Joan Mitchell. *Field for Skyes*, 1973. A triptych, lent by the Galerie Jean Fournier, Paris, to the Mitchell exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

NEW YORK LETTER

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Joan Mitchell, like most artists, probably feels that she is best represented by her recent work, but what interested New Yorkers needed, and expected, from her major exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art was an overall survey of her career. Despite her expatriation to Paris in the late fifties, she has been showing consistently in New York ever since her first show in 1951. Two years ago she had large exhibitions of recent work at the Martha Jackson Gallery and the Everson Museum in Syracuse; so we can hardly be said to be unexposed to the kind of paintings on view at the Whitney. The thing lacking was a sense of the whole body of work, and the sampling of 22 paintings from 1969 to 1974 that we were given hardly provided that. Mitchell is an uneven painter whose reputation would have been better served by a meticulous presentation of the best work she has done during the last quarter century in a retrospective context.

Joan Mitchell commands a large vocabulary of pictorial devices within a four part syntax of drips, palette knife impasto, brushed-on calligraphy and large squarish masses. In marvellous paintings like *Field for Sykes*, or *Ira*, she deploys each of these approaches hierarchically, to produce an iconic stability which operates almost hypnotically on the viewer. In other, less successful paintings—like *Les Bluets* or *Wet Orange*—these elements are distributed more or less evenly across the surface, "homogenizing" it. Her basic compositional method (in a context inevitably reminiscent of late Monet paintings of waterlilies) is to stack her units vertically and to separate them from one another with areas of white or pale tonalities. Her best paintings usually have a good deal of white space; *Close* and *Closed Territory*, for example, both suffer from the lack of it, while *Chasse interdite* sings because of its use. Mitchell's color—generally a balance of cool and hot tones accented by black and white—often has a kind of glitter which can be scintillating or, on occasion, slightly gaudy. The sumptuous emerald greens of *Field for Sykes* are especially rich in the context of its pale yellows, lavenders and grays. Her use of white, or pale hues, behind and around areas of brilliant color lightens and makes them shine, instead of neutralizing them. It is in her manipulation of these white spaces that one of the essential differences lies between her work and that of Hans Hofmann (her closest parallel). Hofmann utilized a similar range of pictorial techniques and likewise worked geometricizing solids against painterly passages but he generally did so by superimposing them upon one another so that the painterly areas served as background for the more rectilinear elements. His space was much deeper than Mitchell's and he often worked back from the picture plane whereas she manages to keep most of her material close to it or somewhere in front of it. Her forms seem to be in motion, vibrating as it were, before our eyes because of the delicate juggling she performs to keep them in this location. This was one of the key pictorial mannerisms of Abstract Expressionism, which Hans Hofmann didn't often incorporate. In essence, Mitchell remains solidly within the parameters of late Abstract Expressionism to this day.

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Stephen Pace was an important second generation Abstract Expressionist on the New York scene with Joan Mitchell during the fifties. He continued to paint in a loose, allover, agitated style that shared many of the qualities of Jackson Pollock's work until the early sixties. Pace's deep involvement with color and his gentle sensibility clearly separated his vision from Pollock's though. By the sixties, a new philosophy of art-making, influenced to a certain extent by his friend Milton Avery, had altered his faith in abstraction's ability to be meaningful in today's world. He had begun to feel the need for figuration and for a subject matter that came directly out of his daily life. For Stephen Pace, as for Avery, it became a matter of being truthful to oneself to paint only what one saw and experienced daily—not one's emotions, or myths, or geometries. Ever since then Pace's subjects have been himself, his wife and friends, neighbors and models, depicted among the artifacts that are an integral part of their world. During the winter this inevitably means studio interiors and models for the most part, unless he's teaching in some other part of the country. But during the summer—especially since he acquired a summer place on the coast of Maine—the light and freshness of the outdoors invades his canvases making them seem to breathe the ambience in and out. A group of his recent oils at the A.M. Sachs Gallery is filled with light in a way that parallels a good watercolor's property of giving off light. In fact, Pace is a marvellous watercolorist and he uses the technique basic to that medium—letting the paper's whiteness illuminate superimposed color washes—in his oils. White abounds in them, shining through the interstices of each sketchily applied color area. Pace articulates each portion of his surface with its own kind of stroke and rarely lets the strokes coalesce into solid planes. Each area, like each mark of the brush, thus retains its own individuality and all areas of the painting participate actively in the play of surface tensions. For example, in *Artist and Model*, a particularly strong composition which is bathed in sunny pink light, large areas of relatively solid color in the right foreground are pushed to the back of our perception by the plethora of bright visual incident seen through the screen door at the left. There the artist sits, barechested in the summer sun, flanked by his dog, gazing at his car, garage and neighboring chicken house. One can almost

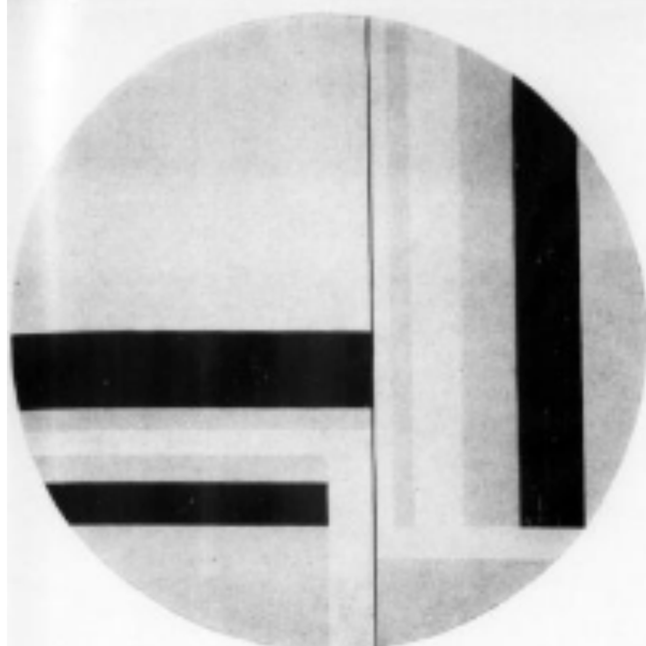
smell the combination of sea air and new mown hay in this idyllic scene. *Iowa* has a magical buoyancy as if no gravitational pull operated on the slender frame of the building or the flag-like foliage of the nearby birch. Pace has a way of making even the most mundane subjects shimmer with unexpected freshness and beauty.

Veteran Geometric-Abstractionist Ilya Bolotowsky's recent show at the Borgenicht Gallery was packed with brilliantly colored tondos, tipped squares, triangular columns, as well as one long mural and regular rectangular canvases. The one compositional device common to most of his paintings is a sort of swastika jog in which the crossing slips down on one side, usually the right. His color combinations include one or two tonalities of one primary, with one or two other primaries, set off by neutrals—black, white or gray. All lines pass in from the edge and out of it again, and only rarely does he allow a colored plane to be locked within the interior confines and thus to be read as shape. The consistent implication that results is that what we see is only part of a continuum of colored lines and planes moving out into space. This notion was, of course, basic to Mondrian, and Bolotowsky has remained remarkably faithful to his mentor's principles despite the many years that have passed since Mondrian's death. No irregularities in or deviations from the right angle (like those of Fritz Glarner, for instance) are ever permitted and each painting is a painstakingly adjusted asymmetrical balance of internal relationships, however eccentric the outer configuration of the canvas. As with Mondrian, rectilinearity of this type refers directly to architecture and to modern urban existence where most of our experiences are ordered by the right angle. Whereas white dominated all but the earliest and last Mondrians, it plays a reverse role in Bolotowsky's paintings, replacing Mondrian's black lines as the separating device between planes. This makes his paintings more colorful than Mondrian's, but Bolotowsky's color seems a little flat and mechanical. As a result, one's initial impression of rich bright color dulls as the moments pass before a group of his paintings and the pictorial emphasis shifts to structure. Ultimately, structure emerges as Bolotowsky's strength.

Another veteran artist, though one who connected neither with Geometricism nor with Abstract Expressionism, Herman Maril, showed landscapes and interiors at the Forum Gallery. Some of the best of them have the limpid clarity and simple composition familiar from Milton Avery's work. Maril's color range is dominated by soft blues and grays which have a pleasant atmospheric dampness. His compositional device of stacking pale-colored planes vertically in high-horizon, unpeopled landscapes produced the most effective paintings in the show.

Alvin Loving has switched galleries, from William Zierler to Fischbach, as well as styles. His new work, like the old, is essentially a collage of elements, but now he is literally using painted and torn paper (cardboard) glued and stapled together which he mounts on an armature constructed to conform to the basic configuration. No framing edge orders this material, which seems to have been amassed centrifugally from dotted, dappled central areas to solid planes of color around the periphery. Many of the rough, irregular edges of the units are either outlined in paint or else the cardboard brown remains visible. This gives them a surprisingly charred look recalling Oldenburg's early "Street" works out of cardboard with blackened edges. Loving's new paintings do have a relief-like object quality as they float on the white gallery walls. He has been toying with sculptural implications ever since his hard-edge geometric paintings began to depart from the rectangle. It seems to be Loving's favorite puzzle—how to make paintings without making them look like paintings. He does this mainly through literal manipulations of the play of pictorial space. Prior to this he did so with stained and painted canvas strips situated three-dimensionally in space but operating two-dimensionally in terms of design. One of the consistent elements in his work, from the geometric shaped

Paul Brach. *Horizon 4*, 1974. Acrylic on canvas, 72" × 95¼". André Emmerich Gallery



Bolotowsky. *Pale blue tondo with dark blue*, 1974. Acrylic, diameter 47½". Grace Borgenicht Gallery

canvases to the recent assembled cardboard cutouts, is his color—usually hot with cool accents which temper its stridency—and the use of occasional horizontal and vertical axes to orient the paintings to their architectural settings. These elements provide the paintings with the strength their amorphous configurations would otherwise lack.

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Like his predecessor Ad Reinhardt, with whose work his has much in common, Paul Brach would probably deny any mystical interpretation of his paintings. But paintings that demand the viewer's studied participation over a period of time simply to become visible, inevitably put the viewer into a contemplative trance which is not unlike certain states of religious awareness. Brach's position is at the extremity of dependence on the viewer to perform his or her role well, and yet, paradoxically, the paintings stand aloof, in an attitude of defiance which effectively hides their essential vulnerability. Monochromatic white, gray, blue-gray, or muddy green, their surface incident is barely discernible from a distance in the large galleries of Emmerich downtown. Up close, one sees tiny points of color sifted onto the white canvases as though through a screen. The same kinds of dots are also sprinkled along a horizontal demarcation near the lower edges of the darker hued paintings. Surprisingly Tworkov-like brushwork activates the surfaces of these canvases with tiers of close diagonal stroking. This occurs most explicitly in *Horizon 4* where green strokes cover a reddish ground. Density and light are two of Brach's major concerns, whatever the format he uses, and both are explored with warm, gentle sobriety.

Two major "Minimal" artists filled the rest of 420 West Broadway—Carl Andre at John Weber and Robert Morris at Leo Castelli and Ileana Sonnabend. An overview of Andre's entire output would show a downward movement from his early carved wood variations on the theme of Brancusi's *Endless Column*, past floorbound bricks and timber to the square metal plates which have become his trademark, and now, to thin sheets of metal which seem one with the floor. His recent group of "Decks" almost appear to be inlaid, and they create an interesting negative impression that implies movement in depth below the floor instead of upward pressure impinging on the viewer's space. They relate to *Lever* of 1966 in configuration—long, single lines of identical units positioned parallel to each other and the wall—but not in function. *Lever* operated on the viewer somatically to create a sense of upward strain and dynamic thrust. These "Decks" create a sinking sensation that seems passive by comparison. The quality of passivity is one which is naturally associated with Andre's work, since it rests so quietly on the floor, and the extreme thinness of these new strips exemplifies this quality beautifully. They have a cool glitter that is seductive; some are "blue", some "cold steel" and others "weathered". The "weathered" ones look marbleized and carry overtones of opulence that relate to his copper and alloy pieces of recent years. One piece of wide cold steel actually shone so much that it cast light up on the wall behind it, which is a whole new thing for Andre.

Throughout Robert Morris' career he has seemed to swing back and forth between two extremes in art—dance and object making—that is, between the ungraspable (impermanent, fleeting, never exactly repeatable performance) and the unavoidably present. An object, once it exists, sits there forever (or as close to forever as the artist can manage) to be used by people in a thousand ways over the years. Morris has made many objects which reverberate with new meaning each time we re-experience them, just as we see an Egyptian head differently, for instance, as we grow and change. But he has also invested an enormous amount of his energy in performance situations which will never be fully understood at the outset, or re-experienced in the same way in the future. His recent exhibition at Leo Castelli was essentially of this order of activity. I don't mean to imply that there were no objects on view, for there were four enormous double speakers covered in white cloth which could easily have been taken for "minimal" sculptures. These units constituted the corners of a diamond-shaped area enclosing a number of low rectangular box-benches covered in white felt. Instead, it was essentially a performance situation because of the focus on a 3½ hour long tape played twice daily through the speakers, and because of the tape's poetic, philosophic and theatrical content. It was also a performance by virtue of the aleatoric choreography that Morris "programmed" for the viewer by the layout of the room's furniture and by the alternately repellent and seductive character of the tape, to which younger members of the audience reacted with movement. In addition, Morris created a definite body awareness in the viewer which was akin to the kind of somatic reactions one has to modern dance. As if to

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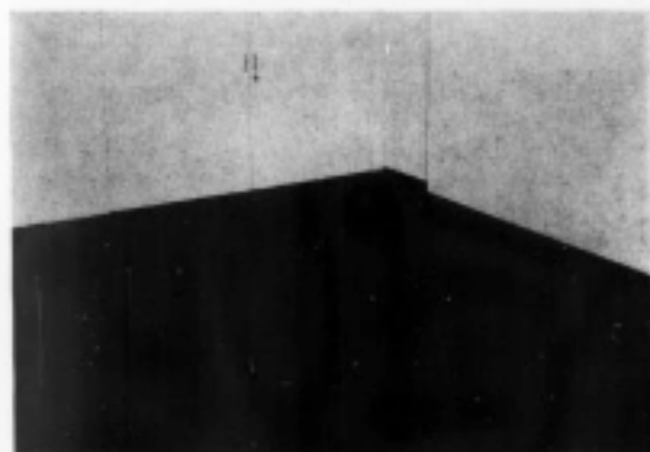

Carl Andre. *52 Weather Deck*, 1974. Weathered steel, 11'11½" × 4'. John Weber Gallery

Robert Morris. View of exhibition at the Leo Castelli Gallery, downtown

underscore the non-object character of this work, the adjoining gallery area was filled with art objects—two columns from 1962 and some new felt pieces—while upstairs at the Sonnabend gallery he showed a large number of eminently purchasable drawings. These were of two kinds, one being automatically achieved abstractions in graphite, executed in timed sequences according to various systems of his devising, usually with the eyes closed and using his fingers, not graphic tools. The others were large ink drawings of labyrinth configurations, usually not shown completely. Morris recently made a giant labyrinth in the I.C.A. at Philadelphia, and is working out some absorbing sculptural ideas with the form. Of course, as a reality enclosing people, the labyrinth inevitably conjurs up a range of frightening psychological connotations. But as his Castelli exhibition last year indicated, and as his naked, enchained, helmeted visage on the announcement for the current show implied, Morris is getting into some very heavy water emotionally lately.

Blythe Bohnen's exquisite graphite drawings at A.I.R. make natural connections between the organicity of nature and the natural functions of the human organism by fusing gesture and anatomic imagery, automatism and pastoral intimation. Unfolding, unfurling, unbuttoning like cloth or tendrils, pages of papyrus, petals or labia, her images seem latently sexual without being uncouth. She executes them in multiples, on an implied grid isolated from one another on large sheets of paper. Each image is sufficiently interesting in itself to be a complete drawing and, as a result, I find her multiplication of them to be of questionable usefulness. Enlarging one of the images to more imposing dimensions might produce startingly effective results which would certainly be more interesting than organizing them this way according to the ubiquitous and boring grid.

Selina Trieff's portraits of herself, her husband and her daughters, at the Prince Street Gallery, stand out from the run-of-the-mill figuration so often shown in the small Soho cooperative galleries. Her canvases have silvery Goyesque tonalities, clear, carefully considered compositional structures, and somber presence. She treats her figures like Egyptian sculpture—faces frontal, feet profile, stiffly iconic and static. Despite the resemblances between her female figures—their wide-eyed, wide-shouldered appearance and mane-like hair—the character of each of them emerges separately without haziness. Summarily handled passages are juxtaposed to precisely rendered detail within room spaces deliberately flattened as if to accommodate her unmodeled figures with the "right" setting.

Robert Henry's new work represents a major departure from his former sun-filled multiple-focus landscapes and interiors. Suddenly his canvases are bursting with distorted human beings in extreme throes of passion or torture, Christian martyrs, monsters, and symbols, locked inside a maze of separate compartments. Overt sexuality runs rampant in these programmatic polyptychs. It seems that some specific iconographical interpretation should be able to explain Henry's symbolism, but no consistent reading of the "narrative" is actually possible. Intimations of Goya, Manet, Beckmann, Picasso and Francis Bacon abound, but the connections between them and their import, like that of most of the events depicted, are indecipherable. The compartments of the large vertical tryptich which dominates the show are organized like a family tree, but one hesitates to give a biographical interpretation to material that seems so loaded with macabre implications. The artist's persona clearly seems to lurk somewhere in the *Family Plan*, however. Henry's characteristic device of out-of-focus blurring continues to distort perspective and create a sense of speed and disorientation in some passages, and some of the images are amazingly powerful—a leaping boy on a beach, for example. My overall impression of the show at the Green Mountain Gallery was that crucially important events of a psychological, historical, familial, religious, and hilarious nature were taking place among which it was impossible to make meaningful associations, and that is very perplexing.

Three new galleries have opened recently which merit special attention: South Houston on Prince Street between Wooster and Greene Streets, Davlyn on the corner of Madison Avenue at 76th Street; and Susan Caldwell at 383 West Broadway. Edward Clark had the inaugural show at South Houston, exhibiting a group of very large canvases executed since his trip to Africa last year which seemed to reflect the heat and light of that continent. Each was a rectangle with his characteristic oval configuration reduced to a broken line extending the width and nearly the height of the painting. The flash of horizontal linear striping speeding across his surfaces has increased in pictorial importance relative to the shaping role played by the oval. Hot oranges and pinks dominate now in place of his former balance of large cool and warm zones. Clark's new paintings seem to be full of assurance and energy.

The Davlyn Gallery is the American extension of the Galerie International in Milan, which explains, I assume, the high caliber European art included in its opening exhibition. Miró, Magritte, Picasso, Dali, and Braque were well represented with important paintings but were put in the shade by four major Légers. How one of these, *The Table*, has managed till now to remain outside of a museum is incomprehensible to me. It must be among the greatest ten or twelve Légers in the world.

While it's not Susan Caldwell's first show, Frances Barth's first one woman exhibition there would have made an excellent opener for the gallery. The work is fresh and amazingly accomplished for so young and relatively unexposed an artist. The show covers five years of Ms. Barth's career from 1969 to the present, from early Frankenthalerish stained canvases and awkward shaping to the sophisticated spatial and coloristic handling of a work like *Gadera*. The earlier works tended toward bright color loosely applied around apparently Rothko-influenced rectangles within rectangles. Barth's penchant for the triangle seems to derive from a habit of cutting off the corners of the interior rectangles, as she did in *Music with Paws*, 1970. The typical 1972–73 configuration might be two light-hued triangles with worried edges floating in simple figure/ground situations on darkish grounds. Her recent work has increased in both coloristic and structural complexity and redounds to her credit. Pale problematic secondary hues operate with good success in contexts dominated by strong light/dark tonal contrast. Thin linear elements, quirky planar overlappings and effective cropping of shapes by the canvas edge now activate the spatial interplay in her compositions. The dusky matte acrylic colors she creates have an unusual vibrancy which doesn't seem to deaden no matter how large the expanse covered. (Acrylic often seems to flatten into lifelessness in direct proportion to an increase in its area.) Barth successfully resists the temptation to activate her large areas of solid color by painterly devices while permitting a modicum of surface unevenness to result from her technique of washing color on in layers. Pentimenti of previous decisions occasionally remain, along with charcoal lines and uncertain edges, to remind us that her approach is essentially experimental.