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Livio Saganic and Leo Rabkin

Hal Bromm Gallery

It is unfortunately true that American artists' growing awareness of critical theory has led to the emergence of a new breed of academics who think they have an obligation to make accepted theory literal in their work. The most pervasive of current theories, and the one which increasingly allows for the least interesting results, was once considered a radicalization of modernism but now appears to be the means by which modernism has been neutralized and made safe for public consumption. I am talking about the notion that the working of a limited set of operations on a particular set of materials is equal to the result. While this reductivist idea may have shocked art lovers a generation ago, it now merely provides an excuse for devaluing everything in a work of art but its surface appeal.

This academicism can be seen in the work of two artists, Leo Rabkin and Livio Saganic, who showed work which, for identical reasons, is competent, tasteful and utterly boring. Both are preoccupied with procedures; Rabkin deals with the procedures of painting, Saganic with those of sculpture. Each manages to reduce his respective medium to something of only cursory interest.

Rabkin folds paper like a concertina and then colors it with bands of paint which bleed into each other. It is apparently important to know that he grinds his own pigments; presumably the evidence of physical labor is supposed to compensate for the lack of mental activity. Saganic is also a hard worker. He takes blocks of grey slate, cuts them and arranges the pieces to demonstrate a logic of formal development. He cuts a shape out of the parent block and places it next to the now empty space from which it came, then cuts a similar, but smaller shape out of the

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they all saying?" He receives the answer that they are telling the experience of being poor and white in America today. They speak an ideology of God and Country which is contradicted by the bleak facts of their lives in this economic dead end of California cardboard and corrugated metal housing. We are made to realize how *Poto* and *Cobengo* will lose with normalization since language for them will surely be limited and based on a false consciousness.

—AMY TAUBIN

JUDY RIFKA, Braathen-Gallozzi Contemporary Art; LES LEVINE, Marian Goodman Gallery:

Eclecticism—not to be confused with this year's fashion—informs JUDY RIFKA's painting from the series, "80 Views of West Broadway." Rifka doesn't rehash old points, though her approach shows a careful consideration of color and form. The catch is that the work appears very contemporary, since its "accessibility" carries a distinctly New Wave sensibility.

These seven paintings are of a limited palette. On grey backgrounds, Rifka arranges, contrasts and composes silhouettes, shapes, and reverse silhouettes of other shades of flat acrylic grey, white, red, yellow, orange and black. The complex is simplified by a central

composition; each collage revolves around the suggestion of an aerial view of a street corner, represented by lines converging from two perpendicular sides of the picture plane. In each painting, this concentrated collage of forms (many of which are in bas-relief) tumbles out of or cascades back into its corner boundary.

From a distance, this looks like remarkably skilled abstraction, though up close there is a lot of representational activity in the layered, textural surfaces. Shapes begin to read as silhouettes of people and things, parts of Rifka's visual shorthand. A headless man scurries in multiple directions on and off the curb in one painting; a reverse silhouette of a palette appears, disappears, reappears, again and again. Television and video screens are silhouetted in miniature, while words like "Eyeburn" and "Impact" in press type peek through the surface coatings. A frenzied Mickey Mouse, eyes bleeping red as he exits the frame, reminds one of Pop imagery, only Rifka's cartoons do not aim to be statements in themselves (as do Lichtenstein cartoon-paintings); their meaning is hard to figure.

Mickey Mouse, the palette, the screen, the crowded corner—it all flashes by in a quiver of tension, an immediate and evocative, but finally abstract vibration. West Broadway is seen from the vantage point of aware-

ness of multiplicity and productivity (Rifka is also a film and videomaker and has done special issues for *ART-RITE*); its upbeat tenor, as translated into paint, has the immediacy and self-containment of Abstract Expressionism.

What makes these paintings odd is that the representation is distracting, but not that important. Painting is not caricatured, as the imagery might indicate: it is taken quite seriously. Though there is an interesting tension between the Pop silliness of the cartoon and the accomplishment of the handling, it obfuscates more than it intrigues. The New Wave guise isn't really what makes the work new. It leaves one wondering about what a painter with Rifka's ability might do without the Mickey Mouse.

LES LEVINE has long been one who disdains the hypocrisy of denying art's inherent status as commodity; hence, his art has often taken the form of blatantly commercial products. His latest series of "ADS" are mock-ups for a low-art form, proposals labeled, "Media Project for a Large Outdoor Billboard." The strange part is that his ads have nothing to do with advertising. He isn't using "art" to question popular culture; he's using popular culture to test the nature and impact of "art."

The subject matter is misleading, though; the imagery seems to implicate that same old demon, materialism. In one piece, a graphic painting of the words, "The Art of Leisure" is the middle section of a vertical triptych, the bottom and top sections being color photographs of desirous vacation spots—the beach and the pool. In another triptych, a canvas with the word "Pink" burrowed in diagonal splotches of Fiorucciesque color is in between two near-sequential high-gloss, large color images of an equally tired scene—a rear view of a woman perched on a bench at the water's side, watching a sailboat glide by. One thinks of Henri Bendel's window displays, record album covers, travel commercials, perhaps, while searching vainly for the parody. But the imagery and treatment is too purposely similar to the real thing.

The romantic, "pure" side of life is treated in a more literal way. On one large canvas, a carefully but badly drawn steer is crowned by the word "REMEMBER" in large orange block letters. Deliberately but without purpose, the word is broken in two: "REME" on the top, and below "MBER." If it takes a few moments to comprehend the

word, the message, particularly if one were in a car on a highway speeding by, seems easy enough to forget. In another piece, the word "DREAM" is broken into "DR" and "EAM" above a painted white horse standing sideways in kelly green grass. One could find these amusing, but hardly provocative or subversive, inside or outside the art world.

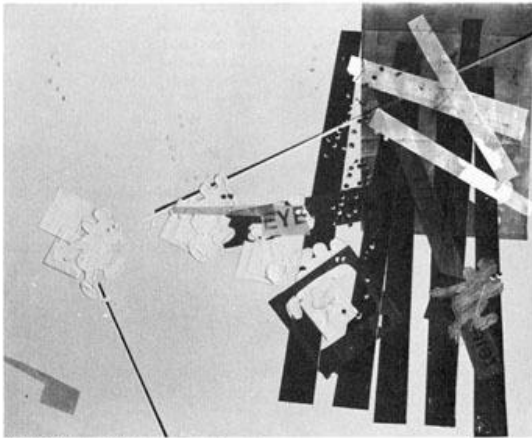
One wishes Levine had considered the loaded genre he has chosen. An audience used to having their television programs interrupted by an expressionless Brooke Shields musing that "Reading is to the mind what Calvins are to the body," wouldn't, one supposes, react much to Levine's largest triptych billboard (his oddest), "THE CAT IS ON HER SHOULDER." The letters are electric blue on a red-and-black leopard-skin ground, the painted images are of monstrous cats cradled in the silhouette of a woman's shoulder. True, the point of the former, no matter how convoluted, is to sell a certain designer's jeans, while the point of the latter is obscure. Ironically, though, the former message (were it to be taken seriously) is more subversive in its mockingly outrageous twist of conventional priorities or high art pretensions. "The Cat is On Her Shoulder" just can't compete in a landscape of perfectly accepted non sequiturs.

—JOAN CASADEMONT

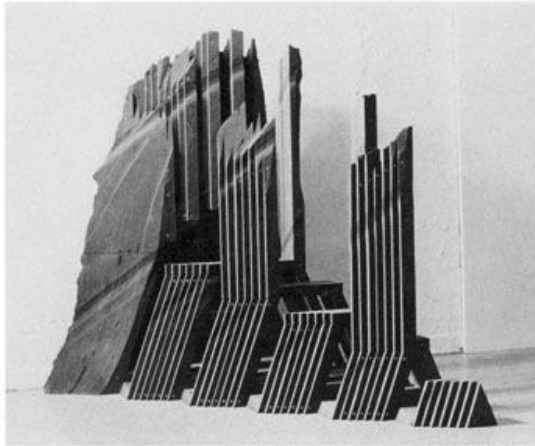
LIVIO SAGANIC and LEO RABKIN, Hal Bromm; MATT MULLICAN, Mary Boone:

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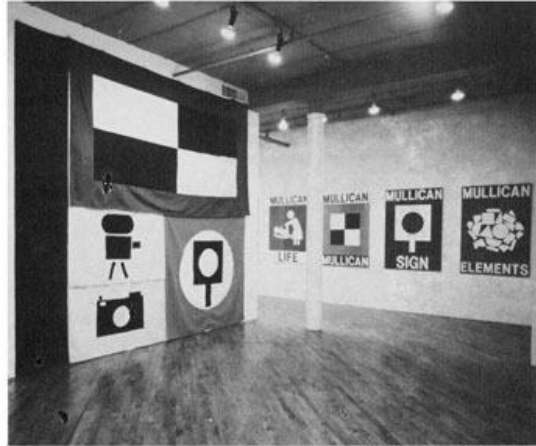
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Judy Rifka, *Eyeburn*, 1980, acrylic on canvas, 24 × 30"



Livo Saganic, *Total Extraction/Total Displacement* #8, 1980, slate and bolts, 66 x 60 x 72" high



Matt Mullican, Installation view, 1980, tags, posters

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Nothing could be further from this one-dimensional concept of the business of making art than the activity of MATT MULLICAN, whose work might also be said to deal with process. However, Mullican goes beyond the material processes into a complex of mental and emotional processes. He is less con-

cerned with objects for their own sake than with the connections we make between objects in order to give ourselves meaning.

Mullican's art demands to be understood as a continuing project, with the individual pieces functioning as markers on a longer journey. The current work must therefore be regarded as incomplete in some essential way, composed of fragments of something larger and as yet unfinished, something which may never be completely finished. This is not to say that the show appears lightweight; on the contrary, Mullican's work may never be completed because he has set himself the task of uncovering the process of self-realization through the production of art. Working initially with intensely private images derived in part from hypnosis, he inevitably arrives at correspondences beyond his own experience, correspondences which are a part of the culture to which he belongs. There is also an awareness that images which he thought of as his own could be distilled to a point at which they could be understood as belonging to everyone.

As a result of this contradiction his work appears split in a way which can seem confusing. With disarming directness Mullican will exhibit simple, almost childlike drawings, primitive looking objects and bold graphics with a very

sophisticated, modern look, as though that was the most obvious thing to do. Which of course it is. For what gives these disparate elements their tremendous sense of cohesion is not simply the fact that they are the product of the artist's unconscious, but that that unconscious is mediated by a structure of signs to which we are all privy. In recognizing his relation to the cultural restraints of the sign, Mullican provides himself with a framework from which he can develop his elegiac vision of life in terms which can be readily understood by all.

The contradictory aspect of much of his work is the source of its strength, for it is that which emphasizes the tentative and fragmentary character of the whole enterprise, a characteristic which is easily forgotten in the face of the seeming confidence of his large banners and posters. It is the close juxtaposition of very different kinds of simplicity—the proximity of the figure of a man made from weathered lumber and pierced with bent nails to the universal stick figure symbol familiar from toilets in airports and railway stations—which gives the work as a whole its air of melancholy. In every case the private man is forced to confront his public destiny, to recognize that every secret, every wish, is already understood, that the individual must discover things for

himself which are already known, since they can be placed within the framework of language.

—THOMAS LAWSON

JUDY PFAFF and KIM Mac CONNELL, Holly Solomon Gallery; "Portraits: 1980," Marilyn Pearl Gallery; "Glitter," Kathryn Markel Fine Arts:

This season's award for best party decoration goes to JUDY PFAFF. One cheerful observer, totally floored by Pfaff's floor-to-ceiling installation, "Deepwater," marveled that Pfaff is the ultimate chairwoman for a prom decorations committee. If she can transform the modernist gallery into a Day-Glow coral reef as seen through the eyes of a flounder on LSD, just think what she can do for the gym. Pfaff's strongest suits are her unbridled effervescence and the fact that she doesn't acknowledge the conventional limits of exhibition space. Dispersal has been her beat since her debut show at Artists Space in 1975. Fortunately for Pfaff, dispersal never means diffusion of energy.

Her space is congested without being cluttered. Stray tree limbs painted green, a gold sprig of leaves, part-colored wood constructions made of scrap lumber, and an abundance of reflective plastic *chazerai* (to name just the leads in this cast-of-thousands of

Matt Mullican

Mary Boone Gallery | Chelsea

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