

Art in America

January 1991 \$4.75

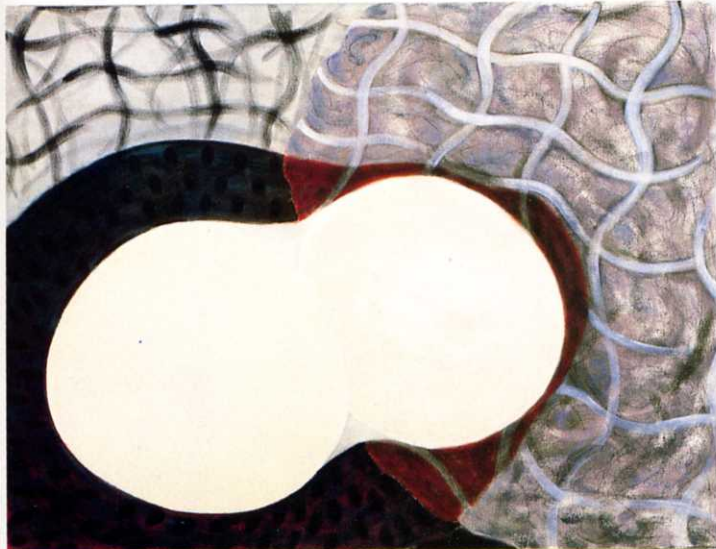
*Titian in
Washington*

*Kosuth on the
Taboo Image*

*Freud's
Antiquities*

*On Site in
Indonesia*





Susan Crile: *Soft, Wild, and Naked*, 1989, oil on canvas, 38 by 50 inches; at Graham Modern.

of Lorna Simpson's sociocritical photomontages and the African-American answer to Mary Kelly's arch meditations about life as a middle-aged, middle-class art-worker.

Weems's story concerns the emergence and demise of a romantic relationship, and the consolidation of a sense of self. It is a stylized story without the feel of autobiography. The narrator's voice is Southern and tough and full of wry humor. At first, there is talk of fried fish, Carmen Jones and that ole black magic. All of the action in the black-and-white photographs takes place around a single table, beneath the glare of a hanging lamp. The lovers' ardent embraces and boozy, cigarette-smoke-shrouded card games give way to mutual withdrawal, she staring into space, he reading a newspaper. Other characters appear—a preadolescent daughter, a mother, a few friends. All revolve around the table as if it were a solid realization of the photograph's surface, and the light above the camera's unblinking eye.

The relationship between man and woman ultimately founders over issues of power. She asserts her interest in politics, her need for personal independence, her prerogatives as the couple's major wage earner. He balks. She leaves. In some of the photographs, their relationship excludes the viewer; they have eyes only for each other. In others, her engagement with the audience is frank and open. There is, then, a latent parable about the urge to make art—

about the drive to overcome the tug of destructive, insular emotions in order to address the public on issues of general importance. The woman's decision is difficult; her attraction to her intolerant, benighted lover was real. And even in the woman's triumphal concluding solitude, she is haunted not only by the specter of loneliness but also by convention. This is the way the story *had* to end.

Weems, slightly younger than the story's 38-year-old heroine, is a Cal Arts graduate with advanced degrees in folklore as well as art. She now teaches at Hampshire College in Massachusetts, lectures widely and shows her work mostly at nonprofit spaces. By training and practice, Weems is an observer; she remains a little distant from her subjects, but she knows them intimately. As demonstrated in a recent exhibition and book called *Then What? Photographs and Folklore*, she can assume, without a trace of caricature or condescension, a great variety of black American voices, most of them steeped in religion and myth. (Two of the portraits in the narrative at P.P.O.W. appeared in this book, as did two other photos also shown at the gallery.) In all of her work, Weems examines archetypal narrative systems and throws special illumination into their emotional depths.

—Nancy Princenthal

Doug Ohlson at Andre Zarre

Nothing is more fundamental to

painting in the modern (*not* post-modern) sense than the structuring of space. Among the several things that Ohlson's paintings do to us, none is stronger or more magical than the way he makes color enact spellbinding spatial effects. Through color juxtapositions alone, he can make forms jump or retreat or hang in delicate suspension against fields of other hues.

The protagonists in an Ohlson painting usually are three or four elongated bands or bars, set either vertically or horizontally in the rectangular field. The edges of these bars are mostly razor sharp, and they are each painted in a single, uninflected hue. The drama unfolds in the way that each bar relates to the field that passes behind it, or in the way that each field butts up to the next, or in the way the aggregate of bars and fields harmonizes into the overall image.

Except perhaps in its unusual horizontality, *Spirit Lake* is characteristic of Ohlson's enterprise. The several bars hang in space like the apparition of a partially outlined colonnade, their vertical and horizontal axes forming a kind of skeleton that measures, defines and gives pace to the wide picture plane. Floating behind in a series of varied but stately intervals are the contrasting fields, each in its own hue

and brushed in its own characteristic way. By color juxtapositions alone, the bars, which are all perforce on the surface of the canvas, take up positions across the painting in a complex play of illusionary depth. In a very pure way, this is a spatial architecture wrought by a keenly sensitive adjustment of color relationships.

A fortuitous and revealing comparison of work by another gifted hand from an earlier era was on view concurrently at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Certain paintings by Burgoyne Diller from his so-called "First Theme" series use a few rectangular bars (and sometimes also squares) set out in a single, neutral field. In the paintings I am thinking of, which are the most sober and the most powerful, the field is a uniform black, without brush stroke or other visible surface inflection, as in, for example, *First Theme, 1938*. The energy and dynamism of these compositions are generated solely by the force of the sharp, rectilinear edges of the bars acting on or against one another as they seem to cut into and break up the inert background.

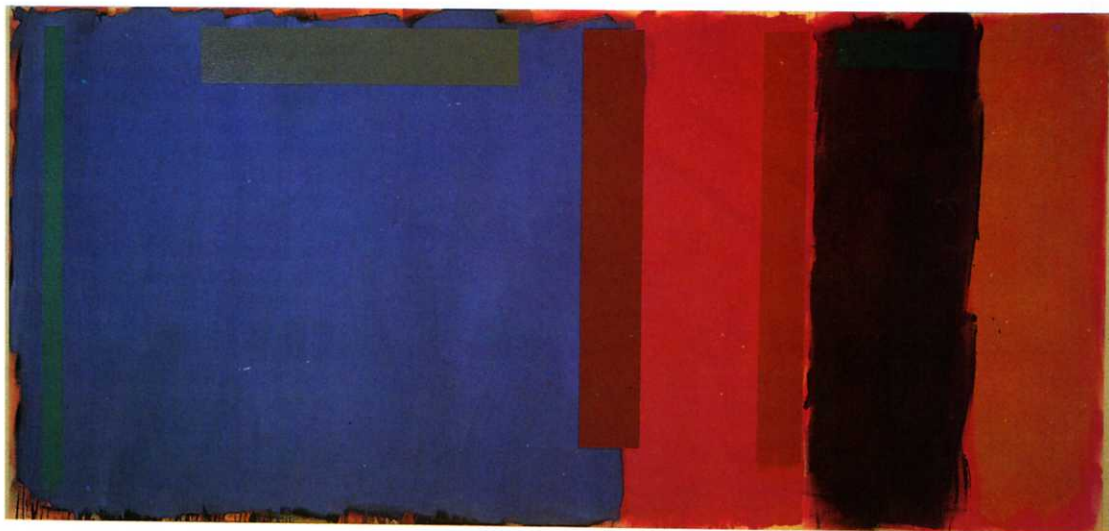
The effect and the process in Ohlson's work are almost the reverse. What Diller superbly achieves by means of drawing, Ohlson creates by color. The lat-



Nino Longobardi: *Untitled*, 1990, oil on canvas, 60 3/4 by 46 inches; at Germans van Eck.

ter artist's field of color, far from being neutral, act on the bars that cross or touch them in quite different ways, sometimes seeming almost to absorb or bury them and at other times throwing them very clearly forward towards us. In a way, the bars in a painting by Ohlson seem the most neutral elements, subjected to the powers and the caprices of the fields they cross, while in Diller the bars are the active forces. Diller's austere classical planarity, set beside Ohlson's luxurious surface play, makes the latter seem baroque.

—Walter Thompson



Doug Ohlson: *Spirit Lake*, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 66 by 140 inches; at Andre Zarre.

Susan Crile at Graham Modern

One of the first paintings you saw in Crile's most recent solo is titled *Radiant Object*, and it is well named: a small abstract work of jewel-like corals, greens and golds, its central image of a glowing orb owes something to Arthur Dove but has the distinctive, lovingly worked weight of a personal symbol. Two other paintings were of a similar compacted richness, but the larger works that comprised the bulk of the show seemed to take us to a different world, away from Dove's eccentricities and into the broad tradition of organic abstraction and the mystical and sexual implications of its original Surrealist impulse.

Nearly all the forms Crile uses are rounded—gourdlike or egglike, abstract though with recognizable cognates in the human body. Most of them are painted a chalky white, with subtle volumetric modeling to give the impression of softness and pliability. Usually two or three large forms predominate, crowded into their space, a smaller one sometimes cushioned on a larger, as if they are outsize or still expanding. Around them Crile has provided a packing of sensuous and varied brushwork. There are passages of cumuluslike patterns, feathery concentric arches, thin nets of loose cross-hatching and vertical streaks that appear to descend like stains. Where the smaller work evidences substantial pigment under rich glaze, the brushwork in the larger pieces is executed in paint thinned down to the consistency of ink. Finally, as if to anchor the compositions materially, Crile often adds a single architectural curving line rendered in a thick impasto of emphatic red or black pigment.

Several of Crile's titles—*Veiled Longing*, *Soft*, *Wild*, and *Naked*, *Out of Pandora's Box*—indicate a kind of mythically charged eroticism. If O'Keeffe tried to make her eroticized forms overpowering and Elizabeth Murray often makes hers comedic, Crile's are "serious" without being sensuous and grotesque without being funny. There is, in fact, a kind of creepy remoteness about her bleached, sluggish forms that leaves them looking at once moribund and synthetic, without a jot of the vivacity organicism usually implies. Compared with the comfortable beauties of *Radiant Object*, *The Mermaid and the Mino-taur* is simply strange, though as a comment upon or an extension of organic abstraction, "strange" is certainly a viable way to go.

—Holland Cotter

Nino Longobardi at Germans van Eck

The Italian wave of the mid-'80s brought Americans into contact with the Transavantgarde, a group of painters inspired by mythology and a classical focus on the figure. Nino Longobardi was one of the dark horses of that movement, less celebrated than the "three Cs" but clearly sharing their concerns. Now that the Transavantgarde has fallen from fashion, Longobardi's work must stand on its own, something it does rather unhappily.

Although the figure remains the focal point in these recent paintings, Longobardi seems to have almost entirely discarded his allegorical concerns for formal ones. Of prime importance is the relationship between figure and

ground, presented here as an interplay among various modes of representation. Typically, these paintings involve a shadowy silhouetted tableau of figures scraped more or less into oblivion by the strokes of a palette knife; over this hovers a rapidly sketched drawing of a figure. There are some variations. In one painting a pair of fish serves as the vestigial underimage; other works offer the silhouette of a chair or a large vase. The overlaid drawings resemble life-study sketches, while the background figures have a more enduring, friezelike quality. But both under and overimage seem threatened with the possibility of disintegration and disappearance into the surrounding thick, pasty void.

The surface treatment of these works is rather seductive, as is the sense of image-traces flickering through heavy matter. Unfortunately, the same format appears in painting after painting, and through repetition quickly becomes formulaic. Though figural, the work lacks the vitality of narrative or allegory. Instead, images are deliberately inert, and their symbolism, if intended at all, involves a neo-Romantic message about decay and loss.

Longobardi seems to be attempting to move from figuration to abstraction. This work hangs uncomfortably in between.

—Eleanor Heartney

Jeanne Silverthorne at Christine Burgin

Jeanne Silverthorne's sculptures look like dour little pods. Often cast in hydrocal or black rubber and frequently exhibited in pairs,

they have a humble, almost Arte Povera appeal. Their organic forms may bring up metaphors of nature and the body, but then Silverthorne will stick a real key or a rubber cast of a broken light bulb into the sculptural mass, which alerts us to the fact that we are dealing with the *machinery* of the body—and the machinery of a subtly twisted mind.

Silverthorne, who is also an erudite art writer, seems to be working within the *vanitas* tradition of 20th-century still-life sculpture exemplified by Picasso's ab-sinthe glass and Johns's ale cans. Three early pieces from 1986, exhibited on little plinths, have their titles embossed on the sculptures, almost like science fair displays. *Please*, perhaps the most plaintive of these slightly drear *objets*, is cast in humble hydrocal from an ice bag. A curving tongue of static liquid "pours" out, as if a genie had been let out of the bag. *Up, Up, Up*, with its dusty little box of tufted objects (ostensibly cast from paper balls), suggests a secret cache of flower bulbs, party favors or perfume bottles.

Often the sculptures look like bronze, when in fact they are cast black rubber and have a paradoxically squishy feeling. *Light Bulbs* (1988), for instance, is a scatter piece comprised of two pairs of bulbs along with the cast of a single broken one. This fractured orb struck me as a startling reversal—soft, open and opaque, whereas we know a light bulb as hard, closed and translucent.

Silverthorne's sculptures often seem to summon up the whole history of art in their ambiguous