

PRINT MAY 1981

Jack Bush

ANDRE EMMERICH GALLERY

One looks at the work of certain established artists to learn about respectable taste. The careless drips and angry spatters of their early work sometimes freeze, in their later work, into affectation, solidify as decor. Looking at such work is a lesson about the dangers, to an artist, of too much artistic civility, of growing old too gracefully.

Jack Bush grew old far too gracefully. He was never a great painter to begin with, though he was a competent one, who knew what had to be done at a certain time, and did it. But he never had the nerve to push that knowledge or stretch that ability, and as a result his later paintings, some of which were in this show, fail to attract, let alone hold our interest. In avoiding risks, he also side-stepped the possibility of making art.

Pale, brushy fields of thinned paint, often just shy, of the edges of the canvas, enlivened by a handful of colorful shapes: this is the sum of Bush's offering. The shapes sometimes have an eccentric geometry to them; often they are simply single brush strokes. Bush allowed himself risks only with color and contrast, selecting combinations which might seem unusual, perhaps even unacceptable by some standards. But how quickly such innovations grow small and unadventurous—too constrained and well-mannered to really count. It was Bush's misfortune to emerge at the end of a tradition, to inherit the job

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ly, not in New York. What is regrettable about the absence of these artists is that they all have used social commentary as an integral part of their light sculptures. This is something one misses in Adams' selection, which is short on the wit that more truly reflective work might have provided.

Of the seven artists in "Lighting," Christopher Sproat looks least at home. His three pieces are sculpture first, more indebted to Sol LeWitt than Thomas Edison, and only incidentally about lighting. Jeff Koons' wall work—in which spanking new household appliances (Proctor Silex Toaster, Mirro Whistling Tea Kettle) are centered and mounted on plastic-sheathed fluorescent tubing—also seems peripherally concerned with lighting and more a commentary on the glamour of conspicuous consumption. Arch Connelly's pieces are primarily exercises in funk decor—including a humorous, but contextually irrelevant, series of portraits of retrochic lamps, epitomized by *Midnight Sun*, a truly hideous assemblage rising from an ornate gold frame base and capped by a nasty blue stalagmite.

Sparking the gap between the esthetically sympathetic and the electrically engaged is Ellen Cooper. Her wall lamps are reliefs with a Mardi Gras peppiness reminiscent of recent Benglis or, at their most excessive, Lanigan-Schmidt. Her crustaceous, pastel-hued sconces are in the shape of conch shells and coral accumulations. On knotty pine, they'd be vernacular; on white plaster, they're art.

The show's three most assertive exponents of lighting are R.M. Fischer, Kiki Smith and Calvin Churchman. Fischer's *faux-Constructivist* lamps have been marketed around Manhattan as both art and merchandise (commercially ambiguous but critically distinct categories). The pieces on exhibit are clunky and tacky, assembled from a bit of this and a bit of that. They are products of a deceptively makeshift aesthetic that results in sculpture that looks like the cut-rate robots June Lockhart used to order around on *Lost in Space*. It's hardware art for an impoverished pop technology.

Kiki Smith's mock-grotesque mylar chandelier is not quite bad enough to be good. Her connecting *Bone Boxes* (similar to tooled Mexican tin lamps) are more effective, but so gratuitously sloppy that they look like they're falling apart before your eyes. Her *Clerk's Desk*—a table with a built-in drafting lamp con-

structed in steel and sheetrock—is the show's most salient attempt at social commentary. Its cramped ugliness and lack of finish—Smith emphasizes the materials' least attractive properties—make it look like an analogy for hard labor, lying in wait for a contemporary Bob Cratchit.

"Lighting" is most reverberant piece is Calvin Churchman's "American Lamp Project," a series of seven simple, decisive cultural signifiers masquerading as lampshades. Slightly tilted out from the wall, held by triangles of thread, its slender black shafts are capped by seven reductive examples of vernacular American shade classics—everything from the "coolie hat" to "twin tiara." Formalizing the shapes and reducing the traditional scale, Churchman makes the prosaic precious. Without becoming trite, the "Lamp Project" provocatively satirizes design clichés and emerges as an elegantly individualized work of art, providing a perfect starting point for "Lighting II."

—RICHARD FLOOD

JACK BUSH, Andre Emmerich Gallery; KATHERINE PORTER, David McKee Gallery; HANS HAACKE, John Weber Gallery; DAVID SALLE, Mary Boone Gallery; ERIC FISCHL, Edward Thorp Gallery; ROBIN WINTERS, Mary Boone Gallery;

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Jack Bush, *Symphony on Brown*, 1976, acrylic on canvas, 76 1/2 x 122 1/4"

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For some time, remedies to keep the dynamics of abstract painting alive have been devised to counter the sterility of a problem-solving formalism, like that practiced by Bush. One such remedy, and one that has been attracting a lot of attention again recently, is the attempt to infuse the work (by which is meant both labor and product) with a sense of personal urgency. This means a return to romanticism and the belief



Katherine Porter, *Queza Hipeque*, 1980, oil on canvas, 88 1/2 x 77"

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DAVID MCKEE GALLERY

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Painters like Katherine Porter give us work that uses the strategies of modernist painting, while conveniently forgetting to include the hard kernel of radical thought at the center of that practice. The early modernists made art to make people think: provocative, questioning art. The latter day academics who borrow the styles of these artists, whether in a Constructivist or Expressionist mode, negate this heritage by presenting self-referential, introspective work, that is accessible to the viewer only on the level of sensation. If it feels good, who cares if it means anything?

Like so many artists of this kind, Porter is content to smear the entrails of an eviscerated modernism across her oversized canvas, hoping that the mere spectacle of commitment will be enough to make her work convincing. Her motifs are simple circles and spirals, which form a borrowed iconography that has acquired a range of meanings, stretching from spiritualism to feminism, but which here only hovers uncertainly in a private, hermetically sealed region of the artist's imagination.

Porter's method appears equally simple, though in fact it is not. The work looks direct, as though painted with speed and urgency, yet the colors are mixed, often downright murky. The bravura brushwork, and its use as a device to elicit a visceral response, recalls the work of Philip Guston. But this is Guston in a self-indulgent mood, Guston without wit, without savagery. The spark is lost, and we are left with eddies of muddy colors presented as solemn exercises in looking important.

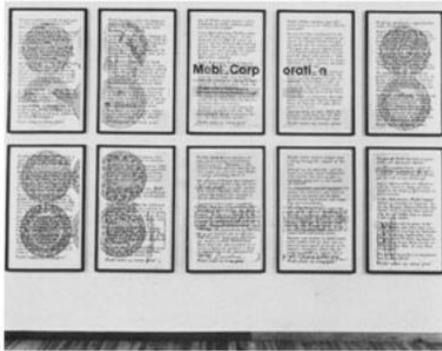
Hans Haacke

JOHN WEBER GALLERY

Although based on a much tougher view of the responsibilities inherent in making art, Hans Haacke's latest work unfortunately betrays a similar pomposity, a desire to be taken seriously, but a refusal to dig beneath the surface of an appropriate look. The trouble seems to be that he has established himself as a political artist of some importance, but is now content to relax in the glow of an all-encompassing irony.

Haacke's work this time is about the Mobil Corporation, a wryly humorous *exposé* of the double talk the oil company uses in its famous advertising campaigns, which are designed to persuade middle-income newspaper readers that the company's business policies are in their best interests. The major piece in this show comprises an enlarged reproduction of a Mobil share divided into sections, each one containing short statements that justify a number of the company's less honorable practices. Written in the sugary style that Herbert Schmerz has perfected, the statements take the point of view of a rather innocent small shareholder. One cannot quarrel with the general drift of Haacke's approach, but its lack of effectiveness is appalling. The thinking remains superficial, the presentation facile. Haacke relies heavily on the ironic mode, and that mode seems strangely compromised right now. It permits, all too easily, the amused dismissal of serious thought. If we accept that the purpose of avant-garde art is to point out contradictions in current beliefs, be they social or esthetic, the problem here is that the contradictions are already quite well-known and accepted, are themselves today part of the currency of received ideas. Public disbelief in any kind of institution is now considered normal, and cynicism is prevalent enough to be understood as a modernist form of sentimentality, an easy way of avoiding any unpleasant, though necessary, confrontation.

It is this defusion which makes Haacke's new work seem tame, even decorative. Any educated person can understand the intention behind it, so there is a certain thrill to be enjoyed. But with no harm done, the thrill remains a mere amusement.



Hans Haacke, *Musing of a Shareholder*, 1961 photolithography and drawing, 35 1/2 x 21 1/2"



David Salle, *Long Intervals of Time and Years*, 1981 acrylic on canvas, 62 x 80"

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Wherever you look there seems to be a loss of critical energy, a blind contentment with the status quo. The situation is bad, but the only response seems to be an irresponsible retreat into a self-delusory nostalgia. The malaise is widespread. I could be talking about politics; I'm talking about art.

So what is a young artist committed to

the idea of making significant art supposed to do? How can art destabilize conventional thought when the critical procedures validated by modernism—the distancing techniques of abstraction, manipulation of scale, and irony—seem worn out? One possibility is to follow a strategy of infiltration, to use established conventions against themselves, gaining access to a position of trust only to confound it.

DAVID SALLE has been working in this way for some time now. He makes tremendously stylish paintings, paintings which are sophisticated enough to look good in the most elegant of rooms. His choice and juxtaposition of color is brilliant—pale, stained fields, highlighted with bright, contrasting lines that have the look of high fashion. Yet his chosen imagery is emotionally and intellectually disturbing. Most often his subjects are objectified women. At best these representations of women are cursory and off-hand; at worst they are brutal and disfigured. His women are made ridiculous or ugly through juxtapositions with containerlike objects, such as furniture. These juxtapositions disturb on a deeper level than one might at first imagine.

Salle's work is seductive, but obscure, and it is its obscurity that is its source of strength. We are primed to understand his work metaphorically, but the metaphors refuse to gel the way we expect them to. Meaning is intimated, but finally withheld. It appears to be on the surface, but as soon as it is approached it disappears, provoking the viewer into a deeper examination of

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MARY BOONE GALLERY | CHELSEA

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This is true of Salle's best work. His latest paintings proved to be a bit of a disappointment, because of a (temporary?) victory of style over content. The paintings looked more impressive than ever, but the clash of imagery was much cruder and more simple-minded. Gone was the disorienting unfolding of contradictory layers of meaning. The central metaphor revolved around the matching of naked women with tubular furniture, and it just kept revolving, going nowhere. The work is as visually aggressive as ever, but one hopes Salle has not forgotten why that aggressiveness is important.

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ERIC FISCHL shares Salle's ambition to make art that makes a difference. Art which acknowledges its debt to the past, but is not intimidated by it. Though he is not as angry as Salle, his work has its fair share of malice, sharpened with a mordant wit which gains immeasurably from the acuity of Fischl's observations of ordinary behavior. His main area of concentration is suburban life, within the realist tradition most often thought appropriate to depicting it.

A typical work of his is *Gals from the Office*, a painting in which meanings and methods about one another, by turns enhancing each other and cancelling each other out. The painting, of four women and a dog in water, is executed in a style of careless realism which Fischl manages to locate at the exact point between pastiche and ineptitude. Just by looking at the surface of a painting like this, one becomes confused by its abrupt and unexplained disturbances. This unsettling is furthered by the strangeness of the composition—an old-fashioned sounding issue made relevant again because of the apparent realism of the work. Three of the women are seated, part submerged in the clear, shallow water. They are ordinary looking. The fourth one, who has a more conventionally good figure, stands back, further into the water; she might be beautiful, but we cannot tell because the painting is cropped so that she appears headless. A range of narrative and psychological possibilities are set in motion, but left suspended. And they are confounded as well by the specter of a hunting dog, with bird in mouth, splashing out of some very dark, stormy looking water at the top of the picture. Expectations are raised, but



Eric Fischl, *Gals from the Office*, 1980, oil on canvas, 69 x 80"

situations are left unresolved, so that we are left in a state of morbid anxiety.

Like a good soap opera, the painting is loaded with possibilities, and executed with an economy which invests little value in virtuosity. The comparison is important, for it indicates that Fischl is concerned with a great deal more than a couple of esthetic issues.

ROBIN WINTERS is as disrespectful as Fischl and Salle in pursuit of unsettling differences. He can almost be charged with being too consistent in his inconsistency. Winters sees himself as a joker, engaged in a humorous, off-

hand terrorism aimed at causing fissures and cracks in the ideological constraints which deny us the freedom we like to think we enjoy. As it suits him, he is by turns performer, impresario, writer, painter and sculptor. Defiantly, he is not any one thing, but whatever he does becomes an anarchic obsession, a disruption.

His sensibility of excess is given form by the skimpiest of means. Endless little physiognomic drawings appear on scraps of cheap paper; a funny, rather touching typology. There is a series of portraits, painted on plaster. He has helped to organize vaguely political,

sprawling group theme shows which are presented in unusual locations. And he creates paintings which make fun of that male myth-making, European tradition best exemplified by Picasso.

A great deal of Winters' work can be too easily dismissed as a continuation of neo-Dada activity, as antiart with a smiling face. So his decision to show paintings in a conventional gallery is a welcome one, for the shift of context allows his critical methodology a wider scope. Just as his many fringe projects throw a certain light on the commercial art market, so his participation in that market now throws a skeptical light on the more naive assumptions of that other activity. The paradoxical coexistence of the publicly funded outlaw and the market-conscious producer allows Winters to transcend his self-appointed role as joker, as purveyor of attitude. He can begin to seriously address the esthetic and political contradictions at the heart of art-world practice.

—THOMAS LAWSON

IDA APPLEBROOG, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts; HOLLIS SIGLER, Barbara Gladstone Gallery;

IDA APPLEBROOG's paintings and books of cartoonlike couples and lonely figures seeking refuge in desolate hotel rooms are about as sentimental as *Saturday Night Live's* version of TV news. If at least one of the characters in each work isn't represented as a member of the dominated or demeaned, the one-line titles suggest a narrative sequence during which someone will become a member, whether forcefully or subtly. Applebroog's satirical targets are men and women involved in stereotypically unequal sexual relationships, or individuals stricken with paranoia and self-doubt. They all inhabit not only the same godforsaken consciousness, but the same barren environment as well. Cumulatively, their situations suggest that Applebroog is more interested in social observation than in domestic power plays.

Each scene is framed by curtains (and sometimes also by half-closed shades), which place the viewer in the same voyeuristic role as would glimpsing domestic settings through street-level windows. Applebroog embellishes the theatrical quality of her staging by spot-lighting each of her large cutout vellum and rhoplex paintings to create shadows of its action. She then repeats the identical image in three flat, unit versions. These repetitions serve



Ida Applebroog, *FMCA (detail view from street)*, 1980, ink and rhoplex on vellum, 2 panels, each 64 x 54"

Eric Fischl

EDWARD THORP GALLERY

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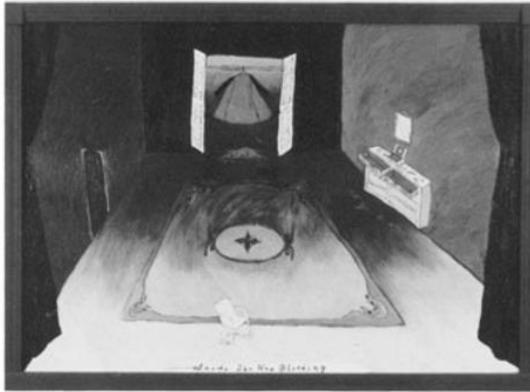
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as affirmative echoes of the sentiments of the captions, which all indicate stagnant or stifling behavior patterns. *Look at me* shows a woman sprawled out on a bed and trying to pull an uninterested man down with her. *Sure I'm sure* shows a woman in bed as a man undresses. Another man, sitting alone in a room as barren as the others, looks at what we cannot see; the caption reads, *Take off your panties*. To such obvious sexual domination is added a more humorous, subtle form of put-down. In a small wall series, of a bald man and a woman, the phrase "Your hair will grow again" appears with "It isn't true." And in a book called *You'll see*, in which two women exchange seemingly harmless words, there appears an unexplained warning: "Something unequal is about to happen."

What is happening in all of these rooms that is so unequal? The sexual domination of the women is grim, but not as oppressive or depressing as the cell-like traps in which all of the characters reside. These environments are as devoid of descriptive detail as the characters are of any signs of individuality. This is a city of the faceless, nameless and homeless; of inhabitants as temporary as their surroundings.

The simple vocabulary of Applebroog's funny but troubling images is more socially keen than overtly political. Though far more pointed than Roger Brown's, and more objectified than Robert Longo's, the commentary she makes on city life through these images remains elusive, if not obscure. But Applebroog is smart to leave us at the point that she does. She gives us potent subjects in a fresh and clever form, but dares us to make whatever connections we will between domestic and social unrest. That language, she insinuates, is far too complex to explain simply.

If Ida Applebroog is a soft-spoken commentator on urban affairs, then HOLLIS SIGLER is a closet interpreter of suburban life. Her new series of paintings, "Poisoned," depicts a set of unpopulated rooms cluttered with the tiny material objects and emotional residue of one dominant male who was "hungry for power," and of one dominated woman who was "always devining [sic] to be loved." Their mock-sentimental tale of woe, told through the delicate captions that are painted onto these paintings, is not nearly as interesting as the varying collections of tiny doll-sized objects that clutter the paintings. The two mysteri-



Hotels Sigler, Inside She Was Bleeding, 1980, oil on canvas, 42 x 60"

ously absent folks who inhabit these places wouldn't hang out in desolate hotel rooms; if they even venture from their luxurious interiors, it is probably to go to a social event populated by their own kind.

Simply, the fairy tale told in nine one-line captions is as follows: power-seeking successful businessman (one painting shows his room, decorated with numerous sports trophies) passes on his empty heart, poisoned by materialism, to a woman, an innocent, romantic victim. Sigler manifests the different stages of this hollow affair through the heavily symbolic details in each of the rooms.

Like Applebroog, Sigler uses curtains to frame the illustrations of this narrative, but hers are the opulent curtains of a stage, held back in some works by long, black-gloved hands. Glistening with the

accoutrements of material comfort, the first five of these paintings (before the "poisoning" takes effect) show interiors well-suited to those who have sought and acquired power. But the next three, in which electric colors and hallucinogenic distortions take over (depicting such things as a card table teetering on yellow and green mountainous shapes), are stereotypically tacky. The last painting *The Perfection of this Poisoning*—of an elegant parlor with a lonely, glowing TV set—is quite a bit more muted, and, of all the interiors, is the one most likely to warrant an appearance in *House & Garden*. Is this what undeclared love does to those who have money? Does a failure at love reveal the tack hidden beneath the riches?

Sigler doesn't bother with tedious explanation, but there are enough details

and subtleties in these paintings to keep us guessing. The only catch to this guessing process is that it remains a game, obfuscating a deeper purpose. We are not led out of these paintings; rather, their imagery pulls us back in again for closer scrutiny. But upon closer examination, the objective of Sigler's stylization grows opaque. "Poisoned" is not as incisive as we may at first have thought. Its style outweighs its message.

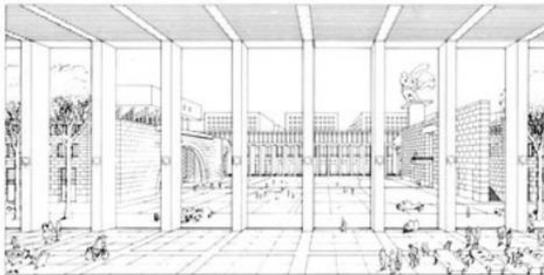
—JOAN CASADEMONT

LEON KRIER, Max Protetch Gallery; "Sequences," Artists Space; CHARLES FAHLEN, Frank Kolbert Gallery; LEWIS BALTZ, Castelli Graphics; PATRICIA JOHANSON, Rosa Esman Gallery; MICHAEL LOEW, Marilyn Pearl Gallery;

"The Reconstruction of the European City, 1967-1980" is a project of drawings and manifestos by LEON KRIER; it is also an extraordinary critique of modern architecture, indeed of modern capitalism. The drawings show the European city (specifically Paris, West Berlin and Luxembourg) in detail and in total, in neo-Beaux Arts cityscapes and town plans. The "reconstruction" of each city is according to street, square and *quartier* (the prototype does seem to be pre-Hausmann Paris). More importantly, it calls for seeing the classical architectural mode as the only standard. Such, in brief, is the project. Now, is it a return or a departure? Is it reactionary or radical?

To Krier modern architecture is the monster of modern capital. Like capital, it is hostile to community, precedent and place—it has rent the fabric of the city, zoned it into a monolithic, abstract no-man's-land. The public disgust with the city is to him a natural, not philistine, response, and in the "reconstruction" drawings he effaces the modern just as Le Corbusier effaced the premodern. (Le Corbusier, especially as seen in *Ville Radieuse*, is the negative example here.) This would be mad if it were not rhetorical, but Krier's is not a naive return to the past. He wants to reconnect, not repeat, history; he wants to reconstruct, not merely resume, the urban tradition disrupted by modernism.

"I can only make Architecture, because I do not build. I do not build, because I am an Architect." This is Krier's credo of Architectural Disobedience—not to partake in capitalism's urban scheme of abstract zoning, architecture and design. To Krier such a city



Leon Krier, from *Les Nouveaux Quartiers de la Vilette à Paris*, 1976, ink on paper, 7 1/2 x 6 1/2", from "The Reconstruction of the European City."