Bonnard. *Self-Portrait*, 1938. Canvas, 23" × 26½". Lent anonymously to the exhibition, "Faces from the World of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism" at the Wildenstein Gallery

# NEW YORK LETTER

*APRIL KINGSLEY*

Wildenstein's benefit exhibition, "Faces from the World of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism", provoked a surprising amount of interested attention here and led many critics to speculate about Impressionism in general, and about the role of portraiture in nineteenth and twentieth century art. The show included some of the worst and best examples of their art by the leading painters of the period. Manet's reputation, for instance, might never have been made had it relied on his representation in this exhibition; except for his brilliant handling of a *Young Woman Reclining in a Spanish Costume*, 1862, and *Emile Guillaudin on Horseback*, 1870, the works included lacked any real distinction. Van Gogh's portraits seemed superficial as character studies in comparison with Gauguin's *Self-portrait with a Palette*, 1893 (the best in his representation), and neither could compare with all the great Cézannes like the portraits of his father, Victor Choquet, his wife and himself. Renoir was disappointing (except for his study of a young boy, *Maurice Grimprel* and the *Daughters of Paul Durand-Ruel*) and Vuillard, Fantin-Latour, Toulouse-Lautrec, Morisot, Dufy, and Bazille were of secondary interest, as always. The large number of Mary Cassatt's included did nothing to raise our estimation of her contribution either. The big surprises were Bonnard and Degas who shone forth with particular brilliance that was only matched by Monet's *Jean Monet on a Mechanical Horse*, 1872, for structural lucidity and painterly perfection. That great painting recalled the limpid clarity of Corot's light as well as his fresh approach to the sitter's face.

The paintings by Degas reaffirmed one's convictions about his mastery of psychological characterization as surely as they did one's respect for his remarkable compositional abilities. The freshness and immediacy of his approach to his subject, also reminiscent of Corot's, is epitomized by the striking double portrait of his cousins, *Elena and Camilla Montejasi-Cicerale;* while his *Portrait of René de Gas*, executed ten years earlier in 1855, is firmly positioned in the tradition of Ingres and Bronzino. It is in his more generalized portrait studies like the *Mante Family*, *Rose Caron*, and *Mary Cassatt Holding a Dog* that his masterful command of structure is utilized with fullest effect in the service of characterization.

Impressionist character analysis is rare, the figure paintings being marked by an overall sense of anonymity. People look like "everybody" more often than they look like "somebody" in particular, which is probably why the exhibition is entitled "Faces . . ." rather than "Portraits . . ." The fleeting moment, caught with snapshot inexactitude, rather than the studied portrait, that is the heart of Impressionist figure painting. Degas seems to have been the only artist of the time who was able to capture that moment and the subject's personality as well. He uses dramatic cropping to force the sensation of recognition and immediacy, but he never misses the subtle psychological faceting in the process. The way he shifts in and out of focus, from illusionism at its trompe-l'œil best to sketchy devices that are highly abstract, within the same work is truly modernist. Yet every figure he paints is a true portrait without his seeming even to have tried to achieve it, while the rest of his peers seem to have to struggle to portray the human psyche.

Impressionism made what were really the last stabs at true portraiture, and they were largely ineffective. The twentieth century tends to ignore it. Because of its subjective commitments, the self-portrait remains the only viable form of modernist portraiture. We have produced no great portrait painters of Degas's stature. He understood the hypnotic power of the human face completely, and was able to subvert it to his compositional ends. Bonnard understood it too, but refused to deal with the problem outside of his self-portraits. One marvelous *Self-portrait* of 1938 included in this show was its real highlight. The tragicomic humanity expressed in his mirrored face can stand for "everyman".

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Arshile Gorky (Vosdanig Manoog Adoian), an immigrant to this country in 1920, performed the major transitional role in the esthetic shift from the School of Paris to the New York School of painting. His study of the European masters was so thorough that for most of his career Gorky's own style was barely discernible. The current exhibition at the Allan Stone Gallery includes a number of important examples of subjugation to the School of Paris during the twenties and early thirties. It also includes his Miróesque works of the thirties prior to his development of a personal style. Gorky's mature work is characterized by a linear configuration which juxtaposes a swelling curve and a sharp point. Though never specific, his organicism is polarized between passive "feminine" roundness latent with fecundity and an aggressive "masculine" pin-point thrust which threatens to rupture it. From the time of its crystallization this formal theme became the basic constituent of all his compositions. The cold crosshatchings of the thirties give way to a softer, more tentative and illusionistic line in the early forties. Though the forms are abstract and unknowable the line which describes them is light-drenched and atmospheric, conveying a sense of real things actually observed. The drawings and paintings of this time seem to be "about" nature, rather than running parallel to it. By the mid-forties and a great painting like *Good Afternoon, Mrs. Lincoln* Gorky has come solidly into his own, bringing with him the "New American Painting". He infused European automatism with American energy. The sure signs of this conversion are present in his line which became firm and unhesitant by 1943. It delineates forms with such even classical assurance that their abstractness is asserted rather than described. The exhibition, over half of which is comprised of museum quality work, provides a rare opportunity to follow Gorky's development in a large number of first-rate examples from every period. Most unfortunately, the gallery is also cluttered with kitschig what-nots and do-dads that make it difficult to sort out one's visual impressions. One wishes the gallery had "tried harder". The works are unlabeled and no attempt was made at a catalogue or even a checklist for this important exhibition.

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Stephen Greene, like Gorky, has invented a subliminally eloquent world of abstract organic imagery which he uses, however, in conjunction with a whole range of geometric forms. Where Gorky relied on a curve and point, Greene has a tautly stretched line and a knot of intense curvilinear activity as his basic motif. Gorky tends to energize a greater proportion of his surface than Greene, who leaves large expanses of ground to the minimal articulation of his brushwork. His current exhibition at the William Zierler Gallery covers 25 years of drawing providing a concise summary of his formulation of a personal imagery. His draftsmanly facility is evident even in the earliest figure studies of the forties. Already, too, firm straight lines serve to connect passages of clotted organicism. The chiselled transition from bulging hip-pocket to knobby knee in his 1947 drawing of his father presents this succinctly. The same angular-curvilinear axis continues in the violent crucifixion studies of the early fifties and into the blurry Garden of Eden wash drawings toward the end of the decade, though in these it is indistinctly rendered. The full flowering of his style came in the sixties. It was then that color began to play an important part in his paintings; and at the same time the linearity of his imagery became more dominant and forceful. Drawings like *TC #1* of 1966 and *Biograph #24* of 1967 strongly recall the paintings of Duchamp and Picabia which organicised Cubism. Bits of amorphous anatomy—a skeletal jaw or an arm-like shape—are linked to diagrammatic passages of geometry in the form of wheels, wires, ladders and vaguely archi-

tectural detailing. This complex of impenetrable iconography is subtly executed in a wide range of techniques and media. Strong vertical units, located near the centers of the best drawings, lock their scattered incident into compositional focus and structure their spatial ambiguities. The symbolic messages proferred by his allusive figuration are impossible to decode, but the delicate web of sheer draftsmanly perfection he weaves into the picture plane is unsurpassed by any artist working today in the medium of drawing to his extent.

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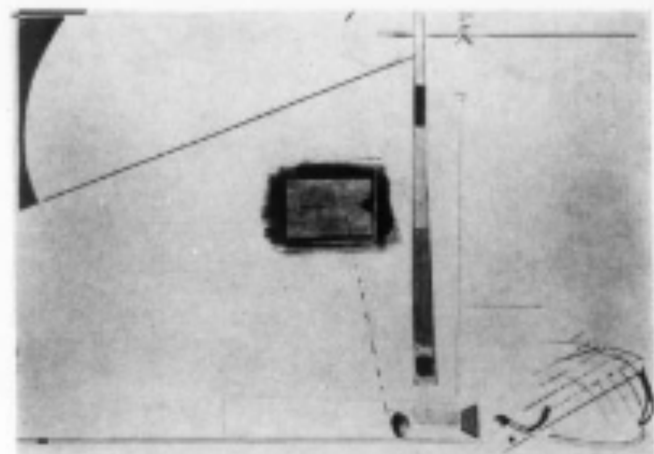
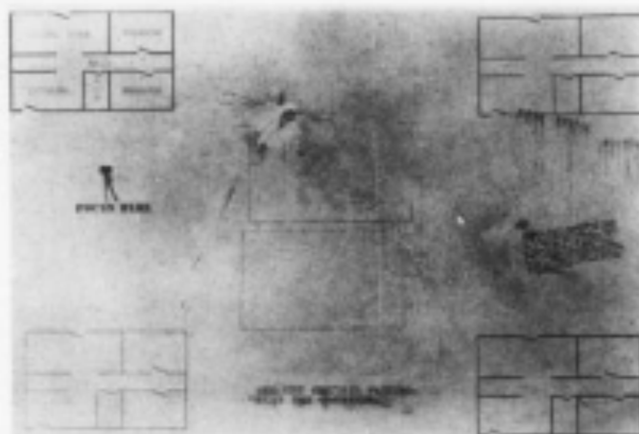
Arakawa, though lacking Greene's advantages of time and practice, also works out of the mecano-morphic world of Duchamp and Picabia in his diagrammatic formulations. Part painting, part conceptualism, and part concrete-poetry, the dozens of canvases which comprise his Mechanism of Meaning series are fully in the European tradition of word-painting begun by these artists. Arakawa hasn't invented a personal morphology, though. Duchamp, Gorky and Stephen Greene all did. Arakawa relies instead on pre-systematized patterns of diagramming—floor plans, stencilled lettering, testing devices, swatch books, and advertising techniques. Formerly he organised his paintings in bi or tri-partite vertical stacks, but his recent work, on view at the Ronald Feldman Gallery, tends to be horizontally oriented. Like most of the most interesting art of this century, Arakawa's compositions are all collages of juxtaposed elements in intent if not in actuality. Collage provides the most precise formal metaphor for the informational flood of twentieth century life. As such, the most intellectually compelling modern movements have been based upon it. Arakawa's paintings are usually linear black on white configurations highlighted with spots of color and collage elements applied with a Jasper Johns or Rauschenbergian sense of wry humor. His complex spatial illusionism involves the use of practically every pictorial gambit in the books. One particularly



Greene. *Recall 6*, 1972. Mixed media, 22" × 30". William Zierler Gallery

beautiful effect used often is to fade or blur some forms so that they seem to be located behind the picture plane while sticking thick hunks of paint on to the surface so they seem to have been attached arbitrarily. Another charming device is a tiny triangular notch painted onto the edge of one work. The words "focus here" are written nearby with an arrow. Why? Well, one reason might be that the tiny notch functions in the same way for Arakawa that it did for Al Held years ago—it lifts the entire frontal plane off the picture plane and suspends it illusionistically in front of the canvas surface. Other devices are purely conceptual in a punning kind of word-object play familiar since Braque drove a real nail

Gorky. Untitled pencil and wax crayon drawing, 1943. 18½" × 25½". Allan Stone Gallery



Arakawa. *The Gloss*, 1972. Acrylic/canvas, 6'7" × 9'9¼". Ronald Feldman, Inc.

Hoyland. *27.8.72.* Acrylic on canvas, 66" × 60". André Emmerich Gallery

into his painting and painted a shadow for it, and later elevated by Johns to the level of an obsession. Arakawa uses verbal means of communication in about equal measure with his use of visual means, often in collaboration with Madeline Gins. Lawrence Alloway has investigated his meanings on the verbal level so conclusively and so brilliantly in the pages of this magazine, in Extensions #7, and in his introduction to Arakawa's *Mechanismus der Bedeutung* text that there is little point in adding a few more notions here on his use of language. Arakawa's highly ambiguous, multiplistic attitude indicates that he is trying to cover all the bases so that he will be able to "catch the ball" under any and all future circumstances of use to which his work may be subjected. It also reaches back into the past comprehensively; it is cross-referential and timeless.

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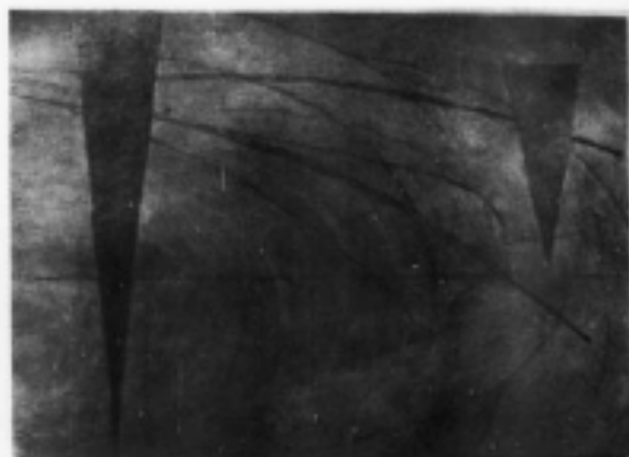
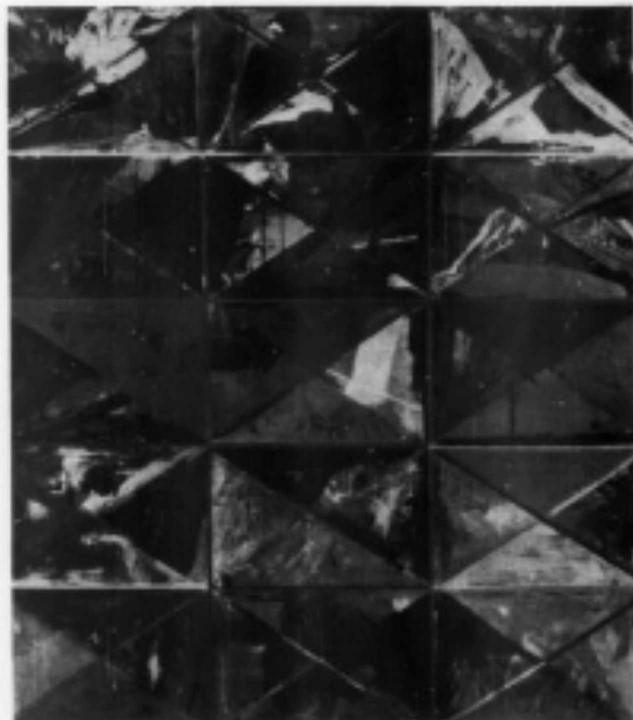
For most American painters, not as sure as Arakawa, for example, about their direction, the sixties was a time of transition and indecision. When abstract expressionism "died" about a decade ago artists tried every non-energetic stratagem they could find to make painting logical and controlled. Ecstasy was eschewed in deference to the need for simple orderliness. All-over painting, always a dubious concept at best, came to be considered an ideal method of avoiding the problems of relational painting. Pollock's homogenized webs of paint came to seem more relevant than de Kooning's risky, decision-laden complexities. A misreading of Pollock's energetic fields led to the elevation of mere surface richness as a sufficient goal for serious painting. Aside from surface consistency there was one other way for all-over painting to "present a united front"—namely to substitute the grid for constructive decision-making. In either case, the results were generally decorative and "good taste" was raised to the level of esthetic canon.

In 1972 this position seems to have reached bankruptcy. The work of those artists who have most heavily invested in its esthetic, like John Hoyland and Dan Christensen for example, seems to have passed the point of diminishing returns. Hoyland, an Englishman, should never have gotten involved in the first place. His André Emmerich (downtown gallery) exhibition shows his painterly adeptness to full advantage. But it's a facility without mystery. The acrylic paint, probably thickened with gel, has been glopped on, allowed to cascade down the surface, and occasionally spaded onto the surface. All the techniques of application are obvious and rather boring. Hoyland's "image" seems to be pink, orchid, and orange variations on the theme of the "rainstorm landscape" already stated this year by Larry Poons. His personal fillip is a sort of square within a square format at times, and a corner shape floating somewhere in his field. Dan Christensen, who seems to change styles yearly, appears to be after a Robert Ryman look this year. Without Ryman's obsession with purity and facture to give this simple painterly attitude some degree of force, however, the paintings in Dan Christensen's uptown André Emmerich Gallery exhibition just look like frosting-white snowstorms of acrylic applied with a spatula over vari-



Tom Holland. *O'Mara*, 1972. Epoxy on fiberglas, 81" × 116". Lawrence Rubin

Gary Bower. *Basic Gray*, 1972. Oil/canvas, 75" × 60". O.K. Harris



colored grounds. He, too, like Hoyland, has a pleasant painterly facility, and one feels that if he would only take a year or two off from the pressures of producing confections for a public in search of interior decoration he might be able to locate a genuine style of painting for himself that would interest us.

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Other popular sixties artists seem to be heading for the life boats in desperation. Neil Williams' exhibition at the Lo Guidice Gallery indicates that he missed his. For some inexplicable reason, he has begun to treat his familiar chevron-shaped canvases like plain rectilinear painting surfaces. The Paul Jenkins-type veils of poured paint he applies to these surfaces have no relation to the shape of his field and, with the sole exception of *Edge*, read as simple figure-ground, organic-geometric distinctions. His geometric paintings on geometrically shaped canvases of the mid-sixties were at least in harmony on that point. Gary Bower is still using the grid in some of his paintings, but is an interesting painter finding intelligent solutions to the problems of painting today. In a recent series of painterly abstractions without the grid, he has arrived at an intuitive hierarchical method of structuring his paintings in meaningful ways, both internally in terms of weighting his materials in terms of relative importance, and externally in terms of establishing an architectural relationship to the framing edge. These strong new works seem to be part of a tendency which may be developing toward a renewed involvement with Cubist syntax, not that Arakawa and many other interesting sixties artists weren't thinking along those lines all the time. It seems to be present in the work of Tom Holland at the Lawrence Rubin gallery too. Holland, a Californian, subtly weaves literal and illusionistic curving shapes and lines in and out of a shallow, cubist-collage space. His line is gentle, like his darkish, moody, basically monochromatic colors. The paintings are executed in epoxy on fiberglass and are composed of many parts fastened together. The result is that a few elements, like the descending triangular wedges seem to float in front of the picture surface. Lines painted on and incised into this surface convey the impression of being the edges of unclear forms yet to emerge into view, and the fastening devices set up a staccato counterpoint to all this activity. Internal units rhyme with each other and reiterate the shaping edge organically, geometrically, and in a pleasantly unpressured, but completely satisfying way.

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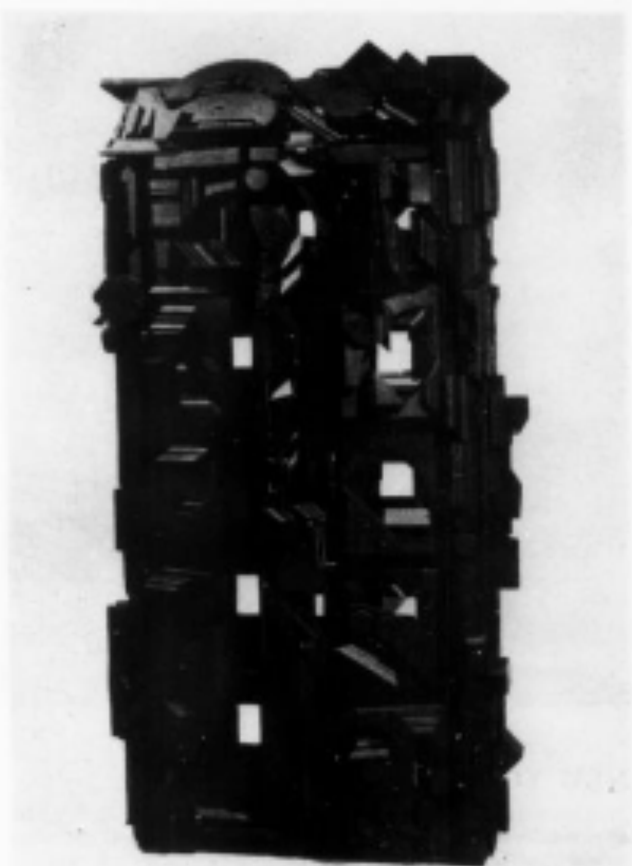
Louise Nevelson is again working in the mode which is her best—the black wooden conglomerate sculpture—first shown in her 1958 "Moon Garden Plus One" exhibition. That show, at the age of 59 was her first exhibition in a mature sculptural style and the first real environment. The current Pace Gallery show includes over 20 free-standing sculptures and reliefs in similar environment-like profusion. There are many works in the form of "doll's houses", armoires, columns, and plaques, a table and two large wall-sized reliefs. With the exception of one rather uninteresting piece which looks like a stack of orange crates viewed from the rear, all the new work is profusely cluttered with detail. Entitled "Houses" but not confined to that configuration alone, the works share a rough, unrefined, un-crafted look. Assembled from an apparently inexhaustible inventory of wooden trim, knobs, molding, furniture parts, spools, scraps, and negatives left from sawn and drilled boards—some handfashioned, others clear-



Nevelson. *Night Enclosure Series III*, 1972. Black wood, 33½" × 22½" × 11". Pace Gallery

ly machined—they look like mad-cap three-dimensional jig-saw puzzles of some surreal cityscape.

Nevelson has always been a pictorial sculptress. Her work is frontal. Each side of a three or four sides unit is another front. She never burdens a single side of her work with the informational content of the other sides. It is a literal attitude toward the concept of many-sidedness, and really remains the position of a relief maker. As Arnold Glimcher accurately notes in his monograph on the artist recently published by Praeger Publishers in New York, "Nevelson's sculpture, like Cubist painting rather than Cubist sculpture, delineates the shallow space within which the forms coalesce to build up additively the formal substance." A little later he points out that this has the effect of extending her "sculpture into the realm of illusion, a territory previously reserved for painting". Nevelson is a filler and stacker of boxes. She is not really a carver of forms or a shaper of material. She

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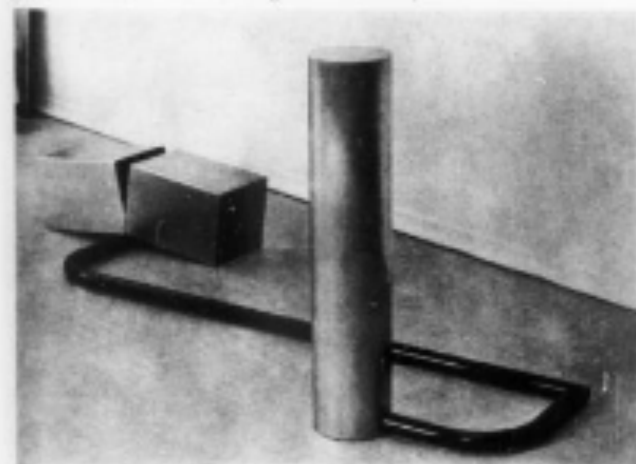
Oded Halahmy. *City & Street*, 1969–1970. Stainless steel and aluminium painted black, 77" × 59" × 32". James Yu Gallery



Tom Doyle. View of his exhibition at the 55 Mercer Street Gallery

works additively with found materials, even when she has them made specifically for her purposes. Her similarities are with painters like Tanguy and, especially his wife Kay Sage. The only sculptor with whose work hers is directly comparable is Kurt Schwitters, and even he is better known as a collagist. Like his Merzbau environmental constructions, Nevelson's works, at their best, are surrealist assemblages that seem to have been executed automatically or only semi-consciously. Glimcher describes her working process as one where "She dips her hand into piles of debris, like a brush into pots of paint, and without plans other than a natural predilection for vertical and horizontal axes, automatically assembles a fabric charged with the energy of its feverish construction."

Nevelson shares two other qualities with Schwitters. The first is a sensual, loving approach to the collage element—the bit of lace or doily, the silver seal, like his candy wrappers, the beautifully colored scrap of paper—which is apparent for the first time in this exhibition since it includes her first attempts at collage. This is quite remarkable since she has shown evidence of an involvement with the Cubist collage sensibility throughout her long career. The second attitude she shares with Schwitters is an obsessive horror vacui which finds an unfilled niche or unadorned surface anathema. Schwitters filled his whole house in Hanover with sculptures and reliefs made of and with found objects. As the need to embellish these progressed he began to encase these units in other sculptures, often obliterating them from sight. He unified the whole exterior of this environment with white paint later, when he was in a Constructivist frame of mind. Nevelson, too, unifies her constructions (which in this show often contain other constructions hidden within them behind little doors) with a coat of paint, thus eradicating all traces of their natural state except their textures.

Her best work displays a baroque abundance of ornament articulating every surface. Her worst work, because it seems so unobtrusive, is her plain "minimal" sculpture. When she attempts a non-idiosyncratic style in plexiglass or metal which utilizes uniform parts and smooth surfaces she has to compete with all the rest of the sculpture being made in a formalistically severe vein and she is bound to fail. Her surrealist, nightmare vision is her forte and only the wildest works give it full expression. Since her approach is additive, it is virtually negated by an attempt to compose. She is a master of modulation, of accent but not of heavy stress. The shadow world she inhabits best is infinitely varied in depth, lending her positive forms a blurry-edged painterliness as they emerge into the light. She deliberately plays hard, clear edges against less distinct boundaries, and this is most effective in black. The only problem with Nevelson's sheer mass of accumulated detail is that it tends to tire the viewer. Her all-over "maximal" articulation leaves the eye no place to rest. This is an unavoidable failing of an anti-compositional attitude.

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Two sculptors—Tom Doyle at 55 Mercer Street and Oded Halahmy at the James Yu Gallery—continue to explore various modes of sixties "Concrete Expressionist" sculpture. Doyle's work hasn't undergone any major stylistic alteration in years. His familiar curving shapes seem more natural in the polyvinyl cloride and fiberglass materials he has been using recently, while his bent or creased lines seemed a little smoother before when they were executed in wood and steel. Doyle's use of polychrome, unlike that of George Sugarman, continues to be based on polarities of warmth or coolness, matte and gloss. He uses color expressively for emphasis; other sculptors including Sugarman, use it for the pictorial demarcation of parts. Doyle also employs color to





minimize the "local" natural qualities of his materials and to unify them into superficially consistent configurations. In the past Doyle would project his curving steel or masonite forms so weightlessly into space or let them seem to sag so naturally over floor-hugging supports that his material seemed to act more like cardboard than steel. Now he is using PVC which has less flexibility than steel but great compressive rigidity and he makes the material seem to have the soft pliability of rubber. All his work is so consciously oriented to the flat surface of the floor on which it sits that it can work quite well on the wall at times too, as does *Green River Bridge* in the show. Other works, like *Chickasaw Bluff*, are too tall to imagine as wall-pieces, but they address the floor no less one-sidedly. The shingle-like overlapping curves of his planes, heat-welded now instead of being glued or arc-welded as before, generate distinctly organic associations. *Between the Blue and the Tuscarora* for instance, the most successful piece in the show, is intended to contain topographical connotations abstracted from a specific geographical location in the artist's home state of Pennsylvania. Instead it looks like a giant blue sea monster with a dark red tail. The animalian impressions one receives are due in part to the viewing angle, which is always downward, as if into an aquarium.

A somewhat similar kind of playfulness informs the work of Oded Halahmy. He also makes polychrome sculptures out of more than one material, but he works with the forms of a "minimal" vocabulary which he alters manneristically. *City and Street* is typical. A rectangular block of aluminum is unexpectedly split in half by a neat wedge of air as it spans a tube of steel painted black which saunters along the floor in a graceful curve before jogging around a swift right angle to mysteriously enter the base of an upright aluminum cylinder. In *Spring is Here*, a piece I especially enjoyed, the same aluminum elements are joined by a lovely arc of purple-painted steel. The splitting wedge is driven in different places, the jog occurs variously, and the colors operate differently in each piece, but the vocabulary remains the same. His colors are even less the colors of nature than Doyle's. Having studied in England with Henry Moore and Anthony Caro before moving to Toronto, Canada where he worked alongside sculptors like Robert Murray, Halahmy's work has the kind of smooth surface elegance we have come to associate with the English-Canadian-Bennington sculpture axis. It makes Doyle's work look rough and expressionistic by comparison.

Charles Ross, an "ecologist sculptor", employs nature to help in the production of art in a way that channels energy without diminishing it. The results are highly-charged units of art-energy which benefit the world. His exhibition at the John Weber Gallery consisted of 365 planks of wood, painted white. Each plank had been exposed on successive days of the year to the effects of sunlight passing through a prism he constructed. This prism concentrated the sun's energy, burning a "projection" of the path of the sun across the plank each day it shone during the equinoctical year 1971/72. The planks, thus unmarked or containing swaths of golden-ringed black char, were shown on end lining every bit of gallery wall space. The whole had an expressionistic force that was previously not associated with Ross' work. His familiar glass prism sculptures, on the floor before being transferred more recently to the window, provided much gentler visual delight as they dispersed given light sources into rainbows of gorgeous pure color. A film of the action of the sun through one of these prisms as it cast moving ribbons of color across furniture, dishes and the artist's hand accompanied the exhibition along with a film of last summer's solar eclipse. The violence of the sun's energy and our vulnerability to it was brought home to the viewer with full force in this show. But an opposite realization was effected as well. Ross made double spiral configurations out of tiny photographs of the planks by simply aligning the photos end to end. The precision and orderliness with which the universe controlled the sun to create the perfection of these spirals provided an immediate antidote to the frightening effect of the charred wood. The nuances of our daily lives were registered too in the gradations and spacings made in the imagery produced on the planks by the passage of clouds between us and the sun, and by the presence of high smog concentrations. Blank panels, resulting from completely cloudy days made neat parallels with the bleak days that probably produced them. In a very twentieth century "automatic" way, larger extra-terrestrial forces worked in conjunction with such trite daily inconveniences as bad weather to assist Ross in the formulation of his art.