

arts

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LYNTON WELLS Ruth Siegel
DOUG OHLSON Ruth Siegel
BILL SPIRA Vanderwoude-Tananbaum

By ELLEN LEE KLEIN

LYNTON WELLS

Lynton Wells' latest paintings look electrified. When you walk into the gallery it feels energized and the walls seem to vibrate. In a stunning group of works this artist captivates, fascinates, mystifies, and horrifies.

The exhibition consists of rather large oil paintings and smaller charcoal drawings. Wells' surfaces are uniquely energized by a relentless sgraffito process where lines are rhythmically scribbled and incised into the pigment creating a brittle wiry-appearing surface. The textures and fuzzing of forms and images create tensions. Wells makes transitions from one form to another, one plane to another, one subject to another by employing this technique as a device. Since they obfuscate, the fuzzied transitions and images allude to things at the same time, thus creating enigmatic presences and suggestions.

Wells' palette is confined to black and white and earth tones for the most part. These seem to add to the dreamlike sensations they impart. The rhythms and images seem fleeting. The viewer is not grounded by any dense colors or weighty solid areas of pigment.

The theatricality of Wells' painting seems drawn from many sources. Some of them almost resemble images from horror movies or horror movie posters. In the painting entitled *HE: I've just painted the definitive frog painting./SHE: You say you've painted a frog?/HE: Yes./SHE: Are you sure you can tell it's a frog?!*

HE: Yes. black foliage suggestions which float from the upper right down into the painting seem to contain a houselike form. On the lower left other foliage-like forms seem to contain a frog. The palette is black, white, and a yellow reddish brown. It is difficult to understand or guess at the message or meaning of this painting, but the house in the black floating foliage seems derivative of horror movie or commercial animation imagery. There is something so seductive about the flickering surfaces that one doesn't seem really concerned after awhile.

One of Wells' most powerful images is *Screens* a very large two-paneled horizontal piece. In a landscapelike setting a table supports a television in the left foreground. On the screen is the image of an empty chair. In the upper right some architectural structure seems unanchored but present with perhaps a billboard screen or something like it being frontmost. Dry-looking, branchlike forms cascade throughout the painting while a row of tree-trunklike forms restate the verticality of the table legs in the foreground. The palette includes the same black, white, and yellow reddish brown with a subtle patch of dark blue incorporated behind the architectural structure.

There is an implicit sense of wasteland, or destruction, of events lost by a catastrophic history and time that characterizes Kiefer's work which the gallery's press release indicates Wells admires.

In a turbulent, large painting entitled *Another Country*, urban

buildings sit on a classically inspired shelf that seems not to be anchored, but to float amid a stormy, dense, swirling landscape of black and white and vibrant reddish browns. Crackly black lines allude to either broken branches or lightning.

In some works images seem to metamorphose into others. In *Aside* a face appears in front of a window and fades into a crackly, vague background. In *Metaphor as Degeneration* a woman is lost in the landscape, her head transformed into a dog or some other animal.

Wells seems intentionally obscure. One minds less than one might about the missing pieces of the puzzles he creates because the surfaces and fragments are so compelling, so riveting. (Ruth Siegel, *January 28-February 21*)

DOUG OHLSON

Doug Ohlson is a master of elegance, restraint, refinement, control, and color. His reductive paintings give way to more humanized sensations and suggest a human presence as they inspire physical and emotional responses. This is due in part to fuzzied edges that remind the viewer of the artist's hand and role in the making of the art.

Each of his paintings seems limited in palette to five more or less highly dense and intense colors. The proportions of the sections of the paintings and their placement result in elegant harmonies. This group of paintings and Ohlson's aesthetic transcend the chic coolness of the seventies. Rather, what the artist imparts is a warmth not only in his palette, but in his gesture and in the implicit evocation of an elicited response to his images.

There is a careful balance aimed at and accomplished in the completion of each work. Edges and proportions are critical as are juxtapositions. Ohlson works on tiny paintings that are jewel-like but which engage and involve the viewer as thoroughly as the more majestic works done on a much grander scale.

There is something very musical about these paintings. They each seem to emit a resonance or tone but they don't vibrate the way that Rothko's paintings do because of the juxtapositions and sense of compression of rather equal densities. They breathe a bit less than Rothko's works but they overpower, confront, and captivate the viewer more boldly and

directly in a physical way.

The edges of the forms are critical and suggest a knowledge of the color stains of Frankenthaler and Louis. The differences here, as in contrast with Rothko as well, is in the opacity and volume or key of the palette and paint. Ohlson's parts are equally dense and opaque so that the irregular edges and use of corners is what makes the paintings breathe. A careful balancing is what results in his final visual resonant harmonies.

These are masterfully composed works done by an artist who takes his art and craft seriously. They are lush and handsome works and are absolutely compelling. (Ruth Siegel, *January 28-February 21*)

BILL SPIRA

In Bill Spira's last exhibition he seemed to be more constrained by his architectural training so that the sense of precariousness in combinations of visual weights and unlikely materials of wood and ceramic was countered by the dominance of classical structure and balance were daring joinings. In this latest group of works, Spira seems less constrained although his knowledge of physics still modifies and contains his sense of whimsy or aberration.

He is still confining himself to the same materials. He uses hand-formed pieces of stoneware and joins them in unlikely visual and physical groupings with pieces of shaped, textured, and sometimes colored mahogany. There is still a sense of handsomeness and an elegance about these pieces that reflects the influence of Bauhaus teachings. Each element is beautiful independent of the others. The surfaces are lovely as are the color and the shapes and forms. They are joined in rather domestically sized works that sometimes appear to be maquettes for more grand-scale pieces which would function in outdoor or architectural settings.

It is still nice to see an artist in love with his materials, and it is lovely to see materials in a fairly natural state used for their own inherently beautiful properties. There is something very serene and calming about the safety and sense of resolution in these pieces, yet one can't help wondering what would happen if Spira would give up some of his traditional control and let himself go a little. (Vanderwoude-Tananbaum, *February 3-March 7*)



Lynton Wells,
*Metaphor as
 Degeneration, 1986.*
Oil on canvas
(3 panels),
90 x 108". Courtesy
Ruth Siegel Gallery.