

The many interesting abstract painters who worked during the sixties, a period when painting came under heavy criticism, are being joined by others. There is a lot of recent art done on various flat or semi-flat materials (plywood and metal, as well as canvas) which qualifies as painting, and is or is becoming strong. But this regeneration, which has been gathering for three or four years, promises to bring out into the open more of the same repetitious work which made painting so tiresome in the first place. There is nothing to do but complain and my complaints are specifically inspired by the first two exhibitions at the new SoHo Center for Visual Artists, an exhibition space sponsored by the Aldrich Museum

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ROBERTA SMITH

JACK WHITTEN manages to be relatively credible, if only through restraint. His surfaces have velocity, suggesting a film in which the camera's pan of a painting has blurred its configuration into a series of horizontal lines. Of course, Whitten has actually done this himself, working on the floor, by raking a very wide brush across deposits of color. Sometimes the paint clogs, the brush skips, the lines break, opening to other colors and spaces beneath. The openings are looser gestures countering the regularity of the lines. So this single drag results in a random surface which still looks composed in a usual way.

of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Connecticut. Each exhibition reflects, by about two-thirds majority, the extent to which the specter of Jackson Pollock is still with us and the widespread tendency to conventionalize certain aspects of his work. A prevailing view of Pollock recognizes the breakdown he established between gesture, material and final result (the painting), a fluidity in which each stage became an increasingly visible and permanent extension of its predecessor. Many painters who seem involved with this formula get bogged down in the first two stages. One advance on Pollock appears to be to combine more muscle with more paint and (voila!) the final result will take care of itself. Such work is exhausting rather than extending Pollock's use of accident, which was for him never more than a tool toward abstraction scale, and nonrelational composition. The current emphasis on gesture and material still accommodates contrived composition (regardless of how random it first seems) and an increased, generally nautical, naturalism. Both developments, which are regressive, are corroborated, if not increased, by tasteful, elaborately-balanced palettes. The gap between artists who compose color and those who use it is wider than ever. All this might explain some of the motivations and problems in the work presented in these two exhibitions.

Whitten's color is muted and oriental in its richness: grays and blacks oppose deep earths, reds, and yellows. Color lightens the weight of Whitten's surfaces by making the striations more optical. But it further contributes to the floating, reflective naturalism of his imagery, a structure no longer synonymous with and more conservative than, the structure of the surface itself.

sional and would not imply cubeness, maybe one reason LeWitt stopped at three.) LeWitt has produced all the possible variations, proceeding from the three possible three-part variations to the one possible 11-part variation. In between the process expands outward, reaching its peak with 32 eight-part variations and then contracting inward; there are only 25 nine-part variations. The orderly accumulation of these cubes on the white gridded table suggests the accumulations we are used to in LeWitt's earlier sculpture. However here each unit is both set unique, although its uniqueness is most apparent in its drawing graph. The accumulation or remains, like the instructions drawings, somewhat impene resistant to vision. Seven large 40" square in painted metal, and more interesting, des cramped installation. An ob native to LeWitt's earlier com cubes, these newer ones forc them as a series of parts, numbers, as well as an accur individual geometric eccent this plethora of information i one idea from beginning to e clearer it gets, the more re becomes. Finally we are most we are seeing a production compulsive single gesture, the determin- ation simply to do it, to fill it in. The cubes are shown up by the scale and openness, the conceptual and visual complication of the new wall drawings. Two and a half years ago I wrote, in *Data Magazine*, that I suspected LeWitt's wall drawings were his most interesting work. This show confirms it; always good, they are now better than ever. They proceed through a process of thought and experience which is way beyond filling in.

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In ELLIOTT LLOYD's paintings, large slugs of roplexed color barrel across the surface. The pours are bright (a lot of blues, purples, some pinks) and enter from all directions, disregarding gravity and the paintings' edges, but they still manage to look leaden. The resulting space is complicated and overblown. What Lloyd lacks in scale, he makes up for in size. The paintings, like his gestures, are inflated beyond emotional or formal credibility. Never forming a coherent whole, they remain a group of big details, unfelt, like bad opera.

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Gary Tenenbaum, *After the Storm: Awakening*, 1974, acrylic on canvas, 84" x 144"

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GARY SMITH's debt is to Cubism, which he flattens, simplifies and scales up in the direction of Pollock and recent abstraction in general. Stained planes of color, with distinct but fragile edges, overlap inward, converging toward center. Besides the space created in this overlapping, each plane of color is painted differently, and carefully, sometimes scumbled with a second color; consequently each has its own vague spatial effects. All this is complicated, but it is a complication of familiar spatial devices. In *Sweet Trifles*, four pale salmon planes, each jutting in from one of four directions, like clockwork, are alternated with a couple of gray planes, two olive ones and a pair of flesh planes, near but browner than the salmon. Smith's color is pleasant, even resonant in the darker paintings, but his individual choices are as predictable as his combinations. As with Whitten, color is a giveaway. The casual arrangement of the planes, a pretense toward loose composition, is belied by a self-conscious arrangement of color which suggests an earlier method of structuring.

In the second exhibition, CAROL ENGELSON drips and trowels thick, near black paint over mottled, stained surfaces, monochromes of either deep blue or dark green. Material counters an otherwise deep space, but the result is uni-

formly murky. STUART HITCH is also dripping paint, but onto a surface which is itself closed and physical. Hitch's unstretched canvases are completely coated with acrylic, forming a sheet of rubbery plastic. His pastel colors are garish, made more so by this surface and by glitter thrown into the paint. Hitch's drips occasionally add up to scrawled words: *Flesh Pull* or *Champion*. Both artists share with Lloyd a tendency toward empty gesture and deadly surfaces. More modest, their work avoids both his inflated scale and bravura and is therefore even more a series of painterly anecdotes.

Although he does not confuse gesture with gymnastics, GARY TENENBAUM's paintings are also a series of anecdotes, presented one at a time, side by side in careful repetition. Tenenbaum stains thin trails down the canvas, bleeding them horizontally into areas of raw canvas. These are contrasted with staccato impasto strokes also grouped vertically, a more controlled version of the juxtaposition that Engelson employs. This contrast is echoed in color: deep purples and green are relieved by the sharpness of an occasional chartreuse, orange or pink. The final results do not take care of themselves. The seriousness of this painting and much like it is not being questioned. What is questioned is the assumption that painting is a tradition which can sustain the endless, if competently readable, repetition of its basic conventions.

The Aldrich Museum's 10th anniversary coincides with the opening of this new space. Always involved with current trends, occasionally of significance, since 1970 it has focused increasingly on the dubious phenomenon called lyrical abstraction. Lyrical abstraction has a con-