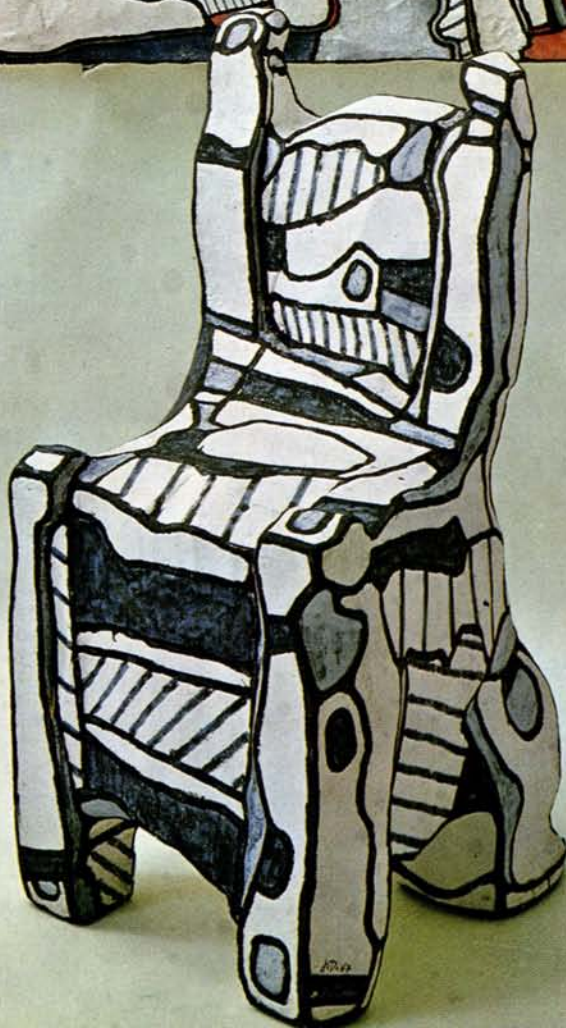
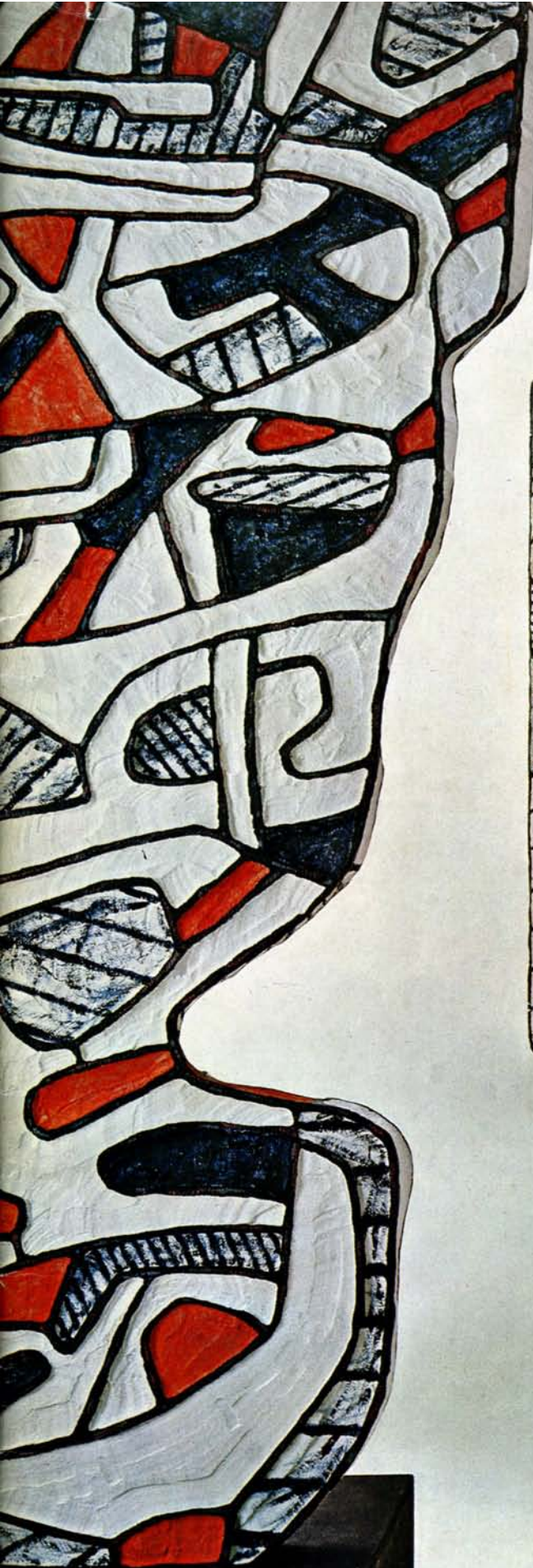


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May, 1968  
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Doug Ohlson, photo Alfred Lyons.

By Scott Burton

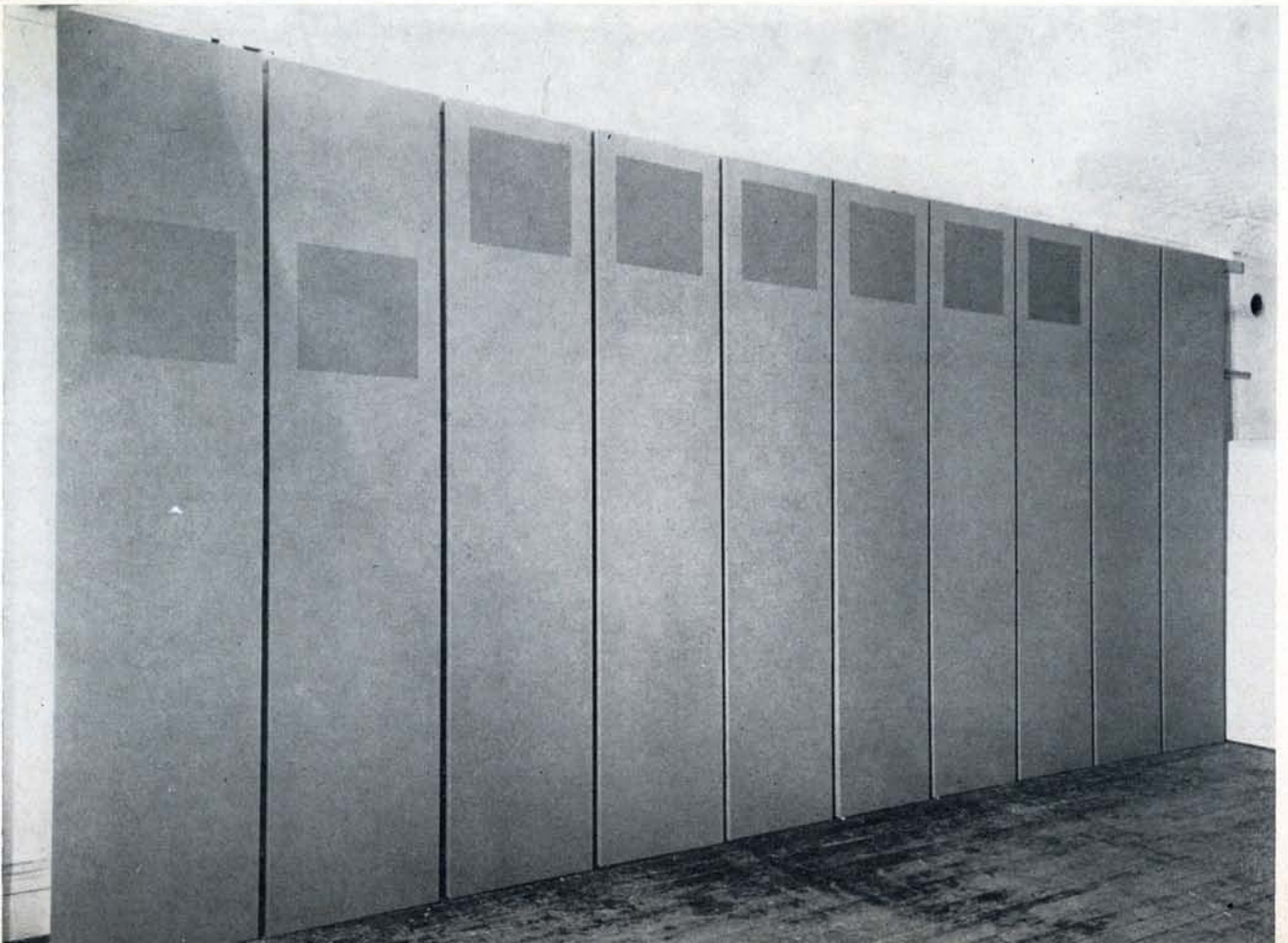
## Doug Ohlson: In the Wind

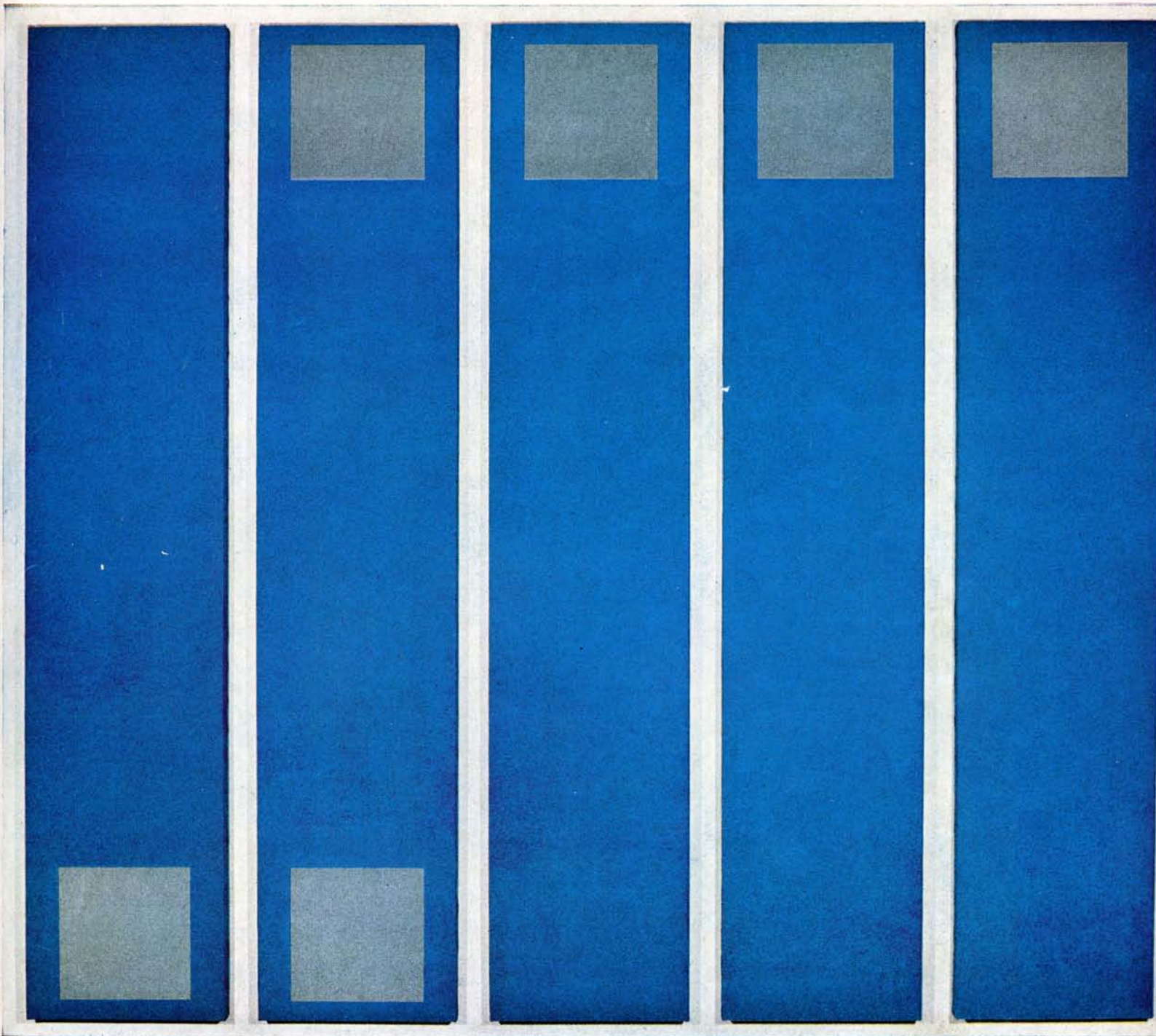
Sensuous color and controlled form  
interact in his modular  
panel paintings at Fischbach this month

The new paintings of Doug Ohlson [at Fischbach; May 11-June 8] have a strangeness and complexity not immediately apparent—in fact, almost hidden. At first glance, they seem, with their modular panels, uninflected surfaces and restricted palette, to be well-behaved specimens of the Minimal type. But then one discovers that they really are something else. They are inward paintings, taciturn, unintimate, slow to reveal themselves. Yet, in their remoteness, they are not images of indifference. They can be witty, though drily so, sometimes brooding, but always open and expansive, secretly expressive and moving.

Ohlson practices the strictest economy. The only elements he works with are the panels—tall, narrow palisades of one color—and the squares painted on them, all in one

Ohlson's *The Gates*, 1967, consists of ten panels 116 inches high, placed 3 inches apart.





Doug Ohlson: *Mátho*, 1967, 90 inches high.  
In his one-man show at the Fischbach Gallery, New York [May 11-June 8].

other color. The former, often 18 by 90 inches or one to five in proportion, number from three to twelve per painting and are hung on the wall  $2\frac{1}{2}$  to 3 inches apart. Horizontal paintings are made out of vertical shapes. The squares range along the bottom or top of the rows; when they are raised or dropped, it is no more than their own height. So far, none have appeared toward the middle. The equal margins they make out of the field around them approximate but do not duplicate the intervals between the canvases. The colors (acrylics applied with sponges) are

more opaque than transparent but stay thin, neither quite infused into the material nor lying pronouncedly on its surface; tactility is not an issue.

These paintings are not fantasies of renunciation or of rigidly controlled order. Their tight-lipped Purist aspect (of which the square is almost a badge in modern art) co-exists with a high sensuousness breaking through in the eloquent color but strongly tempered with intimations of melancholy and solitude. *Mátho* is a five-panel nocturne whose deep, clear midnight blue and darkly silvered grey  
Continued on page 67

Europe? Some of the board members were getting angry. It wasn't fun guessing anymore, when more important things were waiting to be done.

"When she finally told us, everyone was amused, but it was kind of a let down. She said, 'Nothing had changed since last year.' She smiled brightly. Later we all agreed that Miss Cary was odd, but O.K."

To further complicate the issue, Wiley has constructed an actual piece of sculpture based upon this particular watercolor, calling it *Sub-Standard Test*. The cloth strips have been changed to grey felt, the water-box to a sandbox and the piece contains a jar stuffed with cloth plus a further, even longer subtitle/explanation:

"Sub-standard test is about design inevitable design and testing for seeing and thinking shrinking and expanding and will either record in encounter for you or you will record your encounter with it . . . and seeing and living and the fingers try desperately to the thing for the brain and to hold the hand the good way when it shook badly and to be able to conduct yourself fully and inevitably in your ultimate design and just withstand a substandard test."

Funk? . . . Once again we are offered a category that is beguilingly vague. "The term itself was borrowed from jazz: since the '20s Funk was jargon for the unsophisticated deep-down New Orleans blues played by the marching bands, the blues which give you that happy/sad feeling," wrote Peter Selz in the catalogue for his omnibus Funk show last year in Berkeley.

But I like William Wiley's explanation better (also from the catalogue): "I watched a lot of good Artists/draw/backwards/in/fear/while other guys just stood around with fake velvet beards and gunny sacks lined with old Art Magazine covers to get you out on a snipe hunt and leave you in the desert while they sneak back to the fire and eat the weenies. Just mete out a little interest in survival kit form and it will find its place like balls of mercury rushing to the cold end of the thermometer."

It may indeed be very cold at the other end of the thermometer, but, coming out of left field, William Wiley may be in the new center. The art that our senses and our sensibilities need consists of visual and semantic discontinuities. Wiley's new works are a threat to easy equilibriums. They are not "beautiful." They are hybrids. They are not anxious objects or specific objects. Because of their extreme ambiguity and their mysteriousness, they are irrational objects, dream objects, metaphysical objects. The a-rational, irrational and meta-rational cannot be repressed for very long, power-Puritans notwithstanding. The viewer is forced to approach Wiley's watercolors and sculpture with his whole sensibility—his emotions as well as his intellect—rather than with a tape-measure or an art-history text-book.

William Wiley is an important new artist who re-introduces qualities of subjectivity, complexity and wit and makes them viable by the use of new extremes and by his resourcefulness, his playfulness, his inventiveness. At a time when simplicity is too often a disguise for simple-mindedness and has become not only a cliché, but a dogma, Wiley dares to be complex. At a time when "meaning" is held to be vulgar, Wiley dares to create works that are all meaning—layer upon layer—contradictory, dream-like and violently poetic.

### Ohlson

Continued from page 39

lie together in unbroken silence. To *Mâtho* as day to night and twice as wide, *Cythera*, with its luxuriant almost orange-yellow field and intense pink squares, has a Southernness so brilliant and warm that only a Northerner could have imagined it. *The Gates* is both somber and burning, its dull ocher field and deep red squares making together a shadowed incandescence. An untitled painting, 10 panels of

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medium grey with pale blue squares only at its far right, is tranquil and light by contrast but is touched by a mood of desertion.

In short, Romantic. To find such feelings in such forms—it is as if Keats had written concrete poetry.

Of the several things about Ohlson's work that are paradoxical or apparently self-canceling, another is the way in which his monochrome grounds are and are not fields. They are, as with a number of other painters, both flat, inert planes and illimitable, intangible stretches of color and light. But they are also literally not fields because they are divided, in accurate and sensitive proportions, into non-contiguous parts. However, the shared color of the panels is as strongly unifying as their interstices are separating. One major way the viewer is drawn into Ohlson's paintings is in his alternation between seeing them as parts and as wholes, as units or as unities.

If one thinks of the fields as illusions of void, there is a nice reversal in the role of the interstices. When the field remains a simple plane, the spaces between the panels are what is missing; they are the not-there. But when the fields themselves are experienced as empty or open, then the interstices interrupt and recall the eye to physical actuality. They represent no longer the absent but the present. Ohlson's fissures are their own opposites, in something like figure-ground reversal but fresher.

The interstices are a unifying factor instead of a disruptive one when they are compared to the internal forms. They are regular and predictable, and the distribution of the squares is anything but. Here is not just the standard good-design rule of repetition with variation, but something more extreme—the repetition is patent, the variation seems haphazard and wilful. Ohlson strews his squares intermittently over the panels as if he were throwing the dice but never abolishing chance. The large *Sterne*, for example, has light blue squares at the bottoms of its first four other panels (reading from left to right), then raised ones on the next three, and then, as if perversely, none at all on the last two. Even odder is *Cythera* (which will be seen this summer at the Museum of Modern Art in "The Art of the Real: USA 1948-68"): pink squares appear low on six panels in a row, but disappear for three, then return with a muffled exclamation both at the bottom and the top of the last panel. *The Gates* has, except for the first two, a straight row of squares at the top which does not make it all the way across; the last panels are blank. There is no logical progression or programmed order to be obtained from these groupings. They could not be predicted beyond the painting's limits, unlike the panels, which if blank could be repeated indefinitely. The apparent randomness of the squares, contrasting with the even beat of the panels and interstices, gives the paintings an intensified rhythm like that of a line of verse in which the stresses are played *against* the meter. Ohlson's "prosody," surprising and supple, makes the lateral unfolding of his paintings into slightly quixotic skirmishes between chance and control.

But laterally or sequentially is not the only way to look at them. Another way is a frontal, simultaneous apprehension. The eye hesitates between a temporal viewing, passing from panel to panel, and a spatial one, encompassing all of them at once. Usually when we look at a painting we see the whole first and afterwards lose ourselves in its parts, but with Ohlson we first see the parts and afterwards lose ourselves in—that is, discover—the whole. It is then that the squares group themselves into an order, not a logical one but an intuitable one. They look no longer arbitrary or capricious but reveal the painting's inner unity and justness.

Looked at all together, the squares align themselves, forming an invisible imagery of large, wholly unconstrained ges-

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ture. All of them, not just the ones in rows or steps, fall into place. Motion generates itself and soon we find that we are watching an implied skein extended, S-curving, suddenly flicking, hardly veering, through a no longer dormant area. That area has begun to stir. Triggered by the squares, it takes on an animation as if from inside itself. Ohlson calls this a "contraction and expansion of the field," but perhaps metaphors of wind are best for describing what happens, for there is no organic muscular exertion but rather a massing of immaterial energy. It fills the painting, transmitting itself across the breaks; it gathers force, slackens, swells, rises and drops. At times scattering the squares before it as well as being guided by them, it turns sinusously back on itself through a narrow funnel of margin to billow forth elsewhere, or is released in all directions at once. This evocation of energy without a direct imprintation of it is perhaps the final sensation of Ohlson's paintings. Since it reaches over the entire surface, it is the source of internal unity.

What at first appeared to be an architectural diction (the rows of panels as the standardized façades of modern buildings and the squares as their fenestration) is replaced in time by an impression of breadth and distance relatable only to the open scale of nature, of landscape as well as air. (The two seem fused in his paintings.) Ohlson says, "My subject matter isn't squares."

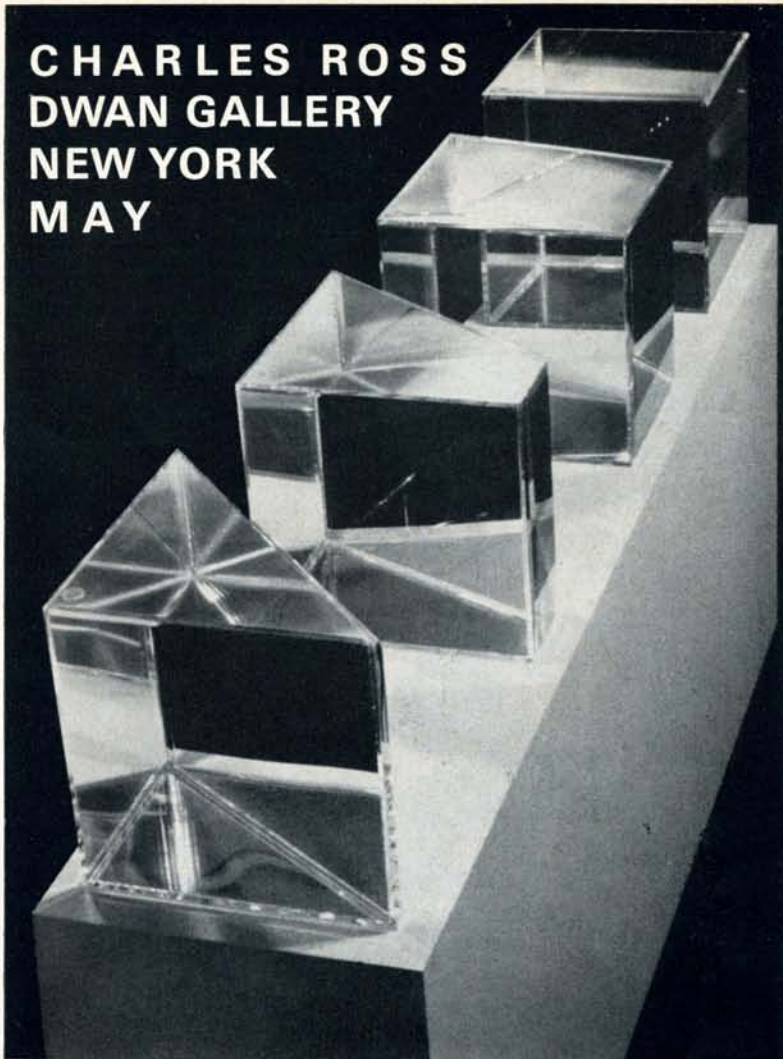
He is not the only painter around who possesses this wide-openness, but it seems particularly imbedded here, present in spite of the artist, because his discontinuous panels challenge the existence of the field in which the sense of spreading space is loosed. Yet it prevails.

The squares, their individual and combined areas and their placement, contribute to the extended scale. So do the taller than human heights and vision-filling widths, though these are not emphasized by any boundary-recalling device—the vertical panels are too unlike the over-all shape to reinforce it, and the interstices, because there are so many of them, do not bind the sides. The colors, especially, work as releasing agents for the space-expansion, not in a push-and-pull interaction but in a way that language cannot imitate.

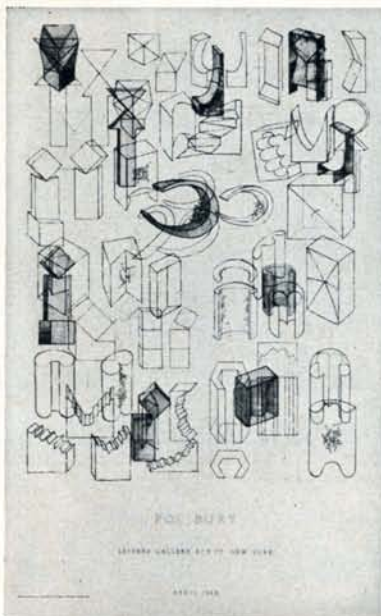
Ohlson was born in 1936 and raised on a farm near Cherokee, on the little Sioux River in north-west Iowa, where his Swedish grandfather settled in the nineteenth century. The empty, endless landscapes of the Mid-West and the Northern Protestantism of his upbringing must have influenced, but do not "explain," his art. He studied painting at the University of Minnesota. In 1961, he came to New York and graduate school at Hunter, where he now teaches. This show is his fourth at Fischbach since 1964.

Ohlson's style has been geometrical since his student days; it is a natural rather than an evolved mode for him. Within it, his investigations have been intensive. He very early decided that figure-ground ambiguity was exhausted for him, and it would be a mistake to look for that in his work. He has hardly ever used more than three or four colors in a picture but never went all the way down to one, either. Moving from static, frame-oriented symmetry to design in which the forms began to "float, freed from the edges," in his words, he found his colors getting at the same time darker and more and more tundra, until most of his paintings came to have black fields. Too, each came to have only a single rectangle or square of another color, close in value to that of the field. Dissatisfied with the overwhelming illusion of recession in the dimness, he made the paintings more concrete by dividing them into two stretched canvases of equal height but unequal width. These were the same color and were joined, so what was created was an internal edge—an "undrawn line," he calls

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it, or a thin vertical dissociated from contour since optically it separated nothing. After these paintings (shown in 1967), which were charged with impudence, the gap widened and multiplied. That, and a renewed exuberance of color after a dark period, have gone into producing the current series.

Ohlson has recently received a Guggenheim, and a grant from the City University of New York to investigate the possibilities of paintings that will take in more of their surroundings in more ways. He keeps spreading out. As Edwin Denby wrote in another context: "Americans occupy a much larger space than their actual bodies do; I mean, to follow the harmony of their movement or of their lolling you have to include a much larger area in space than they are actually occupying."

### Look Aloft

Continued from page 51

to figures and the human situation. Montgomery, who idolizes Kline and de Kooning, is slowly emerging from Abstract-Expressionism. To compare his work with Van de Bovenkamp's is to point up the difference between European and American Expressionism, despite the fact that Van de Bovenkamp has lived here since 1958. Montgomery is working with paper, and the first thing that strikes you is the lightness of his bas-reliefs, a lightness that is neither airy nor abstract (the atmosphere is rather somber and charged, in fact), but one that reminds you of the vulnerability of flesh.

Van de Bovenkamp aspires to monumentality in form, and adds animation by using a variety of materials and finishes. Montgomery's work, on the other hand, is all animation, combining reminiscences of destruction with sudden flares of assertiveness. Both of these artists work more with ideas and materials than with space, but Montgomery is the more sensitive to plasticity. His pieces stir the air around them.

The work of Roger Jorgensen, one of the best painters of the group, is like Bob Wiegand's in that both grow out of Hard Edge. Both artists developed a highly refined sense of the formal balance of shape and color, and both use this formal judgment to push the work subtly off-balance, setting forms precariously beyond the bounds of safety and stability. Jorgensen's bland, regular geometric shapes are given heavy-bodied, clangorous colors whose density gives meaning to the thin cut-out shapes that he adds to the surface of the canvas. A delicate adjustment of curve to straight line and of color against color keeps the dense wheels and planes from colliding and rolling off the surface. Jorgensen constantly risks poise and grace, and repeatedly comes off the winner.

His large canvases ordinarily have more strength than dash; his sculpture, on the other hand, sets out to surprise you. For example, three identical yellow triangles, very grave and ponderous, are lined up for an unlikely trip into space. My favorite is a set of four deceptively simple slabs. Almost immobile as an envelope, they conceal a dynamic tunneling core that forces you to reread the exterior for clues. You find them, and a pair of triangles in raised relief at the sides is transformed from ornament to indications of interior structure.

Bernard Aptekar is primarily a painter, but on entering his studio the visitor's first encounter is with a group of large cut-out figures. Drawn in a bold comic-book manner and painted on both sides, they combine motifs of militarism, transformation and dismemberment in a heavily satiric style. Aptekar is the youngest artist in the group, and his work reflects his generation's odd concern with politics as an aspect of the inner life. His meticulous, polished paintings use cosmetic colors to heighten Surreal ambiguities between mechanical and organic form. Of all the teachers in the group, Aptekar seems most involved with reaching his stu-