

NEW YORK LETTER

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As the art season gropes uncertainly through its mid-point a few general tendencies seem to be coming into focus here. It appears, for instance, to be registering on a large portion of the art public, that women's art—and painting in particular—is good, at least as good as the art currently being produced by men. The high quality of the work in "Women Choose Women" at the New York Cultural Center, and the virtual impossibility of distinguishing men's art from women's in the Whitney Biennial on a qualitative basis, has brought this realization about.

The esthetic bankruptcy of color field decoration is now pretty much of an accepted fact. Dying gasps like the San Francisco retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art and a scattering of "pretty" shows at the Larry Rubin and Andre Emmerich galleries have only served to underscore the dead end position of this sort of painting. But while this is happening, it also seems to be clear that we are entering an eclectic era of strong painting, unsupported by any consistent esthetic underpinning. Many vigorous, individual styles are emerging. The only hint of similarity between them is an attitude of indifference. Hard edges, soft, automatic paint application and brushstrokes, formal, spatial, and coloristic considerations may all be found within a single work. Expressionistic, but rigorously formal, the best new painting being done by old timers as well as newcomers is trying to do more rather than less and to mean something.

The ambience of Soho—restaurants and bars full of artists socializing, open lofts where there is much visiting back and forth, an effective communications network of posted notices and the spoken word—is highly reminiscent of the atmosphere of community ferment that suffused the fifties. Now two artists are living in close proximity to their galleries. During the sixties it was common for an artist to live in a loft near the Fulton Fishmarket and show on 50th Street, instead of living and showing in Greenwich Village as they did in the heyday of Abstract Expressionism. The grandfather principle seems to be in full operation now, in a wide variety of ways. Fifties insistence on honesty and stylistic individuality is re-emerging, in opposition to the false consensus of the sixties to form movements and to force artists into opposing camps.

The overall feel of things here is refraining and hopeful. The cool inertia of sixties reductionism seems to be giving way slowly and inexorably to a new intensity and catholicity of strategies. Hans Hofmann is providing an ancestral role model for several individualists. It is a significant indication of recent indifference that he is now receiving the respect long due him. Starting with Henry Geldzahler's appropriate homage to him in the New York School 1940-1970 exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum, continuing in yearly shows of major work from the estate, like the recent one at Andre Emmerich (opposite) following on the heels of the Remata Series exhibition at the Metropolitan this fall, and highlighted by Sam Hunter's Abrams monograph on him, Hofmann has been receiving the proper treatment long denied him by all but a few enlightened curators, critics and dealers (Sam Kozak is particular).

Hofmann's explosive energy has never been equalled. And, as the Emmerich Gallery exhibition proves, this was especially true during the last decade of his life. The sheer exuberance of his paint handling and the high level of mastery he was able to maintain from canvas to canvas during his late sixties and eighties is amazing. One wonders if he didn't occasionally have an unhappy day. His enthusiasm for life and for painting must have been the basic factor in his effectiveness as a teacher. Acclaimed for his teaching skills from the time he opened his first school in Munich in 1915 until 1938 when he closed his last school in New York and



View of Hans Hofmann exhibition, Andre Emmerich Gallery

Provincetown, he somehow managed to avoid academism during that whole time and to maintain a continuously fresh approach to painting. The full extent of his powers, though, seem to have been felt in the last eight years of his life when he was free of the constraints of his heavy teaching schedule. It is during these years that his impacted surfaces begin to open up to the passage of air within them, to breathe and to sing.

Hofmann's paint handling ranges from the thinnest turpentine washes to the thickest globs of pigment. This span of viscosity is paralleled by the range of spatiality in his color, from deepest atmospheric distance to instant presence. His whole pedagogical system is based on a vision of the picture as a deep place containing many planes parallel to the canvas surface. The color he places on that surface take their position in the relative depth of his three-dimensional pictorial space as a function of their associative or analogical distance from the viewer. His pictorialism is that of cubist collage, from the earliest surviving paintings to his last joyful outbursts.

Hofmann's color is "tonal"—based on the clash of opposites—in the sense of the often expressed Germanic notion of the dichotomy of reason and passion. Spectrums of red hue vie with shades of green for dominance in most of his canvases, as they do in most German Expressionist painting. But Hofmann's light-filled pigment is never hardened with metaphysical Germanic morbidity. It is always joyful and streaming. Whether dripped or splattered onto the surface, thickly mixed, spread on with a palette knife or squeezed directly out of a tube and left untouched, its application feels spontaneous and free. Every inch is applied with its own direction and facture, so as to pick up ambient light differently from the next color and thus to be read uniquely.

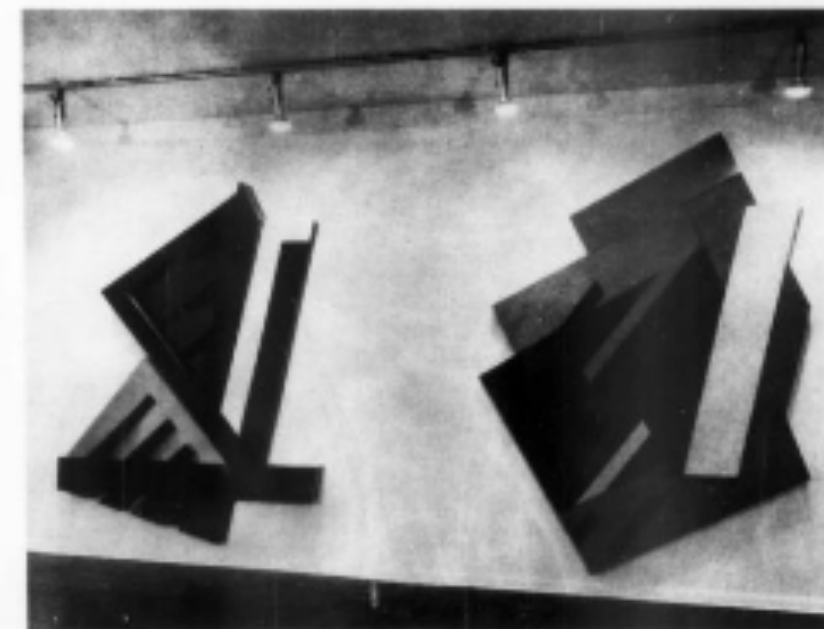
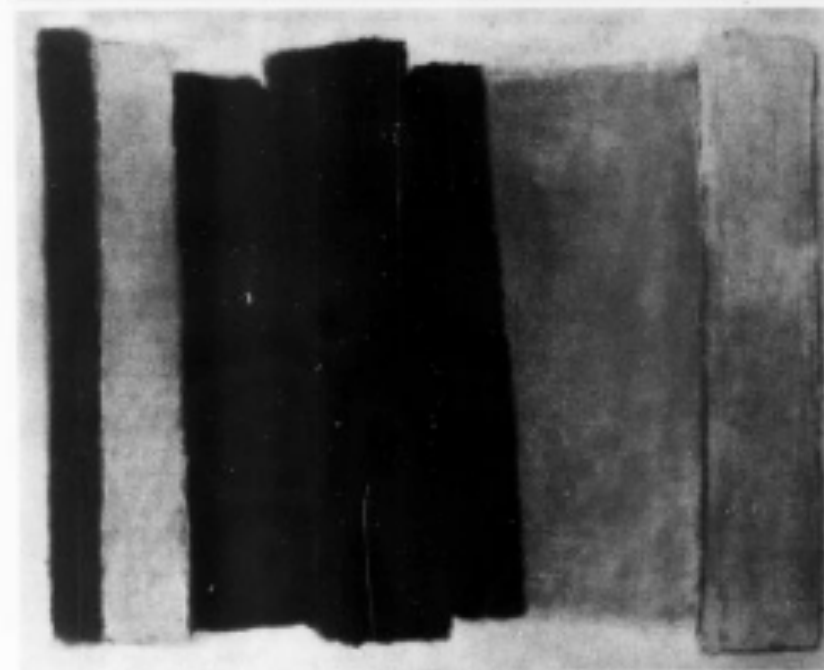
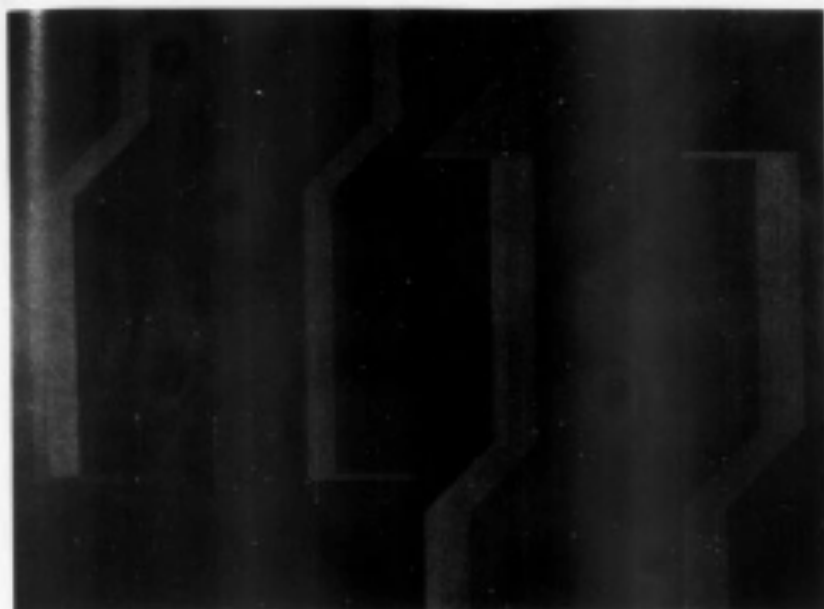
Unlike Gorky or Miró, Pollock or Kline, Hofmann eschewed no Manieristic form world with which he could be readily identified. Whatever his starting point—real or imagined landscapes or still lifes—his resultant paintings are pure abstraction that carry no specific overtones. This is so from the early forays when he moved resolutely into abstraction. General implications of natural phenomena—grass, trees, clouds, flowers—are lumped with architectural, geometrical units implying man-made artificiality in swirling, pulsating compositions that make no definite sensory inferences. Aside from a period of relatively baroque neo-plastic pairing around 1960 when hard-edged forms predominated, he has always tended toward a loose organic type of abstraction. But no matter how loose and free, he carefully reinforced the solidity of the work through recitrilinear references to the canvas edge. He often used isolat-

ed, floating geometrical units to reassert the architectural stability of his late, highly painterly compositions, as well as directional linear stroking.

Hofmann was the archetypal abstractionist. Hard edges and soft, cloistered areas of crushed impasto and wide open windows that let the air rush through the painting; clashing color, near passages and sweet ones; incredible velocity and absolute stasis; planes that leap forward into the viewer's space and sink to some distant depth—all these aspects co-exist within a given painting, and "work".

Michael Loew has always been an outsider on the New York art scene. During the Abstract Expressionist period Loew was still painting neo-plastically, like his fellow American Abstract Artists had been painting since the late thirties. Late in the fifties (when Stella came to town) Loew began to paint loosely. This temporary aberration away from the hard edges he had favored for more than two decades was over by the mid-sixties. Since then he has been combining both modes of paint handling within many of his canvases. Such a combination of linear and painterly styles, epitomized by Hofmann, has only recently been gaining any kind of acceptance. Now that the artificial prison of the sixties has passed Loew, for the first time in his long career (he was at the Art Students League in the middle twenties), seems to be marching in time with some of his fellow artists.

Though the paintings seem at first glance to be regularly organized by zig-zagging bands into symmetrical areas of closely held color, a second glance reveals subtle geometrical systems creating asymmetries and a wide range of distinctive color situations within each canvas. A unitary chromatic reading or a simple grasp of the painting structure is impossible. He worries every inch of his surface, making minute color adjustments, realigning his thin linear elements, modulating his stroke. The result is that the entire surface looks as though it has been carefully and painstakingly considered and decided upon. Loew's close valued colorism is particularly exhilarating, at times almost excruciatingly so. It is the reason why his works reproduce thematically in black and white. A subtle range of reds, red-oranges, purple-reds, and pinks, for instance, may set your teeth on edge when they are juxtaposed with sour greenish blues or soothe you with a sonnet sensation of pleasure in another area where the blues deepen and seem to sponge up retreat. Loew is a remarkable painter, and it is to the credit of our recent, more catholic understanding of art, that his work is being seen in a conducive context and being accepted, at long last.



Top, Michael Loew, *Blue and red slippah*, 1969, Acrylic, 96" x 18½", Landmark Gallery, Canton, John Oppen, *Cube Series 29-1972*, Acrylic, 96" x 70", Grace Bergericht Gallery, Boston, Frank Stella, *Black III* (left) and *Glaze II*, at the Leo Caroll Gallery

John Oppen, a contemporary of Michael Loew, is another of the quiet painters to have survived both the exuberance of Abstract Expressionism and the chill of the sixties while continuing to work in a consistent personal style. His bright, soft-edged images seem like Rothko rectangles aligned horizontally. Oppen's field is horizontal, and Rothko's, of course, was vertical, his rectangles aligned in vertical stacks. But unlike the muted unified tonalities Rothko favored, Oppen's color utilizes dramatic juxtaposition of warm color with sharp incisions of icy neutrality in blue or white. He contrasts dense and saturated areas within a given painting, the way he accents his large, fleshy planes with slender wedges of partial rectangles. All of Oppen's paintings are asymmetrical, and he blurs his forms, varying them in size and shape, overlapping them as if to imply their existence behind raised frontally placed rectangles. Their soft edges set them in optical situations with their neighbors so that color and shape function cooperatively to spread the painting's light outward toward its edges. Oppen's color is clear and sunny, like a summer's day on Cape Cod. It warms you. His Bergericht Gallery exhibition offered no real challenges, only a pleasurable sense of simple things having been done right.

It seems to me that ever since his big retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, Frank Stella has been going through a period of stylistic procreancy. During this time he has been concentrating his picture-making energies on literalizing neo-Cubist, multi-layered pictorial space—the same kind of space Hans Hofmann spent his life explaining and depicting. In doing so Stella gives the lie to all the formalist assertions about his flatness, his coolness, his logic, and his unambiguous, holistic, non-relational, emblematic image. All the talk about his allegiance to the flat picture plane now literally goes by the board as well, in the face of shaped canvases in obvious but-reflected with all their clear sculptural implications. Not that all those formalist delusions of his intentions were correct in the first place.

Stella's whole career has been marked by an alternating diastole of formal procreancy with systoles of rigid rationality. Both flows have been accompanied by a cold, hard certainty of intention. His black and silver striped paintings were followed by jumpy, jarring, multi-colored concentric squares; his cool monochromatic enclosures prior to 1965 by the inexplicable eccentricity of the polygons of 1966 and 1967. The generalized rainbows, fan and interlaced of the late sixties were answered by asymmetrical, Matissean relational painting on unshaped rectangular surfaces. The "art nouveau" curvilinearity of these beautiful paintings gave way last year to a new "art deco" rectilinearity; the rectangular edges to die-stamping cut-out shaping; and the warm Mediterranean color to cooler, gritty dulcinea. In like manner the stress on flatness has given way to the assertion of depth. The differences between this year's and last year's paintings are only that this color is even muddier and more sluggish now (more like faded brocade or cheap upholstery fabric) and the depth of areal relief he is incorporating has increased. This is remarkably little change for the artist who made it an essential art strategy to alter one's "look" yearly. Last year's fiasco of late Joan Gris prints, as does the appearance of being frozen diagrams of lifers' gesture, Stella's materials—felt, cloth, pressed matte board, colored paper and painted canvas—are deployed to the edges of the areas of wood, plywood or pressed wood they cover in such a way that neutral intentions do not consciously separate the areas of color. The device of reserving canvas between colors has previously been essential to Stella's classification

ground lines that interrupt the field. He uses various shades of raw linen so that the color of these reserved areas operates optically with the pigment he applies on it. Light-filled and lyrical. Boxer's gentle caricatures at Thore de Nagy so hard to dislike. Their emotional range may be narrow, but they say what they mean to say in the strictest possible ways.

Although one could read landscape implications into the paintings of Virginia Capridge as well—visions of mesas and arroyos in the painted desert at sunset—her insistent hard edges offset those overtones by asserting the architecture of a cityscape. Although the A.M. Sachs Gallery Exhibition is her first solo show in New York, this 25-year-old Australian seems to be absolutely sure of her pictorial means. She is making an instinctive synthesis of Mordorians, Rothkos and Hofmanns, the kind of work we might have expected to see from an intelligent painter in the early sixties, but rarely did. Finely bounded rectangular blocks push in from top and bottom edges toward a loosely loaded central area. Warm tones near the top and cool ones near the bottom flatten the space optically and the atmospheric haze that suffuses all areas without hard edges is prevented from reading as background by subtly located edging bands. Relational and tough, her solid geometricity works well in conjunction with the assurance of her paint handling. Glossy areas are contrasted with matte-finish planes in a tricky balance of factors that she occasionally fails to bring off, but none of the paintings is dull. Her attitude is inclusive, her spare is the complex, light-filled space of neo-Cubist collage modernism and her paintings feel traditional, as though they've been around a long time.

John Kacere seems to emerge from obscurity periodically—in the mid-fifties, and again in the early sixties, doing linear abstractions—only to disappear out-of-town or out-of-sight once again. He re-emerged recently with a whole new style. Dead center, now, in our "New Realism" movement he is painting enlarged female lower torsos, front or back, seen from above. The area customarily depicted extends from the waistline to mid-thigh; buttocks are covered as often as not; and the whole treatment has the smooth finish of a *Playboy* Magazine pin-up. It is an interesting coincidence that the image-observing Kacere is identical with that of an underground erotic artist, Charles Stark, with whose work he is probably not even familiar. Stark's work is delicate and dramatically in contradiction to Kacere's enormous blow-ups of the image to occupy many square feet, every inch of which is steady, if flatly, painted with loving attention to details of hair, folds of silk and satin, or fleshy curves. Although cutting the figure as he does implies an abstracted reading, the fact is that Kacere's choice of subject matter dictates most of the formal decisions just as it determines the color range. This is generally true of the "unstudied" neo-realism being produced today, and is its major creative tactic. The technical achievement of resistibility replaces esthetic decision-making to the detriment of the work's ultimate humanity.

The situation is the same for realist sculpture, of course, which is one of the reasons George Segal has so steadfastly emphasized the active and theatricality of his work. His two principal means of stressing the reality of the sculptures have been to keep them entirely white and to reveal evidences of the process of their making—the cloth underwrappings, and the rough texture of unsmoothed plaster. When he places his cast figures into environments, he runs the setting off dramatically, abstracting it, literally, from life. By a wide variety of theatrical devices Segal's work, which someone once described to me as looking like "walk-in Edward Hoppers", emphasizes the esthetic play of real vs. simulated and averts attention from the kind of stark sensitivity to which it might easily fall prey. In this Sidney Jurs Gallery



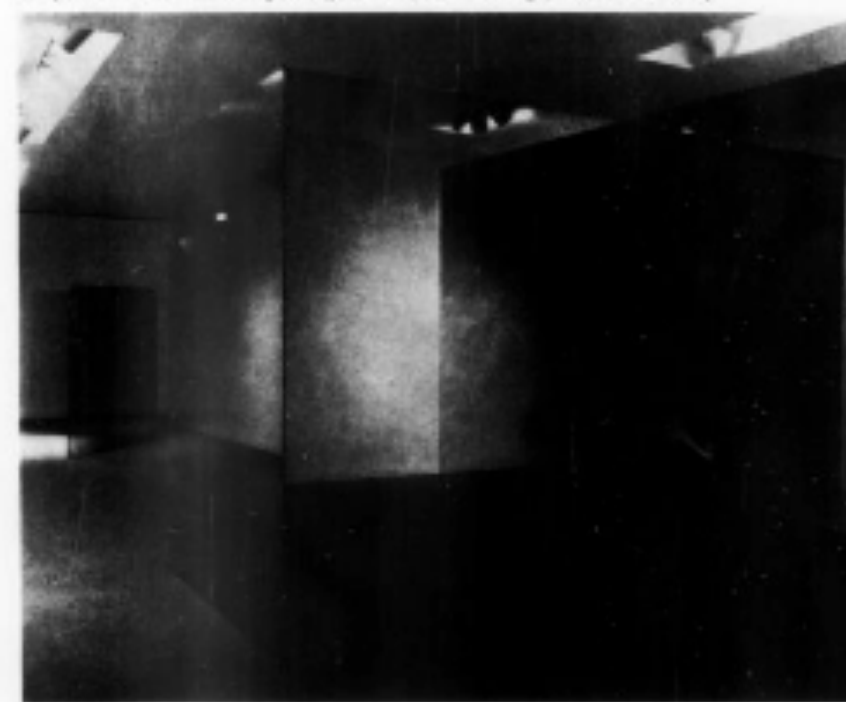
George Segal, *Portrait: Doubt Portrait*, 1972. Plaster, wood, plastic, super 8 movie film. 96" x 141" x 72". Sidney Jurs Gallery

show of two years' work he has added a new form, the hat-collie, to his vocabulary and greatly enriched his esthetic position in the process. Like Diego's ladder in the tub or Rodin's figures emerging from rubble, Segal's relief figures are partially enveloped by physical manifestations of ambient space. The *Enbrace* made the most effective use of shadows and had the strongest composition of the group. Some were bounded by heavy wooden frames that stressed their plasticity, others incorporated real materials—a chair part or shower tiles and fixtures—which overemphasized their reality/irreality moments and were inflexible. The bulk of the show consisted of his usual tabularia events, theatrically lit, the figures looking, as they customarily do, like lead-faced zombies. One large new work, *George: Doubt Portrait*, included a window-framed film of the subject in color showing her "in real life" eating and talking so we could compare her with her plaster alter ego. It was

an effective device for adding yet another dimension of reality and of theatricality.

All the problems a realist sculptor doesn't have to solve are the working material of the abstract sculptor. With no figures to provide ready-made scale reference a sculptor like Larry Bell has to rely on the size of his pieces and their relationship to architecture. Being an indoor sculptor his relationships have to be made with walls, floor, ceiling, and people life size. Bell's recent work—two large rectangular plane constructions of vacuum coated glass were on view at the Pace Gallery—uses the reflective qualities of mirroring to full advantage in order to incorporate all these environmental elements within the body of his work. Even to get a photograph of the piece the photographer becomes part of it. This subtle blurring of distinctions between the art and the surrounding context is similar to electronic music in its Zen-like arbitrariness.

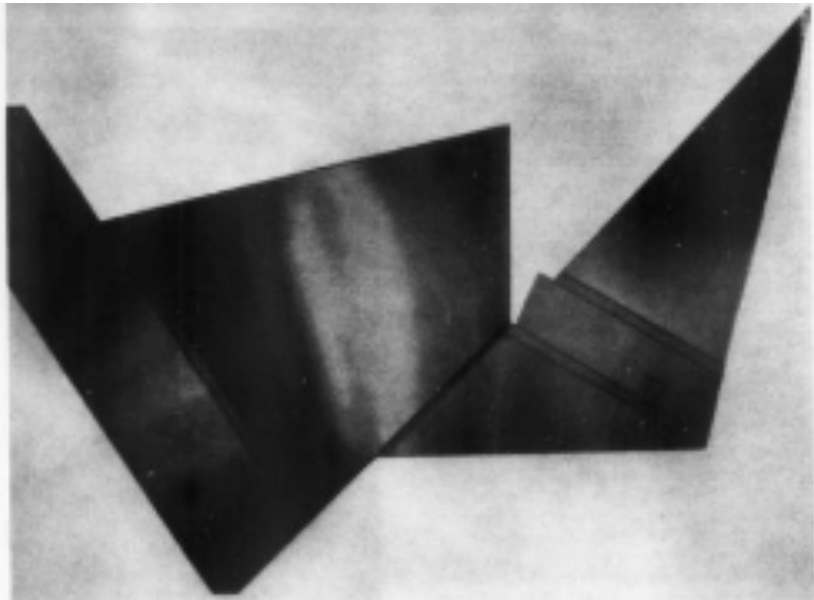
Larry Bell, Untitled vacuum-plated glass work, 96" x 72" x 1", 1972. Pace Gallery



The ambiguity experienced on viewing Bell's work—now you see yourself, now you don't. Is that a real plane or only a reflection of this one?—are manifest through the mysterious transparency/transparency of his application of mineral particles to the glass. The smoky, beige gray color of his recent pieces is reminiscent of the Los Angeles smog that surrounds him in Venice, California where he coats the glass in a room-size vacuum-treating machine of his own. It was essential to Bell's position as a "minimal" sculptor that he move on to making sculpture that was larger than the human being viewing it. The machine was crucial to his production of these pieces. In a sense, Bell reversed the usual minimal tendency to move into factories to fabricate sculpture by moving the factory into his studio. Abstract objects, as differentiated from anthropomorphic ones like the sculptures of David Smith or figurative pieces, must have literal size on a par with architecture to read successfully. Otherwise they look like bubbles. Minimal anti-object rhetoric is, in fact, merely a cry for architectural scale in sculpture, be it intended for placement indoors or outdoors.

Bell's work is elegant. It does epitomize that notion of L.A. "finish-finish" which was invented to describe it and the work of a few other L.A. artists, like Billy Al Bengtson in the early sixties. It is "cool". But all these attributes are hollow, too.

Two group shows of interest were mounted in Soho during January. The first, at the new Landmark Gallery, included two gallery visits and two invited exhibitions. Nora Speyer was represented by two large figure paintings in oil and a landscape. She has been relentlessly exploring the theme of Adam and Eve and their fall from grace for a number of years now. Heavy implications of woman's sexual involvement with evil, in the form of glittering green snakes, are physically conveyed by the tactile stimulation of her convulsant inquests. *Woman II*, both terrified and spellbound, holding off masses of writhing reptilian flesh while caressing them, is her best expression of this theme thus far. Jean Cohen showed three biomorphic abstractions, the colorism of which is reminiscent of Mattias's fine chromatic nuancing. The only artist I know of who has a similar way of handling color is Herman Soreberg, and in both cases it is too complex to describe in a few words. Cohen's form world also shares something of Soreberg's anthropomorphism, though I'm certain this is completely accidental. Phoebe Helman exhibited one large geometrical abstract wall-sculpture and two



Phoebe Helman, Stainless steel, 9'4" x 11'8", Landmark Gallery

large preparatory drawings for it. These drawings (like the unsharpened working models of Ronald Bladen) are expressionistically executed, graphically exploring the controlled tension of the finished piece. Small linear units are played against large expanses of diminishing brushed aluminum with a nice sense of scale. Paul Yakovlevski's dolls, masks, helmets, animal robe and spear-like sculptures are constructed of fiber, feathers, hemp, clay wire and nails, either painted or left in their natural state. He calls them his "own Voodoo dolls" and they fit so well into the traditional primitive modes of finish construction that underlying modernist sculptural terms are difficult to discern. For some reason, perhaps their obsessive personhood, they function beautifully in the context of the other works in the show, especially Nora Speyer's mesmerizing, light-filled canvases.

The other group show was mounted in the James Yu Gallery which is newly opened and hasn't yet settled its stable. Porfirio di Donna showed a series of quartet paintings with faint pencil line grids dotted with color at each cross-

ing. Though the configurations were obviously reminiscent of Agnes Martin the color operated optically like miniaturizations of mid-sixties dot paintings by Larry Posen. The overall tonalities of each work were monochromatic though, no matter what width of pastel color range went into their composition. Louis Lieberman makes fiberglass and resin reliefs which he plasters onto the wall so smoothly that their edges are imperceptible. His twisting, hugging forms seem absurdly to have bunched up sections of the wall as if it were made of malleable stuff instead of plaster and then fattened it with "venetian". The shapes that result have a plant-like organicism. Herbert de Roockere, a Viennese artist living in San Francisco, showed three large, unstratched paintings, each composed of 4 vertical, elongated ovals. The sides of these ovals flapped loosely out from the wall revealing the acrylic coloration of the back side of each section. His color is often darkly moody and, like Murray Close's, discordantly juxtaposed dusky secondary hues. De Roockere has been working with loosely constructed, multi-unit canvases shaped curvilinearly since 1968, but this is their first exposure in New York.

Nora Speyer, *Woman II*, 1972, OIL, 83" x 60", Landmark Gallery



Herbert de Roockere, Acrylic on canvas, 81" x 67", 1972, James Yu Gallery

