Art in America

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Cover: Stuart Davis' "Swing Landscape" (detail)
Special 30-page section on 1930s art: Bolotowsky on the A.A.A./Hélion
Stuart Davis/James Brooks's LaGuardia Mural/plus: Prendergast/Constable
Demuth/William King/Suzanne Harris/Chicago Photography/Books

picture plane and some at her usual 45-degree angle, becoming part of the play of regularity and irregularity, interrupted form and mutilated view.

The show also contained woodblock prints, gouaches and drawings, with different motifs. The woodblocks, more sculptural than the Albers they seem to echo, use the wood grain as a totemic form, rather than as field. The gouaches and drawings are particularly interesting because filled with lyric, looser and more indeterminate designs. In them, grid systems surround a freer drawing of a private, almost Tantric resource; then the whole system is confined by darker crayon marks. With each medium, Cohen works idiomatically, and one does not necessarily want the drawings to echo the paintings. The latter, which solve and dissolve many spatial knots so tactfully, represent a real advance. While firmly within the tradition of hard-edged geometric abstraction, she knows peculiarly well how to handle the abrasiveness of closely valued colors. Her color sense, coupled with an architectural bias in the complex motifs, distinguishes her. From a sparse vocabulary of polygons and stripes, overlappings and discontinuities, a language emerges to conserve geometric abstraction through coloristic tension and structural integrity.

—David Shapiro

John Duff at Willard

Hanging Spiral, 1975, one of the pieces in John Duff's recent show, uses wood and metal alternately in equal lengths to form a diagonally positioned open cube resting on one of its points. This bottom point just touches the floor; the sculpture is suspended from the ceiling by a rope attached to its top point; thus the work occupies the space from floor to ceiling. Its substantial, utterly unrefined materials have been rendered visually fragile and weightless.

Although Duff's earlier fiberglass sculptures often had openings or perforations, they appeared closed and mysterious; one felt drawn to peer or even to feel inside. Their material opacity served to hide and hold, rather than to reveal. Ambiguities are still an important element in Duff's work, though the appearance of the five sculptures and seven wall reliefs that made up this show is radically different.

The new work has, in addition to its openness, a crisp clarity and precision. *Spiral Relief No. 3* is a long, narrow, empty frame hung diagonally on the wall. Two long boards are joined at either end by two short boards, L-fashion. This double-L structure is neatly contradicted by its four colors, deployed in an oppositely directed "spiral" of paint that covers the four boards but crosses their abutments. The slim space enclosed by the reversing Ls acts as a window to the wall. Finally, a sheet of clear glass covers the painted frame, providing both a continuous surface and a third plane. *White Column* also plays with dichotomies. It is a square vertical column 6 feet tall and about 7 inches thick. Four steel angle-irons support its four wood panels, enclosing the edges and projecting at both the top and bottom. The whole has been given a coat of white paint, except for the projections. The paint is thin; the column is thin and its height makes looking over and into it difficult. It reads as a unit and is proportioned like one, but its hollowness is something one feels.

All of Duff's new pieces deal, in a precise and inventive spirit, with polarities and similarities—spirals in squares, openings that are closed, sculptures that are paintings, fragility and toughness. Equally important is the feeling Duff has for his materials. One is made aware of the beauty of simple things: the green edge of a thin sheet of glass, the warm tones of wood showing through a casually thin coat of paint, the traces of some unknown past on old boards.

Duff's work has a Constructivist feel that sometimes recalls a wide range of other work: by Tatlin, Rietveldt, Bolotowsky, Anne Truitt, even Richard Serra. While Duff's unitary, geometric forms lack the forcefulness of Judd or the obsessiveness of LeWitt, they establish their own evocative, complex ambience through a Minimalist vocabulary. However, what this latest exhibition showed is that Duff is capable of developing in often surprising ways his peculiar stylistic position. *—Susan Howe*

Doug Ohlson at Susan Caldwell

For some years Doug Ohlson has been making paintings in which round spray-gun bursts of oil paint, of more or less equal size, occupy expanses of canvas ranging from small to quite large. The patterning used to be apparently random, and the ground used to be raw canvas; one could feel with these paintings, alternately, that the puff-ball-like shapes were jostling each other gently in an indeterminate kind of space or, attending to the puddled or matte interiors and fuzzy edges of the bursts, that what was interesting was the way various textures were incorporated into a flat plane. The color, meanwhile, might be varied or monochrome, light or dark, with consequent shifts in mood. More recently the color has tended to monochrome, the raw ground has disappeared beneath layers of paint, and the bursts have been loosely ranked, grid-fashion, across the surface. In some of Ohlson's newest paintings, the shapes appear only after long looking, like Ad Reinhardt's black crosses, or can be seen only from certain angles, as areas reflecting more light than their surround. The colors are all subtle variations on red, from hottest pink to darkest plum, one hue to a canvas, though here and there the whisper of another color will come up from the underpainting; in a few of the paintings a bit of canvas shows along the edges.

The uncertainty one felt with some of Ohlson's previous work—whether to read it illusionistically or as something literal—is not a problem with most of the new paintings. Here the total covering of the surface and saturation of the color yields an experience that is reliably perceptual, with no overtone of either the metaphorical or the didactic. The sensation is color-sensation, an effulgence, haze or murk, and one gets right down to the business of looking into it. The paintings are extremely generous to the viewer who will concentrate his gaze on a single canvas for several minutes. There's no need to "meditate," exactly, because the paint, with the passive cooperation of one's eyes, does all the work; it's just a matter of not thinking too much. Even a short spell of undistracted looking is sufficient to produce a sense of penetrating and being penetrated by color, of being awash.

If there remains a problem with Ohlson's work, now that it has become so satisfying visually, it is a problem of style. (At some point one does have to start thinking again.) What *kind* of painting is this? It would seem to have everything in common with "Color Field," but to call it that would be to imply both too much in terms of formal control and too little in terms of emotional content. These paintings communicate a single-minded intensity; the way Ohlson attacks the canvas with his spray gun, head-on, has an almost Action-painting feel. One does not, at any rate, sense that the relative orderliness of the image is a formula coolly arrived at; rather, it seems a difficult discipline, a way of riding herd on impetuous feelings. This is clearest in the works where the calculations are least successful, as in the occasional unpainted edges or in the show's one diptych—formalistic devices that seem uncomfortably out of key with the prevailing emotion of the work, which strikes one as full of a desire to express and affect. If to have a style is to make one's intentions thoroughly intelligible—and I think that's part of it—Ohlson still does not have a style, though he seems close. What he does have are some beautiful paintings haunted by an unresolved dynamic which, judging from his remarkable progress in recent years, can be counted on to provoke further growth—perhaps toward something truly powerful. *—Peter Schjeldahl*

N.Y. & POUGHKEEPSIE

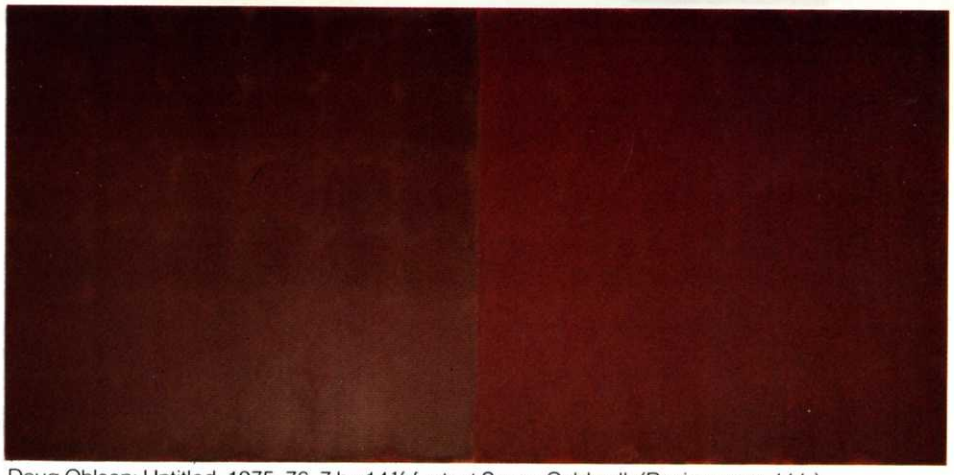
"19th-Century American Women Artists" at the Whitney downtown, and "7 American Women: The Depression Decade" at Vassar College Art Gallery

These two shows provided some invaluable information and filled in some of the

numerous gaps in women's art history, although both were finally more exciting from a historical than from a visual point of view. Their common virtue was the scholarly and fascinating documentation provided in their catalogues—from the Whitney, a four-page brochure crammed with a general essay and biographical data; from Vassar, a 40-page booklet with a wealth of sociological background about women's roles in the 1930s and a monograph on each artist. The organizers were, respectively, Whitney Independent Study Program participants Judith Bernstein, Madeleine Burnside, Jeannette Ingberman and Ann-Sargent Wooster, and at Vassar, historians Karal Ann Marling and Helen A. Harrison, under the aegis of the A.I.R. Gallery.

The subject matter in the Whitney's 19th-century show was predictable (portraits, still-lifes, landscapes, genre scenes) as were some of the names (Harriet Hosmer, Malvina Hoffman, Mary Jane Peale, Anna Hyatt Huntington and Mary Cassatt), but the high point for me was the work of a woman whose work I had barely known previously—Susan MacDowell Eakins (1851–1938)—(incidentally, the only woman to be included in the uptown Whitney's controversial Rockefeller Collection Bicentennial show). Her two small oils of a girl reading and *Woman with Book* are incisive and adventurous, full of both life and thought. The catalogue tells us that she was quite successful before her marriage to Thomas Eakins; that afterwards her production diminished greatly, "and it was only after his death in 1916 that she resumed her career in equal measure to that of her student days." I was also struck by a bold self-portrait by Violet Oakley (1874–1961); *Still Life: Study of Two Plums* by Helen Searle (1827–86), with its curious collage effect; a lovely little landscape of sand dunes by Lilla Yale (1859–1959); once again by four vitally decorative Cassatt prints; and by the inevitable and delightful "primitive"—*A Couple in the Landscape* by Eunice Pinney (1770–1849), with its overt sexual symbolism. Unfortunately, there was also much mediocrity and some downright awful watercolors.

Marling and Harrison chose the artists for the Vassar show on the basis of "a secure critical reputation, demonstrated by a survey of commissions, prizes and notices in the art literature of the '30s, and a corpus of extant work exhibited during the decade," rather than on the basis of today's "qualitative standards." They did so in order to "provide a brake on ideological biases stemming from art-historical hindsight"—a brave notion, if not entirely successful from the viewer's viewpoint. The artists included were: Rosalind Bengelsdorf (abstract cubist oils), Lucienne Bloch (mural projects and a wonderful, modernist cat portrait), Minna Citron (often touching social realism, reminiscent of Marsh and Bishop), Marion Greenwood (mural projects, sketches and portraits), Doris Lee (homey, crowded genre scenes, among them *Storm in Washington Square*—the first painting by a woman I remember seeing as a child), Elizabeth Olds (socially conscious prints) and Concetta Scaravaglione (models for her huge, rather bovine statues of women).



Doug Ohlson: Untitled, 1975–76, 7 by 14½ feet; at Susan Caldwell. (Review on p. 111.)

Bengelsdorf's abstractions and Bloch's Social-Realist mural projects provide solid examples of the double-mainstream of American art in the '30s and '40s, but the star of the show was Greenwood, whose immensely powerful fresco studies and powerful *and* sensitive conté portraits of workers and peasants combine the strength that was the greatest virtue of the Mexican mural movement with a sympathetic view of humankind which I ascribe unashamedly to the artist's experience as a woman. There is a gentle solidity to this Rivera-influenced art that made me wonder why her work wasn't better known. Both Greenwood and Bloch (who also worked with Rivera) provide new and interesting role models for contemporary women who want their work to have effect outside of the art community. I only wish there had been more space and money available for a larger show of "lost women" from the Depression, and that more of their murals had survived.

—Lucy R. Lippard

SAN FRANCISCO

Claire Falkenstein at Smith Anderson

Since the late 1930s Claire Falkenstein has been dealing with abstract form in sculpture, or more exactly, with abstract space. In her remarkably consistent evolution she had developed structural metaphors for growth, from the cellular to the infinite. Process and image are integrated through her additive formula. One of Falkenstein's strengths has been her flexible approach to materials, an innovative opportunism that has ranged through ceramics (1939), reinforced concrete (1950), plexiglass (1956) and neon, but her most characteristic works are made of wire and often incorporate chunks of glass. In earlier pieces the wire twisted and curled in rhythmic, gestural, somewhat Twomblyesque loops or wound into convoluted skeins that wrapped space in a loose cocoon.

This exhibition included fairly recent sculpture, drawings, prints and some interesting combinations of all three. The earliest pieces were two "Never Ending Screens" of 1964. Short lengths of copper wire form a flat all-over network structured by heavier elements and punctuated by a glob of solder at each joint. The descending scale of thickness

John Duff: *Spiral Relief No. 3*, 1975, wood and glass, 58 inches high; at Willard. (Review on p. 111.)