

## NEW YORK LETTER

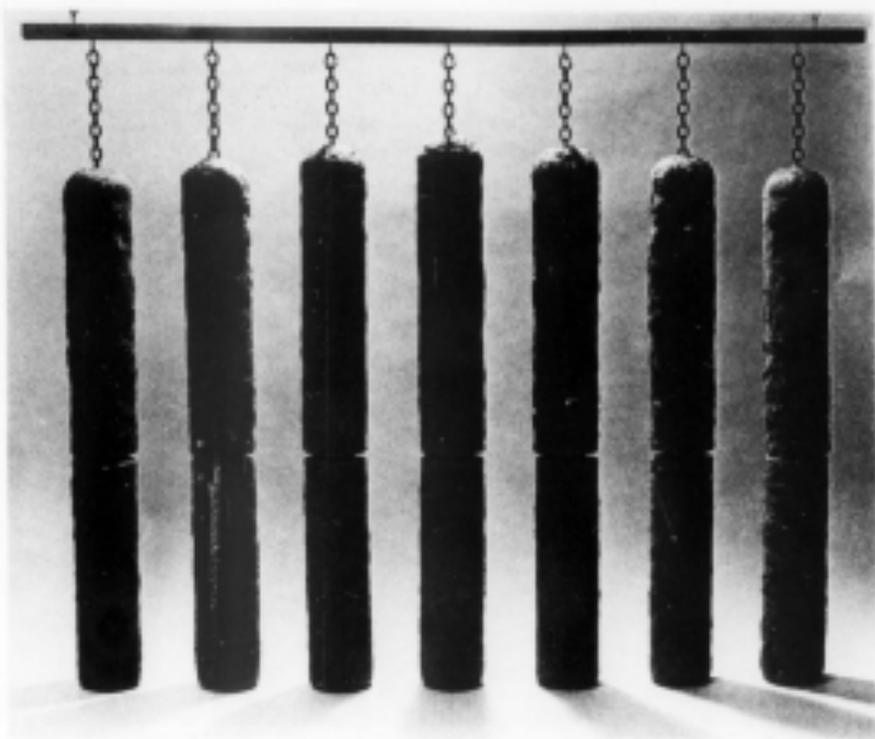
APRIL 3/1975

It's called the "Second Annual Contemporary Reflections" exhibition by the Larry Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Connecticut, but for as long as I can remember Mr. Aldrich has been mounting similar shows of recently collected works. The emphasis has usually been on young or untried artists, lacking gallery affiliations, who sell directly to Mr. Aldrich from their studios. This sort of procedure ought to assure the show a freshness otherwise only found at this time of year in gallery "new talent" exhibitions. Something seemed to go wrong this year, however, and despite the presence of a fair number of excellent works, the show had a depressing air. The audience shared something with that of a class on the first day of school which is filled with scrubbed faces, neatly combed hair and pressed clothes; uncomfortable but well-behaved students doing their best to please the teacher. Not that the work was unattractive; it just seemed to be trying too hard to please. It was studiously well-crafted, eye-catching, "different", but not much more.

Transcending the general level of blandness were the constructions of Jackie Ferrara, Richard Nomas, and Donald Sussner. Four mixed media wall, or wall and floor, pieces had a kind of magical potency. These were by Michelle Stuart, Rex Morton, Aelre Schloss and Louis Liebermann. Among the most effective paintings were those of Victor Adles, Bob Varikas and Fred Brosen.

Nearly half the artists in this show were women, many of whom are doing excellent work—Vilias Scott, Mary Obering, Nancy Gross, Abigail Gerd and Joyce Cole, in particular. I wish it were possible to report that such a large female participation had resulted in a show of truly outstanding quality.

Peter Agostini has always seemed particularly attached to rounded, bulbous forms, be they ab-

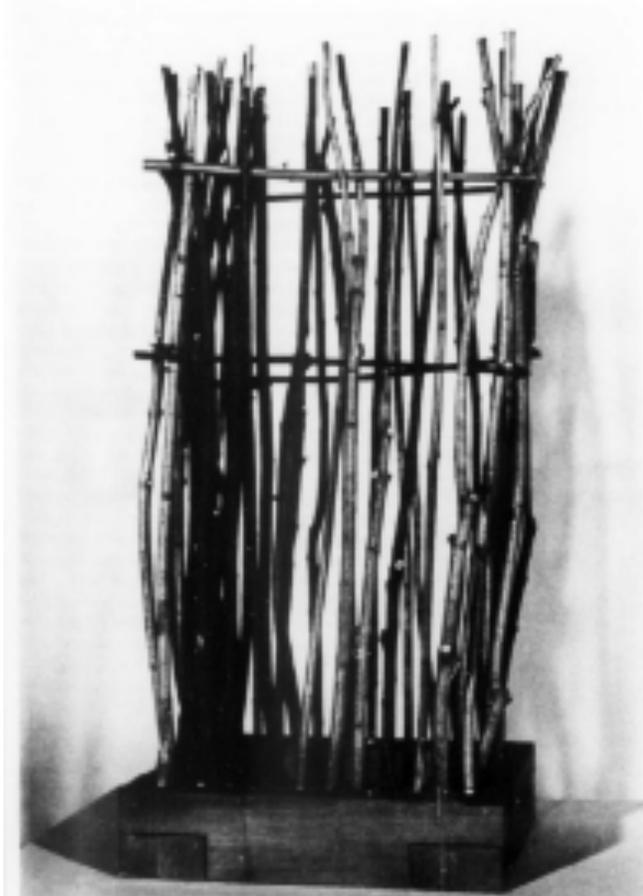


Jackie Ferrara, Untitled Tumb construction, 1972. Cotton batting, wood, chain, 69" x 90" x 7". Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, Conn.

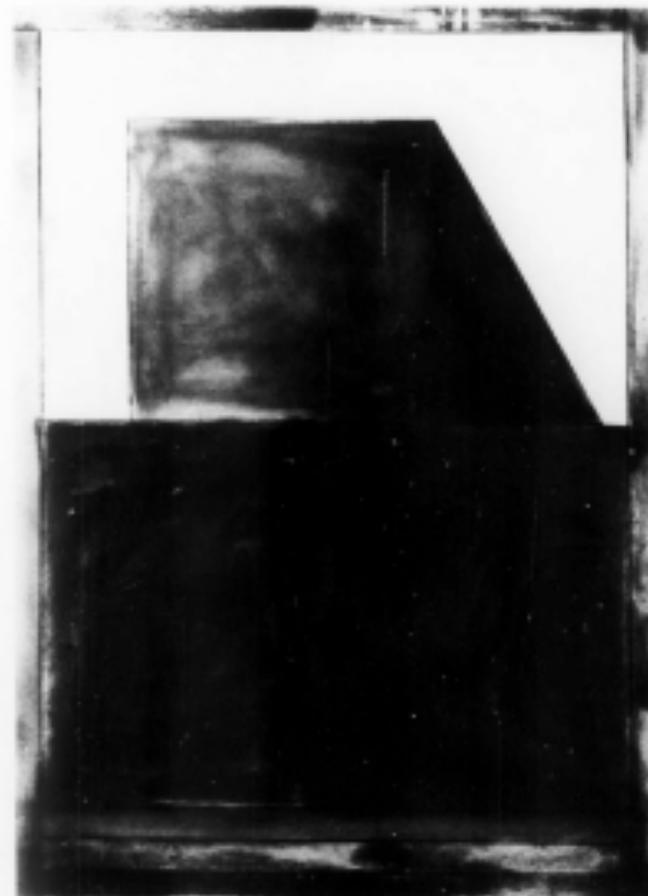
stract bulbous-like shapes or figures. His exhibition at the Zabritsky Gallery last spring indicated that he is in a figurative cycle; it concentrated on heads—rotated, neckless, ovoid ball-like heads. Puffy cheeks and fully convex chins and craniums pre-

dominated, unmarred by hair or such textural detailing. Some of the heads approached the elemental simplicity of Brancusi's *Sleeping Muse*; some of them were portrait-like; while others seemed highly abstracted. Some of the female heads with

Don Sussner, *Galley*, 1973. Sticks and wood base, 33" x 15" x 15". Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, Conn.

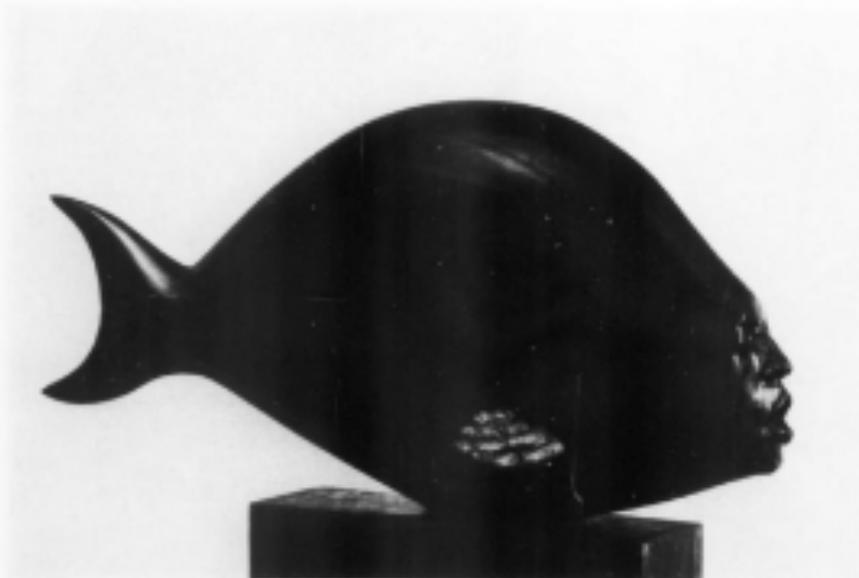


Joe Stefano, *Sadness PM*, 1973. Acrylic on canvas, 71 1/2" x 51" (see page 54). The New Bertha Scherler Gallery





Top, Agostini, *Big Doll's Head*, 2, 1972. Terra-cotta 20½" x 32" x 22". Zahrtkoff Gallery, Center, Baltman. Casts, 1972. Bronze on steel (cire perdue, unique cast). Martha Jackson Gallery, Boston, Marisol, *Green Fish*, 1970. Wood, plastic, plaster, 18½" x 37" x 7½". Sidney Janis Gallery



global massings of hair referred directly to Matine's great *Joséph* I-V series. Their simultaneous particularity and abstractness served as the connecting link between the two sides of his style and elucidated his formal conceptions for the viewer. The show was check-full of material for thought and brought to mind many of the great sculptors of this century. It almost seemed as though it might have been conceived as an homage to some of them. There were correspondences, for instance, with the frontal obesity of Lachaise's basson female figures. There were reverberations from the whole history of figurative sculpture, from Indian temple carvings, Egyptian mummies and Fontainebleau mural confectionary to Sarcophage mannikins. Agostini seems to have located an inexhaustible mine of subject matter in these heads, a mine producing singularly personal, yet endlessly variable art. Three gigantic terra-cotta heads dominated the show—*Big Doll's Head* #1, #2, and *Fragment*. They all had an antique flavor, as though they'd recently been salvaged from the dusty corner of some Roman museum; their gigantism related to Imperial Roman sculptural rhetoric. Of the three, I found the strongest work to be the complete head with a vertical split running from the chin to the tip of the nose. Pencil thin eyebrows, roughly textured eyes, ears and lips (which seemed to simulate the ravages of time) contrasted with the smooth surface of the rest of the head. Minor scratches, tiny lumps, scum marks and other accidental traces of the piece's fabrication were judiciously allowed to remain in order to cultivate the bland smoothness of the surface of this piece in a viscerally tactile manner. The fragmented head seemed to exploit the "antique look" too frankly, while the *Big Doll's Head* #1 seemed to have a too obviously contemporary look to rebuke the history of sculpture in a satisfying way.

Frise Baltman's exhibition of unique lost wax bronzes entitled "Passages through Fire" at the Martha Jackson Gallery last spring was small, but fascinating. Opportunities to see Baltman's work are unfortunately quite rare, despite the fact that he has been a figure on the New York art scene since the heyday of Abstract Expressionism. He is a multi-faceted artist, equally at home in the mediums of sculpture, abstract painting, figural drawing or collage. Perhaps this diversification detracts somewhat from the impact his work might otherwise make on the art world. If so, that is a shame, as Baltman is a truly fine artist in each medium. He draws frequently from the model and his paintings are abstracted in a non-specific way from these drawings. When working in sculpture he works directly in wax or plaster, and then casts the pieces in bronze. Though the sculpture has a decidedly organic quality, as if derived from parts of human or animal skeletal anatomy, it too is highly abstract and non-specific. But, unlike his painting which is structured out of smoothly swelling curves and is hard-edged and simplified, the sculpture is roughly textured, full of surface incident, and seems raw or "unfinished". Baltman's eccentric collages are his most purely abstract and least organic works. They have a great deal in common with the mechanical-architectural world of Léger and Picabia, in fact, though sweeping curves often predominate in them as well. These curves provide one of the few connecting links between the many sides of Baltman's style. The play of curves, of concavities and convexities, of oval holes and their edges, is especially crucial in his sculpture. There he stresses organic resonations of pelvic saddles, rib cages, craniums and torus with rotating curling strips of bronze. The recent series of black patina bronzes from 1967-1972 is highly evocative. Their "burnt look" makes them seem like the charred remains of living creatures and gives them a disturbing force lacking in the rest of his gentler, more lyrical work. Though they share something of the urgency of Seymour Chwast's or Theodore Roznak's more expressionistic work, they are not rhetorical. In this one respect

they bring to mind the serene classicism of Rosalyn Sakis. What is needed is a large, retrospective exhibition of the whole range of Boltman's work in order to be able to begin a proper assessment of his contributions. It isn't possible to give him his due on the basis of the tasteful taste of it we are given in this small exhibition.

In a surprise move, that seems at once progressive and retrogressive, Alan Cote has turned his back on the color, dynamism, and hard-edged clarity that characterized his previous painting style. Instead, in his Spring show at the Cunningham-Wood Gallery, he is making a major shift toward both painterliness and limiting his means. Utilizing a medium-thick impasto to outline his groups, he has reduced his linear activity to horizontal and vertical bands and his color to stark light-dark contrasts, with a Mondrian-like asceticism. Formerly, numerous ribbons of flat color articulated the surface of his paintings coloristically as well as structurally. Now, only four rectilinear units per painting, each connected with one of the four edges of the canvas, delineate the painting field. These bands are crisply edged, as before, but now they function in marked contrast to the rest of the painting surface which is covered with thick waves of constant pigment. Each of the four rectangular blocks is differently sized in width and length and the fine tuning of these scalar adjustments is an essential aspect of the new work. Their relative dynamism is a function of their abrupt discontinuation shortly after their emergence into the field, and energizes the painting space. These factors, plus the lively surface facture and the large scale of the paintings, clearly removes them from the Constructivist or neo-plastic sphere from which they would seem to descend. They have a great deal in common with the muscular geometry of Al Held or Burt Hopkins, and in particular, with the bags, thrusting, black and white carcasses of Harry Krancy. Though I have always regarded Cote's work with esteem, I am convinced that these new determined, rigorous and energetic paintings are his best to date. They confirm my conviction that we are witnessing a genuine attempt to fuse the painterly freedom of Abstract-Expressionism with the structural principles of the most rigorous twentieth-century European abstraction.

Miró Escobar's recent sculptures at the Sidney Janis Gallery seemed remarkably far removed from her familiar chunky personages of the past. Except for one coarsely chiseled fish-headed standing human figure, all the works were sleekly fashioned analogues and plastic fish, many with human faces. (The show also included 10 landscape pastels in garish hues, the horizons lines of which arced as though viewed through a distorting

"fish-eye" lens.) But Miró is a sculptor first and she attends to the details of her craft with great attention. Staining her naturally reddish wood green, brown or black and sanding it to a fine finish before varnishing it to a mirror-like gloss, she calls a maximum amount of our attention to her surfaces. This is, in a sense, a ruse to distract us from the work's content. She has employed similar tactics throughout her career. In the heyday of Pop Art, despite the possibility that she might have wished to detach herself from that label, her work had an undeniably "popular" flavor which functioned to camouflage its deeply obsessive content. Aside from autobiographical implications, there were no explanations for those personages, any more than there are now for the sudden appearance of these new slippery fish. Yet, throughout her work, there runs a deep thread of necessity, a surreal and meaningless but essential content which prevents it from seeming merely chic. Narcissism has always been one of the primary constituents of this content; her off-beat humor is another. Both of those factors were in full operation in the fish whose her face replaced their heads, and in the fish-headed man. She is a cagey artist. She offers the viewer a handle on her work, but when it is grasped, its attachment to anything substantial disappears. Her major piece—an erect, fish-headed, part man, part woman holding a blue plastic fish in one hand—exemplifies this. It would seem that she is making highly specific mythological references in the piece, and yet the symbolism is elusive. The *Fishman*, as he is called, would have seemed quite at home in a painting by Magritte; its composite character would have made it a good choice for inclusion in a Surrealist exhibition of mannequins by Masson, Seligmann or Frost. But its scale, its non-specific iconography, its humorous incongruity and its border-line banality, fix it firmly within the time-frame of America's post-Pop imagery.

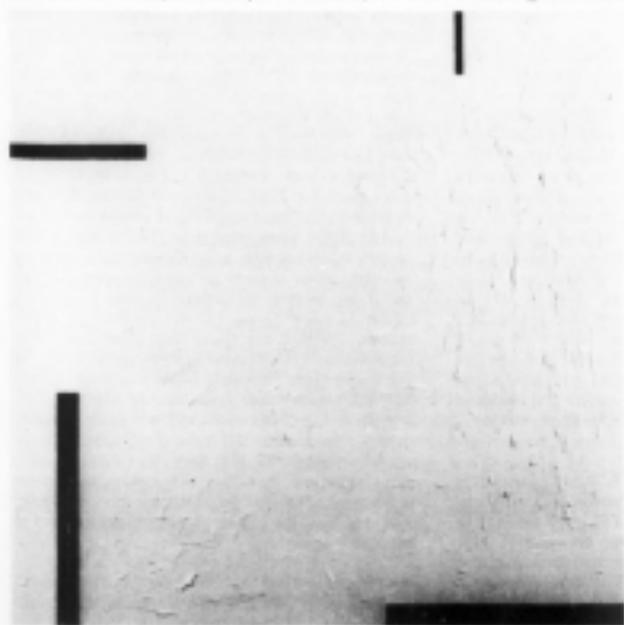
Now that Picasso is gone and only Miró remains to represent the height of this century's School of Paris accomplishment, it is most appropriate that he has been the subject of considerable attention this year in New York. His large Guggenheim Museum show concentrated on iconographical findings and formal parallels between early and late paintings. This approach was beneficial in that it explored an area previously shrouded in mystery, but detrimental to Miró's artistic standing in general as it diminished (of necessity) many of Miró's greatest paintings, those of the thirties and early forties. An exhibition of paintings, gouaches, etchings, wall-hangings, and sculpture executed between 1956 and the present, mounted by the Pierre Matisse Gallery late this spring, has done much to rectify this situation. It included one



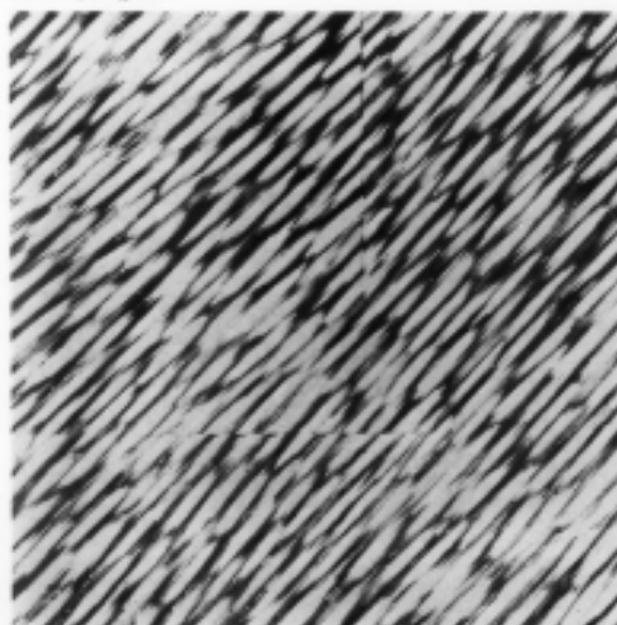
Miró, *Fosse*, 1963. Bronze, height 41". Pierre Matisse Gallery

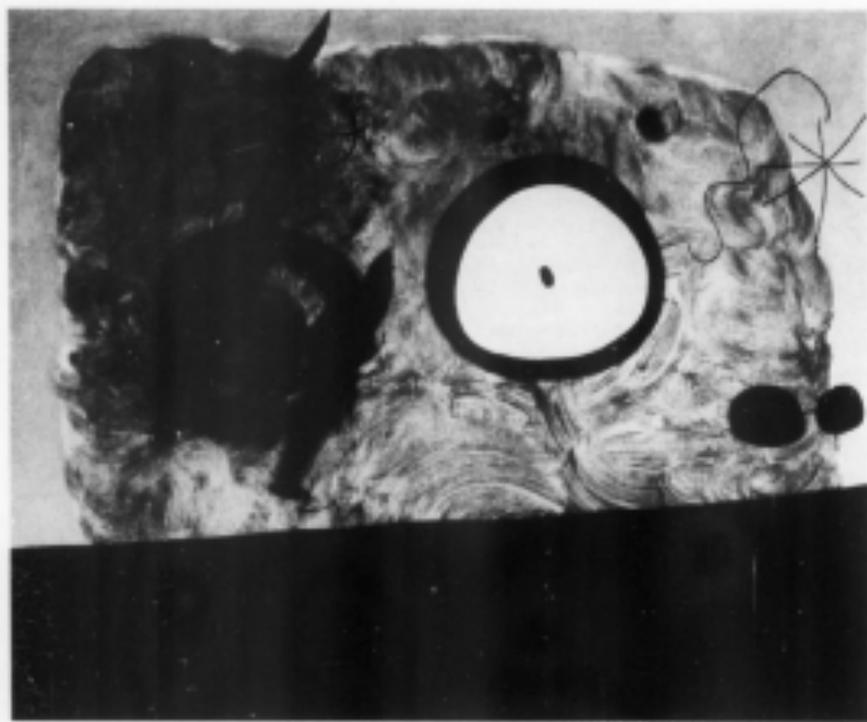
painting on tanned animal hide, one on burlap as well as three large mixed-media "Sobstericism". These are wall-hangings of roughly matted or woven fibers that are partially painted and to which are attached banks of yarn and rope, swathes of painted canvas, wire screening and cardboard. These new works are particularly coarse, inorganic, even brutal, but many of the more subdued paintings in the show were executed with a similar broadness and expansive freedom. Miró seems to have benefited more than most of his European peers from the gestural emancipation of Abstract-Expressionism.

Alan Cote, *Untitled*, 1971. Acrylic on canvas, 76" x 76". Cunningham Ward



Robert Yaculis, *Untitled*, 1972. Acrylic on canvas, 61" x 61". The Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield





Miró, *Homage à Gort*, 1966. Oil on canvas, 69" x 81". Pierre Matisse Gallery

For me, though, the most interesting facet of this fine show was Miró's sculpture. Of the nine pieces included only one belonged to his fifties period of ceramic sculpture. It had a primitive, totemic quality reinforced by crude surface texture and coloration that made it seem like an ancient collection of magical bones. The rest of the sculpture was executed in bronze, in an assemblage-like manner reminiscent of Picasso's sculptural methodology. *Womas*, 1969, for example, is a bronze-stick-figure with a rich green "patina" comprised of a concave casing of what looks like a crustaceous backbone and ribs serving as a body, a human left foot in the place of its right foot, and a large left hand making an Indian *maná* gesture. The cosmic incongruity of Miró's bronze is fully in evidence in this piece. In *Presence*, 1970, he replaces the male figure's sexual organs with a facet recalling early Dadaist games and Duchampian mezzaninism, while other works, like *Moments*, 1971, have a Moore-like appearance of worn stone.

From Da Vinci to Degas, artists sought to capture the fleeting movement of living creatures with ever more accurate visual delineation. The study of movement came under special scrutiny by scientists, photographers and engineers as well during the 19th century, and culminated in the "moving picture". Eadweard Muybridge was among the foremost pioneers of his day in this field. Born in the English town of Kingston-on-Thames in 1830, he died there in 1904 after a productive, peripatetic life during the course of which he drastically altered the study and depiction of animal locomotion. Famous and acclaimed in Europe and America during his life, Muybridge's accomplishments suffered partial eclipse during this century and were relegated to the category of interesting erotica by all but a few scholars and artists. He was restored to the public this spring in a marvelous exhibition at the New York Cultural Center entitled "Eadweard Muybridge: The Stanford Years, 1872-1882". The show was organized at the Stanford University Museum of Art in California to mark the 100th Anniversary of Muybridge's collaboration with Leland Stanford. Stanford had been a Governor of California, founder of Stanford University, President of the Central Pacific Railroad, and, in his spare time, a passionate trainer and breeder of champion horses. He was fascinated by the study of their movement, and in 1872 he asked Muybridge to turn his photographic abilities toward an attempt to visualize animal locomotion. Up until then, Muybridge had been a successful

photographer of horses, celebrities, panoramic views of San Francisco and of the mountains and valleys of the Pacific Northwest. He was particularly famous for his cloud and tree studies and for his spectacular views of Yosemite. Representative examples of his work in these areas are included in the show, but Curator Anita Ventura Mosley of Stanford keeps the main focus on the years Muybridge spent working with Stanford on animal locomotion studies. Their aim was to photograph the horse in motion with sufficient speed so as to ascertain, once and for all, whether all four of the animal's feet were ever off the ground at one time. It was proven early in 1877 that this was in fact what occurred, but the photographs were rough, and none still exist. Results of his experiments were translated into paintings very quickly, and by 1878-1879 Muybridge had refined his techniques and equipment to the point where he was able to make a clear and perfect full-scale photographic record of all phases of animal locomotion. He utilized a battery of cameras arranged in series and triggered by the animal's motion which he developed with the assistance of mechanical and electrical engineers.

Muybridge devoted the rest of his life to elaborating these experiments and publicizing the results of them, primarily through lecture-demonstrations. The exhibition included examples of the various aspects of human, animal, and bird movement caught by his cameras during these years, and the various projection devices in which he played the photographic images in order to simulate or, rather, reconstitute their motion. Collaborations with French physiologist E.-J. Marey and with the painter Meissonier were especially beneficial to both his experiments and his fame. Many artists and scientists—Elihu, Seurat, Degas, Thomas A. Edison, Futurists and Dadaists, among them—felt the impact of his innovations. The exhibition and catalogue gives a fully-fleshed out picture of Muybridge's achievement and its ramifications. Such complete documentation and scholarly perfection is all too rare, and exceedingly welcome.

Despite the generalized ho-hum reaction in New York to the Whitney Museum's Bruce Nauman retrospective exhibition, I found it fascinating for a number of reasons. Primary among these was the extraordinary, almost embarrassing precision pervading the show. The most specific instances of Nauman's self-absorption were works like *Being My Work* or *Self-portrait as a Fountain*—

photographic pieces of 1966-67, neon pieces like *My Last Name Engraved 14 Times Vertically*, 1967, or *Non Template of the Left Half of My Body*, taken at Ten Jack Annual, 1968, and various holograms and videotapes such as *Making Faces*, 1968, *Man Ball's and Kissing Ball's*, 1969. Other, indirectly self-referential works reiterate the artist's lanky physique. These include early elongated oval in fiberglass, tubular rubber pieces, and more recent tall, narrow corridor pieces that are just wide enough to accommodate someone of his minimal body thickness. Links between these two sides of his style are to be found in works like *My Kiss extended to Six Feet*, *Device for Left Armist*, or *Shoap Capsule for the Right Rear Quarter of My Body* of 1966-67 which are abstract and nonspecific looking shapes derived from casts of his body.

There were 117 pieces in 32-year-old Nauman's seven year retrospective exhibition, and he had his *Fluting Room* on view concurrently at the nearby Leo Castelli Gallery, which reinforced the room-sized environment section of the retrospective. An excellent catalogue accompanied the show with occasionally overlapping, but generally enlightening texts by Marcia Tucker and Jane Livingston, curators of the two museums organizing the show—the Los Angeles County Museum and the Whitney. Strangely, viewing his career in toto provided little support for critical claims concerning Nauman's pioneering roles as a proto-Conceptualist, anti-formalist, Duchampian descendant or leader of the LA school of semi-environment construction. Instead the show promoted appreciation of Nauman's very humor, his poetic capabilities, and his personal style of "hurl-baring", inverse-directed-sublimation. Art making for Nauman seems to be a process of self-insulation through which the artist exposes his private self, rather than a celebration of self or the construction of self-sufficient persona.

Joe Stefano's familiar hard-edged geometrical paintings of the past few years have loosened considerably this year. His luminous color fields were only barely held in check by bounding black lines in the show of recent work on view at the Bertha Schaefer Gallery last May. He is now applying acrylic pigment so wetly that the effect he achieves is remarkably close to that obtained by watercolor on wet paper. It has the same kind of limpid clarity and softness. Loose painterliness seems to flow naturally from Stefano's brush, as well it should, considering that it has characterized his style for most of the twenty or so years that he has been working and exhibiting in New York. The biomorphic configurations that once predominated gave way slowly over the years to an illusionistic geometry in which the architectural implications of the use of square or rectangular forms within the rectangular field of the canvas were fully exploited. He has travelled extensively in the Near East, especially in Egypt, and the recent paintings reflect the ambience of that region. This is made evident coloristically in his emphasis on sharp dark-light contrasts which coexist up a desert setting. His forms—flat, sun-shaped disks, or parts thereof, mastaba-like monoliths, and comb-shaped indentations—refer even more specifically to the architecture and scenery of the Near East. Of the many different formats Stefano has been exploring in this new work, I found those of *Sabbath PM* and *Ball's* to be the most satisfying. In these the monolithic upright form located in the top half of the canvas is held tightly onto the flat picture plane by edge bands of color on all sides and it is balanced by wrightly horizontal swaths or vertical blocks of color occupying the lower half of the canvas. The negative space (sky) surrounding the monolithic form becomes unambiguously positive in these paintings. In others where this does not occur, the monolith reads too simply as a figure on a ground. It may or may not prove to be accurate to say that Stefano's new images have more obsessive weight for him than his earlier biomorphic forms did, but they do register with great seriousness. Perhaps, in the long run, the hallmarks of his style will seem more closely bound to his personal methods of handling paint than to the various images he uses as vehicles for his adeptness with brush and pigment, but I do feel, nevertheless, that the new work has a sense of the momentum that makes it seem his best to date.