

# 'Flesh Was the Reason Oil Paint Was Invented'

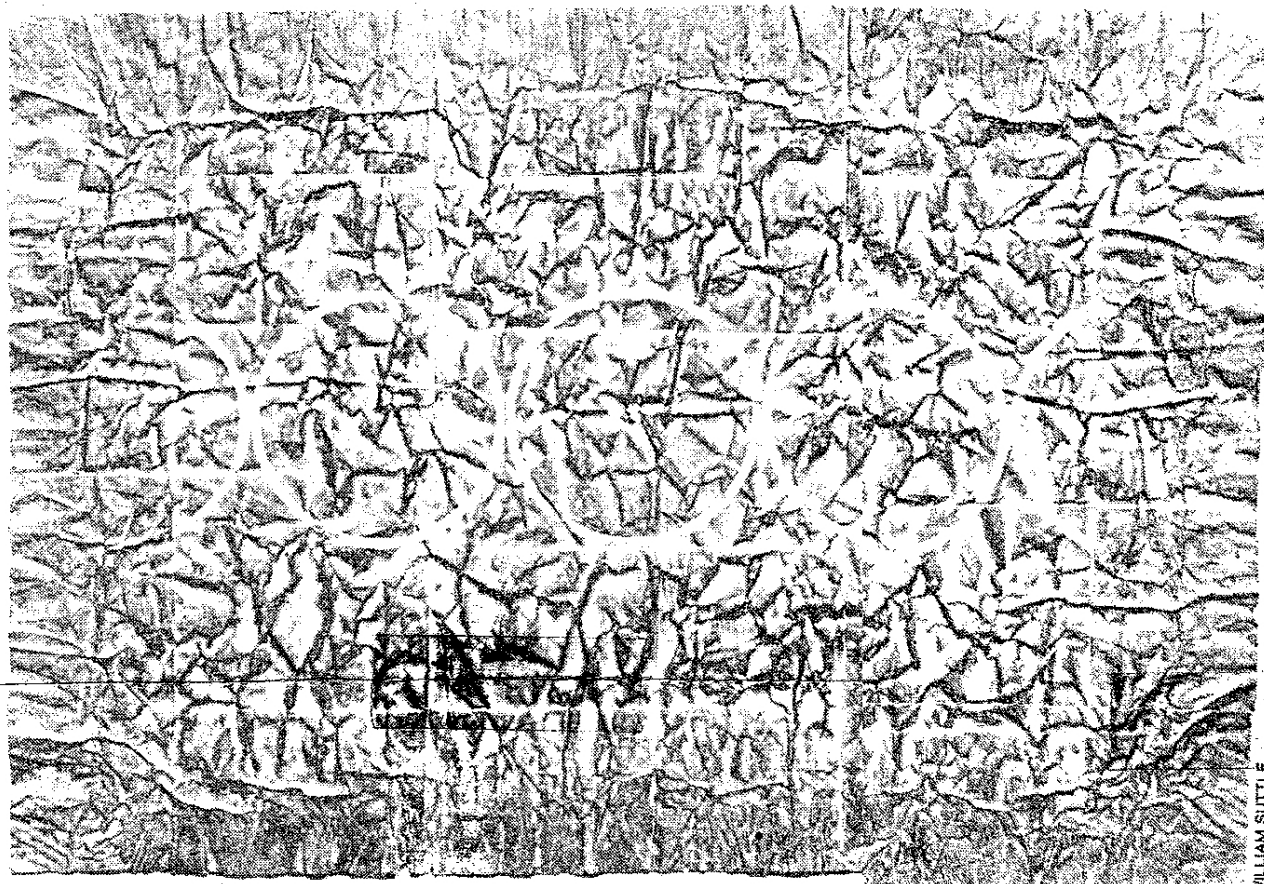
By April Kingsley

So said **WILLEM DE KOONING** in the '50s, and, judging by his current show at Xavier Fourcade (36 East 75th Street, to November 19), he still means it. During the '50s, when his Abstract Expressionist *Women* paintings surprised the art world, it was obvious. Now he's not necessarily painting the figure, but his robust paint handling, and the bursts of warm pink, sultry yellow, and soft, blood red seem full-bodied, like flesh. De Kooning's swaths and squiggles of oily, wet-looking pigment form a palpitating, breathing skin on the picture's surface. The energy in his work, too, is of the human variety, not that of machines or electricity.

There is nothing new in all this, of course. If he slipped in a painting from last year, no one would know the difference. It's not like the old days, when each show signaled a new breakthrough. But it seems appropriate for a man his age (73), at this stage in his career (he's heading into the home stretch way ahead of the pack), that we view his work as though peeping in on a section of a larger, ongoing, self-reflexive process. There are no pat formulas for de Kooning; his work never seems fully resolved in a closed way. Whatever problems he's tackling he doesn't seem to have wrestled to the ground yet.

Viewing these frenzied abstractions is an exhilarating experience. You are swept into his struggle as your eye risks passage along the maze of discontinuous pathways and plateaus he's created out of an endless series of reconsidered decisions. You can no more retrace your way than you can remember what the whole picture looked like once you're out of the room. These are literally all-over paintings without even the possibility of a "gestalt" reading to grasp.

**PIERRE BONNARD** devoted a lifetime (1867-1947) to painting flesh. The interior of his house and, more often than not, his bathroom, served as the setting for hundreds of paintings of nude females. When he ventured outside it was only to paint his garden (with female figures in it) or the landscape visible from his garden. This Intimist knew full well that the subjects of art can be of the simplest variety, because it's what the artist does with them that counts. An exquisite show of his oils and drawings is now on view at the Acquavella Galleries (18 East 79th Street, to November 12, admission free), organized in conjunction with Galerie Beyeler in Switzerland. (Beyeler, the most brilliant dealer in the world, ranking with the likes of



WILLIAM SUTTLE

Nadine Valenti's "Untitled": resilient density

## ART

Duveen, Durand-Ruel, and Kahnweiler, has a sure eye for masterpieces, and seems to be consistently able to acquire them.)

Somewhere along the line it became a commonplace of Bonnard criticism to say that he couldn't draw. Nothing could be further from the truth. The fact is that he draws like a colorist, the way Van Gogh did, or Rubens. Drawing wasn't, for him, "the art of making beautiful lines," the way it was for Ingres. Instead it was a notational system for registering color. Different kinds of marks—dots, hatchings, stipples, dashes, commas, etc.—signify various color areas and textures. His drawings are all-over variegated patterns that parallel and complement his paintings.

Bonnard—and Matisse, during his middle period—are sources for the "pattern

painting" that seems to be so prevalent and so popular these days. **JOYCE KOZLOFF**, one of the leaders of the movement, is exhibiting various possibilities for the form at Tibor de Nagy (29 West 57th Street, to November 17). The show includes two enormous multipanel paintings, three large pasted-paper drawings, two illuminated books, and one sewn silk on canvas work. (This piece shows the influence of Miriam Shapiro, who initiated the feminist involvement in quiltlike patterning with her fabric collages.) This is Kozloff's most varied and experimental show so far. The paintings are actively asymmetrical, whereas the new collages are heraldic in their bordered symmetry. The stress on the framing edge, which is so evident in the large works, disappears in the small illuminations, which are treated like details. Kozloff's colorism, which is always intense in a Bonnard-like way, is most scintillating in the smaller works and grows increasingly sonorous as she goes up in scale. The nuanced stroke, which does so much to subtly enliven her surfaces, is missing in

the fabric-covered canvas, and I find it less satisfying.

**NADINE VALENTI** is also involved with pattern (circles in a grid), with sumptuous color, and with manuscript illumination. The latter seems particularly relevant to the 25 paintings and assemblages now on view at the Gloria Cortella gallery (41 East 57th Street, to November 20). The golden or silvery sheen of her surfaces recalls Irish full-page decoration, like those currently at the Metropolitan Museum. The clearest example of this is Valenti's emerald-green painting with thin red circles glowing in a dark gold grid. All the works are made of water-soaked rag paper that she shapes by wrinkling and folding. Acrylic paint is then washed onto the creviced surfaces in layers, pooling in the folds, and forming a grid. Finally, she isolates discrete shapes, such as the circles, by adding dry pigment. The results are like topographical models of some nonearthly surface. They have a density that is remarkably resilient and a sensuousity that is as satisfying as caressing flesh.