SYLVIA PLACHY

James Brooks at Lerner-Heller: Exiled from his own movement, his greatest contribution has been consistently ignored.

Ah! Revisionism

By April Kingsley

JAMES BROOKS never received the Greenberg seal of approval, and since Clement Greenberg, even more than Tom Hess or Harold Rosenberg, determined the outlines of "the new American painting" in retrospect, Brooks has practically been written out of the movement. He's never had a MOMA retrospective and has only been marginally included in recent exhibitions of Abstract Expressionism, despite the fact that he has painted some of the finest work in that mode since the late '40s, when the movement, and his career as an abstractionist, began in earnest. His long overdue reevaluation can begin with the group of nine major '70s paintings on view at the Lerner-Heller Gallery, 956 Madison Avenue (through September 28). This show demonstrates his unqualified importance as a pioneer of post-war American painting, as well as his continued relevance in this post-formalist period of heightened emphasis on content.

Greenberg saw Abstract Expressionism as the fulfillment of his Modernist prophecy that painting would reduce itself to essentials, expunging all "unnecessary" traditional conventions—such as modeling, tonal contrast, representation, and illusionism—and be pure, abstract, all-over color painting. (Any such determination as to the kind of painting a painter has to paint in order to be "modern" was, and is, of course, purely arbitrary, but the force and absoluteness of Greenberg's belief in this definition had tremendous impact, as any clearly stated, forthright opinion tends to have, whether it is right or wrong.) Writing later about post-painterliness in *New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970*, he described the painterliness of Abstract Expressionism as "loose, rapid handling, or the look of it, masses that blot and fuse instead of shapes that stay distinct; large conspicuous rhythms, broken color; uneven saturation or densities of paint; exhibited brush, knife, finger, or rag marks." The problem for Brooks, and to a lesser extent for Motherwell and Gottlieb, lies in the phrase "instead of shapes that stay distinct." Even in Brooks's late '40s and early '50s canvases, where Pollock-influenced skeins of paint are densely interwoven all-over, he lets dark and light fluctuate and discreet shapes coalesce. This, coupled with his use of black and white or contrasting tonalities, is what exiled Brooks from his own movement in the eyes of Greenberg and his disciples. As he has matured his shapes have ripened accordingly, becoming larger, fuller, increasingly assured and potent. He is the one Abstract Expressionist to succeed in transferring biomorphic Surrealist morphology (such as the curving forms of Miro or Arp) to all-over, frontal, energetic, automatically derived, large-scale American post-war painting.

The large interlocked masses in Brooks's recent canvases have a portentous quality that is as disturbing at times as a Surrealist dreamscape. The compelling psychological implications of Brooks's "unconscious formations" particularly intrigued Pollock when the two were in close proximity and frequent contact on the tip of Long Island during 1949-50. These allusive depths (present also in Pollock, of course, but largely ignored in Greenbergian formalist criticism of his drip paintings) serve the crucial function of undercutting any reading of the "playful" shapes, bright colors, and all-over compositions as merely decorative. Brooks's colorism has an edge of night; his darkling blues and reds often seem on the verge of turning black, the way colors do at dusk. The effect can be unsettling, invoking deep-seated fears of the dark or of "things" underwater. Unnameable and unknowable creatures of the sea, viewed up close as if through a magnifying glass, are close analogies to Brooks's bulbous, justling forms.

Brooks invented the stain technique by accident in 1948, when he discovered the beautiful shapes that had stained through to the back of his canvases and decided to use them as the starting point for his paintings. Staining down directly into his canvases the following year, Brooks created his own autonomously derived Abstract Expressionist imagery. Any revisionist reappraisal of Abstract Expressionist "breakthroughs" must come to terms with the real contribution Brooks's staining technique made to the continuing relevance and viability of the movement. It is far more flexible than Pollock's drip, more accessible than De Kooning's constructive/destructive gesture, and less confining than Rothko's or Newman's unitary schemas. Much '60s and '70s work, whether striped, sprayed, or puddled, derives from staining; thus, it is particularly annoying that critical cant (Greenbergian and other) has consistently, mistakenly credited Helen Frankenthaler with its invention in her *Mountains and Sea*, 1952.

Staining was as natural and inevitable an outcome of Brooks's impulse to enlarge biomorphism as Pollock's drip was of his need for speed. The open-handed, expansive gesturing it permits has a gentle warmth that matches Brooks's temperament. His "generous spirit" (as Carter Ratcliff has so aptly termed it) says "yes"—yes to emerging shapes whether clumsy or suave, yes to a wide range of painterly effects, yes to daring color clashes, yes to black and to white. An equivocal balance can result that seems inordinately healthy in a magisterial painting such as *Fonteel*, 1974, or threateningly positive, almost consuming,as in *Jorah*, 1976. Occasionally he seems to let too many shapes crowd in, especially in the smaller canvases, but even then, as in *Deel*, 1972, audacious color ideas usually save the picture.

Naturally, a painter with such generosity of spirit runs the risk of turning out a great many not so fine paintings along with the masterpieces. The excellent sample we are being offered at Lerner-Heller (courtesy of the Martha Jackson Gallery) gives a modest, but accurate, indication of the stature Brooks could have if a large museum exhibition were selected from his total output.

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SHELLEY FARKAS and JUDITH STILES have gotten together to make art—an exhibition and a book, both entitled *Duet*—at the Just Above Midtown Gallery, 50 West 57th Street, which they describe as "an experience in visual communication." They share their art ideas so fully, in fact, that it is difficult to pry their individual sensibilities apart when viewing the work—photographs, silk-screened, montaged, and collaged into and onto lollipops, lace-edged pillows, plastic, porcelain, cloth, and sculpture; humorous pseudo-African masks; and semi-Surrealist "objets" such as a high-heeled pump with pins upthrust through the sole and a twisted heel. Photographs of themselves abound, and much of the work is puerile, kitschy, or patently obvious, but they're onto a dynamic idea—and image—when Stiles says in the book:

> *A little girl has erotic energy throughout her body. Her hands are as sexually alert as her vagina or clitoris. When she enters puberty, all of her erotic energy begins to drain down into her vagina. She grows pubic hair . . .*
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> *I don't like feeling cold and drained. My direction is to diffuse that energy and get all the excitement of orgasm back to my brain and my hands, and into my art.*

The ecstatic quality of Farkas's and Stiles's best work is, like Mary Frank's full-bodied sensuality, ebulliently in tune with life's positive rhythms. The best feminist art now is, as it rises out of the ashes of experience and transforms itself into matter of phoenix-like beauty, but matter that is firmly in the tradition of art. In the book, diaristic, speculative, and visual material is juxtaposed and balanced so that the two women's personal experiences become generalized. Their objects, however, are not yet generalized, conceptualized, or formalized enough to be potent repositories of meaning. Farkas and Stiles are still distracted by the trivia of actuality—to a greater extent when using their hands than when writing prose.

This is not an uncommon problem in recent women's art. Distinctions in "artists' books" are blurred sometimes between personal revelation and fiction, and when an art critic naturally accepts the writing as art, as fiction, and reviews it as such, this can lead to inadvertent misunderstandings. This was apparently the case with my review last month of Jacki Apple's *Trunk Pieces*. I wrote about it as an artist's autobiographical/fictional construct, calling it "a universal Everywoman tale." I certainly didn't mean to imply that the characters or incidents in the story were literally true, although one character was apparently so misconstrued.

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OWEN MORREL's 25-foot steel tower on the rooftop of 260 West Broadway (through October) supports a three-sided room-sized cage with slanted open-grid steel floor and canted walls—two barred (with iron salvaged from a federal prison); the other, containing the "cell door" entrance to the "jail," mirror-surfaced on the inside. There is no ceiling; you feel the sky beginning at the top of your skull, though it takes courage to look up. Morrel calls the piece *Asylum*; but the faint-hearted surely won't find refuge in it, the acrophopic will assume the negative implications of its title apply to them, and even those who love rooftops and Manhattan panoramas (usually people, like myself and the artist, who move here in their youth and find peace and dream space on these disused tarred surfaces) will find the disorienting effect disturbing. Angles are everywhere: the stairs you mount, the floor you are on, you and your reflection in the mirrored wall, the roof structures and the converging, diverging streets below you—all are angling this way and that. The only stability is that the grid of enclosing bars parallels the grids of the surrounding architecture. You will never be so aware of the right angles you make as you walk the canyon streets and ascend the elevators of New York. The cage's pale gray color dematerializes it, creating a dizzying sensation in tandem with the vanishing mirrored wall. Something of a musical quality results from the telescoping of inner and external realities, of time and space. You feel as though you're the focus of things, and yet you don't exist at all—up there in the prism of that open, windswept cage (through October.)

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The ornamental implications of MARY GRIGORIADIS's patterned abstractions at A.I.R., 97 Wooster Street (to October 4), result from the jewellike color she utilizes, the discreetness of her units, and their range from large to small—like stepped settings of precious stones. She has departed from the symmetry that formerly controlled her compositions, but her opulent, encrusted pigment remains the same, except in the oil-pastel series on paper where the images read clearly against the white ground instead of fusing with it as they do in the oils on raw beige canvas. The works in the new series on paper recall the multi-hued feathered apparel of Meso and South American Indians. Their festive air and new asymmetrical dynamism point away from the cloisonneed Byzantine gravity of her past work to a lighter-spirited vein. ■