

# WASHBURN

## New York Letter by Lucy R. Lippard (1966) Art International

### Selection

Also geometric, hard-edge, self-restrictive, Doug Ohlson's paintings at Fischbach are quite another story. They are totally non-exhibitionist. He is not concerned with formal advance in general, public terms, but in specific, personal terms, demanding less of the future than of himself. There is nothing radical about his work, but it is pushing gently at the barriers, and could not have been done by anyone else. It looks, somehow, sincere and hard to do. The palette – somber, considered, including dark reds, greens, blues, chalky browns, grays, olives, used occasionally in close-values though never with “invisibility” in mind, will inevitably be traced to Reinhardt. Still, Ohlson uses it to his own ends. The muted scheme serves both to restrain and to point up the distinction between form and ground, that is, the edges of the square image (or rectangular forms made up of square units) and the edges of the canvas. The placement of the units is refined to a hair's breadth. The compositions, sometimes asymmetrical, sometimes logically centered, act to relieve tension and replace it with a strong equilibrium resulting from neutralization of potentially dynamic forces. I preferred those in a square space, since in this sort of controlled and subdued painting any other format is likely to seem somewhat extravagant. One of the most beautiful canvases had a dart, intense red ground with two equal squares: a green one beginning not quite half way up the left side and a few inches from the outer edge, and a dark gray one in bottom center, closer to the right than the left. Some of the paintings were on two or three canvasses, attached, one of which was often solid ground. There are never more than two elements on that ground, so that spatial manipulation is of utmost importance and openness. Placement is entirely, intuitive, unless some logical plan escaped me. The ensuing calm is rigorous rather than flaccid, disciplined and assured but not overly demanding. Ohlson's basic premise is familiar in the better work of the 1960's but his attitude seems to be more stubbornly poetic, if that word can still be used meaningfully and abstractly. Retaining relational, private values, what Judd calls “old” values, Ohlson implies, despite the reductive scheme, a sense of struggle. This is refreshing in view of the plethora of miserably limited imitations derived from the best in cool art. From the evidence in this show Ohlson confronts a different problem of space and relationships between surface, support and figuration in each canvas, rather than working it out serially. There was a point a few years back where we lost track of quiet painting, but now that the clamor has died down, whispers can be heard again.

### WASHBURN GALLERY

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