work, they have the certainty open only to a thoroughly evolved style, and one that was long in growing. I have been aware of Farber's painting only since the most recent Whitney Annual, although on nosing around I learned that the career extends back to the patronage of Peggy Guggenheim and the colleague enthusiasm of Jackson Pollock. In short, the artist who is widely read as a hefty idiosyncratic film critic, is no kid. And it shows.

Farber paints — sometimes just moves — highly liquid acrylics on and across butcher-brown wrapping paper. The paper is folded, smoothed out, joined, scored, creased, patched, pasted, cut—in short, *carpentered*. The fields of color and the papery grounds are thin, bark-like affairs and, unlike the case of so many young artists perhaps thirty years Farber's junior, there is nothing green or adolescently fashionable about his work. The surfaces vary from matte to glossy depending on the dilution of the acrylic and the surface which may have been drawn off from it, such as plastic sheeting, not to speak of the artist's volition. With rare exception, the pictures deal in time-honored formats—Braque-like ovals pinned in



Manny Farber, untitled, acrylic on paper, 1969. O.K. Harris Gallery.

the horizontal axis (the artist says "football-shaped"), trapezoidal figures long side down or vertical rectangles bisected into two fields of varied and contrasting activities and effects. The effects tend to highly nuanced color generally of a monochromatic thrust (though built from many hues and textures): liverish reds, leathery browns, inky blues, speckled green-greys, imprecisions altered through scrim overlays and sere, micrometrically thin passages, thickenings, clots, folds and pools. The feel of the color is tender but never simpering or estheticizing in the sense, say, of Kenzo Okada (who might be pointed to as a source for the style). Bold interplays of luminous color within the unit are eschewed. The absence of this Stella-like color is one of the reasons that the pictures demand a freshness of eye for apprehension. Nor does the color refer to the optical shimmer of the white light and plastic radiance of the California boys. Intriguingly enough, this disembodied color makes no reference to Olitski either, which may be its most curious achieve-

ment. The color in fact is as classically focused as the format and only the perverse would refuse to admit its Mediterranean bias and mottled nostalgia. Despite their certain quality—perhaps the final works in a closed development—the pictures still manage new possibilities. The last work, slung over a horizontally hung tube, admits of a structural and dimensional option heretofore unexplored.

Pop art soured after 1963. By the mid-'60s it became evident that the movement could no longer sustain itself, hold together out of sheer stylistic glue, so to speak, and those figures who were to occupy positions of second and third rank began to identify themselves one by one—or fall away to nothingness. The artists of the movement sought out other modes of expression—some achieving a production of equal vigor, others, not. Rauschenberg, whose contributions were and are immense, opted for intermedia "technology"—a production often of a staggering dullness. Jasper Johns confirmed what had been hinted at all along—that his many strengths were those of a



James Dine, *Peaches*, m/m, 6 1/2 x 16 1/2', 1969. Sonnabend Gallery.

major graphic artist. Andy Warhol made emphatic his role as intermedia entrepreneur and filmmaker. George Segal continued to produce as before—cast relics of human desolation. Roy Lichtenstein stayed abreast of current taste for *Arts Déco* and Depression ephemera, intensifying the fad as he was in turn affected by it. James Rosenquist made serious contributions toward pictorialized sculpture. Oldenburg also contributed to this evolution, preempting at the same time a lion's share of esteem. Wesselmann, Indiana, Marisol, Ray Johnson, so many others—evaporations. And JIM DINE? No longer bolstered by a broad-based style or public approbation, Dine emerges as an engaging, talented painter whose popularizations follow so closely upon authentic achievements as to make it appear that they had been his all along.

The early work demonstrates to what degree Dine had been indentured to Rauschenberg and Johns and his sharing of aspirations with Oldenburg in terms of street art in the late 1950s and early '60s. These earliest works, with their sordid and touching surfaces, are Dine's strongest and most lyrical efforts. From Rauschenberg came the "real" industrially fabricated element affixed to an "art" surface of pigment and canvas. From Johns, a feel for rich word and image interchanges and the confirmation too that seeming painterliness could be predicated on traditional drawing values. Oldenburg also had been confirmed by Johns in this respect. And the grimy, *matérielle-at-hand* collage and Happening contributed a frank transitional note from Abstract Expressionism. My heart goes to the works of the early 1960s—*Hair, Shoe and Green Ties in a Landscape*—a richly impastoed monochromism after Johns. Like early Cézanne repainting his way through Monet, Dine is a touchingly awkward Johns. By 1963, the tangible object is out in full flourish—garden implements, bathroom fixtures—and from here on all becomes stylish permutation. The fortyish surrogate persona—the bathrobe—emerges and the heart motif, too—love, his wife, hairy snatch, as indicated by several studies and prints.

What is so curious about these thematic symbols are not that they devolve about Rauschenberg, Johns

or Oldenburg, but that Magritte has been shaken down—particularly in those Dines which incorporate the symbol of the axe or hatchet, mostly the arresting aluminum sculptures of 1965, *The Red Axe* and *The Hammer Doorway*.

Between 1962 and 1966, Dine had been psychoanalyzed; in 1968, expatriated. These biographical tantalizers are hurriedly given in a brief autobiographical paragraph. They raise vital questions concerning the focus of the psychoanalysis—as well as the effects of the displacement. Did he work with a Freudian, a Jungian, a Sullivanian, a Rogerian? This experience demands long discussion if only to get at the meaning of the symbol to the artist—that is, their functioning in his neurotic pattern and, in this way, to divulge their inspirational sense, if any. Expatriation seems important because it is accompanied by such Etruscan decline. What was jejune in New York still passed muster in London. Emerge the monumental straw and chicken wire hearts, the free assemblages of studio configuration. That they are knock-offs of Sonnier, Saret and company, and possibly, too, of the tactile assemblages of Samaras, bespeaks the acuteness of the artist's transatlantic antennae.

A broad view of a focused theme in Dine's recent work was facilitated by a companion exhibition at the Sonnabend Gallery. The theme is the Studio, as realized in several large canvases and various accumulations. The canvases were smudged freely with purple patches of various colors. In front of them, on the floor, were arranged selections of carpenter's, plumber's and electrical tools, ribbons and rags, and studio implements. These studio theme pictures, like the earlier palette series of 1963, are in the debt of Johns's studio pictures. Interspersed are ubiquitous hearts as carefree as Warhol flowers. The motif underscores Dine's conflict between the emotional association of the motif and the abstract "meaning" of the substance out of which it is made—straw, wire, cloth, paint, wood. In Dine's work the symbol is all flux and spontaneity, the substance all turgid and fixed, in its concentration more "literary" than the symbol. This, despite its *dernier cri* all-over floor distribution, anti-verticality, aleatory structure and sup-

port, "new materials" and impulsivity. The combines never become "objectified," "factual," "empirical data." They remain a confessional window display—a stage setting which continues to represent the heroic first years of the Reuben Gallery and the Happening.

Recently KEITH SONNIER has worked toward two ends—tightened geometry, at least insofar as individual units are concerned, and environmental theatricality. I am still not convinced that these ends are congruent although Sonnier's prevarications are, by moments, capable and realized solutions to these antithetical propositions.

But there is a lot of weak work. I say this gingerly, taking into account my confirmed view that Sonnier is, with very rare exception, one of the valuable and talented artists we have. The swarm of imitators and hangers-on who have pullulated in one year is proof enough of this. The weakest works were those which partook of a straight aleatory distribution—even as they were at the same time handsome. A yielding yet massive pile of folded and tossed foam rubber near the warehouse entry should suffice as example of this.

Far more complicated, and thereby liable to more anguished failure, are those pieces which incorporate large geometrical forms of foam rubber—cubes and the like, neon segments, black light, tripod-born arc-lights, heavy cable, television tape projectors, and still more metaphorically mixed elements. Central to all this conglomeration is the problem of how to structure light. Sonnier accepts as given the tautology that light is luminous but, paradoxically, since his arrangements emerge out of extenuated metaphors for painting, his luminosity has detached itself from color and is now embodied in projection (video tape), emanation (neon light), transparency (glass) and reflection (mirror). Viewed this way, light becomes divorced from its "sensuous" expression and is more readily allied with a "structural" need—to "hold" or to become "tectonic" or in some special and ultra-refined way, to "engineer" an episode which otherwise might be disorganized or disintegrated. Part of the impressive character of the warehouse entry piece—a glass circle leaning against



Keith Sonnier, *Display II*, m/m, 1970. Castelli Warehouse.

one wall while, opposite it, a square of glass leaning against another—is that its "artistic" identity is conferred through beams of light—one circle shaped beam which illuminates the circle as it passes through it and another, a square shaped beam, which passes through and illuminates the square. This crisscross blipping is a permutation of a geometrical idea and, as such, is equally relevant to a large mirrored pair of glass squares standing *vis-à-vis* across the warehouse, each mirroring and reversing each other's order.

Even in the "failed" complex works, "mirroring" as a structural premise is sensible in those projections from one kind of small antechamber space into another grotto-like cavernous exhibition hall. The rhythmic beat of a foot and images of installation processes were magnified in the large room, filling not only a wall, but, by "feel," the whole atmosphere, as the tape itself was easily and simply readable on a small television set in the front room.

The problem, as always, in such complex situations, is that technological elements tend to obfuscate and get in the way. It is easy, even banal, to say that media are only as good and important as the artist whose hands they are in. However, unlike watercolor or pastel, the cumbersome character of new media is yet to be integrated with ease. I expect that the disjunctiveness of these materials add a kind of gauche beauty to Sonnier's new work. Yet, because of this,

I preferred the clarity of the geometrically based pieces—although they represent a hesitant step away from the highly atmospheric and intellectually extravagant, if not entirely impossible, technological environments.

Barbara Rose and H. H. Arnason have contributed essays to a presentation of the Black Paintings by AD REINHARDT. Painted over a long period, from the early '50s to the time of his death in 1967, they were executed contemporaneously with both a Red and a Blue series about which no discussion has yet appeared. Since, by contrast, the Black Paintings have been so widely shown—although, perhaps, without the signal success they achieve in the present installation—I feel freer to immediately deflect attention from the paintings themselves to Miss Rose's essay which clarifies so many of their issues as it nullifies Mr. Arnason's offering which, if nothing else, is impertinent biographical flim-flam: you know, how he and Reinhardt never quite hit it off until one day, quite by chance, they ran into one another beneath the Carpaccios of the *Accademia*.

Miss Rose, instead, offers up a perceptive argument of which I offer only the merest outlines. She rightly contends that the Black Paintings are a mystical attempt on Reinhardt's part to staunch art, to present "a single summary statement which would subsume all previous forms, styles and techniques in painting." To

achieve this exalted end the artist was obliged to overcome quintessential dualities, a split between Eastern and Western modes of feeling, between linearity and painterliness, between ego-action and theocratic stasis—Miss Rose avoids such awkward locutions—and still more. To have thrown out of art, for example, *all* of the Western cultural tradition after a long “summarizing and distilling (of) all previous advances in painting,” was also an aspiration shared in common with Clyfford Still and is central to the thinking which brought first school American field painting into existence.

The East/West duality was synthesized within a rejection of the instantaneous image of the artist's emotionality in favor of an Eastern stasis which demands, for its very comprehensibility, a viewing in extended time, a particularly excruciating duration in those Black Paintings whose tones are so closely approximated as to render the elusively simple images—cross figures in the earlier ones and a nine square grid in the later ones—virtually monochromatic. Through such a method, the Western record of personality traces was transformed into a non-representational icon, that is, an image which takes much time to see but little.

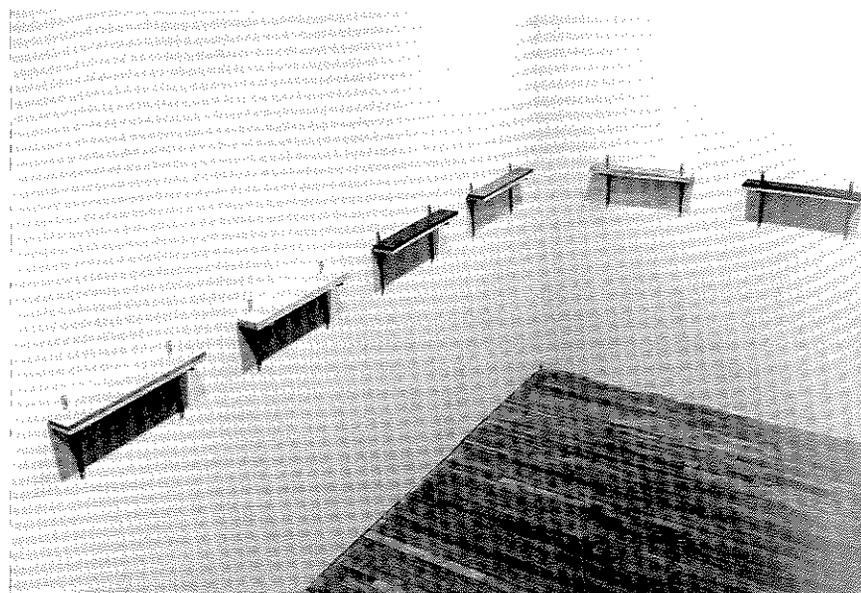
Moreover, the blacks are often so closely hued—their distinctions are primarily thermal—as to call into question the edge of the square which gives the individual black plane its figure and, by extension, the whole concept of linearity, at least as it is defined in the traditional Wölfflinian concomitants of local color and planarity. Miss Rose holds the absence of luminosity accountable to a thirst for mystical perfection, that is, for an image devoid of the traces of the human hand or whatever environmental reflections may glance off a glossy surface, which explains why Reinhardt opted for mattness. She is, of course, assisted in her view, though no claim is placed on it, by the fact that blackness depicts the absence of light although symbolically blackness argues for the absence of God, a fact which might have been avoided as it appears to refute Miss Rose's expert presentation.

For me, these matte, unmarred, unreflective surfaces induce a kind of dusty or murky haze—a black lumi-

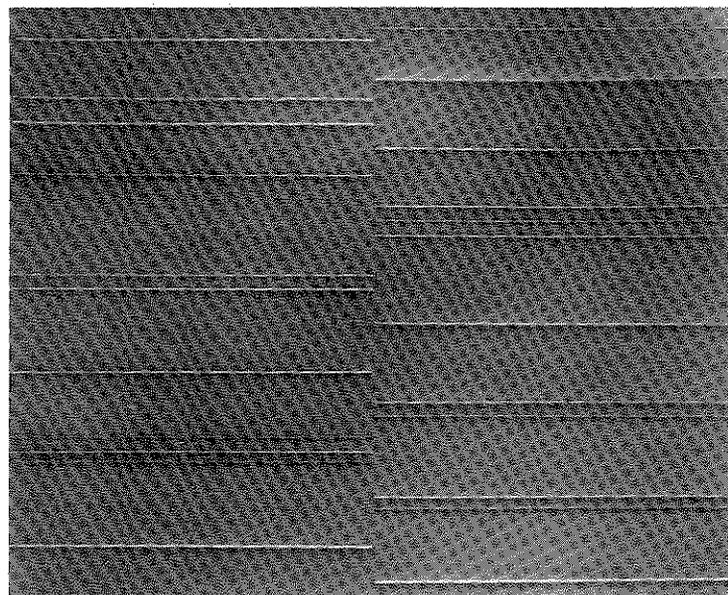
nousness one might say, or a de-ego-fied shimmer. Bizarrely then, however far from human production the Black Paintings have moved and however close to a neutral, desireless nirvana, one feels that their effect tends to counter the aspirations of the artist. Instead of withering Western ego away they at length travel full cycle, and affirm through their ultra refinement only that which is most distinctly, humanly and individually possible.

Two exhibitions of high merit opened at Paula Cooper: acrylic paintings by DAVID DIAO and shelves displaying substances by JOEL SHAPIRO. In both of these artists the problems of acute modernity are sensible and, at times, resolved less than idiosyncratically, at least insofar as Joel Shapiro is concerned.

David Diao, for a few years now, has been devoted to wet field painting — emphasizing tonalist experiences in highly delimited ranges of color spread out upon a large canvas. The lyricism and the cloudiness are, on an obvious level, something too conventionally assigned to an Eastern ancestry—although it clearly announces in Diao's work, as well as in all second generation color painting, not only an immediate continuity from Rothko and Frankenthaler, but a much older one stemming from the musical exercises of Whistler from the later 1870s and 1880s. The present Diao especially strikes one as Whistlerian—lunar, silvery, eclipsed. The color tends to light creams which are modified by dark grounds—deep reds, earthy buffs. The paint is applied with a wide, stiff, trowel-like instrument, the manipulation of which relegates thickenings of paint to certain areas and permits the ground color to peer through. Limpidity and liquidity are emphasized and long plumed bleedings often occur. It is delicate and dexterous. What is particularly interesting in this kind of painting—and it is to be seen in Ruda, Poons, Wofferd, et al.— is the resolution of the margin. It had been assumed that aleatory and gestural displacement worked against the idea of conscious composing around the perimeter—as indeed it does. In new field painting the margin organizes itself, provided the canvas is large enough and despite whatever encrustations or



Joel Shapiro, *Shelf Pieces*, 1969-70. Paula Cooper Gallery.



Peter Stroud, *In Two*. Max Hutchinson Gallery.



Edward Avedisian, *Cool Aid*, acrylic, 75 1/2 x 112 3/4", 1970. Elkon Gallery.

thickenings may occur. A visual circumambience is operative no matter the vagueness of the figure. The retina and the mind compose the frame in this kind of painting and not necessarily the pigment or the "composition," or even the shape of the support. Said another way: the shape of the canvas will determine the "retaining walls" of this kind of composition whether or not such "retentions" were consciously composed, as is the case in those Pollocks in which the gestural thrust skirts the edge and doubles back upon the center.

Joel Shapiro is still finding himself—one thinks so anyway, remembering the few works one has already encountered in group exhibitions these past two years. These were primarily interested in the soft, hairy materiality of unravelling mats and hanks of blue or black nylon. The present works are adjustable bracketed shelves—each approximately two feet wide. The shelf is five-eighths of an inch thick and made out of composition wood. Upon each of these there fits still another layer of wood or slate or glass or copper or alloys of various kinds—industrially fabricated materials as well as *matières nobles*. The shelves are unabashedly what shelves are meant to be—supports and display units—although their effect is altered by the height at which they are affixed to the wall—slightly too high for comfortable viewing. The pertinence of the elementarism of Carl Andre is inescapable although Shapiro avoids extrinsic intellectual structuring such as elements in sequence from the table of atomic valences or serial structure. Moreover, the floor pieces of comparative lengths of marble, wood and slate also bring to mind several of the recent works of Richard Serra. Perhaps the most intriguing aspects are the shelves themselves and not their materialistic empiricism. In the most recent exhibition of Larry Bell, for example, we were presented with ledges; narrow, prismatically anodized shelves of bevelled mirror which threw back upon the wall exquisite colored flushes of light in the manner of Morris Louis Veils. No such coloristic effects are even remotely hinted at in the blunter, non-allusive work of Shapiro. And yet, what seems curious is that disparate sensibilities can find in a furniture-like idiom the means for the cre-

ation of highly oblique statements.

MELVIN EDWARDS negotiates a supposed gap between geometrical minimalism and anti-form. Robert Morris has already accomplished this and in new field painting it is a commonplace—loose handling spread over a grid structure. Therefore, the criticism levelled is directed against the Whitney Museum for so obviously sponsoring the career of a young artist over those of the many artists who are responsible for having brought that style into being—Hesse, Andre, Flavin, Rosenquist, to name but a few. Edwards rejects the floor as the primary structural support (admitting too of the modish eclipse of the vertical monolith) and deals instead in open transparent planes of barbed wire which interconnect ceiling and wall convergences or which dangle in curtain-like expressivity from the ceiling. The clearest exposition of Edwards' premises occurs in two pyramidal works. The plane of a single pyramidal face rises either to a point in the ceiling from the floor or conversely it descends from the ceiling to the floor molding.

EDWARD AVEDISIAN's new paintings are his most acutely distressed statements to date. Faced with painting himself out of a systematized color abstraction in which he dovetailed early Poons and Stella, Avedisian opted for a looser usage, focusing in on certain critical features of color field painting of about three years back—namely its immateriality and its limpidity, two conditions which contributed to color painting's pent up sense of luminosity. However, Avedisian—like many figures in the broad front of second school field painting, Poons, Landfield, Ruda, Wofford particularly—has chosen to thicken up the field and, unlike the others, has managed to clog it, to render it, at least for me, unsympathetic. Not forcefully disagreeable like Poons—just blandly unimpressive. As a result, Avedisian's reputation as a colorist must be called into question because I can think of little else in so-called advanced painting today as un-supple or as coloristically banal.

Avedisian employs paint rollers as his primary instrument to thicken the surface. The use of such an implement builds dryly porous layers but discourages seepages or feather

bleedings, which marked the inception of his looser style. And this arid method emphasizes, as never before, Avedisian's Mexicali color sense—conventional variations on a single hue, relieved by rollings in and over of complementaries. The composition has remained a long horizontal arena and the fields are set through a friezework of approximately vertical gestures.

PETER STROUD is hampered by a sensibility predicated on a sage and tempered asseveration, a sensibility which by its fine hesitation has led to a high geometrical abstraction which appears to be dissatisfying even to the artist himself, precisely because the demands of this ever-unsatisfied and self-chastening hyperesthesia can never be met. American color painting, one of the sources of Stroud's art, indicates a means whereby the artist may overcome his vitiating tendency for delicacy and *affinement*. The other strain of Stroud's painting comes from a longer tradition, English geometrical abstraction in the persons of late Pasmore, Nicholson and Honneger. The latter is sensible in terms of monochromism and raised geometrical figuration. The hesitant Constructivist note struck in Stroud's painting can be traced to the former figures.

Stroud composes in squarish areas which carefully respect vertical-horizontal coordinates. The horizontal is expressed as a raised thin ridge painted in a more intense variant of the ground hue. This is additionally modified by two factors—the invisible vertical (of binary or tripartite compositions) made manifest by the coming up short at them by the horizontal ridges and by the shadows cast upon the surface by these thin layers.

Ultimately one is more intellectually engrossed in the option away from the English relief and possibly the adieu to this kind of esthetic procrastination as represented by the American coloration rather than by these really quite lovely works in themselves.

—ROBERT PINCUS-WITTEN

MILTON AVERY, Brooklyn Museum; ROBERT GOODNOUGH, Tibor de Nagy Gallery; BEAUTIFUL PAINTINGS, Jewish Museum:

The relevance of MILTON AVERY'S

work stems not only from the fact that he contributed personally to the Abstract Expressionist generation through his long-standing friendships with Gottlieb and Rothko, but that the simplicity, dignity, and tact of a vision which made use of large areas of soft flat color, firmly but modestly organized into nearly abstract compositions, is still pertinent to much contemporary painting. These were the constant and basic materials with which Avery had worked for his entire career, spanning almost forty years (he died in 1965). The Brooklyn show was not hung chronologically, but this is justified by the consistency of Avery's motifs, themes, and manner, which are united by a timeless quality that seems to obviate the need for a stricter art-historical order. The unfortunate crowding of the installation, however, did a disservice to many of the finest, more contemplative works which could have used breathing space.

Avery's affinities with his European predecessors, and with other Americans of his generation who first battled for the cause of abstraction from nature (Dove, Hartley; Marin, O'Keeffe), come across more directly than his frequently cited relationships (especially in his figure pieces) to Matisse and the Fauves. Throughout his production Avery concentrated on three categories of painting: 1) portraits of other artists or of his family, satirical self-portraits, and figures; 2) still-life studies of gulls, roosters, baskets of fish or the more humorous "genre" pictures; 3) most importantly, landscapes, including the seascapes, beaches, dunes, rock jetties and mountains which were the basis for his most broadly monumental compositions. Like Matisse's art, Avery's work exudes happiness with the conditions of his life and surroundings, but Avery was above all an outdoor painter, a distinction from the more formalized studio methods which Matisse practiced with an Old Master's regimen. The airy, soft focus of Avery's vision is nevertheless intruded upon by a deliberate awkwardness in his draftsmanship—a rudimentary, angular quality of drawing which relates him to the passionate intensities and primitive urges which Dove, Hartley, and O'Keeffe sought to express in their paintings as well. Somehow this almost naive essentialness of contour and form does not ob-