

Motherwell, Bultman and Ross Uptown

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Two members of the pioneer generation of the new American art known as Abstract-expressionism are exhibiting uptown this month. Robert Motherwell has a rich selection of recent paintings and collages at Knoedler Contemporary Art until February 11th and Fritz Bultman is showing large bronzes and collages at the east and west side branches of the Martha Jackson Gallery through February 7. Both shows are fresh and full of vitality. They sparkle with new ideas, amply demonstrating the continued relevance of Abex premises thirty years later.

Since I have written an article on Bultman's sculpture that is in this month's *Arts Magazine*, I shall confine my remarks on it here to praise for the installations. In both galleries the very large bronzes are distributed with plenty of room for the circumambulation they demand and with a keen sense of their inter-related strengths, both geometrical and organic. The scale of this exhibition, which contains more than a dozen major pieces produced over the course of more than 10 years, alone makes it a definite must-see, since such an undertaking is extremely rare these days.

The bonuses in either of Bultman's exhibitions are his dazzling collages. They are positively breathtaking. Made of painted paper, they are manipulated freely and intuitively on a wall

in the artist's studio until they "work" and then they are mounted and framed so that they float within rectilinear bounds to which they don't necessarily relate. The huge size of these works—most of them are over 6 feet high or wide—plus their brilliant coloration are only two of the reasons why they are so impressive. Other reasons are their internal scale—from the small holes in the spiral-bound pad paper he uses, to huge expanses of velvety blue or vibrant crimson—and subtle chromatic devices like a single orange or green unit that you don't discover at first in an otherwise overall primary color situation.

Bultman's collages incorporate Leger's use of mechanical, sequential schemata to create a sense of movement and of the passage of time. Also, in their joyous celebratory expansiveness, they recall late Matisse papier collés. Since they are also typically Abex in their gestural, unself-consciously energetic impact, they are probably the most underrated, overlooked new statement in contemporary art.

Robert Motherwell is a much better known collagist than Bultman, having worked in the medium and exhibited the results ever since 1943. By comparison with Bultman's collages, which he admires, Robert Motherwell's seem very French in their marvelous felicity and elegance. His colors are subdued, almost somber, with grays, greens, blues and browns predominating. He

usually seems to work up from an uninflected neutral ground by stages, slowly increasing the amount of incident and the sharpness of focus until he reaches the topmost layer which is the densest unit in the collage. This area



"Opening.Closing," by Fritz Bultman typically contains highly specific information, often an addressed envelope, a label, stamps, or other remnant of real life. His literal overlappings, in conjunction with

his large scale and his experimental (sometimes) passages, are the elements which detach his collage style from that of the Cubists who came before him.

Motherwell covers a wide range of emotions in these collages, from the delicate sentiments of *Silver Music* to the poignancy of *Dublin Collage* which includes a photo-enlargement of an old-fashioned looking box of McClinton's Barilla soap surrounded by violent black painterly passages. *St. Michel* (a brand of cigarettes) has both baroque grandeur and iconic presence.

Motherwell's miracle is his ability to be so consistently involved with the same images while maintaining an appearance of maximal diversity. There are 3 *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* in the show and one partial one—*The Spanish Death*. Of them I preferred the two with white to the two where grays and a fleshy tone replaces the white, making them seem as if the light had been drained out of them. One might reasonably argue in favor of a totally different choice, however. The important thing is the power Motherwell's obsessive image continues to have since he first began painting it in 1949. The *Open Series*, a more recent and more radically simplified image for Motherwell, is represented in the show by a knockout painting entitled *A La Pintura Number 12* which he's been working on since 1971. The pentimenti of former states that remain visible, the gestural handling of the optically brilliant crimson field (more brilliant even than Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*), and the parenthesis-like shapes with their echoes inside the usually empty 3-sided box off-center at the top, all function to give this image new vitality. It doesn't merely surround you with color sensation, it pervades you with it to an almost unbearable degree.

Though the huge canvas entitled

to earlier *Africa* paintings in its broad horizontal thrust) manifests a new interest in painterly openness and interlocked brushstroke which reminds me of Clifford Still's flame-like unit but not his surface. It is a highly charged, intensely emotional painting but I was actually even more excited by his new *Liffey* image. It relates back, as do all his various uses of vertical stripes to *Little Spanish Prison* of 1941-44, but it has a new gentle lyricism, bordering on sadness, which I find very touching. Letting paint run down over the face of a canvas suddenly becomes, in Motherwell's hands, a romantic gesture, not just literalized process.

Motherwell is an extremely complex artist producing work really too multi-levelled to deal with in a short newspaper review. His show indicates that he's at the height of his powers ranging freely over his whole oeuvre for ideas, continually revitalizing them, and painting as a whole, in the process.

Both Motherwell and Bultman summer in Provincetown (as do Red Grooms, Jack Tworkov, Ed Giobbi, Lila Katzen and a number of other well-known artists and it's really still a going summer art community) and so did Alvin Ross before his death this fall. There is a memorial exhibition of some of Ross' still-lives on now at the Washburn Gallery which I didn't receive notice of in time to review for this issue. It's on until January 31 and I can at least recommend it for a visit on the basis of past familiarity with his work. Ross painted small, pristinely beautiful still-lives of everyday things with an objective clarity that we associate with 17th century Dutch painting. His anachronistic commitment to this way of painting transformed banal subject matter into a very special kind of poetry. This crystalline vision is irreplaceable. ●